QAA

Institutional audit

University of Ulster

MARCH 2010

Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

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

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

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

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

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

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

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Ulster (the University) from 8 to 12 March 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University of Ulster 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 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 audit team concluded that the Institutional approach to quality enhancement was effective and supported through the creation of an environment in which teaching is developed and rewarded, and good practice is routinely captured and disseminated.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

In general, the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students 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, and in the main are operating as intended.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. However, the team concluded that the University should ensure that student handbooks are routinely and accurately updated to reflect significant policy changes from the academic session in which they take effect.

Features of good practice

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

- the operationalisation of the University's strategic commitment to the social, economic and cultural development of the region

- central monitoring and review of quality assurance processes and the work of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup

- the comprehensiveness and collegial tone of the Assessment Handbook

- the considered and effective approach to providing well-thought-through learning opportunities for students

- the framework for the management and development of research degree programmes.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- ensure plagiarism cases are consistently identified and recorded

- review its systems for ensuring the accuracy, consistency and clarity of its course-level published information.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider ways of extending active participation of students in the quality assurance of educational provision

- continue to evaluate the extent to which its arrangements for the annual monitoring pilot allow the University and faculties to maintain oversight of the quality and standards of educational provision

- review the requirements for external examiner participation in the consideration of assessment tasks and outcomes at all higher education levels of undergraduate programmes

- review its arrangements for the management of UU (University of Ulster) Health programmes delivered overseas

- clarify the requirement for research supervisor training.

Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice*

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

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

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

Report

1   An Institutional audit of the University of Ulster (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 8 March 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The University provided the audit team with a briefing paper and supporting documentation. The University of Ulster Students' Union produced a student 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.

2   The audit team comprised Professor G Chesters, Professor S Dilly, Professor G Smith, Ms K Southworth and Mr N Yates, auditors, and Mr J White, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr A J Biscoe, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   The University was established in 1984 with full degree awarding powers through a merger of Ulster Polytechnic and the then New University of Ulster. It has four campuses: Belfast, Jordanstown, Magee and Coleraine. The University's mission is to 'Provide excellent learning opportunities which are student centred and client focused; undertake excellent research in selected areas of activity; maintain the University's position as a sector leader in widening access to higher education; establish the University as a sector leader in promoting creativity and innovation; and conduct business in line with the University's core values and to the highest standards of corporate governance'.

4   Since its establishment, the University has more than doubled its student population. In 2008-09 it had some 24,000 enrolled students, of whom 80 per cent are studying for undergraduate degrees and 20 per cent for taught or research postgraduate awards. A third of students study part-time. Courses have a strong vocational element and many include a period of industrial or professional placement. Over 1,100 students are enrolled on fully online distance-learning courses delivered through the University's virtual campus, CampusOne.

5   Over 5,000 students, the majority of whom are studying part-time, are enrolled on courses offered by partner institutions and which either lead to awards of the University or provide access routes to University courses. The University has identified four distinct types of collaborative provision: validated courses, joint provision, outcentre provision and articulation arrangements. The University describes how the success of its commitment to social inclusion is reflected by 46 per cent of its full-time undergraduate entrants coming from socio-economic groups 4-7, 12 per cent in excess of its benchmark. As part of its strategy to promote wider participation in higher education, the University has established an extensive network of partner institutions, predominantly colleges and institutes of further and higher education throughout Northern Ireland. This is one aspect of the University's strategic commitment to Northern Ireland, which is also evidenced in other sections of this report (see below). The audit team considered the operationalisation of the University's strategic commitment to the social, economic and cultural development of the region to be feature of good practice.

6   The major academic groupings within the University are its six faculties, each of which is managed by a dean. All faculties have provision on more than one campus and comprise a number of schools and a Research Graduate School, which provide both subject focus and supporting management structures for staff and postgraduate research students. There are 16 Research Institutes within the faculties to provide an enhanced research focus. The University has recently approved academic governance arrangements for two 'quasi-faculties': (University of Ulster) UU Health Ltd, and the Access and Distributed Learning Division. UU Health has been set up principally to manage contracts for courses for health professionals in Northern Ireland and the relationship with an overseas outcentre.

Access and Distributed Learning is responsible for university-wide courses delivered by the Staff Development Unit and the management of the University's credit-bearing short course framework.

7   The 2005 Institutional audit expressed confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the quality and standards of its academic provision, as did the separate 2006 Collaborative provision audit. The University took part in the 2006 Review of research degree programmes and the Audit of overseas provision in Hong Kong in 2007. All these reports contained a number of features of good practice and recommendations. The audit team noted that the features of good practice have been built upon and that all of the recommendations have been addressed in an adequate manner.

8   Senate is responsible for the academic affairs, direction and strategy of the University and its effectiveness was recently reviewed utilising advice from the Leadership Foundation. The main committees of Senate are the Teaching and Learning Committee, Academic Development and Enhancement Committee, Research and Innovation Committee and Information and Student Services Committee. The Teaching and Learning Committee and Academic Development and Enhancement Committee are both chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. The former committee is responsible for setting and maintaining academic standards and policy development. While there is considerable overlap in terms of membership, the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee is a separate committee responsible for quality and enhancement. The Information and Student Services Committee is responsible for university strategy in relation to libraries, ICT and information handling, student administration and student support. The main committees may elect to conduct some areas of business through sub-committees. The Course Approval Sub-Committee is responsible for coordinating approval and revalidation and makes an annual report to Teaching and Learning Committee. The Academic Planning Sub-Committee is responsible for considering new course proposals and withdrawal of courses and reports to Academic Development and Enhancement Committee. Faculties are required to have a committee structure which maps to, rather than mirrors, the central committee structure. Collaborative provision is included in the remit of the above committees, and is further supported through the Faculty Heads of Collaborative Course Forum, which is a sub-committee of Academic Development and Enhancement Committee.

9   The University's embedded academic quality culture continues to benefit the University. The distinct yet mutually reinforcing relationship between the Academic Office and the Quality Management and Audit Unit ensures that the University is particularly rigorous in its approach to quality. The Programme Approval Monitoring and Review Handbook sets out the processes for quality assurance. This systematic approach to quality assurance incorporates effective consultation, piloting, evaluation, project management and institutional oversight adopted for the introduction of strategic University developments.

