



**University of Sheffield**

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## Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

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

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

### **Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex**

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

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Sheffield (the University) from 19 to 23 November 2007 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

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

### Outcomes of the institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers
- 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 has a structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities that operates across the institution. The University is effective in taking deliberate steps both to enhance the learning experience of its students and also to identify and reward staff who demonstrate excellence in teaching or take on national or international responsibilities in teaching policy and innovation.

### Postgraduate research students

The University's arrangements for maintaining academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes are clearly documented and appropriate. They broadly meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

### Published information

The audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

### Features of good practice

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

- the distinctive and innovative approach to the annual monitoring of teaching and learning, which draws on a range of performance indicators to determine the level of scrutiny to be applied to individual departments

- the thorough and systematic procedures for quality assurance which are characterised by a high degree of self-reflection and a rigorous cycle of follow-up actions
- the procedures for consideration of external examiners' reports, which secure the requisite central oversight and action in response to issues both at the local level and those with institution-wide implications
- the University's prompt and effective response to national external initiatives and to matters raised internally through both informal and formal channels
- the Academic Diary, which provides students with a single, concise and comprehensive source of information about the University and its policies, procedures and regulatory requirements
- the use of directors of learning and teaching development, and of departmental learning and teaching advocates, to stimulate and support the University's enhancement agenda in line with its learning, teaching and assessment strategy
- the 'PGR Link' newsletter for postgraduate research students, the production of which exemplifies the constructive relationship between the University and the Sheffield Union of Students, and which contributes to the fostering of a sense of community among postgraduate research students
- the structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the institution.

### **Recommendations for action**

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

The audit team considers it advisable for the University to:

- ensure that the process for the approval of joint awards includes the production of a clear specification of the procedures and regulatory provisions to be applied to delivery of the programmes of study
- secure consistent and equitable application of central and local guidance for the management of postgraduate research provision with particular reference to supervisory arrangements and rules for progression from MPhil to PhD.

The audit team considers it desirable for the University to:

- consider establishing a clear separation in time between the approval of potential collaborative organisations and approval of the programmes to be delivered through the collaborative arrangement.

### **Reference points**

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

- the *Code of practice*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

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

## Report

1 An institutional audit of the University of Sheffield (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 19 November 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Emeritus Professor E Evans, Dr J Grattan, Professor C Morris, and Professor M Whitby, auditors and Ms J Rhodes, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms S Butler, Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University of Sheffield is a research-led civic university. Founded in 1905, the University was formed from the merger of Firth College, the Sheffield Technical School and the Sheffield School of Medicine. The University has 47 academic departments or schools. At the time of the audit, there were seven faculties: Architectural Studies; Arts; Engineering; Law; Medicine; Pure Science and Social Sciences. There are plans to reduce this number to five. In 2006-07, the University had 24,075 students registered for degree and diploma programmes. There were 20,815 full-time students, of which 16,877 were undergraduates and 3,938 were postgraduates. Part-time student numbers were 3,260, comprising 1,779 undergraduates and 1,481 postgraduates. Among the 5,419 total postgraduate students (both full and part-time), 3,265 were on taught programmes and 2,154 were research students. There were 3,387 international students.

4 The University describes its new style of strategic planning, and the five-year corporate plan, 'Our Shared Vision', which resulted from it, as 'the most significant' development since the last audit. The University's mission is 'to discover and understand'. It aims to provide a learning experience that reflects the process of creating and deepening knowledge, by engaging its students in activities that encourage them to think critically, use research methods and, where appropriate, mirror the processes of research. The University highlighted two of the seven goals in Our Shared Vision as being of particular relevance to the student experience: 'to produce Sheffield graduates who demonstrate impact, excellence and distinctiveness in their chosen field; and to have a reputation for the highest standards of education and research skills to attract the best students'.

5 Since the last audit, there have been evolutionary developments in quality assurance processes, in particular, a revision of the programme approval process and the introduction of a new Annual Review of Learning and Teaching which involves a variable intensity of review. A detailed set of management information has been introduced to support this process. The University has also strengthened its focus on quality enhancement in recent years, and has extended opportunities for its staff to develop and share examples of excellent practice. To this end, the role of faculty directors of learning and teaching development has been expanded, and departmental learning and teaching advocates appointed to liaise with them. The University has undertaken a major capital funding programme, partly in response to changing student needs. Functions relating to marketing, public relations, student recruitment and admissions have been consolidated in a single unit, Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing. This not only markets the University but recruits and admits students and manages their initial relationship with the University.

