

University of Sheffield

November 2007

Annex to the report

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance 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.

Outcomes of the institutional audit

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

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

Institutional arrangements for 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 by QAA.

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 of good practice:

- 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 (paragraphs 13 to 23)
- 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 (paragraphs 14 to 18)
- the procedures for consideration of external examiners' reports, which secure the requisite central overview and action in response to issues, both at the local level and those with university-wide implications (paragraphs 30 and 34)
- the University's prompt and effective response to national external initiatives and to matters raised internally through both informal and formal channels (paragraphs 43 and 53 to 56)
- 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 (paragraphs 93 and 175).

- the use of directors of learning and teaching 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 (paragraphs 115 to 117)
- the PGR Link newsletter for postgraduate research students, the production of which exemplifies the constructive relationship between the University and the University's Union of Students, and which contributes to the fostering of a sense of community among postgraduate research students (paragraph 119)
- the structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the institution (paragraph 128).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers 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 142)
- 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 162).

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- 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 (paragraph 140).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The University 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.

2 The University describes its new style of strategic planning, and the five-year corporate plan, 'Our Shared Vision', that resulted from it, as 'the most significant' development since the last audit. The University's mission is 'to discover and understand'. The University aims to provide a learning experience which 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'.

Other developments since the last audit

3 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 that 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.

4 The University responded positively 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.

5 The University has reviewed its portfolio of collaborative activity and has systematically reduced the amount of validated provision concentrating this in a small number of institutions whose reputation and level of scholarship it believes to be consonant with its own. 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.

The information base for the audit

6 The University provided the audit team with a briefing paper and supporting documentation, including that relating to the sampling trails selected by the team. The index to the Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the University's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. The team had a hard copy of all documents referenced in the Briefing Paper; in addition, the team had access to the University's intranet.

7 The Sheffield Union of Students' produced a students' written submission setting out the students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

8 In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the report of the previous institutional audit 2003
- reports of reviews by QAA at the subject level since the previous institutional audit
- QAA Review of postgraduate research programmes
- reports produced by other relevant bodies (for example, Ofsted and professional, statutory or regulatory bodies)
- the institution's internal documents
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Institutional framework for managing academic standards and learning opportunities

9 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 is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Academic Planning and 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.

10 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 Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching chairs the Learning and Teaching Committee and two of its subcommittees. The Quality and Standards Subcommittee provides advice on policy and procedure relating to quality assurance and standards and has overview 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 maintains an overview of the programme approval process (see paragraph 13) and has a key role in overseeing and auditing the scrutiny of programme proposals by the faculties. 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.

11 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. Each faculty has a subcommittee, the Faculty Teaching Affairs Committee, the terms of reference of which are common. Recommendations from these subcommittees are made to the Faculty Board and ultimately to the Senate, via the Learning and Teaching Committee. The Annual Review of Learning and Teaching is usually conducted by the Faculty Teaching Quality Committee, but the Teaching Affairs Committee and Graduate Research Committee may, in certain circumstances, also have an input.

12 Having audited the operation and interaction of these committees and subcommittees and seen clear evidence of careful and responsive management, the audit team reached the view that University's framework for the management of academic standards and learning opportunities was effective.

13 Programme approval is managed by the Programmes Subcommittee, which makes recommendations to the Learning and Teaching Committee on the introduction, significant amendment or discontinuation of taught degree programmes. Minor changes to the curriculum (for example, the title) are handled at faculty level. At the Subcommittee, every new proposal is reviewed by one committee member, who, where possible, discusses it with a second reviewer in advance of the meeting. Approval may be given in principle, with referral back to the department for amendments and clarification. The audit team also saw evidence that proposals could be rejected, for example, because the extra staffing resources had not been agreed by the Academic Development Committee and because further amendments were required. The Programmes Subcommittee also conducts an annual audit of proposals approved by faculties during the previous session to ensure that a robust process has been followed. 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.

14 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 (light, intermediate or full) is determined, following an assessment undertaken by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, the Dean of Faculty and relevant professional support staff. They consider a set of key indicators, including National Student Survey data, issues from external examiners reports, data relating to appeals and complaints, progression and attainment statistics and Independent Evaluation of Teaching reports, to determine the depth of report expected from each department. 'Light touch' reviews require comment and reflection on progress in relation to action plans arising from preceding reviews, together with reflection on teaching quality indicators, including any opportunities for the promotion of good practice. Intermediate reviews additionally require consideration of specific issues highlighted by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Dean, and an action plan to address these, where appropriate. Full reviews require a comprehensive analysis of all provision, consideration of adverse indicators, and a full action plan.

15 Auditors reviewed annual review of learning and teaching reports from several faculties, assessed the evidence base provided and the treatment of these reports by faculties and the Quality and Standards Subcommittee. The process for considering the information at different levels is clearly defined.

16 It is clear from the annual review of learning and teaching pro forma completed by departments that the University clearly identifies core issues that needed to be addressed by departments. These include active monitoring of preceding review activities, specific responses to issues raised by the Dean and Pro-Vice-Chancellor during the intensity meeting, comments on the previous year's action plan and an assessment of progress against the departmental learning, teaching and assessment strategy, if applicable.

17 Departmental reports were scrupulously scrutinised by Faculty teaching quality committees, with logs of issues that needed resolution being maintained and tracked by officers. The Quality and Standards Subcommittee receives and considers a faculty report on the outcomes of the annual review of learning and teaching which highlights key generic issues that emerged during the review process, together with examples of good practice for dissemination beyond the faculty. Information from the Faculty reports is then sent to the appropriate central service departments and the action taken reported back to faculties. The Quality and Standards Subcommittee then considers responses from these groups and comments, as appropriate, identifying where further action is needed and how this will be taken forward.

18 The audit team found the operation of the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching to be rigorous. The team considered 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, to be a feature of good practice.

19 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 and enhancement of quality. These are set out in the Independent Evaluation of Teaching Guidance produced by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit and this is supplemented in the agenda and notes for Evaluation panel members. Departments are reviewed by means of a two-day visit, involving meetings with staff and students and scrutiny of an extensive evidence base. The Independent Evaluation of Teaching is conducted by a panel that includes two external members from other universities, two experienced academics from other faculties and two members of the Teaching and Learning Support Unit. It is chaired by a senior academic from outside the faculty, who remains engaged in the follow-up process on the review's recommendations. The University provides detailed guidance to panel members and the Evaluation panel asks explicit questions, which provide the University with assurance that the standards of awards, the student learning experience and

quality enhancement are appropriate. The Evaluation panel is informed by a pre-visit scrutiny of a departmental self-evaluation report, the departmental learning and teaching strategy, key performance indicators statistical information, programme specifications, information prepared for students, previous internal and external periodic teaching quality reviews, annual review of teaching quality reports and external examiners' reports.

20 Following the Independent Evaluation of Teaching, a detailed report is produced that includes commendations and recommendations.. Departments are required to produce an action plan in response to recommendations arising from the Evaluation. This plan is approved and monitored by the appropriate faculty. The faculty teaching quality committees ensure that recommendations made in the Evaluation are implemented through a range of follow-up meetings. The operation of the Evaluation is kept under review and overseen by a project team of professional support staff. Generic issues arising from the visits are monitored by the Quality and Standards Subcommittee.

21 The University's policy is for the independent evaluations of teaching to occur on a six-year cycle, but the current schedule of visits shows that this has not yet been achieved, although by the end of the current cycle of visits in 2008-09, there will have been some progress in reducing the interval from nine to 10 years in 2004 and 2005 to eight to nine years. The University is encouraged to continue to work towards implementation of its published cycle.

22 The audit team was able to evaluate the effectiveness of the Independent Evaluation of Teaching by reviewing its operation in two departments, the Department of Physics and Astronomy and the Institute for Lifelong Learning. The team was also able to note the monitoring of other Independent Evaluation of Teaching events through Faculty teaching quality committee papers and the minutes of the Quality and Standards Subcommittee and the Learning and Teaching Committee. The audit team concluded that the operation of the Independent Evaluation of Teaching was well designed and rigorous. The Evaluation generated clear action plans; these were followed up by the University, which maintained oversight of departmental responses. The University used the Evaluation process to identify generic issues which required central action.

23 Overall, the auditors 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

24 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, 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 developed and 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 is 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.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

25 The audit team determined that the programme approval processes, together with the annual review of learning and teaching, which secured central oversight of the assessment process, and the Independent Evaluation of Teaching, made an effective contribution to the University's approval, monitoring and review of award standards.

26 In addition, 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. The audit team considered programme specifications mounted on the University's intranet to be both detailed and effective, initially as a tool in the programme approval process and subsequently as an information source for staff and students.

External examiners

27 The report of the 2003 audit considered that the external examiner system was working effectively, but noted that it was to some extent 'a process which stood apart from other key processes for quality assurance and standards'. The 2003 report also stated that in the 2002-03 session, for the first time, an overview report of matters arising from external examiners' reports was prepared and submitted to the Quality and Standards Subcommittee.

