



Institutional audit

University of Nottingham

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Preface

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

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits, on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations, to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the 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) carried out an Institutional audit of the University of Nottingham (the University) from 23 to 27 November 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

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

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University's commitment to enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities is manifest in several important initiatives outlined in Section 4 of this report. The current revision of the Learning and Teaching Strategy offers the University an opportunity to articulate a clearer strategy for these initiatives and introduce more effective mechanisms for their evaluation.

Postgraduate research students

The University's arrangements for securing the quality and standards of its research degree programmes are sound and 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 University has developed and implemented systems which ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

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

- the University's systems for listening and responding to the student voice
- the integrative activities across separate campuses that help to secure equivalence of the student experience

- the contribution of the Graduate and Student Service Centres for supporting and enhancing the student experience.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- strengthen institutional oversight of the outcomes of annual monitoring conducted by schools.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider strengthening the evidence base used in its review of the new School Review process, in order that the process may contribute more fully to the assurance of quality and standards
- extend the academic scrutiny of external examiner reports at institutional level
- expedite the planned harmonisation of its assessment practices
- reflect on how it may satisfy itself that its policy on sharing external examiner reports with students is implemented consistently.

Reference points

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

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

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

Report

1 A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Institutional audit of the University of Nottingham (the University) from 23 to 27 November 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor A Billsborough, Professor T Cryer, Professor R Foskett and Dr R Haggarty, auditors, and Dr C Robinson, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr W Naylor, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University began as an adult school in 1798, becoming University College, Nottingham, in 1881. In 1948, the University College was awarded a Royal Charter and became the University of Nottingham.

4 Most of the University's provision is located on University Park, three miles west of Nottingham city centre. The University has two other campuses in Nottingham, a Medical School based at campuses in Nottingham and Derby, and a campus at Sutton Bonington which is 10 miles south of University Park. The University also has two international campuses in Malaysia and China.

5 Teaching takes place across a broad range of disciplines which are mainly organised into schools and grouped into faculties. The five faculties are Arts; Social Sciences, Law and Education; Science; Engineering; and Medicine and Health Sciences. The faculties also include a number of institutes and centres focusing on research.

6 In 2008-09 the University had a total of 36,932 students, shown by programme level and mode of study below.

| Level | Full-time | Part-time | Total |
|-----------------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| Undergraduate | 27,230 | 1,417 | 28,647 |
| Taught postgraduate | 2,824 | 1,427 | 4,251 |
| Research postgraduate | 2,261 | 526 | 2,787 |
| No award | 564 | 683 | 1,247 |
| Total | 32,879 | 4,053 | 36,932 |

7 According to the University Plan 2007 to 2010, the University aspires to be among the world's greatest universities and distinguished for its international reach, its commitment to learning, and its world-class research.

8 QAA's last audit of the University in 2005 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes, and the academic standards of its awards. The report noted three features of good practice, made three recommendations where action was considered advisable, and one where action was considered desirable. The advisable recommendations related to the monitoring of assessment schemes for joint honours programmes; the development of the University's policies and procedures for periodic review and audit; and formal agreements for the operation of collaborative arrangements to preclude serial provision and include a means for the University to approve all publicity information produced by its partners. The desirable recommendation related to reviewing the continuing appropriateness of its policies and procedures for the management of the quality and standards of its awards offered at the international campuses.

9 An annex to the Briefing Paper described the University's response to each of these recommendations. The annex reported the revision of the University Quality Manual to ensure consistency of assessment processes for joint honours programmes; that external members continue to be appointed to all review panels; the modification of the Quality Manual in respect of collaborative courses to reflect the auditors' recommendations; and the creation of a Transnational Education Committee with the responsibility of making recommendations to the Learning and Teaching Committee on any changes to policy necessary to assure quality and standards on the international campuses. The audit team regarded these responses as appropriate and satisfactory.

10 The University Senate is responsible for regulating and directing the academic work of the University in teaching, examining, research, awarding degrees, as well as the regulation and superintendence of the education and discipline of students. Many of the day-to-day academic decisions and the functions of Senate are delegated to its committees. The Learning and Teaching Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning, has delegated responsibility for the University's academic quality and standards. Other Senate committees with important roles in the management of standards and quality include the Transnational Education Committee, which provides advice on matters of policy and strategy concerning transnational education (in particular with regard to the international campuses); the Postgraduate Strategy Committee, which leads the development, and oversees the implementation of, postgraduate policy; and the Student Affairs Committee, which is responsible for formulating and overseeing the implementation of strategy and policy in the areas of student support, accommodation, recruitment, admissions and widening participation.