6 The University responded constructively to the majority of the recommendations of the last audit. Most significantly, a major review of assessment was undertaken in 2004-05, resulting in a wide-ranging consolidation of practice and new developments.

7 The University has reviewed its portfolio of collaborative activity and has systematically reduced the amount of validated provision. At the same time, it is expanding its involvement in other types of partnerships such as jointly delivered awards at master's level, articulation



agreements and locally supported distance learning. These collaborative arrangements fall within the scope of the present audit.

8 The University's framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is separated from that for resource allocation. The Senate holds responsibility for the quality and standards of all academic activities. The Academic Development Committee, which reports to the Senate, has responsibility for the management of the academic budget and admissions. Oversight of collaborative activity rests with the Board of Collaborative Studies, which reports directly to the Senate. The Research Committee is the Senate committee with responsibility for all matters concerning research, including postgraduate research degrees; operational responsibility for these degrees is delegated to a subcommittee, the Graduate Research Development Committee.

9 Responsibility for taught programmes is devolved to the Learning and Teaching Committee which is supported by three key subcommittees involving a series of cross-memberships to ensure coherence. The Quality and Standards Subcommittee provides advice on policy and procedure relating to quality assurance and standards and has oversight of the key monitoring and review processes. The audit team saw clear evidence that this subcommittee maintained scrupulous oversight of these processes and was responsive to generic issues identified through them. The Programmes Subcommittee makes recommendations to the Learning and Teaching Committee on the introduction, significant amendment or discontinuation of taught degree programmes, and has a key role in overseeing and auditing the scrutiny of programme proposals by the faculties. The team was able to scrutinise the operation of this subcommittee in detail and was assured that the process was thorough, incorporating rigorous and useful peer review. The Learning and Teaching Development Group focuses on the enhancement agenda within the University. It has overseen the development of academic networks, sought to develop opportunities to disseminate excellent practice across the University and raised the professional profile of learning and teaching activities.

10 Faculties play a vital role in undertaking the quality assurance processes and management of educational provision. Faculty committees, which have cross departmental membership, make recommendations on the approval of new programmes of study and conduct the annual monitoring and review processes. The audit team examined the operation and interaction of these committees and saw clear evidence of careful and responsive management.

11 The annual review of learning and teaching is the University's mechanism for annual programme monitoring. Departments are required to undertake a variable intensity review, the level of which is determined following an assessment undertaken by the Pro Vice Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, the Dean of Faculty and relevant professional support staff. The audit team found the operation of the annual review of learning and teaching to be rigorous, with clear identification of core issues that needed to be addressed by departments. Departmental reports were scrupulously scrutinised at Faculty level, with logs of issues that needed resolution being maintained and tracked by officers. Generic issues that required attention by the University were reported to the Quality and Standards Subcommittee, together with examples of good practice for dissemination beyond the Faculty. The team considered the distinctive and innovative approach to the annual monitoring of teaching and learning, which draws on a range of performance indicators for determining the level of scrutiny to be applied to individual departments, to be a feature of good practice.

12 The Independent Evaluation of Teaching is the mechanism for the periodic review of taught programmes. It confirms that academic standards are consistent with national benchmarks; examines the extent to which learning opportunities are appropriate; and considers the department's future plans for the maintenance of quality and enhancement. Departments are reviewed by means of a two-day visit involving meetings with staff and students and scrutiny of an extensive evidence base. The audit team reviewed the operation of the Evaluation and found

it to be well designed and rigorous. The Evaluation generated comprehensive action plans; these were followed-up by the University, which maintained clear oversight over departmental responses. The University used the Evaluation process to identify generic issues which required central action. The University's policy is for the Evaluations to occur on a six-year cycle but the team found that this had not yet been achieved. The University is encouraged to work towards implementation of its published cycle.