28 The Quality and Standards Subcommittee has considered the University's alignment with amendments to the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, published by QAA. The University of Sheffield's own Code of practice for the External Examiners of Taught Programmes provides clear guidance on the policies and procedures that are to be followed, and establishes transparent lines of communication and responsibility.

29 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 student performance.

30 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 that is reported to the Quality and Standards Subcommittee. These logs facilitate the monitoring of follow-up action by identifying responsibility and tracking outcomes. The University provides an annual generic response to all external examiners to inform them of relevant developments within the University. These logs are considered by the Quality and Standards Subcommittee and key issues reported to the Learning and Teaching Committee.

31 The audit team tracked departmental responses to external examiners' comments via the papers presented in respect of the Independent Evaluations of Teaching for the Department of Physics and Astronomy and for the Institute for Lifelong Learning. The audit team noted the careful use made by the independent evaluation of teaching teams of external examiners' comments in their scrutiny. The audit team considered the use of external examiners' comments to inform the decision of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Learning and Teaching and the Dean of Faculty as to the intensity of the annual review of learning and teaching. The team also considered the logs of issues pertaining to external examiners' comments on undergraduate programmes for 2006-07, and for both undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes for the 2005-06 and 2004-05 sessions for all faculties.

32 The audit team reached the view that these processes demonstrated a thorough scrutiny of external examiners' comments by the University and their use to inform University policy. Clear evidence of the University's responsiveness to external examiners' comments was seen in the University's amendment of its examination regulations concerning the award of Merit and Distinction on taught master's courses, following the issue being raised by several external examiners.

33 The audit team also read the generic responses to external examiners and found these to be a clear, informative and accurate reflection of the issues identified and addressed in the external examiner reports.

34 It was the view of the audit team that the external examiner system could no longer be considered to be isolated from key quality assurance processes. It was clear that the system ensured both that the programmes of study and assessment were of an appropriate standard and also that the system forms an integral part of the University's quality assurance processes. On the basis of their consideration, the audit 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 the local level and those with university-wide implications, to be a feature of good practice.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

35 Module and programme approval and their subsequent review are informed by consideration of 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.

36 Departments are expected to consult subject benchmark statements when developing and reviewing programme and module structures and content. External examiners are explicitly asked to comment on the alignment of programmes with the published national subject benchmarks and compatibility with the relevant statements is also reviewed in the context of the Independent Evaluation of Teaching. Programme specifications are expected to reflect, and refer to, subject benchmark statements.

37 The University has over 300 programmes which are accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. Institutional oversight is maintained through the annual review of learning and teaching and the Independent Evaluation of Teaching, for both of which professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation reports act as performance indicators. The Independent Evaluation of Teaching considers professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation reports and departmental responses to them.

Assessment policies and regulations

38 The 2003 audit recommended that, as matter of priority, the University should review and revise its assessment practices in the interests of transparency, consistency and fairness. The audit team tracked the University's response to this recommendation. The University established a 'Review of Assessment', which sought to achieve greater consistency in practices across the University, including the introduction of a single method of degree classification. Consideration was given to generic assessment descriptors, variations in practice, assessment strategy and design, including good practice guides and case-studies, and possible methodologies for a single degree classification scheme. The recommendations of the review group were discussed fully in the faculties.

39 The review process influenced parts of the learning, teaching and assessment strategy, which was developed for the period 2005-10. It also led to the adoption of University-wide principles of fair, valid and reliable assessment. The audit team considered these to be well designed and to give clear guidance. University-level generic assessment criteria were approved to provide a framework within which departments are expected to develop subject, and level-specific criteria for each main type of assessment used.

40 Departments are also expected to develop their own learning, teaching and assessment strategies based upon the University's learning teaching and assessment strategy. The development of these is overseen by faculty teaching quality committees and departments are

asked to comment on their strategies in their Annual Review of Learning and Teaching reports. It was evident to the team that they also feature in Independent Evaluation of Teaching reports and subsequent follow-up by the relevant faculty.

41 As part of the review of assessment, the University conducted a thorough and wide ranging comparison of methods by which to calculate degree classifications. After wide consultation, a single classification method was established, which will come into effect for the first time for undergraduate degrees awarded in 2008.

42 The application of the regulatory framework relating to individual student cases 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 from 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.

43 The University responded rigorously to the recommendations of the 2003 audit on assessment practice. The audit team considers that the University has achieved the objectives of its learning, teaching and assessment strategy and operates a consistent, fair and transparent assessment policy. The team considers the extension of the 'Review of Assessment' into a second phase (to explore all aspects of assessment including its function and purpose) to be an example of the structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the institution, and an example of the University responding positively to external initiatives.

Management information - statistics

44 The University has a data quality and management information unit, which produces a large volume of progression, completion and other data. Analysis of these data is carried out centrally. Key performance indicators are flagged for comment by departments and extensive guidance is provided on the content and structure of these data.

45 The audit team learned during the audit that the centrally produced data have increasing credibility with departmental staff, and that the tendency for databases to be held at local level has correspondingly been much reduced.

46 The Teaching Quality Report Set, introduced in 2004-05, provides five-year data on a range of criteria: undergraduate cohort progression; first degree population review; postgraduate taught student survey outcomes; postgraduate research student population review; and other reports, which can be analysed across variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, socioeconomic grouping and tariff score at entry. These data sets are used to inform the intensity of scrutiny applied to the annual review of learning and teaching.

47 Examination during the audit of documentation for both the annual review of learning and teaching and the Independent Evaluation of Teaching processes indicated that the data provided were of a high quality, and that departments do indeed engage with the information which they contains. The University's guidance for self-evaluations requires not only use of the internal data, but reference to appropriate external benchmarks, thus introducing an element of externality to the process.

48 In relation to research degrees, the pro forma for the Independent Review of Research Supervision and Support requires departments to provide statistical information relating to progression and completion, and these data are also carefully analysed by the Graduate Research Office. However, the reports of reviews contained little reference to this information, and there was also some evidence of dissatisfaction in departments with the centrally produced data relating to postgraduate research students.

49 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.

50 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

51 The University's learning, teaching and assessment strategy for 2005-10 has three overarching aims: to educate students within a research-led environment, to support the vision of the University of Sheffield graduate, and to provide fair, valid and reliable assessment. To help realise these aims the strategy defines 15 objectives for all students, plus three additional objectives for postgraduates and lists 12 key characteristics of the University of Sheffield graduate. The strategy is to be implemented through six strands: the development of departmental learning, teaching and assessment strategies, support for networks of champions and special interest groups, university-wide projects to develop key themes, operation of rigorous internal and external mechanisms to assure the quality of the student learning experience, promotion of professional standards, and recognition and reward for excellent practice in learning and teaching. The audit team found that considerable progress had been made in advancing the six strands and in achieving the objectives.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

52 With regard to the *Code of practice* and the publication of revised sections, the University states that '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'.

53 The audit team reviewed how the University had considered two of the revised sections of the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education* and *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. In each case, the Teaching and Learning Support Unit had prepared a clear briefing document that reported the original precept, the revised precept and commented on the extent to which the University's practices met the expectations of the new precept, identifying what action was needed if any. It was also evident to the team that revised sections of the *Code of practice* relating to the assessment of students and also to programme approval, monitoring and review had been subject to a thorough digest prepared by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit, which was considered in a meeting of the Quality and Standards Subcommittee. In all cases, the changes were clearly iterated and new requirements identified.

54 It was also evident to the audit team that University-level committees and relevant sections of professional services engaged with the QAA's consultation process on proposed revisions to specific sections of the *Code of practice*. Institutional oversight of departmental engagement with external reference points is maintained through the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching and Independent Evaluation of Teaching processes.

55 The University uses its 'task-and-finish' approach to assess the impact of significant external developments and to identify necessary actions. Thus, in response to 'Fair Admissions to Higher Education: Recommendations for Good Practice' (the Schwartz report), an admissions review working group was established, which first met in December 2004. The aim was to determine how far the University and its individual departments met the recommendations of the Schwartz report and the expectations of the precepts in the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*. This Working Group reported to the Academic Development

Committee in December 2006 with 11 recommendations for implementation no later than 2007 entry, and a schedule for progress against the recommendations.

56 Evidence from the documentation established that the University pays attention to relevant external points of reference, assesses the possible impact of developments, and adapts its internal policies and practices appropriately. 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.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

57 Clear guidance on processes for approval, monitoring and review is provided by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit. The guidance document on programme design and approval defines what counts as a new programme and distinguishes between amendments classified as significant and non-significant. The process is illustrated in a flow chart, which is supported by lists of the necessary consultations and documentation for each stage in the process. The guidance on the annual review of learning and teaching and the Independent Evaluation of Teaching processes is clear, with lists of questions under standards of awards, quality of student learning experience, and quality enhancement and forward look, and provides a basis for everyone involved in the processes to understand what the stages and purposes are.