10   After consulting on the updated Teaching and Learning Strategy the University identified a need to review its regulatory framework. It felt this was necessary in order to respond to a perception that University regulations impeded creativity in curriculum development and assessment.

11   The University places particular emphasis on its Teaching and Learning Strategy. This aims to enhance the quality of the student learning experience; target, recruit, support and retain a diverse range of students; promote and foster creativity and innovation in curriculum design and delivery; and promote learning, professionalism and employability through the integration of academic theory and relevant vocational practice.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

12   In recent years the University has reviewed its course approval, review and monitoring processes with the aim of removing what were perceived to be brakes on innovation and creativity. The alterations to course approval and revalidation processes were not major and were

based on a principled assessment of risk. The significant change has been in the system of annual monitoring of courses/subjects.

13   The Handbook states that external course approval panel members, who are academic subject experts, are proposed by the sponsoring faculty. They should not have been involved in the planning stages nor be closely associated with the school, for example by having recently been an external examiner or a member of staff within the last five years. The University, through its rigorous and detailed annual review of approval and revalidation events, has identified a not infrequent lack of understanding among course proposers about such requirements and has put in place careful checking procedures, such that faculty nominations are sometimes referred back for further consideration. The need to observe due process in this area (as in others identified by the annual overview report) is overseen by the Course Approval Sub-Committee and Teaching and Learning Committee and is reinforced through the annual revision of the Handbook, an annual briefing seminar on approval and revalidation and support given to course proposers by the Centre for Higher Education Practice. The audit team considered the central monitoring and review of quality assurance processes and the work of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup to be a feature of good practice (see paragraphs 14, 19, 21, 23 and 25).

14   Following the 2008 Strategic Review of the Regulatory Framework, the programme approval process was re-designed with the aim in part of focusing on confirmation of standards and suitability of resources for successful delivery. Evidence from the first year of the operation of the streamlined system suggests that the audit of library and information technology (IT) resources, for example, is the subject of careful scrutiny. The focus on academic standards is manifest in the design of the approval template, the rigour of programme specifications and in the explicit requirement for evaluation panels to comment on such matters as the relevant subject benchmark statements, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and conformity to the University's own regulatory framework. The audit team noted that evaluation reports often contain detailed conditions arising from meticulous scrutiny by the Academic Office to ensure such conformity.

15   A further consequence of the Regulatory Review was a flexing of module sizes, of distribution of student credit load between semesters and normal maximum credit load for a whole cohort of students. The audit team heard how this flexing had encouraged creativity and innovation in curriculum design, one example being the approval of a new single honours programme of 500 credits, the additional credits allowing double accreditation in law and accounting. The audit team considered the course approval system to be robust and rigorous, while supporting innovation and creativity.

16   The University operates a system of periodic revalidation according to a five-year cycle. The process is laid out in detail in the Handbook. It is essentially the same as the initial approval process, with the difference that several courses may be revalidated through a single event. Guidance on who the revalidation panel should meet now extends beyond course providers to include a representative group of students. The audit team welcomed the latter change but noted that the time expected to be spent with students was relatively limited and that there is no student member of the panel. The team considered that it would be desirable for the University to consider ways of extending active participation of students in the quality assurance of educational provision.

17   The evidence from the sampling trails seen by the audit team indicated a robust revalidation process with detailed scrutiny of the documentation and a considered approach to the setting of conditions. The audit team considered that arrangements for revalidation are fit for purpose, but would encourage the University to explore ways in which students can become more actively involved in the process.

18   At the time of the audit visit, the University was operating two systems of annual monitoring of programmes and subjects: the long-standing Annual Subject Monitoring and a new programme management system piloted in three faculties in 2008-09. The Quality Management and Audit Unit provides key management information for each faculty, including statistical information. Faculties are required to report their conclusions on the monitoring documentation received from central sources and from constituent reporting units and are specifically asked to confirm that intended learning outcomes are being delivered and obtained by students and that standards are being achieved. As part of the process, the University and the faculties identify particular objectives for the reporting year, over and above the standard requirements. This mechanism allows the tracking of themes with the aim of enhancement or verification. The audit team saw evidence of how reports of Annual Subject Monitoring are considered at course level through to faculty level and then to university level, where faculty reports are considered by the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup, which itself then produces an overall report for the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee.

19   After a mature review of monitoring options, the University took a careful decision to pilot the new programme management system for one year, to conduct interim and fuller reviews and, subsequently, to extend the pilot for a further year. This phased, reflective approach to reviewing and implementing quality assurance processes has much to commend it.

20   The programme management system places specific responsibility for monitoring on the course team and relies on its capacity to monitor performance continually rather than annually. Importantly, the new system does not require monitoring units or faculties to produce reports but action plans. As yet, the details and expectations of the system remain unarticulated in the Handbook, although the rationale for the process and its practical implementation were clearly set out in the proposal for change that went to the Teaching and Learning Committee in April 2008.

21   In 2009 Academic Development and Enhancement Committee received a frank report evaluating the new system. The report focused specifically on the role of course committees and their associated staff-student consultative committees to see how they coped with the system of continuous monitoring. It found that in nearly a quarter of the courses scrutinised the course committee minutes and staff-student consultative committee minutes alone could not provide adequate assurance to the University about the effectiveness of the new monitoring system. Consequently, the University has put in place a sustained programme of training for minute secretaries to improve the adequacy of records. It has also recognised that other issues, such as attendance at meetings and capacity to use information, need to be addressed.

22   The Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup provides the University with assurance on the robustness of its annual monitoring process. Its role is to consider whether the faculties have taken an appropriate and effective risk-based approach to annual monitoring and whether full account has been taken of available qualitative and quantitative indicators. Where appropriate, it may conduct reviews of programmes as identified from faculty reports and other indicators, and identify courses or subject areas or themes for detailed review. The audit team saw evidence that in undertaking this work the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup had had an impact both on quality assurance and quality enhancement, as well as on the securing of standards.