13 Overall, the audit team found the thorough and systematic procedures for quality assurance, which are characterised by a high degree of self-reflection and a rigorous cycle of follow-up actions, to be a feature of good practice.

## **Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards**

14 The University aims to 'maintain the highest standards of excellence in learning, teaching...across a wide range of subjects'. This ambition is underpinned by reference to external benchmarks, the Academic Infrastructure, published by QAA, good practice recognised by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). In response to comment in the last audit, the University has introduced standardised policies across a range of activities in order that levels of variation between departments and faculties are minimised and that fairness and transparency are maintained. Departments and faculties are given responsibilities for managing their own provision within a well-constructed and active regulatory framework. The University maintains a regime that monitors performance indicators, adopts sampling methodologies to audit practices, and involves periodic central checks of departmental activities.

15 The audit team determined that the programme approval processes, together with the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching and the Independent Evaluation of Teaching (referred to above) make an effective contribution to the University's approval, monitoring and review of award standards. The Teaching and Learning Support Unit provides central coordination and support for an annual review of programme specifications. As part of this process, departments are asked to identify any appropriate amendments to ensure the continued currency of these documents. Programme specifications for new or significantly amended programmes are recommended for approval by faculties and, where appropriate, the Programmes Subcommittee as part of the programmes approval process.

16 The University makes scrupulous use of external examiners to ensure that programmes of study are of an appropriate standard. External examiners are expected to comment on the standard of awards by reference to programme specifications, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and relevant subject benchmark statements, as well as by comparison with the standards of other UK universities. They also comment on collective student performance.

17 It is the responsibility of the dean, in consultation with the head of department, to ensure that external examiners' reports are considered and acted upon. If issues are raised that need consideration beyond the department or faculty the relevant dean takes responsibility for forwarding these to the appropriate University committee. External examiner reports are scrutinised by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit, which maintains a log of issues and examples of good practice which is reported to the Quality and Standards Subcommittee. These logs facilitate the monitoring of follow-up action. The University provides an annual generic response to all external examiners to inform them of relevant developments within the University.

18 It was clear to the audit team that the external examiner system ensures both that the programmes of study and assessment are of the appropriate standard and also that the system forms an integral part of the University's quality assurance processes. The team reached the view that the University's procedures for consideration of external examiners' reports, which secure the requisite central oversight and action in response to issues both at local level and those with university-wide implications, are a feature of good practice.

- 19 The University has over 300 programmes that are accredited by public, statutory and regulatory bodies. Matters arising from accreditation visits are normally addressed by departments, although wider issues may be considered at faculty or University level. Institutional oversight is maintained through the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching and the Independent Evaluation of Teaching, for both of which public, statutory and regulatory body reports act as performance indicators.
- 20 Module and programme approval and their subsequent review are informed by the FHEQ. Departments are required to assign an FHEQ level to each module and programme, and to reflect on learning outcomes in the context of the relevant qualification descriptors.
- 21 Departments are expected to engage with subject benchmark statements and to consult them when developing and reviewing programme and module structures and content. Programme specifications are expected to reflect, and refer to, benchmark statements.
- 22 The University has a learning, teaching and assessment strategy, which was developed for the period 2005 to 2010. Following the last audit, a major review of assessment was undertaken that sought to achieve greater consistency in policies and practices across the University. A single method of degree classification was agreed and will be implemented for the first time for degrees awarded in 2008. University-wide principles of fair, valid and reliable assessment were adopted, and University-level assessment criteria provide a framework within which departments are expected to develop both subject and level-specific criteria for each main type of assessment used. Departments are also expected to develop their own learning, teaching and assessment strategies based upon the University's learning teaching and assessment strategy.
- 23 The application of the regulatory framework relating to cases of individual students on taught programmes is the responsibility of academic departments and is subject to ratification at Faculty level. The latter process is managed by the Taught Programmes Office, which ensures consistency of practice. Formal student complaints or appeals are considered at Faculty and University level independently of the academic area to which they relate. A service quality unit within the Student Services Department has an overview and audit role in relation to complaints and related activity.
- 24 The University responded energetically to the recommendations of the 2003 audit on assessment practice. The audit team considered that the University has achieved the objectives of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and operates a consistent, fair and transparent assessment policy. The team consider the extension of the review of assessment into a second phase to be an example of the structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities operating across the institution, and an example of the University responding positively to external initiatives.
- 25 The University has a data quality and management information unit which produces progression, completion and other data. Analysis of these data is carried out centrally and key performance indicators are flagged for comment by departments. The data are used as one key factor informing the intensity of scrutiny applied in the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching and are provided for departments in the form of the Teaching Quality Report Set.
- 26 Overall, the audit team formed the view that the University is providing departments with relevant, reliable and timely data in relation to taught provision, and that good use is being made of this data to inform annual and periodic review processes. There is, however, scope for the use made of management information relating to research degrees to be further developed.
- 27 As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University is that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

### Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

28 It was clear to the audit team that there is a commitment at all levels, from the Vice-Chancellor through the Senior Management Team (and other academic leaders) to staff in the academic and service departments, to the achievement of an excellent learning experience for all students. This is pursued through a regular process of action and reflection as well as through particular responses to individual issues.

29 The University engages with an appropriate range of external points of reference, and national policy initiatives in its commitment to the maintenance of its students' learning opportunities. The publication of new and revised sections of the *Code of practice* triggers a review, coordinated by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit, of relevant institutional policies and practices to identify areas requiring further consideration or revision. Resulting new or amended policy or guidance is considered and approved by the Learning and Teaching Committee and the Senate and is disseminated by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit. The audit team found that the University's use of these reference points was effective in all respects.

30 The University uses a 'task and finish' approach to assess the impact of significant external developments and to identify necessary actions. For example, in response to the national report on Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice, an admissions review working group was established at the University, which drew up recommendations to ensure concurrence with the national recommendations.

31 The audit team reached the view that the University's prompt and effective response to national external initiatives and to matters raised internally through both informal and formal channels was a feature of good practice.

32 The interlocking processes of the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching and of the Independent Evaluation of Teaching provide an effective and proportionate approach to the monitoring and review of programmes of study. Issues for action are clearly identified and then followed up constructively through the committee cycle, to ensure that appropriate responses are made. The audit team found that the University's arrangements for approval, monitoring and review of programmes made an effective contribution to the maintenance of students' learning opportunities.

33 The University regularly surveys student opinion at all levels, from the individual module through the programme to university-wide issues relating to student support. An internal student satisfaction survey has been conducted for several years, and this has now been aligned with the more recent National Student Survey, which the University has participated in from the outset. Information from these various sources is fed into the annual monitoring and periodic review processes, and issues that are identified are either taken up at departmental/faculty level or are pursued, where appropriate, through University-wide initiatives. An annual student evaluation of research degree programmes is also conducted.

34 The audit team formed the view that the University has comprehensive methods of surveying student opinion, and that student opinion forms an important element in maintaining and enhancing the learning opportunities of its students.

35 The University encourages the involvement of students in issues of teaching quality and the student experience at departmental, faculty and university level. The University and the Union of Students cooperate to support a comprehensive system of staff-student committees, which is backed up by a separate network of Union Links. It was clear from discussion with students that there is some variation in the operation of the staff-student committees. The audit team found that there were opportunities for student representatives to play a full and constructive part in assuring quality at departmental level.

36 Student feedback is collected on all modules, and this information, together with the student views expressed through the Student Satisfaction Survey and the National Student Survey, is factored into the annual monitoring and periodic review processes. The student written submission drew on a wide range of information to comment on the student experience as learners, and noted examples of the University's responsiveness to student concerns.

37 As a result of its discussions and reading the audit team determined that the University makes appropriate use of student feedback in maintaining the quality of learning opportunities.

38 The linkage of research and teaching is an essential element of the University's learning, teaching and assessment strategy, and the research activities of staff provide the challenging environment within which University of Sheffield students can develop the attributes that will enhance their employability. The audit team recognised that it is inevitable that research excellence will often be the primary determinant in the appointment of new academic staff as the University pursues its goal of a leading position as a research institution. However, the team found that, through the University's programmes of staff development, it also seeks to ensure that research quality is aligned with exciting pedagogy. It can be difficult for students to understand the excitements and benefits of research, but the team recognised that the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences is spreading the message in its disciplinary areas. It was the team's view that there is scope to embed and extend this more broadly.