58 The interlocking processes of the annual review of learning and teaching and 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 an ethos of regular review of programmes, reflection and consequent action is embedded fully in the culture of the institution.

59 So far, the majority of departments have undergone the 'light touch' annual review of learning and teaching, although there are some examples of the intermediate and full processes. Securing Faculty engagement with the annual review of learning and teaching outcomes had been regarded as a possible problem when the scheme was launched, and there is evidence of ongoing reflection on the issue. It was discussed at the Quality and Standards Subcommittee in relation to a request from one faculty to conduct a pilot of an electronic discussion forum and possible disadvantages and advantages were weighed. The audit team saw clear evidence of reflection on the effectiveness of the annual review of learning and teaching process by this Subcommittee. The Subcommittee discussed the dissemination of good practice from annual reviews of learning and teaching, taking action to ensure that one faculty complied with the requirement to identify good practice. It invited the Teaching and Learning Support Unit to consider the role of faculties in dissemination and how new staff could be made aware of policies, procedures and good practice. Examples of good practice arising from the 2006-07 Annual Review of Learning and Teaching cycle were forwarded to the recently appointed case-studies project officer.

60 The audit team found that the University's arrangements for approval, monitoring and review of programmes, which are characterised by a high degree of self-reflection and a rigorous cycle of follow-up actions (see paragraphs 13-23), made an effective contribution to the maintenance of students' learning opportunities.

Management information - feedback from students

61 The University regularly surveys student views about teaching and learning issues, central services, and the scope for enhancement. At departmental level, modules are evaluated by anonymous questionnaires through a combination of tick boxes and space for free comment; central guidance is provided on minimum expectations for these questionnaires as well as a model for local adaptation, but a rigid set of questions is not imposed. In addition, final-year

students are asked about core courses, the syllabus as a whole, and their time at the University. Issues are taken up, as appropriate, by the head of department, the departmental teaching committee, the staff-student committee, or the Library Committee.

62 There are also targeted surveys of specific groups, such as postgraduate research students, and international students, for whom a series of feedback and monitoring mechanisms are listed: evaluation sheets for participants in orientation and for new arrivals; contact with the Union's sabbatical international officer; correspondence; focus groups; evaluation weeks; student services suggestion scheme; and informal networking.

63 The University encouraged its students to participate in the National Student Survey while the University's annual student satisfaction survey, which is planned jointly with the Students' Union and conducted by the Oxford Research Agency, collects information towards the end of the first session about student experiences of centrally provided services (for example, library and information technology facilities, as well as questions of academic support). The student satisfaction survey predates the National Student Survey, but in 2005-06, action was taken to bring together the findings of the various surveys and the University's survey was aligned with the National Student Survey to pose the same questions to students before their final year.

64 The results of these surveys are widely disseminated within the institution and specific actions arising from the University's student satisfaction survey are posted on the website. Faculties identify issues arising from the National Student Survey and the University's own survey with regard to each department as part of the annual review of learning and teaching process; this affects, in particular, the decision as to the level of review required. Faculty deans take the lead in discussing results and raise directly, with heads of department, cases where a departmental score in the National Student Survey has declined or where there is other cause for concern. Emergent themes are taken up by special 'task and finish' groups or through specific projects. The processes and results of student evaluation, from departmental surveys to the National Student Survey, are monitored through the independent evaluations of teaching.

65 The audit team formed the view that the University has effective and comprehensive ways of assessing and surveying student opinion, and that student opinion forms an important element in maintaining and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities for its students.

Role of students in quality assurance

66 The University states that 'active participation of students in departmental, faculty and University committees is encouraged', although it also notes that participation is best at departmental and central University level. This is supported in the students written submission, which refers also to the membership of Students' Union officers on key University committees and the informal interactions of these officers with senior University managers. Students sit on all the main committees that monitor the annual review of learning and teaching and the Independent Evaluation of Teaching processes, identify issues/areas for action and monitor the follow-up. Students do not sit on the Evaluation panels, but these are informed by discussions with students.

67 In academic departments, elected course representatives belong to staff-student committees, the suggested membership of which is set out in a joint University/Sheffield Union of Students' Code of Practice; training and support for the course representatives on these committees is provided by the Union's student representative coordinator. These departmental structures are supplemented by a network of union links, one student in each academic department who is recruited and paid by the Students' Union, to enhance communication between the Union and departmental students and to ensure that student representation is working well. It is also accepted by the institution and students that engagement is currently less effective at faculty level.

68 When the audit team met a group of students, which included some current and former course representatives, it heard that the take-up of training for representatives was patchy. Mixed views were also expressed about the visibility of some course representatives.

69 On the basis of discussions and reading the students' written submission and other documentation, the audit team formed the view that students make a significant contribution to assuring the quality of their learning opportunities.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

70 The University states that research and scholarship inform and enrich the environment within which learning and teaching occurs. The significance of the contribution that the research activities of staff make in shaping curricula and enabling students to gain knowledge and skills through a challenging, questioning, rewarding and distinctive educational experience is also emphasised in the University's new overarching strategy document, *Our Shared Vision*.

71 The audit team was able to confirm, as a result of its scrutiny of documentation, that the availability of relevant research expertise is considered during the approval process for new programmes. The linkage of research and teaching is also one of the issues monitored through the Independent Evaluation of Teaching process.

72 Research excellence is a key factor in the appointment of new staff. *Our Shared Vision* states that the institution will 'set the agenda in terms of global research activities; recruit, retain and provide sustained development for the very best people and those with the potential to set tomorrow's research agenda; position the University at the forefront of academic discovery', with the goal of being one of the top five UK institutions on the basis of peer review, nationally and internationally.

73 In the audit visit meeting with students, the audit team found that there was limited awareness among the undergraduates present of the significance of the University's research and the possible relevance of this to their learning. There was also little knowledge of one of the University's centres for excellence in teaching, the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in Arts and Social Sciences, part of whose remit is to encourage students to become fledgling researchers by their final year through the pursuit of inquiry-based learning. Some students had not heard of this Centre, but the Centre website presents its project in detail, and five Centre student ambassadors are currently in post to spread the message, including through a student journal. The Student Ambassadors Network runs a weblog that refers with enthusiasm to the impact of the project.

74 The audit team concluded that the University has a variety of way to ensure that its important commitment to research excellence contributes to the quality of students' learning opportunities. However, the team would encourage the University to pursue and extend the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in Arts and Social Sciences project, to increase the understanding among all students of the relevance to, and impact on their learning of, the University's research activity.

Other modes of study

75 Documents provided during the audit visit demonstrated that there is a substantial number (148) of distance-learning programmes for PG Cert, Master's and EdD awards, primarily in social sciences, but with some in medicine, pure science and arts. The majority of individual programmes have small enrolments, with over half those in social sciences having no current students. Overall numbers have dropped somewhat over the past four years, but there are still more than 1,100 students enrolled.

76 The distance-learning variants of the University's programmes are approved through the same processes as campus-based programmes. The Teaching and Learning Support Unit produces a specific distance-learning handbook for staff, which covers development of a proposal, preliminary planning, programme design and approval, learning resources, and programme monitoring and review. These policies and procedures have been established in the light of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, published by QAA.. It is the University's policy that, wherever possible, the processes and infrastructure for distance learning are embedded within existing procedures

applicable to all modes of programme delivery. The audit team recognised that a sense of community is constructed for cohorts of distance learners, and electronic communications are used to establish new social networks and new types of working relationships. Departmental websites provide clear guidance to applicants, with a page for frequently asked questions. The team also heard of an innovative way of establishing contact between a cohort of distance learners and their external examiner through the establishment of a videoconference link.

77 E-learning, or technology-enhanced learning, is used by the University in two distinct ways: to deliver many distance-learning programmes, and to contribute to the blended delivery of many campus-based programmes. In order to further its understanding of the levels of expertise and engagement, the University participated in Phase 2 of the HEA/JISC e-learning benchmarking exercise, mapping engagement through the e-learning Maturity Model (eMM). A mix of departments with involvement in distance-learning and use of blended learning took part. The diverse experience from six other institutions in this pilot had been gathered, and areas for possible development have been identified.

78 The Institute for Lifelong Learning provides support for a variety of part-time and mature students through its website, as well as hard-copy resources such as the Institute for Lifelong Learning Handbook. The Institute has over 50 years of experience in delivering part-time higher education courses and recognises the issues that are likely to arise. The most common are discussed in the 'Practicalities' and 'Frequently Asked Questions' sections of the Institute website. Both the Students' Union and the Student Services Information Desk websites provide specific guidance on funding issues for part-time study. The possible benefits of the switch from full-time to part-time status for some self-funded postgraduates were recognised and brought to the attention of relevant students. At the same time, the University sets out the challenges in terms of time, energy, and resources for students embarking on, or planning to switch to, part-time study.