23   At faculty level, responsibility for oversight of annual monitoring rests in practice with the Teaching and Learning Committee (or equivalent), supported by the faculty teaching and learning coordinators. The latter play a crucial role in the linkage between course/subject level and the central University monitoring bodies, particularly in providing faculty oversight of quality, standards and enhanced practice. The team also found that, even in those faculties where the new system was operating, the work of school and faculty teaching and learning committees (or equivalent) was closely focused on the monitoring and enhancement of provision within their remit, mitigating risks posed by the absence of formal annual course or faculty reports. In further

mitigation, the 2009 review of programme management system noted that all faculties had agreed arrangements for reporting issues through school boards and faculty committees. The team also heard that the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup was able to draw its own conclusions from the substantial information that it received, offering the University a vehicle for monitoring which is independent of course teams and faculty committees. Nevertheless, the audit team concurred with an important conclusion of the 2009 evaluation of the pilot scheme which recommended that consideration be given to the adequacy of central review activity given the reduced evidence emerging from course teams and faculties. The team considers it desirable that the University continue to evaluate the extent to which its arrangements for the new system of course monitoring allow the University and faculties to maintain oversight of the quality and standards of educational provision.

24   Overall, the audit team considered that the University had displayed a careful, evolutionary approach to its systems for the approval, revalidation and monitoring of its courses of study. The aim has been to allow greater flexibility and remove what were perceived to be brakes on innovation and creativity. The significant change has been in the system of annual monitoring of courses/subjects. The team recognises the fact that the new system is not yet embedded, that the University is not being hasty in the extension of the pilot scheme and that it has in place a mechanism for evaluation of the pilot. Overall, it judged that, in the area of approval, revalidation and monitoring, the management of the quality and standards of provision are effective.

25   External examiners are appointed to cover every module that leads to an award. The University also appoints chief external examiners who are concerned with ensuring fairness and impartiality in the application of award regulations and procedures in the context of combined undergraduate honours degrees.

26   Faculties nominate external examiners and the Teaching and Learning Committee has responsibility for appointing them. This committee receives each year a report on the nomination process. Recurrent concerns relate to the late nomination and appointment of externals and the number of departures from the University's Code of Practice for External Examining of Taught Programmes of Study. Such departures have led to the refusal or withdrawal of a significant number of nominations, bearing witness both to imperfect understanding of the Code within faculties and to the rigour of the central monitoring.

27   The Code of Practice describes how external examiners are required to approve in advance all examination papers and coursework assessment schemes and to have access to all examination scripts and coursework. The exception relates to those 'modules at levels 3 and 4 in undergraduate degrees where they do not contribute to the final classification of an award'. In other documentation, this exception is held to relate to level 3 and 4 modules which 'do not contribute to a final award'. In a credit framework where eligibility for an honours award depends on successful completion of modules at levels 3 and 4, the audit team was of the view that all such modules arguably contribute to the final award. In a classification system that depends entirely on performance at level 6 (with level 5 marks, as level 4 marks, not contributing), clarity about the extent and rationale of external examiners' involvement at
levels 4 and 5 is, in the view of the team, even more vital. Yet the wording of the Handbook on involvement in meetings of boards of examiners suggests that their presence is not an expectation 'where the performance of candidates in assessment does not contribute to the final result'. Despite an implication that would appear to exclude external examiners from consideration of level 5 outcomes, the team was assured, and presented with evidence to show, that external examiners were fully involved at level 5. For the sake of clarity, the team concluded it is desirable that the University review the requirements for external examiner participation in the consideration of assessment tasks and outcomes at all higher education levels of undergraduate programmes.

28   Each course committee is required to draft a response to the relevant external examiner's report and communicate it directly to the examiner. The reports are also considered at course committees as part of the annual monitoring process and, importantly, at the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup as part of its general monitoring function. The team found sufficient evidence that external examiner reports are being considered by staff-student consultative committees in line with *HEFCE 06/45*.

29   The Pro Vice-Chancellor, Teaching and Learning, prepares an annual overview report of external examiner reports which, as well as highlighting the positive comments received, outlines areas for development. Some of these observations have led to a themed audit initiated by Academic Development and Enhancement Committee, for example the use of group work in assessment schemes. The audit team considered this a clear example of enhancement prompted through the use of external examiners. Partly on the basis of a reading of a number of external examiner reports and a trailing of how the University dealt with the issues raised, and partly on the evidence of the robustness of procedures, the audit team judged that overall the University's external examining process was effective in assuring the academic standards of awards and reflected the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA.

30   Since the last audit the Teaching and Learning Committee has reviewed the University's regulatory framework in light of revisions to the FHEQ and the *Code of practice*. Subsequently, the University has aligned its previous award levels with the new FHEQ levels and the Handbook has been updated.

31   Programme specifications are integral to the design of new courses. The course proposal form includes three linked sections that require the aims, learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment methods to be stated and the Handbook provides extensive guidance on how this should be done. The course approval process also requires the revalidation panel to explore use made of both QAA's subject benchmark statement and relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements. It was clear from the revalidation documentation the team saw that subject benchmarks figure appropriately in the submissions and reports. After completing professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation visits reports are submitted to the Teaching and Learning Committee with a response and action plan

32   The University produces a regularly updated Assessment Handbook which contains a substantial exposition of all aspects of assessment. It covers, among many other things, regulatory matters, arrangements for students with particular needs, and penalties for late submission of coursework. It does so in a style that seeks to engage academic colleagues in the theory and practice of assessment, supplying footnotes and references, as well as a list of further reading. In the audit team's view, the comprehensiveness and collegial tone of the Handbook is a feature of good practice, and is likely to lead to increasing consistency of practice across the institution.

33   The recent review of the regulatory framework touched on two central aspects of assessment: condonement and the classification of degrees. The decision on condonement was to remove its use, which had been inconsistent, too complex and subject to discretion. The audit team agreed that the new rules for awarding a pass in a module have the potential to provide greater robustness and transparent equity for students. However, although the University showed itself to be aware of the impact of such changes on students already on courses through its detailed discussion of the matter at a meeting of Senate, some Student Handbooks seen by the audit team suggested that some schools and faculties had not clearly communicated the changes to students (see Section 7).