11 Operationally, the primary responsibility for the maintenance of standards and quality rests with the heads of schools who report directly to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor overseeing their faculty. It is up to heads of schools to determine precisely how they discharge this responsibility within the parameters of the University Quality Manual, adherence to which is mandatory. Its provisions, and any other University regulations regarding quality assurance, pertain equally to all campuses.

12 For the purposes of quality assurance, the five faculties are grouped into three academic boards: Humanities; Science and Engineering; and Medicine and Health Sciences. The academic boards' remit is to assure the quality and standards of academic provision in the schools allocated to them. In practice, this involves considering both internal and external reviews of schools and subject areas, and making recommendations as appropriate. Membership of academic boards includes students.

13 Each faculty has at least one undergraduate vice-dean and one postgraduate vice-dean. The vice-deans play a particularly important role in the management of quality and standards: they are members of the relevant academic board and responsible to that board for ensuring that the schools in their faculty adhere to the University's quality assurance framework. A vice-dean chairs each of the three academic boards, and these three individuals are also members of the University Learning and Teaching Committee.

14 The responsibility for designing, coordinating, monitoring and maintaining the University's quality assurance policies and procedures lies primarily with Academic Services Division.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

15 The University defines, applies and reviews standards through programme design and approval, assessment, and regular monitoring. External reference points inform its educational frameworks, outside experts participate in programme approval and periodic review, while external examiners secure assessment standards. The University has taken care when assuring standards at its international campuses to ensure comparability with its UK-based provision.

16 New programme proposals are based on detailed programme specifications subjected to both internal review and external scrutiny; those offered across campuses may differ in detail provided learning outcomes remain the same.

17 In Annual Monitoring schools consider external examiner reports, student feedback on teaching, and student cohort data, and produce a report which remains within the school. Proposals from the Learning and Teaching Committee in 2008-09 for the Annual Monitoring Report to be submitted to academic boards, were rejected by schools. The audit team concluded that, although annual monitoring is an effective mechanism for reflection and evaluation within schools, the confinement of the resulting reports may impair the University's oversight of quality and standards. The team, therefore, considers it advisable for the University to strengthen institutional oversight of the outcomes of annual monitoring by schools.

18 The University has recently merged its dual processes of University Quality Audit (an audit of school mechanisms for managing quality and standards) and Course Review (a five-yearly review of all taught courses involving external specialist(s)) into a single system of periodic review called School Review. The new system covers research, innovation and knowledge transfer as well as learning and teaching. Its basis is a school information pack, containing a learning and teaching section which includes sample external examiner summaries and annual monitoring reports.

19 Given the recent introduction of School Review, only two information packs and one draft school review report were available to the audit team. The team noted that the draft report's learning and teaching section was substantially shorter and less detailed than that from the previous periodic review process; it confirmed that programmes matched subject benchmarks but did not comment further on teaching or assessment.

20 The University informed the audit team that it intends to review the working and outcomes of School Review at the end of its first year of operation. The team took the view that the new procedure's use of summaries or samples of various supporting evidence risked weakening the evidence base by omitting other valuable information. The team therefore considers it desirable for the University, in its review of the new School Review process, to consider strengthening the evidence base used in order that the process may contribute more fully to the assurance of quality and standards.

21 The University's recent periodic review of its campus in China focused on context and environment rather than specific subjects. The University review panel found standards and quality to be comparable with the UK campus and its quality assurance and control processes to be carefully managed.

22 External examiners report comprehensively on programme content, assessment and standards, and on comparability with programmes at other institutions. The Examinations Office produces summaries of external examiner reports and schools' responses, identifying concerns and good practice. Annual scrutiny by academic boards and the Learning and Teaching Committee, and periodic School Review, are based upon these summaries, and complete external examiner reports are not considered beyond the school and the Examinations Office. In consequence, the audit team concluded that potentially valuable information for the University may not be recognised. The team considers it desirable for the University to extend the academic scrutiny of external examiner reports at institutional level.

23 The University's Qualifications Framework is consistent with the Academic Infrastructure and the framework for the European Higher Education Area, while School Review requires assurance that qualifications align with relevant benchmark statements, and are assessed satisfactorily. Schools with programmes subject to external review by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies consider the review report and then forward it in full, together with their response, to their academic board for approval. The audit team concluded that University

engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points makes an effective contribution to the management of standards.

24 All schools must have written marking criteria across the full range, including categories above 70 per cent and below 40 per cent. However, two of three exemplar schemes to which schools are directed in the University's Good Practice Guide do not fully differentiate within the marking ranges above the First class/master's Distinction boundary or below the honours/master's Pass thresholds. The Marking and Classification Working Group has recently reviewed the University's assessment frameworks and has significantly reduced the number of weighting schemes by programme level. There are currently two main schemes for classifying honours and integrated master's degrees: most schools use the mean, but two schools where conventions restrict marking ranges use a 'thresholds' scheme. Recently, schools using the thresholds scheme have been formally requested to reconsider this, and the University aims for universal adoption of the arithmetic mean for determining degree class.