79 Several programmes incorporate opportunities to study or work abroad, for which North America is particularly popular, and these are put through appropriate quality assurance procedures. For example, universities to be attended by its students are vetted in advance by the University to confirm the standard and content of courses, weekly contact is maintained by email, half-way and end-of-year vivas are conducted to measure progress, and students' achievement is checked during their final year back at the University to monitor any unexplained discrepancies in performance. Such placement opportunities conform to the University's guidance on placement learning.

80 The audit team found that the University's arrangements for maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities in other modes of study were effective.

Resources for learning

81 The impact of the physical learning environment on the student experience is monitored by the Teaching and Learning Infrastructure Group, with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning in the chair and reporting to the Estates Strategy Advisory Group. The Teaching and Learning Infrastructure Group considers issues that arise through the annual review of learning and teaching process and from the creation of departmental learning, teaching and assessment strategies, and recommends projects to the Estates Strategy Advisory Group. An estates strategy was approved in November 2006, which includes the aim of supporting the continuing development of a community of learning. The Institution has approved a major capital programme, currently in excess of £160 million, which covers upgrading and refurbishment, as well as new building. There has recently been substantial investment in the refurbishment of some central lecture theatres and science and engineering laboratories as part of a rolling programme.

82 Specific accommodation issues may be raised through the annual review of learning and teaching and Independent Evaluation of Teaching processes and are then pursued through the faculty and central follow-up. Faculties also ensure that concerns about teaching space are raised in the Academic Development Committee planning round. The Teaching and Learning

Infrastructure Group is currently developing policies for the creation of informal open-plan learning areas and the refurbishment of former departmentally owned teaching spaces.

83 A wireless network extends across the whole of the University campus, and support is provided for student machines. Students have access to a range of internet-based applications, including email and a managed learning environment via the University portal, MUSE (My University of Sheffield Environment), which can be configured to their individual needs. The University uses the proprietary WebCT virtual learning environment, adapted to the University's needs and now referred to as My Online Learning Environment (MOLE). Corporate Information and Computer Services provides system support, while the Learning Development and Media Unit provides user support. The audit team's experience of navigating and using the institution's website to support its activities confirmed that this is a user-friendly and informative resource.

84 Sheffield's two centres for excellence in teaching and learning each have their own physical space. The White Rose Centre for Excellence in the Teaching and Learning of Enterprise, a joint project with the Universities of Leeds and York, builds on the University's record in enterprise and entrepreneurship activities. An enterprise zone offers a flexible teaching space, with a technology-rich multimedia environment to support the introduction of innovative teaching methods, and a business space for current and recent students to develop their ideas. Part of the remit of the Centre for Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences is to provide learning spaces equipped with high-performance technology to inspire innovative inquiry-led teaching. The original Centre for Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences space is located in Bartolomé House and comprises a 'collaboratory' space for up to 48 people, equipped with five plasma screens, five huddle boards, two copycams, flexible furniture and 24 laptops, a personal Access Grid room that allows up to three people to work collaboratively with videoconferencing software, and a social networking space. This facility was chosen by JISC to include in a series of video case-studies on the theme 'Designing spaces for effective learning' and is influencing future estates planning in the University.

85 The opening of the £23 million Information Commons in April 2007 has provided students with a study area with 24-hour access to a range of library and information technology materials, including more than 500 personal computers (to add to the 1,100 available elsewhere), 1,300 additional study spaces, and 100,000 of the most heavily used undergraduate texts. There are some silent-study areas, but also a range of more informal study spaces. This has proved popular with students overall and has addressed a previous concern about the availability of study space with a computer. The University accepts that facilities had previously been under pressure.

86 Part of the library's current development strategy involves the rationalisation of its distributed operation, major renovation and reorganisation at the Western Bank Library and the closure of four site libraries. Stock from the libraries being closed is being moved to Western Bank or the Information Commons. These developments, which represent a planned focusing of resources, inevitably generate some discontent as familiar resources disappear, and the academic liaison librarian is available to consult about issues. During the briefing visit, the students expressed concerns about some current changes to library opening hours and about the availability of text books, for which there was a low score in the University's student satisfaction survey, and for which there was also a low score in the National Student Survey, under Learning Resources.

87 A new partnership project to promote dialogue with academic departments about information requirements for teaching and learning is being rolled out across half the University, following a successful pilot in 2004-05. It aims to tailor information resources to the needs of individual modules, with greater emphasis on electronic delivery, to provide core reading for large cohorts. A learning and teaching development grant permitted the library to create an information-skills resource, located within the managed learning environment, which contains re-usable learning objects that can be embedded in individual modules. As a result, through MOLE (WebCT), academic staff can, in a structured way, incorporate into their reading/resource lists links to print material in the library, websites, chapters from e-books, lecturers' handouts and PowerPoint slides.

88 The University accepts that investment in new facilities, such as the Information Commons will constantly raise the level of expectations among students, and it remains committed to a cycle of continuous improvement. The audit team found that the University recognised the priority of enhancing the quality of learning resources for students and that in this respect its arrangements for providing, allocating and managing such resources were effective.

Admissions policy

89 Oversight of admissions rests with Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing, which was established in 2006. This has developed a student-centred service based on the concept of the 'Student Journey' to support the transition of an individual from tentative enquirer, or attendee at an open day, through application to acceptance and arrival. The relationship with individual departments is defined by service-level agreements. Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing provides guidance on good practice as well as practical support to departments on all aspects of admissions (including widening participation), and it trains and supports relevant departmental staff. Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing's strategy and activities are aligned with the University's Widening Participation Strategy 2005-10 and support its commitment to fair access. Departmental admissions activity is monitored both through performance against targets and through 'mystery shopper' exercises.

90 Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing is developing an information technology-based customer relationship management system to improve services to 'customers'. A pilot started in September 2006 with six academic departments, and after one year this was being used by 21 academic departments and 10 sections within the central professional services. The National Student Survey and other survey data are used to identify where 'customer' expectations are not being met, and recommendations for improvements are fed back.

91 A major review of induction, managed by Student Services, resulted in the inauguration of a new undergraduate induction programme at the start of 2006-07. This was taken to the HEA/Leadership Foundation as a case-study for the Change Academy 2005.

92 The audit team found that the University's policies and practices have fully considered the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*, published by QAA, and that it effectively ensures the consistent implementation of its admissions policy.

Student support

93 One of the main sources of information for students about all aspects of work and life at the University is the Academic Diary and Student Handbook, which students receive at the commencement of their programme. The first part of this consists of diary pages for the academic year, with key dates (such as deadlines for registration, changing modules among others) highlighted, while the second part constitutes a single comprehensive source of information on the University's policies, procedures, and regulatory requirements. Detailed information is contained, for example, on progression, assessment, procedures for applying for additional financial support, student responsibilities to check University email accounts regularly, appeals, health and safety issues, and work-life balance. Students agreed that this was a useful document, and the audit team regards it as an example of good practice.

94 The Student Services Department has adopted a 'Magnificent Eight' set of strategic themes to support Our Shared Vision. These provide a framework for specific projects such as a revised model for English-language support and 'Supporting the Supporters'. The latter is a priority for 2007-08, which focuses on support available to staff in academic departments. The Student Services Department website provides sections for different categories of students for example, international, disabled, mature, research, distance learners, as well as links to other relevant services and sources of information. The University's Student Services Information Desk, based in the Students' Union, complements the Academic Diary by providing generic support for all students and acting as a 'gateway' to the whole range of support,

including professional services such as healthcare and counselling. The 'Source' is a one-stop activities resource centre for information about clubs, societies and volunteering.

95 The institution publishes a students' charter that was developed in consultation with the Students' Union. This provides a clear statement of policies, rights, responsibilities and expectations, and sets service standards. It contains a commitment to annual updating.

96 The University's Policy Statement and Guidelines on Personal Support for Students, updated annually, emphasises the importance of all students having a named contact for personal support. The students written submission refers to variations in provision of personal tutorial support between departments, and suggests that the institution's good policy on personal tutoring is not always adhered to, with regard both to the allocation of a tutor and to the frequency of meetings. The students written submission also refers to the problems caused by changes in the allocation of tutors, although in discussion with students the audit team found that students appreciated that some changes were unavoidable due to staff being on leave or moving.

97 The University undertook, in 2005-06, to offer all students the opportunity to engage with personal development planning; this followed a range of pilot activities in 10 departments. A handbook supporting the introduction of personal development planning, together with training sessions, is provided to all heads of departments and personal development planning champions. The personal tutor system is regarded as one of the mechanisms to support students in pursuing their responsibility to engage with personal development planning activity. The Careers Service also helps to train students on skills issues and curricula vitae preparation. The Certificate in Learning and Teaching programme (paragraph 103 refers) gives new lecturers an introduction to personal development planning and student support issues. The University accepts that personal development planning is not yet fully embedded across all departments, and this is corroborated by the students written submission. Satisfaction rates in the University's student satisfaction survey and National Student Survey are noticeably lower on questions related to personal development than for most other aspects of the University's services.