39 As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team determined that the University is effective in maintaining links between its research agenda and activities and the teaching and learning opportunities for students.

40 The University has a considerable number of distance-learning programmes, of which the majority are variants of campus-based offerings. The majority of individual programmes have small enrolments, with over half those in social studies having no current students. These are approved, monitored and reviewed as far as possible through the processes normally employed for University programmes. Departments involved in distance learning are aware of the particular issues which may affect these cohorts of students, and provide the appropriate information and guidance, especially through their websites, to address these.

41 Through participation in the HEA/JISC Benchmarking exercise the University has recently had an opportunity to reflect on its use of e-learning, which both supports distance-learning programmes and contributes a blended element to campus-based programmes. The University has concluded that development of further overseas collaborations, (as well as pedagogic innovations at home), will ensure that the lessons from this exercise, which included the opportunity to assess the approaches of other participating institutions, are reviewed and adopted where appropriate.

42 The University has a long track record in part-time study, and is well versed in the difficulties and challenges that part-time students are likely to face. The Institute for Lifelong Learning, through its website and physical presence, offers a comprehensive system of support for these students.

43 As a result of its discussions and reading, the audit team determined that the University effectively maintains the quality of students' learning opportunities in other modes of study.

44 The University is embarked on an ambitious programme of redeveloping its estate, in part to ensure that the physical facilities for teaching and learning match the expectations of its students and the University's wider reputation. The University recognises that this is a continuous process, with improvements in one place raising expectations for other areas, but appeared committed to handling this long-term challenge for regular improvement. Specific issues that require attention are raised through the annual monitoring process, or may be highlighted through the National Student Survey responses.



45 The Information Commons is one example of a major investment to enhance the student learning experience. The additional work spaces as well as extra personal computers have relieved some of the previous pressures on University resources, and also help to smooth out some of the inevitable disruptions resulting from the overhaul and rationalisation of other library facilities. The audit team recognises that such change to familiar provision is bound to cause some tensions and negative reaction, but it took the view that the University was taking reasonable steps to manage these by explaining the factors underlying the developments and responding, where possible, to specific requests.

46 The two centres for excellence in teaching and learning which the University hosts offer important support for different aspects of the University's teaching and learning agenda. The Centre for Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences focuses on exploring and developing teaching-research linkages in the arts and social sciences, while the White Rose Centre for Excellence in the Teaching and Learning of Enterprise relates to the development of graduates' employability skills. The University is aware of the need to identify long-term funding for these initiatives.

47 The audit team determined that the University manages the provision, allocation and management of learning resources effectively so as to maintain, and as appropriate enhance, the quality of students' learning opportunities.

48 The University publishes a clear policy and procedures on admissions, and is taking steps through the Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing service to ensure that the experience of applicants and new students is monitored and improved, where possible. The audit team found that the Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing services to departments are appropriately defined and that it also regularly monitors departmental activity to ensure student satisfaction. The team formed the view that the University is effective in ensuring the consistent implementation of its admissions policy.

49 At a central level, support for students is provided in a variety of ways by both the University and the Sheffield Union of Students', and its overall effectiveness depends upon a close and constructive collaboration between these partners. A students' charter offers a clear statement of institutional policies and student rights and responsibilities. The University's Student Services Department maintains a website that provides information for different groups of students, and also supports specific projects to enhance student provision. The Academic Diary is the first port of call for students needing information from the University about all aspects of life and work at the University. The Student Services Information Desk complements this institutional provision.

50 At departmental level, support for students is provided through a personal tutoring system, which can also serve to support personal development planning activity. The University is aware of some problems in the system, and the audit team recognised that the University is committed to continue tackling the issues.

51 The development of student employability is a strategic priority for the University, and the key characteristics of a University of Sheffield graduate are defined in the learning, teaching and assessment strategy. Skills development makes an important contribution, and the University is aware that further support is needed for some academic skills, for example in mathematics, and has invested to enhance this. Beyond the academic curricula, the wide range of student activities provides considerable scope for the development of general skills, and the University has taken steps to provide recognition for these through the creation of a Sheffield Graduate Award.