34   The decision on classification of awards was to re-affirm the University's belief that the final classification of an award should be based on performance at final level. Thus the classification of an undergraduate honours degree is based entirely on level 6 module results, with a few exceptions permitted where a professional body requires the inclusion of level 5

modules or where a faculty can make a convincing case to the Teaching and Learning Committee. The latter has been granted to the BSc (Hons) Accounting in a pilot to test the contention that a level 5 contribution to classification would improve student motivation in the second year. The audit team considers that the whole cycle of consultation, review and debate around these two decisions exemplifies the University's capacity to engage in reflective and collegial decision-making.

35   The Assessment Handbook explains the rationale behind assessment criteria, their relationship to learning outcomes and the need for students to know them in advance. While it gives detailed generic assessment criteria by level and distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative work, it also accepts that 'differentiated assessment criteria cannot be dictated centrally since they will vary with subject and style of assessment'. Students met by the team were clear that they knew where to find relevant assessment criteria. However, the evidence of faculty, course and module handbooks seen by the team demonstrated that there was inconsistency in the information given, a conclusion that had already been reached in a review of information given to students conducted by the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee in 2009. The University will wish to ensure that all students are consistently given clear assessment criteria at module, course and university level in accessible published information (see Section 7).

36   The University's Plagiarism Policy was approved by Senate in December 2006 and was reviewed after its first year of operation. The policy established a graduated framework of penalties for plagiarism, based on the number of offences, with the first offence involving formative advice. It contains scope for academic judgement over whether a student may be deemed to have referenced poorly rather than have committed plagiarism. Although plagiarism detection software is available, the audit team learnt that it is not used routinely in all courses, except in research degree programmes. Penalties are not related to the student's level of work in the case of undergraduates and misdemeanours are dealt with locally, except for offences which would invoke the most extreme penalty of exclusion from the University, a penalty which would only be applied on the fourth offence. The policy emphasises the importance of a 'holistic approach', balancing punitive measures with formative ones, such as advice at induction and in assessment design.

37   In 2009 the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee found that plagiarism definitions and penalties were inaccurate in some information for students. The audit team found that some student handbooks presented an interpretation of plagiarism which was not the same as the definition given in the Policy.

38   The audit team also found evidence which questioned the information base used by the Teaching and Learning Committee to monitor the operation and effect of the policy. The original Working Group that developed the policy suggested that the incidence of plagiarism in the final year of undergraduate study would decline over time. However, two years after the introduction of the policy the Teaching and Learning Committee concluded that the majority of reported cases were at level 6 and that the number of postgraduate offences had increased. It also recognised that the incidence of reported cases was low, uneven across the schools and faculties and did not include some cases which had been mentioned in external examiners' reports. After further investigation of the Register of Offences, it was concluded that the record was unreliable and it was not yet possible to finalise a benchmark against which progress could be monitored.

39   The audit team concluded that the University has insufficient evidence that its plagiarism strategy either deters plagiarism or that cases are being routinely detected or systematically reported. In order to monitor the success of its strategy and to maintain the standards of its awards, the team advises the University to ensure that cases of plagiarism are consistently identified and recorded.

40   Data on the performance of students in modules and courses are routinely provided from the central record system for meetings of boards of examiners. The audit team saw examples of how such data allowed boards to identify modules or courses where assessment results might be at odds with normal patterns. The Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup receives a large amount of management information, often sifted and analysed by the Quality Management and Audit Unit; it uses such data partly to identify areas at risk or courses for special review. Both annual monitoring processes rely on provision of significant statistical information. The Annual Subject Monitoring reports seen by the audit team consistently made use of statistics to identify issues, whereas the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee evaluation of the new system pilot notes that 'limited use was made of available statistics to inform discussion' in course committees, being frequently 'noted' rather than analysed. The University will wish to keep under review this difference in approach between the two monitoring systems as part of its continuing evaluation of the new system.

41   The University operates a module monitoring system, the main purpose of which is to identify outliers in terms of assessment results (either abnormally poor or abnormally excellent). Heads of school are provided with a summary report by the Quality Management and Audit Unit at the end of each semester covering all modules offered by their school, which allows them to identify modules for review. The review, conducted by the Head of School, typically involves discussions with the module coordinator and a group of students, and results in an action plan. The audit team heard from one head of school how the recently introduced Student Survey on the Quality of Teaching contributed valuably to the review of identified modules.

42   The audit team concluded that overall the use of statistical management information as part of the University's management of academic standards was broadly effective, notably in the work of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup, in the operation of annual subject monitoring and in module monitoring. The team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

43   The University undertakes a systematic review of its procedures when a revised section of the *Code of practice* is published. The audit team read a number of reports to Teaching and Learning Committee recommending minor changes to existing procedures. For example, the pro forma for external examiners' reports was revised to ensure that external examiners' comments were acted upon. Publication of the revised *Code of practice, Section 9: Work-based and placement learning*, led to a revised University policy statement and a Guide to Good Practice. The team considered the University's approach to the *Code* to be clear and proportionate.

44   The University gathers feedback from students on the quality of student learning opportunities from the Student Survey on the Quality of Teaching and the National Student Survey and staff-student consultative committees. The module-based online student survey provides qualitative and quantitative data to module coordinators within two days of the survey closing and subsequently to heads of school and deans. Course directors receive the quantitative data. Course committee minutes seen by the audit team confirmed that the data, and benchmark information made available to the committees, informed the reflection of staff. The audit team considered that the design of the survey and the timely and sensitive dissemination of results, enable high-quality feedback and responses to it.

45   The University has mapped its own student survey onto the National Student Survey questions. Results from the National Student Survey are the subject of a detailed report to Academic Development and Enhancement Committee, which decides on university-level action. For instance, in relation to relatively poor outcomes on feedback to students' on assessed work, the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee required faculties to report how they proposed to address the issues of quality and timeliness in feedback, and considered the

responses at its subsequent meeting and agreed faculty action plans, while suggesting the need to engage students earlier to ensure their understanding of what constitutes feedback. A Centre for Higher Education Practice project on assessment and feedback is due to report to the Teaching and Learning Committee in October 2010.

46   The University requires students to be represented either through staff-student consultative committees or course committees and preferably both. Terms of reference and role descriptors emphasise the importance placed on ensuring that the student perspective is considered in decisions relating to their courses. The Students' Union provides training for student representatives. The student written submission found the effectiveness of course-level committees to be variable, a concern also identified in the 2008 National Student Survey. In its analysis of minutes from staff-student consultative committees the audit team found that they effectively provided feedback but this was not necessarily followed through by action in course committees. Also, there was little evidence that students were active participants in decision making about their courses.