98 Graduate employability is prominent in Our Shared Vision. The Careers Service plays a crucial role in providing an integrated guidance, information, vacancy and work experience service for all students and for recent graduates, together with facilities for employers. It operates a work-based skills certificate programme, sponsored by a number of major graduate recruiters, to give students experience which will bring them advantages in the recruitment market place. This programme and other employability issues are monitored by the Learning and Teaching Development Group.

99 Student concern about the provision of study skills led to the Sheffield Union of Students' education officer, working with the University, to design a study-skills survey that was distributed to students in March 2007. The survey results have been considered by the Generic Skills Working Group, which will make recommendations to the Learning and Teaching Committee. The survey suggested that delivery of study skills was focused in the first year, with limited reinforcement thereafter, that the understanding of plagiarism was an issue, and that there were concerns about note-taking, time management, English language and basic mathematics skills.

100 Outside of the academic curricula, a broader approach to the recognition of skills development was piloted in 2006-07 through the Sheffield Graduate Award. The Award recognises students' extra achievements, including work experience, volunteering, course representation, and enterprise activities. The Award website presents information on the benefits and processes, and is also linked to the 'More' website, which collects information on activities that can contribute towards the Award. Students are expected to demonstrate their constructive engagement with the activities they chose, and reflect on them in a portfolio that is assessed. For 2007-08, a £25 fee has been introduced, payable after attendance at the induction session, for those pursuing the Award; in discussion, students thought that this imposition, whose logic they did not understand, would make the award less appealing.

101 The audit team found that the University operates a comprehensive system of student support and that this contributes effectively to the maintenance and enhancement of students' learning opportunities. Within this system, the auditors considered the Academic Diary, with its detailed information on a wide range of student issues, to be a feature of good practice.

Staff support (including staff development)

102 The University recognises that the high quality of learning opportunities, and the student experience more broadly, is dependent upon the quality of the staff; therefore, it has in place a range of training opportunities and support processes to help staff develop their full potential. The institution also recognises that it is important to raise the profile of teaching overall, as an aspect of career development.

103 The human resources department provides a range of induction information for all new staff. Academic staff who are new to the profession are placed on a three-year period of probation, which may be extended. The University publishes a probation policy and guidelines, which set out formal requirements, and describe roles and responsibilities. Academic staff on probation are required to take the Certificate in Teaching and Learning, a course accredited by the HEA. New staff with some experience can obtain full or partial exemption from this Certificate as appropriate for their experience and circumstances.

104 For postgraduate students involved in teaching, there is a two-year, part-time, Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, which is also accredited by the HEA and qualifies its holders for the HEA's associate practitioner status. At a more advanced level, the University runs an MEd in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, a programme that also has HEA accreditation. This aims to develop a community of reflective educators who understand students as learners and evaluators of their own learning, publicise their practice, and explore the relationships between teaching and research.

105 A revised staff review and development scheme was introduced in 2005; it is comprehensive, and embracing all levels of academic staff. Representatives both of departments and senior officers of the University had a clear view of the scheme, and referred to the provision of training for appraisees, as well as appraisers, at all levels. The University recognised that the staff review and development scheme could increasingly have some financial impact through the Exceptional Contribution Reward process, the existence of which the University had been promoting during 2006-07; as a result, it accepted that there would have to be encouragement for the more modest staff to present a properly balanced account of their contributions.

106 The University has adopted a developmental approach to peer observation of teaching. This represented a University initiative to encourage greater reflection on teaching practices and to improve the quality of teaching across the institution. It was rolled out to departments in 2006-07, with departmental engagement in the first year being monitored through reports to the Learning Development and Media Unit. Participation rates were encouraging for the first year, and steps have been taken in certain areas where these were lower. Concerns were expressed about complexity and bureaucratic impact of the scheme, and the matter was referred to the Learning Development and Media Unit for review. Departments are encouraged to consider how the outcomes of their individual set of peer observations might be integrated into the annual departmental staff development plan. Although there is no requirement to link peer observation to the staff review and development scheme process, this is one route through which specific development issues can be pursued.

107 It is clear that many of the enhancement activities that the University supports provide opportunities for the continuing development of academic staff, for example, the learning and teaching exchange, which facilitates the sharing of good practice, the inaugural 'good practice' week, when the attendance included some staff who had not previously engaged in development activities, and a successful learning and teaching conference in January 2007.

108 As part of its commitment to fostering research excellence, the University has established a University of Sheffield research leaders programme that harnesses the experience of the University's leading researchers to develop the next generation of the academy.

109 The University has recognised that there are particular issues relating to the support of hourly-paid tutors; these had been raised through the annual review of learning and teaching and Independent Evaluation of Teaching processes. A working group was established to investigate these in March 2005. This group established clear definitions and a programme of work, leading to an interim report in 2006 and final guidance on the use of associate tutors involved in learning, teaching and assessment being published to departments in August 2007. Work is ongoing to regularise the contractual position of hourly-paid tutors.

110 The audit team determined that the University had adopted a serious comprehensive approach to supporting staff development, and that these arrangements made an effective contribution to recognising the importance of teaching within the institution and to encouraging staff to engage with enhancement opportunities.

111 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 quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

112 The audit team found that the University had made substantial investment in a framework to support enhancement. The University's strategic approach to enhancement is grounded in its learning, teaching and assessment strategy, which reflects the University's ethos as a research-led institution. The University aims to support students by engaging them in learning activities that mirror the processes and activities of research. The strategy builds on previous initiatives but seeks to move beyond working with enthusiasts in order to achieve wide-scale strategic enhancement.

113 This strategic thrust is supported by developments in the University's central infrastructure and in the level of partnership between academic colleagues and professional services. It has developed academic networks, initiated a series of major projects to support strategic themes and it has advanced means for recognising and rewarding excellent teaching.

114 The University's Learning and Teaching Development Group has initiated a range of strategic enhancement projects with the aim of engaging the whole institution and its students. Projects have attempted to bring together a range of relevant expertise across the Institution. The Learning and Teaching Development Group produces an annual learning, teaching and assessment action plan, managed in detail by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit. The work of the Group links with estates and the student support strategies to enhance the student experience.

Good practice

115 Directors of learning and teaching development play a key role in the University's enhancement agenda. Appointed jointly by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching and Faculty deans, they are members of the Learning and Teaching Development Group. The audit team learned that they meet monthly to share updates on project-based and other activities within their faculties. They identify examples of good practice and formulate priorities for action that emerge from programme development and review. In its scrutiny of documentation and in meetings, the team was able to appreciate the range of activities which directors of learning and teaching development had helped to promote at faculty level and beyond. These directors also help to establish and sustain a range of funded teaching and learning projects. These include good practice and teamwork, effective advocate networks and the management of plagiarism issues.

116 Since 2005, a departmental learning and teaching advocate has been in place in each department. The University believes that these advocates play a key role in encouraging collaboration and involvement in learning and teaching development. In meetings, the audit team learned of the wide range of teaching and learning activities in which these advocates were engaged. In conjunction with the directors of learning and teaching development, they have recently facilitated the development of the University's revised peer observation of teaching scheme.

117 The audit team considered the work of directors of learning and teaching development and of departmental learning and teaching advocates to be a feature of good practice, in that it stimulated and supported the University's enhancement agenda in line with its learning, teaching and assessment strategy.

118 The audit team found that both the annual review of learning and teaching, which uses a range of performance indicators including student satisfaction surveys, and the Independent Evaluation of Teaching give prominence to the dissemination of good practice in teaching and learning. The Independent Evaluation of Teaching forms part of the University's strategic approach to enhancement. Review panels are required to evaluate departmental capacity for enhancing taught provision and how departments respond to reports and recommendations from external examiners and other external advisers. Since the University's commitment to enhancement is so clear, it might wish to revise the specific guidance it issues on drafting Independent Evaluation of Teaching action plans, in order to ensure that enhancement is given greater emphasis.

119 The University considers effective communication with both staff and students to be a key feature of its enhancement agenda. The audit team particularly noted two examples of this. The University has recently appointed a dissemination adviser, part of whose role is to encourage collaboration between academic departments and professional support services. The team also 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 team considered the production of the Link newsletter as an example of the constructive relationship that exists between the University and the Sheffield Union of Students. More specifically, PGR Link also contributes to the fostering of a sense of community among postgraduate research students. The team considered it to be a feature of good practice.

120 The University's Learning, Development and Media Unit has evaluated the success of teaching and learning projects in achieving their aims. Since earlier evaluations had not concentrated on the impact of such projects, The Learning, Development and Media Unit now approaches evaluations more systematically with a university-wide methodology ('Theories of Change') which ensures a qualitative, impact-focused, approach; this engages a range of stakeholders, and concentrates on the contribution made by a given project to the wider teaching and learning environment.