52 The University supports a variety of arrangements that contribute effectively to maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities. Within the context of this overall system of support, the audit team considered that the Academic Diary, through the clarity and comprehensiveness of its information, was a feature of good practice.

53 In keeping with its commitment to enhancement, the University supports a variety of development opportunities for its staff. Induction activities are arranged both centrally and in departments for new staff, and supporting guidance is published on the web. Probationary staff are required to take an HEA-accredited certificate in higher education, with appropriate exemptions being available in accordance with previous experience. The University has recognised its responsibilities to non-established or hourly-paid staff, and is working to implement fully the results of a comprehensive review of the support provided to this significant group within the cohort of teachers. Support and guidance are also available to researchers at different stages in their careers through the Research Leaders Programme. A staff review and development scheme is in place, which embraces all staff. The now University-wide policy of peer observation of teaching complements this. After its introduction in 2006-07, peer observation is now to be extended to the few areas which did not implement it in its first year.

54 The University has recently clarified the ways in which teaching can be recognised through promotions procedures, and the establishment of a cadre of senior academics whose status has largely been achieved through teaching excellence will give added impetus to the process. The Senate Award Scheme to recognise excellent teaching has been successfully embedded, is attracting increasing numbers of applications, and provides clear evidence for institutional recognition for excellent teaching.

55 It was clear to the auditors that the University's arrangements for the support and development of academic staff in relation to their teaching duties were effective in meeting the needs of its different groups of teaching staff.

56 As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University of Sheffield is that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

#### **Section 4: The institution's approach to the management of quality enhancement**

57 The University's framework for enhancing learning and teaching is underpinned by its learning, teaching and assessment strategy which is designed to respond to a number of internal and external drivers influencing learning and teaching. The University stated that it had made considerable investment in the framework for supporting enhancement.

58 In support of this strategy, the University has made developments in its central infrastructure and in the level of partnership between academic colleagues and professional services. The Learning and Teaching Development Group has also initiated a range of strategic enhancement projects with the aim of engaging the whole institution, including its students, with an ethos of reflective improvement.

59 The audit team found that the University had a clearly articulated enhancement strategy which was being implemented effectively. The team recognised that the use of directors of learning and teaching development and of departmental learning and teaching advocates was helping to stimulate and support the University's enhancement agenda and considered this to be a feature of good practice. It found that the University was taking deliberate steps both to enhance the learning experience of its students and also to reward staff, via promotion and otherwise, who demonstrated excellence in teaching or took on national or international responsibilities in teaching policy and innovation.

60 The University considers effective communication with both staff and students to be a key feature of its enhancement agenda. The audit team studied PGR Link, a newsletter produced by the Graduate Research Office and published three times a year for the use of postgraduate research students. It provides a wide range of useful information concerning funding opportunities, research facilities and opportunities to attend and give papers at research conferences. As a matter of policy, PGR Link also incorporates material from the Sheffield Union

of Students'. The audit team considered the production of the PGR Link newsletter as a good example of the constructive relationship that exists between the University and the Students' Union. More specifically, PGR Link also contributes to the fostering of a sense of community about postgraduate research students. The team considered it to be a feature of good practice.

61 The audit team found that the University had a structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the institution.

## Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

62 Since the last institutional audit, the University has reviewed its portfolio of collaborative activity and has systematically reduced the amount of validated provision with which it is engaged, concentrating this provision in a small number of institutions whose reputation and level of scholarship it believes to be consonant with its own. As from 2007-08, there are four partnerships with approximately 1,000 registered students. At the same time, the University is expanding its involvement in other types of partnership, including jointly delivered awards at master's level, articulation agreements (in particular with Sheffield International College, operated in partnership with Kaplan International Colleges) and locally-supported distance learning. The University has a clear and generally understood definition of collaborative activity, and has recently taken measures to ensure that all forms of collaboration which do not involve formal validated provision are also subject to central University approval.

63 The procedures for quality assurance of collaborative activity are clearly set out in the Collaborative Studies Handbook and are as thorough and systematic as those which apply to the University's internal programmes. Scrutiny by the audit team of validation and review processes indicated that these had been conducted strictly in accordance with the University's procedures and, in particular, that matters such as recommendations arising out of validations were carefully followed through.