25 External examiners have reported reluctance in some schools to use the full marking range, although mark statistics for 2006-07 showed that most schools used the full range. However, similar external examiner comments on marking range occur in 2007-08 reports, while a study of comparator institutions had found a number of schools to be awarding a smaller proportion of First class degrees than might have been expected. Issues of marking range and degree class distributions remain under review by the University. The audit team recognised that in recent years the University had developed a more consistent institutional approach to assessment. However, the team concluded that there remains scope for further progress particularly in respect of different marking schemes. The team therefore considers it desirable for the University to expedite the planned harmonisation of its assessment practices.

26 Schools receive student cohort data for annual monitoring and School Review, with academic boards receiving aggregated data, and University committees institutional data and comparator information. The audit team saw instances where such information informed discussion and policy at school, board and institutional levels, and concluded that it contributes effectively to the management of academic standards.

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

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

28 The University's framework for the management of students' learning opportunities corresponds closely to external reference points such as the *Code of practice* published by QAA. For example the University's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and periodic review, described in Section 2, each expect staff and external experts to consider the availability of learning opportunities for students alongside academic standards. The audit team's scrutiny of a range of documents associated with these processes confirmed that this expectation was being discharged effectively. However, the team had some reservations about both the confinement within schools of annual monitoring reports, and the use of summaries and samples of evidence in the new School Review process. This is discussed in more detail in Section 2.

29 The University gathers information on the student experience through student evaluations of modules and of teaching, its own Student Satisfaction Survey (though this is at present restricted to students in the UK) and the National Student Survey, and reviews the results at annual monitoring, School Review and through discussion at the Student Affairs Committee. Furthermore, the University operates student-staff feedback committees at all campuses to ensure that the concerns of students about their courses are represented to the academic staff throughout the year. The audit team regarded these various mechanisms as providing students with an ample number of opportunities to provide feedback to the University, and noted the University's determination to make the full range of mechanisms common to all campuses within

the near future. This contributed to the team's identification as a feature of good practice the integrative activities across separate campuses that help to secure equivalence of the student experience.

30 The University is committed to engaging students in quality assurance across its campuses through students' membership of all relevant committees at institutional level, the course representative system, student-staff feedback committees, student involvement in School Review (for which they are specifically trained by the University) and in nominations of staff for the Lord Dearing Awards for Learning and Teaching. Students whom the team met confirmed both the culture of student engagement in quality assurance and the University's willingness to respond to their views. The team identified the University's systems for listening and responding to the student voice as a feature of good practice.

31 The University aims to facilitate research-led teaching in a number of ways, including two dedicated research centres and the involvement of research-active staff from other institutions in developing and approving new programmes. Staff whom the audit team met described a general expectation that academic staff who are active in research should also teach. However, when the team raised the issue of research with students, it heard several examples of research detracting from the learning experience, mainly due to a perceived tendency for staff to prioritise research over teaching, such as through research sabbaticals. The team concluded that the University might wish to reflect on the effectiveness of its approach to research-led teaching.

32 The University has a small number of distance-learning programmes which are approved in the same way as those delivered on campus. E-learning is a much more substantial area of activity and the University has invested heavily in the systems required to support effective e-learning, including a dedicated Learning Team within Information Services. Students whom the audit team met were enthusiastic about e-learning and gave several examples of how it had enriched their learning.

33 The University's Information Services team operates 13 libraries and resource centres. The provision of learning resources is informed by feedback from student-staff feedback committees, the Student Satisfaction Survey and dedicated help lines and comments boxes. The students whom the audit team met, including those at an international campus, were generally satisfied with the learning resources provided and commended Information Services' responsiveness to their feedback.

34 Operational responsibility for admissions rests with schools following guidance in the Quality Manual, which is consistent with the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education*, published by QAA. The Recruitment and Admissions Office in the UK operates a centralised decision-making process for many schools at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Schools within this system agree with the Admissions Office clear criteria against which decisions will be made by the Office on the school's behalf, although borderline cases will be referred back to the school. It is the University's intention to bring all schools into this framework in the near future.

35 The University's commitment to a diverse student body is expressed through its Access Agreement with the Office of Fair Access and Widening Participation Strategy. The University, through its Access Agreement, has won national recognition for offering bursaries to UK students from lower income backgrounds.

36 The University uses personal tutors as its primary means of providing support to undergraduate students. The role of the personal tutor varies among schools, although the Quality Manual lays down compulsory minimums, for example regarding the number of occasions on which tutors and tutees ought to meet. In addition, five schools are piloting a system of personal development goals set by tutors and students, which is intended primarily to help students identify and record their personal development and, thereby, help them gain employment after graduation.