121 The University established a learning and teaching exchange in late 2005 to raise the profile of teaching and learning. This provides information about resources and internal funding for teaching and learning initiatives. Staff are encouraged to use this exchange to share good practice. The directors of learning and teaching development help focus debate and disseminate ideas through the Exchange. A 'Good Practice Week', held in May 2007 and attended by about 150 staff, discussed a range of pedagogical ideas and practical advice on effective means of reaching a target audience. A 'Case Studies' resource has also been developed to disseminate good practice.

122 The University sees its two centres for excellence in teaching and learning as key agents in its enhancement agenda. The audit team found evidence that, although the work of the Centre for Inquiry-based Learning in Arts and Social Sciences might be better known within the student

community (see paragraph 73), the centres for excellence in teaching and learning had the potential both to help focus, and to accelerate the implementation of, the University's enhancement strategy.

123 The University has also supported projects to: 'internationalise' the experience of students; enhance training and support to all colleagues in academic and central departments who support students; create a mathematics and statistics support unit; and develop a 'Skills for Work Certificate'.

124 The audit team also considered that work supported directly by the University through its 'SeeChange' Projects contributed to the development of a systematic enhancement strategy. This initiative offers opportunities for the development of institutional projects that 'cross-cut' between academic and professional support staff and, when possible, students. Some projects also look outwards, as for example, in the institution's links with schools.

Staff development and reward

125 The University's learning, teaching and assessment strategy states that it is increasing opportunities for staff to make cases for promotion that recognise experimentation, creativity and reflective practice as key attributes of teaching excellence. It also recognises the importance of reward for teaching excellence in the context of a research-led institution. The audit team noted several elements of sound practice in institutional arrangements for staff support, development and reward. Metrics have been developed for assessing learning, teaching and assessment achievements and are used in the University's reward and recognition scheme.

126 For several years, the University has had in place its Senate Awards Scheme, which rewards staff who demonstrate excellence in teaching and/or supporting and enhancing the students' learning experience. The scheme was expanded in 2006/07 by the addition of the category of Excellence in Leadership to the three previously established categories of Rising Star, Sustained Excellence and Excellence in Collaboration. The 2007 Awards had stimulated considerable competition and the University noted that they had attracted a record number of applicants. Although students had not been directly involved in judging the awards, it was clear from discussion with one of the award winners that students participated fully in supporting successful cases.

127 The University introduced new promotions procedures in 2006, through which a range of possible achievements, including peer recognition of demonstrable achievements in teaching, can be rewarded. Two academics have recently been promoted to chairs through these 'teaching-led' criteria. The audit team also learned that the publication of Our Shared Vision has helped to raise the profile of teaching as a promotion route. The audit team found that staff attitudes to teaching-led career prospects were very positive and there were prospects for the establishment of a wider community of teaching-led professors as role models in the future. An increasing number of teaching-led cases are now being presented on the basis of national or international responsibilities in teaching policy and innovation, and research and scholarship concerning pedagogy.

128 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University had developed a structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the institution and that this represented a feature of good practice.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

129 The University's involvement in collaborative provision has changed significantly since the last institutional audit. A strategic decision was taken to phase out validated provision at a number of further education colleges in the UK; this process commenced in 2003 and most of the provision in question has now ceased. The bulk of the remaining validated provision is concentrated at the CITY College in Thessaloniki, Greece, where more than 700 students are

registered on University undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes. The College also hosts over 30 doctoral students registered with the University on a joint location PhD programme. There are plans for CITY College to be given a status equivalent to a faculty of the University, although the detailed implications of this change of status are still being worked through. A number of much smaller validated partnerships also remain in place.

130 While the volume of validated provision has been reduced, the number of partnerships involving other types of collaborative activity has increased. These include the following or proposals for the following:

- programmes leading to joint awards (two partnerships involving French universities)
- distance learning involving a collaborative partner (restricted to the fields of Education and East Asian Studies);
- jointly delivered programmes (a range involving the Universities of Leeds, York and Manchester).
- articulation agreements (with a range of organizations both in the UK and overseas, including a number with Sheffield International College, run by Kaplan International Colleges).

There is also a range of courses delivered purely by distance learning, which are dealt with under Section 3.

131 The audit team learnt that the University's definition of collaborative activity is that it includes any arrangement 'where Sheffield is in partnership with another organisation to deliver provision leading to a University of Sheffield award'. The team considered that this definition is consonant with the position set out in the *Code of Practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. Evidence from a range of documentation examined indicated that this definition is widely understood within the University.

132 The Institutional Briefing Paper indicated that the University has recently taken measures to ensure that it is aware of all developments which fall within this definition. The audit team learnt that these measures included the introduction of processes for the approval of new institutional partnerships and joint provision. The fact that staff from the Teaching and Learning Support Unit support the faculty committees that deal with course development, as well as the Board of Collaborative Studies, helps to ensure that no collaborative developments are overlooked.

133 The University does not at present have an explicit strategy for the development of collaborative activity. Its approach to development in this area was described to the audit team as one of 'cautious opportunism', and its strategy as 'evolving'. The Board of Collaborative Studies recently received an updated version of a strategy statement on collaborative provision. However, this is a very brief document that sets out the current position rather than providing guidance as to the intended future development of the area.

134 Central University oversight of collaborative activity rests with the Board of Collaborative Studies, which has been in existence since the academic year 2006-07. Its predecessor was the Board of Collegiate Studies. The change of title reflects the widening remit of the new committee, which covers all types of collaborative activity, not merely formal validated arrangements. The Board is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, and incorporates representation from each faculty, together with other staff with direct involvement with collaborative provision, plus student representation. The Board has subcommittees for teaching affairs and for teaching quality, although the University is considering merging these. The Board reports directly to the Senate, and is also linked to the Learning and Teaching Committee via a common chair. This enables issues of interest to be forwarded from the Board of Collaborative Studies to the Learning and Teaching Committee. The audit team concluded, on the basis of the evidence provided by the minutes of these various committees, that central oversight of collaborative activity by the University is effectively maintained.

135 All processes relating to quality assurance and standards in validated collaborative provision are set out in the Collaborative Studies Handbook, which is available via the Teaching and Learning Support Unit web pages.

136 The Board of Collaborative Studies has overall responsibility for quality assurance in partnerships, although day-to-day responsibility rests with the relevant department. The link with partners is principally via the moderator, a member of departmental staff. The audit team learnt that the moderator role is appropriately supported by departments, and that informal mentoring arrangements are in place for newly appointed moderators. The moderator also attends examination boards in the partner institution and ensures that University regulations are being correctly applied. Examination boards are not, however, routinely chaired by a member of University staff and the University may wish to consider whether the moderator role enables it adequately to exercise an overview of its delegated responsibilities.

137 Full guidance on the annual review process for validated collaborative partners is provided in the Collaborative Studies Handbook. The process includes provision of an annual report by the moderator; the partner institution is required to address this, together with the external examiner report(s), in its own evaluative report. The Collaborative Studies' Teaching Affairs Committee considers the reports, and assures itself that appropriate action is being taken on any issues raised. This Committee in turn submits an annual report to the University's Quality and Standards Subcommittee, where it is considered alongside the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching reports from faculties. The Institutional Briefing Paper indicates that reports from partners are also considered by the relevant University department, and this was confirmed by documents seen during the audit.

138 Departments are also required to submit to the Board of Collaborative Studies an annual liaison report, covering all the types of collaborative activity in which the department is engaged (including articulation agreements, joint awards, etc). This Board takes an overview of these reports, for which a standard set of headings is provided. It takes action where this is felt to be necessary and can, via its reporting line to the Senate, draw attention to any matters that need to be addressed by the University as a whole.

139 The University does not specify separate processes for the approval of a new institutional partner and for the validation of that partner's provision; both the Validation Process Handbook and the 'Guidelines for the development of jointly awarded, or jointly delivered postgraduate taught degrees' suggest that the two types of approval take place simultaneously, and the Validation Process Handbook makes it clear that generic institutional information is to be included in the validation documentation.

140 While there is no evidence that the failure to separate institutional from programme approval has resulted in any deficiencies in these processes to date, the overlap between the two processes could lead to a situation where plans for programme delivery might reach an advanced stage before any formal agreement was concluded at university level. This, in turn, has the potential to compromise the institutional approval process. The audit team considers it desirable that the University considers 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.

141 The audit team's examination of the validation process confirms the general effectiveness of the process and the rigour with which it is applied by both the University and the partner. The normal interval between revalidations is five years; the revalidation process, which is very similar to that required for initial validation, is set out in detail in the Collaborative Studies Handbook.