64 Procedures for external examining in collaborative provision are rigorous, and the University ensures that external examiner reports are given careful consideration by partner institutions, with any matters requiring action being followed up to ensure that they have been effectively addressed.

65 A strategy statement on collaborative provision has recently been approved by the Board of Collaborative Studies; this does not, however, constitute a fully developed strategy for collaborative activity, and indeed the University's strategy in this area was described as 'evolving'. The audit team recommends the University to continue to develop its strategy, and to consider two matters in particular. Firstly, the team encountered evidence that a lack of precision in defining regulatory arrangements in connection with joint awards had the potential to lead to inequity in the treatment of students registered for the same award, but in different institutions. The team, therefore, recommends that it is advisable for the University to ensure that the process for the approval of joint awards includes the production of a clear specification of the procedures and regulatory provisions to be applied to delivery of the programmes of study. Secondly, the team noted that when new partnerships were under development, the distinction between approval of the partner organisation and approval of the provision to be delivered through that organisation was not always maintained, leading to the possibility that plans for course delivery might reach an advanced stage before any agreement was concluded at an institutional level. The team considers it desirable for the University to consider establishing a clear separation in time between the approval of potential collaborative organisations and of the programmes to be delivered through the collaborative arrangement.

66 Notwithstanding these recommendations, the audit team has confidence in the University's management of the standards of its collaborative partnerships, and believes that the University's collaborative arrangements are in accord with the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.



## Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

67 The University states that research students make an extremely important contribution to the University's research culture and outputs and, in doing so, help to achieve several of the goals of its overall strategy. The University's management of its research degree programmes was reviewed by QAA in 2006. The review concluded that the University's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its provision for postgraduate research students was appropriate and satisfactory. The University produces a Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, updated annually, which informs students about registration, fees, research-training requirements, supervision arrangements, upgrading, thesis preparation and assessment.

68 The Graduate Research Development Committee is charged with maintaining and enhancing the concept of a research-led postgraduate culture and with monitoring and enhancing the quality of the postgraduate research experience. Administrative support is provided by a dedicated graduate research office. At faculty level, responsibility for standards resides with deans and subdeans for graduate affairs.

69 The University places considerable stress on the utility of its Research Training Programme, which provides both generic and subject-specific skills. Full-time students may not progress from MPhil to PhD until they have achieved the requisite number of module credits from this programme. The audit team found that the programme was rigorously monitored in respect both of quality assurance and opportunities for quality enhancement.

70 The admissions process is administered by the University's Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing with academic input at departmental level. The audit team concluded that this process was clear and transparent. It noted, however, that not all departments were meeting the University's Code of Practice, since not all UK applicants were interviewed.

71 The University provides induction sessions at the beginning of the academic year. More than 90 per cent of students attended at least some of the induction sessions. At departmental level, however, the audit team found that provision of induction was variable.

72 It is University policy for all research students to be allocated one main supervisor who will be part of a supervisory team. According to the University's Code of Practice for Research Students, students should submit progress reports at regular intervals. The audit team found that arrangements for reporting on, and reviewing, progression generally worked well. The University has itself noted considerable variation and some instances of non-compliance with its Code of Practice. Some departments did not have supervisory teams in place, the regularity of supervision meetings varied significantly and records of supervisory meetings were not always systematically kept. Some research students whom the team met were uncertain about the processes involved in upgrading from MPhil to PhD. The team also found evidence of wide variations and practices (for instance in departmental requirements for upgrading). Although some of these are explained by differences in disciplinary cultures, others are not. Some supervisory guidance was at variance with the requirements of departmental handbooks. The team, therefore, considers it advisable that the University take steps to secure consistent and equitable practice of central and local guidance for the management of postgraduate research provision, with particular reference to supervisory arrangements and rules for progression from MPhil to PhD.

73 The University has a number of means, both formal and informal, of acquiring feedback from postgraduate research students. The audit team found that feedback arrangements were satisfactory and noted that students were broadly satisfied with the forms of representation and feedback available to them. It noted, however, that a small number of departments have not systematically sought local feedback from research students. It encourages the University to continue its efforts to ensure that this issue is satisfactorily addressed.