47   Students are represented on relevant senior committees of the University and are involved in other ways, such as through the University and Students' Union Forum. What is particularly effective about the Forum is the opportunity for the Students' Union President to present the minutes of these meetings to the University's senior management group. This ensures that the issues of concern to students are regularly brought to the attention of the senior decision makers in the University. The President of the Students' Union provides an annual report to Council. Students have also been included in the series of consultations about the future of the Belfast campus. The student written submission expressed some concern about securing student representation at the faculty level and the University has worked to motivate and improve the quality of student representation through an accredited module, and a dedicated Student Representation Co-ordinator in the Students' Union is now in post.

48   The University's Teaching and Learning Strategy expects courses to be 'scholarship-informed and where appropriate research-informed'. It seeks to maintain a parity of esteem and to explore the synergies between teaching and learning, research and academic enterprise. Contracts for academic staff expect them to be both teachers and active in research or scholarship, while associate lecturers who are based in the professions are seen to bring freshness and currency to the curriculum. The promotion criteria and reward systems also emphasise the research-teaching nexus and research institutes are located in faculties to encourage interaction with teaching. Some discussion of the link has taken place in staff development events, for instance in a Centre for Higher Education Practice workshop session and an event held in collaboration with the Higher Education Academy.

49   The audit team found indications that the University values and is exploring facets of the relationship between teaching and research or scholarship. The audit team heard that final year options exemplify the link between teaching and research/scholarship and the aide-memoire for evaluation and review includes an expectation that this is explored at evaluation and revalidation events. In its reading of reports of these events the team found investigation of this to be patchy. Similarly, there are no specific prompts to external examiners to comment on the relationship. The team would encourage the University to make a more explicit requirement in its documentation for programme evaluation, monitoring and review that the relationship be effectively articulated and demonstrated.

50   The University's regional mission, vocational focus and contribution to 'economic and social inclusion' underlie its approach to other modes of study. Nearly one-third of students are part-time, of whom 1,129 are studying fully online, and 48 per cent of full-time undergraduate programmes have an integrated work-based component.

51   There are three types of e-learning courses offered: fully online, web-dependent and web-enabled. The University considers that wholly online learning is not appropriate for first-year

campus-based undergraduates but encourages the flexibility it affords to part-time students. The final year of the part-time Business Studies programme, for instance, offers six modules completely online. CampusOne provides for both fully online and web-dependent learners and conducts annual satisfaction surveys showing a high level of satisfaction with course materials, support from teaching staff and interaction with other learners. The library supports e-learning through access to e-journals, books and databases and has a fund for digitisation. A themed audit in 2008-09 revealed that students found online learning was challenging but worthwhile and an analysis of their performance found it comparable with that of face-to-face study. The audit team, in its reading of evidence and meeting with students, found that, although this was not a universal experience, e-learning was largely an embedded and valued feature of study at the University.

52   Placements are considered an important component both in vocational courses and in enhancing students' employability in non-professional courses. Learning through work is seen as an important tool for widening participation and addressing regional and government agendas to improve skills. Academically it serves to bring together theory and practice and encourage reflection. Each faculty has a placement coordinator who reports to the relevant Faculty Committee. Typically students undertake a placement preparation module, which includes curriculum vitae development and interview preparation sessions, and are assisted in finding their placements by such means as placement fairs. The Placement Handbooks seen by the audit team were clear and informative and generic documentation laid out the assessment components and weightings, including the contribution of the employer to assessment. On the whole students appreciate the support given for placements, although the student written submission and the National Student Survey showed that there may be some variation in the level of support given by University tutors during placements. The University also seeks to enhance employability by developing courses which attract maximum professional body exemption and opportunities for the accreditation of skills development alongside academic awards. The audit team regarded the use of alternative modes of study as a major contributor to the University's regional mission of economic and social inclusion and concluded that the University's operationalising of its strategic commitment to social, cultural and economic development was a feature of good practice.

53   A cross-cutting supporting aim of the Teaching and Learning Strategy is to 'enhance the quality of the physical and social learning environment' and to 'ensure that learning resources are accessible to all students'. In support of that aim, the ICT strategy is particularly important, since the University regards new technologies as integral to the flexibility needed for long-term growth. The Information Services Department works to help embed innovative technology in teaching and learning, such as an electronic audience response system, in support of such projects as retention and the first year experience. The Department has its own Student Charter which outlines expectations of and for students and performance measures.

54   The Library Management Policy aims to have at least one copy of every title on reading lists and extra as required, with guidelines of one text to 20 students. There are direct links to e-journal articles and a range of services. Library spend has increased in recent years. Reviews of library services have been undertaken through the Association of Research Libraries and showed broad satisfaction with services.

55   The 2009 National Student Survey expressed very high levels of satisfaction with both library and IT resources, although the student written submission suggested that the University improve information about the availability of workstations. Students were generally satisfied with the Student Portal, which 11,000 access daily, and all students contacted for the preparation of the student written submission reported that the virtual learning environment virtual learning environment was a 'valuable learning resource for their course', although its use by staff was variable and the student written submission recommended further staff training in its use. Students who met with the audit team found the to have 'everything you need', although they mentioned print costs as a less welcome feature. Both the student written submission and some of the students who met with the audit team complained about the 'hidden costs' of their courses and the student

written submission recommended that this should be made more explicit to students. New techniques such as online chat and podcasts were particularly highly rated and the student written submission reported that students wanted their use extended. Communication with students through their mobile phones has been used by one faculty to aid retention. The University is well aware and is responding to the potential and challenge of student engagement and the demand for personalised approaches to learning through portable technology through the Emerging Technologies Working Group and work undertaken with the Northern Ireland Assembly and UK Government on policies around media literacy and digital inclusion.

56   The student written submission contained some criticism of social spaces on certain campuses, but the University has recently made investments, such as the integrated Learning Resource Centres, bringing together library and IT facilities with full wireless capability on each campus and was confident that these improvements would shortly come through in student satisfaction. Considerable estate development and investment will take place over the next few years on the Belfast campus as part of the Greater Belfast Development Strategy and students are fully involved in the planning process.