142 The audit team found evidence that a joint award could be approved without necessarily having the prior formulation of a clear statement indicating how regulatory and procedural responsibilities would be divided between the partner institutions. In the specific case in question, this lack of clarity resulted in the possibility that students registered for a joint award at the University would graduate with a master's degree at Pass level, while those registered on the

same award at the partner university, and obtaining the same marks, could achieve a Merit. While the University acted rapidly to rectify this anomaly once it was brought to light, the lack of precision in defining regulatory arrangements in connection with joint awards has the potential to lead to further 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.

143 All collaborative partnerships are subject to exactly the same requirements for external examining as apply to campus-based programmes. External examiners are appointed directly by the University, and submit their reports using the standard pro forma. In the case of the jointly delivered master's (MSc) suite of programmes in nanotechnology (Nanofolio), the external examiners are appointed jointly by the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds. Reports are received by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit, which distributes them to partners and receives responses where required. The moderator also receives a copy of the report, and external examiners are sent copies of moderators' reports for programmes in their areas of responsibility. A separate 'Summary of issues raised in external examiners' reports' is prepared by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit for programmes involving validated collaborative provision. This is considered by the Collaborative Studies' Teaching Affairs Committee, the Chair of which is responsible for following up any outstanding issues from external examiners' reports. External examiners' reports also inform the Annual Review of Learning and Teaching process, in the same way as for internal University provision.

144 Reading of the 'Summary of issues raised' documents for 2005-06 and 2006-07 indicates that the matters being raised by external examiners in relation to collaborative provision are generally similar to those that might be raised for internal provision. Partner responses are also monitored via this summary document, from which it is clear both that appropriate action is being taken to respond to the comments of external examiners, and that care is being taken by the University to follow through on these actions. The audit team therefore believes that the external examiner system is operating effectively in relation to collaborative provision.

145 The University takes the view that students in collaborative partnerships 'do not have an individual relationship with the University of Sheffield'. They are not members of the Sheffield Union of Students, and have no right of access to the University's services and facilities. The University does, however, ensure that processes are in place to ensure that the student voice in partner institutions is adequately represented. In particular, it requires that student feedback at both module and course level should be collected by partners, in a manner comparable to that which the University applies to its internal students. Evidence from annual and periodic reviews of collaborative partnerships shows that where, for example, partners are not operating a programme-level student experience survey, this is followed up by the University.

146 The audit team saw evidence that the University takes measures to ensure that partners are aware of all sections of the *Code of practice*, not merely Section 2 relating to collaborative activity, and of other elements of the Academic Infrastructure. Thus, for example, the section on admissions in the Collaborative Studies Handbook makes reference to the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*.

147 Memoranda of agreement are in place for collaborative activities, and the examples viewed during the audit indicate that these are clear, detailed and regularly updated. Certificates and transcripts seen by the team showed that the location of study was stated on the transcript, and that the certificate made reference to the existence of the transcript.

148 The Board of Collaborative Studies has oversight of the accuracy of publicity and other information published by collaborative partners, and examination of minutes of the Board showed that this oversight was effectively exercised (see Section 7 below).

149 The University does not itself maintain detailed records of students in collaborative institutions; rather it expects the partner to do this, and to supply the data to the University. The Annual Review of Learning and Teaching pro forma sets out in detail a range of data that should be provided. Evidence from annual and periodic reviews examined during the audit visit suggests that partners do produce appropriate statistical information, and that matters such as progression rates and trends in recruitment are adequately addressed.

150 Notwithstanding the recommendations in paragraphs 140 and 142 above, the audit team concluded that the University's processes for the assurance of quality and standards in collaborative provision are as thorough and systematic as those which apply to the University's internal programmes, and that those processes are applied consistently across the institution. The audit team, therefore, 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

151 The University states that research students make 'an extremely important contribution to its research culture' and contributes to a number of the goals of Our Shared Vision. In addition to conventional MPhil and PhD awards, the University also offers professionally orientated research degrees (such as EdD and MD) and also the PhD with Integrated Studies, as part of the 'new route' to a doctorate. The University also participates in the Joint Location Scheme, which permits overseas and European Union students to undertake research away from the University, and has developed a doctoral programme with the South East European Research Centre.

152 Responsibility for the academic standards of postgraduate research degrees lies with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research, assisted by appropriate faculty officers and the Graduate Research Office. The Graduate Research Office produces a Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, which is updated annually. The audit team considered that the detailed information given to students in this publication about registration, fees, research training requirements, supervision arrangements, upgrading, thesis preparation and assessment was presented in an accessible yet authoritative manner.

153 The Research Committee has overall responsibility for all aspects of research but operational responsibility for postgraduate research degrees lies with the Graduate Research Development Committee. Its terms of reference require it, inter alia, to maintain and enhance the concept of a research-led postgraduate culture, to monitor and enhance the quality of the postgraduate research experience and to advise on good practice for the recruitment of high quality postgraduate research students. At faculty level, responsibility for standards resides with faculty deans and sub-deans for graduate affairs.

154 The QAA Review of research degree programmes in 2006 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. It encouraged the University to give further consideration to enhancing its supervision arrangements by reducing the extent to which the system was permissive and left to the discretion of individual supervisors and departments. It also urged the institution to consider arrangements for monitoring and reviewing student progress by ensuring a stronger student involvement in the annual report process. In response, the Graduate Research Development Committee amended procedures to secure greater student involvement in the process, by allowing students to see their annual progress reports. The University also engaged in dialogue with QAA concerning the nature of stronger student involvement, and referred to Faculty research committees the issue of requiring a student written report as part of the annual reporting process.

155 Applications for postgraduate research admissions are handled administratively by Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing with academic input at departmental level. In scrutinising the University's review process, the audit team noted that not all departments met the requirements of the University's Code of Practice, since they did not interview all UK applicants.

156 The University provides induction sessions at the beginning of the academic year and departments supplement these. Departments are also required to produce their own handbooks for postgraduate research students. In meetings, the audit team learned that attendance on centrally organised induction sessions now exceeded 90 per cent, although staff acknowledged difficulties existing for students who entered the University other than at the beginning of the academic session. The Graduate Research Development Committee is addressing this.

157 The University states in its Code of Practice that all research students will be allocated one main supervisor who will be part of a supervisory team; that supervisory meetings should be held frequently, normally every four to six weeks; that a formal record of such meetings should be kept both by supervisor and student; that supervisors are responsible for focusing students on the nature of the research to be done and for providing guidance on the standard of work expected; that they should also give guidance about research training needs and ensure that students approach their work with an appropriate understanding, both of the feasibility of the research project and the timescale required to complete it. It is also the supervisor's responsibility to advise the student if work presented is not of an appropriate standard.

158 The Graduate Research Office provides early-career training for supervisors in the form of 'Best Practice for Research Supervision'. The University believes that this training works well and is appreciated. There is no fixed pattern for later-career supervisors but the University has recently used Roberts Funding for Doctoral (PhD) and Postdoctoral Training, to establish a project entitled 'Training the Trainers' to address this issue. The Graduate Research Office runs a course on capturing good practice in supervision and the audit team learned that this had attracted significant numbers of staff, irrespective of status or length of service. The team concluded that, while it is too early to judge outcomes, the University had identified a significant potential gap in staff support for research students and was making appropriate attempts to address the issue. It also noted that an independent review recommended the University to provide regular, additional supervisory skills-training both for new and for experienced supervisors. The University may wish to give further consideration to ensuring that the skills of supervisors of postgraduate research degree students are regularly assessed and any deficiencies addressed.

159 The University is aware both of considerable variation and of instances of non-compliance with its own Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. In a recent summary, it identified departments that did not have supervisory teams in place and in which records of both supervision and progress meetings were not kept systematically. The audit team also found that, in some small departments, second supervisors were not always appointed. The University's review processes also identified that some students were given insufficient information about a supervisor's plans to be away from the University and of the back-up systems that were available. The regularity of supervision meetings also varied significantly. Some students were seeing their supervisor less than once every six weeks. These findings were confirmed by evidence from the annual student evaluation of research degrees in 2005-06, which suggested that records of supervisors meetings were kept in fewer than three-quarters of cases. Only 61 per cent of students who responded believed that effective alternative arrangements were put in place when a main supervisor was absent from the University. Only 65 per cent of students undertook a training-needs analysis to help assess their requirements within the Research Training Programme.

160 Evidence from meetings and documentation established that the demands made on students preparing for upgrade from MPhil to PhD status varied widely. In some cases, advice given to students by their supervisors about the requirements of the upgrade process was at variance with the information given in the relevant departmental research student handbook. Departmental handbooks also gave varying amounts of advice, support and detail about the

regularity of supervision meetings, the amount of choice available from modules in the University's Research Training Programme and on feedback mechanisms.

161 The audit team noted that the University's requirements in respect of student progress and review were clearly set out in its Code of Practice for Research Students: students should submit progress reports at regular intervals, normally every six months; to these reports, the supervisor should attach a statement giving a judgment about the progress made, to which the student should have access; it is the responsibility of the departmental graduate tutor to read all progress reports; reports that seem to indicate difficulties should be referred to the relevant faculty for further consideration. Annual progress reports, completed by the supervisor, are forwarded to the Graduate Research Office, which monitors the process and brings to the attention of the faculty office cases that seem to need action. The team considered that these arrangements generally worked well, although some evidence of variability was encountered.