74 Postgraduate research students are assessed on the basis of the quality of their research theses and on their performance in a viva voce examination. The University provides detailed guidance notes for the use of internal and external examiners. The audit team concluded that arrangements for assessment are both appropriate and satisfactory and are broadly in line with the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

75 Detailed information about complaints concerning the quality of services or of research supervision and about academic appeals is provided in the University's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. The audit team considered the processes to be satisfactory and it noted that the numbers both of complaints and appeals was very low. Due process was observed in the handling of appeals and the results were communicated promptly to students.

76 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for maintaining academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes are clearly documented and appropriate. They broadly meet the requirements of of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

77 The University provides a large amount of information for students, staff and other stakeholders, both in printed form and via its web pages. The recently created student recruitment, marketing and admissions service has overall responsibility for the University's 'communications with all internal and external audiences'. The service engages in a number of methods of checking on the accuracy of published information, including 'mystery shopping' activities. Specific aspects of information provision are also monitored by appropriate bodies; for example, the accuracy of information published by collaborative partners is monitored annually by the Board of Collaborative Studies. The audit team believes, based on the evidence examined, that the University's procedures ensure the accuracy of the information which it publishes.

78 The student written submission, and the comments of students who met the audit team, indicate that the information provided by the University is generally regarded as accurate and helpful, and this is confirmed by the University's student satisfaction survey, which shows that a high proportion of students are satisfied with information provision. The team saw a large number of examples of information provided to students, in particular the Academic Diary, which combines diary pages incorporating key dates (for example, registration, module changes) with a section covering regulations, rights and responsibilities. The team regarded the Diary as an example of good practice.

79 The audit team found that, overall, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University of Sheffield publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

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

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the distinctive and innovative approach to the annual monitoring of teaching and learning which draws on a range of performance indicators to determine the level of scrutiny to be applied to individual departments (paragraph 11)
- the thorough and systematic procedures for quality assurance, which are characterised by a high degree of self-reflection and a rigorous cycle of follow-up actions (paragraph 13)

- the procedures for consideration of external examiners' reports, which secure the requisite central oversight and action in response to issues both at the local level and those with university-wide implications (paragraph 18)
- the University's prompt and effective response to national external initiatives and to matters raised internally through both informal and formal channels (paragraph 31)
- the Academic Diary, which provides students with a single, concise, but comprehensive source of information about the University and its policies, procedures and regulatory requirements (paragraphs 49, 52 and 78)
- the use of directors of learning and teaching development, and of departmental Learning and Teaching Advocates, to stimulate and support the University's enhancement agenda in line with its learning, teaching and assessment strategy (paragraph 59)
- the PGR Link newsletter for postgraduate research students, the production of which exemplifies the constructive relationship between the University and the Sheffield Union of Students', and which contributes to the fostering of a sense of community among postgraduate research students (paragraph 60)
- the structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the institution (paragraph 61).

### **Recommendations for action**

81 Recommendations for action that are advisable:

- to ensure that the process for the approval of joint awards includes the production of a clear specification of the procedures and regulatory provisions to be applied to delivery of the programmes of study (paragraph 65)
- to secure consistent and equitable application of central and local guidance for the management of postgraduate research provision with particular reference to supervisory arrangements and rules for progression from MPhil to PhD (paragraph 72).

82 A recommendation for action that is desirable:

- to consider establishing a clear separation in time between the approval of potential collaborative organisations and approval of the programmes to be delivered through the collaborative arrangement (paragraph 65).

## **Appendix**

### **The University of Sheffield's response to the institutional audit report**

The University of Sheffield welcomes the report as the culmination of a very useful and constructive process. We welcome in particular the endorsement given by QAA to many aspects of our activities and the significant commendations contained in the report. The fact that many different parts of the University are identified in these, including academic staff, professional support services and the Students' Union, reflects our efforts to achieve true partnership working in delivering a high-quality student experience.

The small number of recommendations have already been discussed at appropriate levels. That relating to postgraduate research students has been considered by Faculty Graduate Research Committees and by the Graduate Research Development Committee, and there is resolve to tighten up on the operation of agreed processes. Recommendations relating to Collaborative Studies have already been incorporated in guidelines on procedures.

The University is currently revising its governance structures, and the views expressed in the audit report will strongly inform discussions on that revision.