57   Taken as a whole, the audit team found the oversight, review and quality of learning resources at the University to be fit for purpose. It considered that the particular contribution of technology to learning resources aligns with the measures employed by the University to promote creativity and innovation in the curriculum and the attention given to placement learning. Together they contribute to a considered and effective approach to providing well-thought-through learning opportunities for students, which the team identified as a feature of good practice.

58   The University is committed to widening participation and has developed a Widening Participation Strategy. Although academic ability is the principal basis for determining admission, the University recognises other competencies that may indicate potential to succeed. One element of this is the 'Step-Up' scheme, where the University works with schools without a tradition of university entry to raise aspirations and promote progression. Students completing a structured and assessed programme can earn up to 60 UCAS tariff points. 400 students have progressed from the scheme into the University, of whom 95 per cent achieved a degree and 62 per cent a 2.1 or above. A high proportion of the University's undergraduate student population is from socio-economic groups 4-7: 46.8 per cent in 2007-08, which was 12.4 per cent above its benchmark. The University has developed a number of programmes to ease the transition to higher education for these students and to improve retention. Non-continuation rates are closely monitored by the University. An important means by which the University seeks to overcome educational disadvantage and contribute to social inclusion is through its relationships with partner colleges in the region. For part-time courses at the University, progression from a University-validated Foundation Degree delivered by a partner college is guaranteed, but for full-time courses this is contingent on availability of places, especially in the case of sports programmes, and is likely to depend on the level of achievement. The audit team heard that this had caused some students uncertainty and anxiety.

59   The audit team found that the University had embedded widening access through its Teaching and Learning Strategy and in its faculties and monitoring systems, especially in the exploration of means by which student aptitudes can be demonstrated, their transition supported and regional needs met. In those respects this aspect of provision makes a significant contribution to the operationalising of the University's strategic commitment to the social, cultural and economic development of the region, which is a feature of good practice.

60   Academic support for students is the particular responsibility of the course committee which is responsible for arranging induction and allocating individual advisers of study. The University has engaged in projects designed to enhance student retention and progression and recognises that this begins with effective induction. In its discussions with students, the audit team found different experiences of induction, from an intense few days to a staged series of

events over the first few weeks and learned that there were advantages and disadvantages with both approaches. The means of allocating students to advisers of studies was not entirely consistent but most of the student handbooks seen by the team directed students to the advisers and described their role.

61   The University recognises the value of Personal Development Planning but also the challenges of implementing a process consistently. The students met by the audit team did not always recognise the process by name but acknowledged the systematic support they were receiving with personal skills and career development, sometimes in discrete modules or in relation to placement preparation and feedback. The University has developed an online system for recording this process and is also a member of the pilot group for the Higher Education Academic Achievement Record. These initiatives contribute to the enhancement of student employability.

62   The Teaching and Learning Strategy aims to provide 'a supportive environment, in which teaching is recognised, valued and rewarded for all those who teach and support learning in the University'. In this regard, the audit team noted that the revised staff induction programme includes corporate, academic and local elements, supported by guidelines and a checklist. The approach to appraisal is reflected in the name of the scheme adopted in 2007, the Developmental Appraisal Review Scheme. This includes a Developmental Review meeting conducted with all staff by their line managers at least once every two years, using a pro forma, and team appraisals are an option. The team learnt that members of the Centre for Higher Education Practice also worked with faculty teaching and learning co-ordinators to help roll out the Teaching and Learning Strategy, advise on Centre projects and discuss staff training needs in line with annual institutional priorities and local needs. The University's Peer Supported Review arose from a review of peer observation, in line with the University's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund objectives for Supporting Professional Standards, and extends the scope of traditional teaching observation to cover a wide range of teaching and learning-related activities which impact on students.

63   The University rewards its staff on the basis of performance through the Annual Review Process, providing for bonuses and, in the case of academic staff, promotion to a higher grade. Outcomes of the process are analysed and reported annually to Council. Three pathways for promotion to Professor, Reader and Senior Lecturer have been established in Teaching and Learning, Research and Development and Academic Enterprise, with minimum criteria established at university level, which faculties may supplement. Leadership in teaching and support for learning is also recognised by individual and team awards. The University has had four national teaching fellowship awards in the period 2000–2009.

64   The Staff Development Unit website advertises a wide range of events, schemes, courses and conferences for staff. The Unit works in conjunction with the two University Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the Centre for Higher Education Practice. Good practice is disseminated through conferences, symposia, seminars, workshops and discussion forums. There is an annual Staff Conference and E-learning Conference, which include presentations from both University and external contributors and are well attended. The University describes the Centre as providing 'leadership, support, opportunity and challenge'. The audit team heard that it represented a 'dynamic community of practitioners' and on the basis of its reading and discussion with staff would support that analysis. The team found that support for staff was both well provided through central staff development bodies and embedded in local practices. It also found that staff development made a significant contribution to the University's aim to provide an environment in which teaching is recognised, valued and rewarded and underpins the considered and effective approach to providing well-thought-through learning opportunities for students.

65   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students, including those on collaborative provision courses.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

66   Academic Development and Enhancement Committee has a specific remit for enhancement, assisted by the Quality Management and Audit Unit. Annual monitoring internal and external course formats have specific headings to encourage reporting of course innovations, enhancements to facilities and examples of good practice. The Faculty Heads of Collaborative Courses are responsible for monitoring collaborative courses and identifying issues, enhancements and good practice. These are discussed and shared in the Faculty Heads of Collaborative Courses Forum and disseminated through its Annual Report of Good Practice, as well as being part of Faculty Head of Collaborative Course reports to the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup.

67   The first strategic aim of the Teaching and Learning Strategy is 'to enhance the quality of the student learning experience' and this is reflected in the action plans for 2009-10 at central and faculty level. This clear and systematic approach to defining the institution's strategy and then translating it into specific, measurable and relevant action plans is the core of the University's approach to sustainable quality enhancement

68   The audit team saw evidence that much of the drive for enhancement comes from internal audits, course monitoring and staff and student feedback. The University also makes use of external examiner comments, Institutional Audit reports and QAA and Higher Education Agency publications. The National Student Survey is a key source of information on student views which is carefully considered at university and faculty level.