162 The audit team recognises that some degree of variation is both inevitable and, in some circumstances, desirable in the light of widely differing research cultures across disciplines. It concluded, however, that the extent of variation, especially in respect of supervision and progress meetings and reports, was unacceptably wide. The team considers it advisable that the University take steps 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.

163 The University reports its increasing concern about timeliness of submission of doctoral theses. It is actively seeking a culture of submission within three years. The audit team learned that the University has recently given this issue high priority and has recommended greater frequency of formal monitoring by the production of progress reports, for scrutiny by the departmental postgraduate tutor, every three months. The team noted, however, that some research students remained uncertain about the processes involved in upgrading to PhD status and that an independent review of research student supervision had considered, as an 'Achilles heel' in the system, the difficulty of obtaining a view independent of the main supervisor of a student's progress. Although recent analyses of annual progress reports by faculty reveal that fewer than 10 per cent of research students are making 'unsatisfactory progress', the University is anxious to ensure that monitoring is handled more strategically. The team urges the University to continue its efforts to ensure that monitoring identifies genuine problems, including possible failure, at an appropriately early stage.

164 The University undertakes independent reviews of research supervision and support at Faculty level and intends these to operate on a three-year cycle. These reviews equate to the Independent Evaluations of Teaching for taught programmes. The audit team conducted an audit trail on the Independent Review of Social Sciences, which the University held in June 2006. The team confirmed that the review process was rigorous. It incorporated external involvement and required follow-up responses to the recommendations made from all departments. It noted, however, that the University had been concerned at the number of departmental delays in responding to the review's recommendations.

165 The audit team learned that the University places considerable stress on the utility of its Research Training Programme, which is designed to provide both generic and subject-specific skills. It requires all full-time students progressing from MPhil to PhD level and obtaining their PhD to have achieved given credit levels from training modules. It subjects this programme to the same quality assurance processes and considerations of enhancement as for its other taught postgraduate students. Three reviews have been conducted since the training programme began in 1995. All postgraduate research students receive a copy of the Research Training Handbook, which includes information about modules available to them in the Research Training Programme, and about the number of credits required to upgrade from MPhil to PhD and to qualify for the doctoral award. In the last year, an 'Excellence Exchange Scheme' has been introduced, which enables students to apply for funding to visit centres of excellence in their own research areas.

166 Student perception of the Research Training Programme is mixed. Some report that full discussions with the supervisory team lead to the identification of training modules, which increase their awareness and provide them with the skills to advance their specific research project. The experience of others is less favourable. The students' written submission noted that only 57 per cent of respondents reported satisfaction with the quality of the programme, and also reported that the Sheffield Union of Students' Postgraduate Research Students' Committee had received adverse comment. The audit team also noted that some students felt the choice of modules available to them was both restricted and not self-evidently relevant to their research. The team recognises that student perceptions of the eventual value of research training may not be maturely formed at the time at which they are evaluating it. It does, however, note the level of student dissatisfaction with parts of the training programme. The University will wish to bear this in mind as it continues to monitor the Research Training Programme it provides.

167 In addition to the regular discussions between student and supervisory team and, as appropriate, departmental graduate tutors, the University has a number of mechanisms, both formal and informal, for obtaining feedback from postgraduate students. Postgraduate research students are represented on departmental, Faculty, and University-level committees. The University draws attention to the work of the Sheffield Union Students'-run Postgraduate Research Committee that is stated now to be 'increasingly active', and which encourages consideration of postgraduate research student issues within the University. A new society for postgraduate research students, 'Progress' has been founded, helped by funding from the University. The Graduate Research Office reports annually to the Graduate Research Development Committee on the findings of the annual student evaluation of research degrees. The audit team felt that the key issues raised in this evaluation were picked up and discussed in the Committee. Findings were also discussed by Faculty graduate research committees.

168 The University acknowledges that a minority of departments have not systematically sought local feedback from postgraduates, but following discussion between departments and the relevant Faculty dean, is confident that the issue is now being effectively addressed. The audit team learned that, in general, postgraduate research students were satisfied with the forms of feedback and representation available to them. They did, however, note that some part-time students with other commitments found it difficult to provide feedback. The audit team concluded that the feedback mechanisms in place were appropriate and that the University was, in general, responsive to issues that were raised.

169 Students registered for doctoral research degrees are assessed on the basis of the quality of their research theses and their performance in a viva voce examination. Additionally, students must normally have accumulated sufficient credits from the University's Research Training Programme to be upgraded from MPhil to PhD status and also to be considered for the award of a doctoral degree. The University provides detailed guidance notes for 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*, published by QAA.

170 Information both about complaints concerning the quality of services or of research supervision, and about appeals on results, is given in the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes. Complaints are considered first by the head of the relevant department but, if not resolved, may be referred to the Registrar and Secretary or, in cases concerning academic matters, to the dean of the appropriate Faculty. Academic appeals are considered first by the dean of the appropriate Faculty, who may decide to refer the appeal to an academic appeals committee if there is a prima facie case. Academic appeals may be brought on the grounds of procedural error; extenuating circumstances; evidence of failure of supervision; or negligence or misconduct on the part of an examiner. In its scrutiny of documentation, the audit team noted considerable variation in the information given about the complaints and appeals procedures in

departmental handbooks. The team found that the numbers both of complaints and of appeals were very low, and mostly concerned alleged failures in, or absence of, supervision. The team also found that due process was observed in the handling of appeals and results were communicated to students promptly.

Section 7: Published information

171 The University produces a large volume of published information, and the Institutional Briefing Paper indicates that great care is taken to ensure that this information is accurate, up to date, complete, and useful to its main stakeholders. Much of the information, both for internal and external audiences, is provided via the internet, and newer formats for e-communication (such as weblogs and wikis) are under investigation as further channels for the provision of information.

172 The University's approach to information and communications is summarised in an information strategy (focusing mainly on the technical aspects of information management) and a marketing and communications strategy. The creation of Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing is described by the University as 'a key development'. The department has overall responsibility for the University's 'communications with all internal and external audiences'. Student Recruitment, Admissions and Marketing engages in various activities to monitor the accuracy and effectiveness of the University's published information, including 'mystery shopping'.

173 Other specific aspects of published information are subject to checking by appropriate bodies, so that, for example, the Board of Collaborative Studies has a remit to maintain an overview of the accuracy of information published by collaborative partners. Scrutiny of committee minutes by the audit team showed that this overview was being effectively maintained, while examination of partner institutions' websites showed that the involvement of the University in collaborative activity is being appropriately acknowledged.

174 The Quality and Standards Subcommittee also reviews information provided to students by departments, and has approved the production by the Teaching and Learning Support Unit of generic information, which can be incorporated into departments' printed and web-based materials.

175 The audit team examined examples of course handbooks, regulations and other documentation issued to students. The students' written submission, and the views of students who met with the audit team suggest that, while there is some variability between departments in the quality of course handbooks, the information provided by the University is generally extensive, reliable and timely. This was said to be particularly true of the information provided to first-year students in advance of their joining the University; the helpful information they receive means that they know exactly what to expect when they arrive. The team also regards the Academic Diary, issued to students on arrival, as an example of good practice (see paragraph 93 above).

176 Where the University is aware of deficiencies in its information provision, for example, in the complexity of the calculations for degree classification, it is acting to address the situation. In the case of this specific example, the audit team learnt that an internet-based 'student mark calculator' is under development, to assist students in understanding how they are progressing towards their final degree result.

177 At the time that the audit took place, the new Unistats website had not been publicly launched, and so the audit team was unable to view the University's entries, or to verify directly the extent to which these would meet the requirements. However, extensive evidence was available from committee minutes, indicating that the University is well aware of the requirements of the phase two outcomes of the Review of the Quality Assurance Framework, and has taken measures that will be effective in ensuring they are met.

178 One such measure is the decision that external examiners' reports shall be discussed at course meetings at which student representatives are present. Another is the agreement that standard summaries of the Independent Evaluations of Teaching should in due course be published. The University is also exploring the scope for links to be provided from Unistats not only to National Students Survey results, but also to the results of the University's internal student satisfaction survey. Programme specifications and module outlines are already available electronically, and can be accessed from outside the University by potential applicants and others.

179 The audit team formed the view, based on the evidence that it examined, that the University takes appropriate and effective steps to ensure the accuracy of the information which it publishes; that, as a consequence, applicants and students receive accurate information which accords with their direct experience, and that the requirements of HEFCE circular letter 23/2006 are being more than adequately addressed. The audit 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.

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The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01425 557000

Fax 01452 557070

Email comms@qaa.ac.uk

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