69   Cross-cutting enhancement initiatives often develop through the Centre for Higher Education Practice Centre for Higher Education Practice. As noted above (Section 3), an area that has received some recent attention from Centre for Higher Education Practice is the linkage between research and teaching, but the team found limited evidence of linkage of research to teaching, although there were some specific good examples.

70   The University recognises the wealth of experience, ideas and good practice that resides in individual staff and has made this more widely accessible by constructing a searchable database of these staff under the themes of assessment, e-learning, teaching first-year students, teaching large groups, reflective practice and plagiarism.

71   The audit team concluded that the institutional approach to quality enhancement was effective and supported through the creation of an environment in which teaching is developed and rewarded and good practice is routinely captured and disseminated.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

72   Currently, there are around 5,800 full-time equivalent students designated as being on collaborative provision. Approximately 4,600 students are at other institutions on University-validated courses. The current Collaborative Provision Strategy was developed in 2005-06 and covers both local and overseas provision. The local provision is focused on the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL) Strategy for Higher Education. The overseas provision preferably takes the form of articulations, so that students come to the University with advanced standing. The Partnership Handbook sets out the policies and procedures for the management of its collaborative provision and the Quality Management and Audit Unit website contains useful information for partner institutions.

73   The University has addressed the issues raised in the 2006 QAA Collaborative audit report by making publicly available a record of all partnerships, continuing to provide training courses for chairs of examination boards and clarifying when collaborative provision students can appeal to the University. The consistency of annual course review (which only applies to validated courses) is being actively pursued by the University through the recently formalised higher education/further education collaboration steering group and the Faculty Heads of

Collaborative Course Forums. The University has endeavoured to resolve the ambiguities in its definitions of collaborative provision. Senate has approved four distinct models of collaborative activity: validated, joint, outcentre and articulations.

74   The different models of collaboration have different operational implications, which include the arrangements for approving the partner organisation and approving courses. The audit team was generally satisfied with the systems in place and saw evidence of their operational efficacy. The team was also provided with evidence demonstrating that potential partners were sometimes turned down and that the termination of partnerships was handled in a thorough fashion. The team concluded that the processes for course and institutional approval were sound.

75   The audit team saw evidence of the effectiveness of staff development activities by the University for staff in partner institutions. For example, staff from the overseas outcentre undertook a combination of visits to the UK to view clinical placements so that they could be trained to approve their own local placements and to act as link tutors for clinical placement assessments. The team concluded that staff development related to collaborative provision was well thought through and appropriate for the various types of provision.

76   University Recognised Teacher Status is conferred on staff employed by other organisations who are to be engaged over a significant period in the teaching, supervision, assessment and examination of students of the University in settings, for example clinical placement or the delivery of modules at outcentres, in which members of academic staff of the University cannot be accessible to students on a day-to–day basis. There are currently 209 recognised teachers, of whom 35 are supporting around 200 students in the overseas outcentre. The audit team noted that this development places higher reliance on recognised teachers than other outcentre courses.

77   The appointment process for Recognised Teacher Status is clearly defined in the Partnership Handbook. It is not specified that appointment should be achieved before staff commence working on University courses. The audit team noted that recognised teachers in the overseas outcentre were approved 12 months later than originally planned.

78   The overseas outcentre is an unusual example of the outcentre model of provision because it has a separate programme specification, much higher usage of Recognised Teachers compared with other outcentres and is managed through a 'quasi-Faculty'. The course differs because it includes a significant English language learning element, some culture-specific modules and a regulated and credit-bearing intern year to satisfy the local professional regulatory arrangements. UU Health (a wholly owned subsidiary of the University) is a 'quasi-faculty', which has powers and responsibilities for assuring quality and standards that are comparable with orthodox faculties but does not have direct line management for the majority of the staff delivering its courses. UU Health is the contract holder for a variety of health professional courses within Northern Ireland and overseas but manages them differently. The home provision is provided via a Service Level Agreement with the School of Nursing that gives the School the responsibility for quality and standards. For the overseas provision, UU Health retains responsibility for quality and standards but is dependent on staff time and expertise from the School for a high percentage of services.

79   The audit team saw detailed evidence confirming that UU Health had committee structures and procedures comparable with a standard faculty for quality assuring the overseas course, which operated with similar rigour to those of a normal faculty. The nature of this development means that the model may evolve in the future, once the course is fully established and the overseas staff have greater experience. The overseas school is recognised by the government as fulfilling the requirements of a higher education institution and so has the potential to be a partner providing a University of Ulster validated programme. The audit team considered that the University, UU Health and the Faculty of Life and Health Sciences, through the cross-representation of senior staff and flexibility, have the ability to keep the partnership arrangements under review as the

programme implementation progresses and the level of direct involvement by University staff changes. However, the team concluded that it would be desirable for the University to review its arrangements for the management of UU Health courses delivered overseas.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

80   The Research Degrees Committee is responsible for approving programmes of study and for analysing performance and support for research students. It reports to the Research and Innovation Committee, a committee of Senate, and has published a comprehensive Research Studies Handbook that lays out policies and procedures relating to postgraduate research. The Handbook is reviewed annually with the aim of sharing best practice and in accordance with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

81   The Research Office, reporting to the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, provides central administrative support for research. Following consultation in 2005-06, some responsibility for the administration of postgraduate research study was devolved to faculty-based research graduate schools. Biennially the Research Degrees Committee carries out a review of the management of research students within each Research Graduate School. The reviews are evidence-based, reflective and generate clear action points. Data on a range of performance indicators is analysed, including supervisor loads.

82   The admission process is clearly set out in the Research Studies Handbook. Applications are strongly encouraged in relation to specific topics in which the relevant faculty has demonstrable supervisory experience and appropriate resource. Admission decisions are normally made by the Faculty Board or, in exceptional cases, by Research Degrees Committee on the recommendation of the Faculty Board. Induction is normally undertaken during the first week following registration and the programme comprises both central and faculty-specific components. Postgraduate students whom the audit team met confirmed the induction process to be well designed and effectively implemented.

83   The respective roles and responsibilities of supervisor and student are articulated in the Research Studies Handbook and reiterated in a Research Student Charter. While there is good provision for supervisor training and updating and for each Research Graduate School to assess the composite strengths of a proposed team, it was not clear to the audit team if initial training is compulsory and needs to be undertaken by staff before being allocated to their first supervisory team. The team considers it desirable that the University clarify the requirement for research supervisor training.

84   Student progress is monitored by the supervisory team and the relevant Research Graduate School, and centrally by the Research Office. Following discussion of the outcomes of the 2006 Review of research degree programmes, all faculties have formalised assessment of students at the end of their second year (for full-time students) to ensure continuing progress. Also, in response to the Review, Senate has determined new arrangements governing supervisors' presence at oral examinations that are consistent with the expectations of the *Code of practice*.

85   The primary mechanism for eliciting research student feedback is the Annual Report system. Independent completion of the report is a requirement of both supervisor and student and the responses are considered by the Research Office and the relevant Research Graduate School in relation to key performance indicators outlined in the Research Student Charter.

86   The criteria against which students' submissions are assessed are incorporated into a Handbook for Examiners of Research Degrees and distributed to the Board of Examiners alongside a copy of the student's thesis. The Handbook sets out the requirements for all aspects of the examination process.

87   In summary, the audit team considered that the balance between postgraduate research students being associated with Research Institutes and the way that their administration is located

in the faculty Research Graduate Schools but monitored centrally by Research Degrees Committee was thoughtful and productive. The team concluded that the framework for the management and development of research degree programmes is a feature of good practice. In general, the University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA, and in the main are operating as intended.

Section 7: Published information

88   The University publishes a large range of material about itself for both prospective and current students, much of which is available online. Programme specifications are published through the online prospectus in abbreviated versions of the full format required at validation. Course information prepared for marketing and recruitment purposes follows a standard template and is checked for accuracy by the Student Marketing Division. The audit team reviewed a range of pre-admission course information and in a meeting with the team students said that they were content with the accuracy of the prospectus they received when applying and that what they had read about their course had been correct.

89   Prompted by concerns emerging from the annual monitoring exercise in 2006-07, the Teaching and Learning Committee asked faculties to put in place new arrangements to review the accuracy of the course information published in Student Handbooks. In April 2009 the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee tested the effectiveness of the new arrangements through a review of a range of published information including a small sample of Student Handbooks. To address its continuing concerns the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee decided that a downloadable template should replace the checklist contained in the Programme Approval Monitoring and Review Handbook. The audit team learnt that this is being developed by the Centre for Higher Education Practice for implementation in 2010-11.

90   The audit team reviewed a number of Student Handbooks and discussed their usefulness with a range of students. The team found a number of inconsistencies in the Handbooks, many of which will no doubt be addressed through the adoption of a new template, but others, including different guidance on the rules for condonement (see paragraph 33), need more urgent attention as they have the potential to put quality at risk. The team therefore advises the University to review its systems for ensuring the accuracy, consistency and clarity of its course-level published information.

91   Notwithstanding the inconsistencies found in student handbooks, the audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

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

- the operationalisation of the University's strategic commitment to the social, economic and cultural development of the region (paragraph 5)

- central monitoring and review of quality assurance processes and the work of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup (paragraph 13)

- the comprehensiveness and collegial tone of the Assessment Handbook (paragraph 32)

- the considered and effective approach to providing well-thought-through learning opportunities for students (paragraph 57)

- the framework for the management and development of research degree programmes (paragraph 87).

Recommendations for action

93   Recommendations for action that is advisable:

● ensure plagiarism cases are consistently identified and recorded (paragraph 39)

● review its systems for ensuring the accuracy, consistency and clarity of its course level published information (paragraph 90).

94   Recommendations for action that is desirable:

● consider ways of extending active participation of students in the quality assurance of educational provision (paragraph 16)

● continue to evaluate the extent to which its arrangements for the annual monitoring pilot allow the University and faculties to maintain oversight of the quality and standards of educational provision (paragraph 23)

● review the requirements for external examiner participation in the consideration of assessment tasks and outcomes at all higher education levels of undergraduate programmes (paragraph 27)

● review its arrangements for the management of UU (University of Ulster) Health programmes delivered overseas (paragraph 79)

● clarify the requirement for research supervisor training (paragraph 83).

Appendix

The University of Ulster's response to the Institutional audit report

The University welcomes the QAA's confidence in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of both the academic standards of our awards and the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. We are appreciative of the many positive findings in the report.

The University is particularly pleased by the recognition given in the report to our commitment to the economic, cultural and social development of the region which is reflected in our strategic priorities and the actions taken to realise these. These include our widening access policy, our network of partner institutions throughout Northern Ireland and the high percentage of our programmes which have an integrated work-based component. The University is also gratified by the audit team's commendation of our approach to the development and implementation of new institutional strategies with their emphasis on consultation, pilot activity and evaluation in order to secure robust processes and the necessary consensus to achieve and sustain effective change.

The matters highlighted by the report for further attention are being actively addressed by the University:

- Faculties have committed to full engagement with the plagiarism register in 2009/10 and will provide commentaries on their plagiarism reports to the Teaching and Learning Committee in October 2010

- A new template has been provided to Faculties to assist in the preparation of course level information and this will be followed by further guidance and, at a later stage, by an audit of published material

- In relation to student engagement with quality assurance and in addition to existing feedback arrangements, student membership of revalidation panels will be piloted in 2010/11 and student involvement in themed audits will continue to be sought where appropriate. The Students' Union has also been included in the arrangements for University oversight of monitoring activity through inclusion on the membership of a sub-committee of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee (see below)

- A sub-committee of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee has been established to manage on-going University level oversight of the quality and standards of provision through the scrutiny of qualitative and quantitative information and detailed review of selected courses or subjects

- The Teaching and Learning Committee is leading discussions with Faculties regarding the role of external examiners in the moderation of levels 3 and 4 and will take account of the outcomes of the national review of external examining

- Responsibility for the academic governance of the courses previously offered through UU Health has been transferred to the Faculty of Life and Health Sciences and UU Health, now Ulster Educational Partnerships Ltd, is no longer operating as a quasi faculty

- The requirements relating to research supervisor training will be clarified.