37 Students with particular academic or pastoral problems may be referred to a range of specialised central support services. In 2007-08 the University opened a Student Service Centre on the University Park Campus, bringing all the support services together; and in 2008-09 opened a similar facility at the Jubilee Campus. The students whom the audit team met praised the development of the new student service centres for increasing the accessibility of student support, and commended the level of service they had received from the support services. The team identified the contribution of the student service centres to supporting and enhancing the student experience, alongside that of the graduate centres described in Section 6 of this report, as a feature of good practice.

38 The University intends to follow the same approach to co-locating student support services at the international campuses. This contributed to the team's identification of the integrative activities across separate campuses as a feature of good practice.

39 New members of academic staff are given inductions at school and university levels, a mentor within their school and a reduced teaching load to accommodate the demands of adapting to a new work environment. The audit team met both staff who had recently been through these procedures, and some who had acted as mentors to new staff, all of whom commended the system. Staff development needs are identified during annual activity/performance reviews, which encompass teaching and research. The University's Academic Promotion procedure recognises three main career paths: research, teaching and a combination of the two. The procedure values all three paths equally; sustained excellence in any one of them can lead to promotion to the highest level. Staff development services and training for staff and postgraduate students are provided by the Professional Development Unit. Peer observation of teaching takes place across the University.

40 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

41 The University's strategic approach to enhancement is set out in its Learning and Teaching Strategy, which identifies the main opportunities for enhancement accruing from research-led teaching, student involvement in quality assurance and staff development and reward. Section 3 above deals with these three areas of activity; staff development and reward is also discussed below. In addition, the University uses its routine quality assurance functions to identify good practice and disseminates it through an online Good Practice Guide, (which schools are encouraged to consult and adopt as they deem appropriate), the University's learning and teaching magazine, entitled The Hub, and a range of web-based teaching resources. Prominent among the latter is Promoting Enhanced Student Learning - a large collection of teaching resources that has been used extensively both within the University, nationally and internationally. Other web resources include a site offering practical advice for staff on the use of e-Learning and a fledgling open courseware initiative.

42 The Director of Teaching and Learning acts as a focal point for teaching and learning. Part of the Director's role is to coordinate enhancement activities at individual, school and university levels in order to secure successful implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy. The Director is editor of The Hub, which was launched in 2008.

43 A notable feature of the University's commitment to quality enhancement through staff reward are the annual Lord Dearing Awards for Learning and Teaching, made to both teaching and teaching support staff in recognition of outstanding achievements in enhancing the student learning experience. Award winners, who are often nominated by students, are featured in The Hub and their work is added to the Promoting Enhanced Student Learning web resource.

44 The Nottingham Advantage Award is a new initiative that recognises the learning that undergraduates derive from extra-curricular activities, such as volunteering and Students' Union work. The Award is led by the Centre for Career Development and is overseen by the School of Education. Although relatively small in scale at the time of the audit, the University intends to extend the scheme, including at the international campuses.

45 The University measures the effectiveness of its enhancement initiatives through the work of the Director of Teaching and Learning, web traffic statistics, attendance at enhancement events and the monitoring by Learning and Teaching Committee of the outcomes of funded initiatives. External evidence of the efficacy of the University's approach to enhancement may be seen in improved National Student Survey results and involvement in four HEFCE-funded Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning.

46 At the time of the audit, the University was in the process of revising its Learning and Teaching Strategy to put greater emphasis on those areas directly impacting on the student experience, such as assessment. The audit team concluded that this provided the University with a valuable opportunity to articulate a clearer strategy for enhancement and introduce mechanisms for critically evaluating the wide range of enhancement activities underway. Nevertheless, it was clear to the team that the University is committed to enhancing students' learning opportunities and is able to point to a number of important activities in which that commitment is manifest, particularly the Nottingham Advantage Award and Promoting Enhanced Student Learning.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

47 At the time of the audit the University's collaborative provision comprised eight articulation, progression and credit transfer agreements; five instances of joint delivery; seven off-campus delivery arrangements; and one validation of a partner's programme. The University has resolved not to engage in any franchising or the validation of more programmes for delivery by another institution.

48 Collaborative arrangements are overseen by the Transnational Education Committee whose remit also covers activities at the international campuses. The committee is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Internationalisation and, through a dedicated subcommittee, approves, monitors, reviews and renews courses or partnerships to ensure that the standards and quality of such courses and awards are congruent with awards delivered on the University's UK campuses.

49 Approval, monitoring and review arrangements for collaborative provision are described in the Quality Manual. At the developmental stage possible partnerships are underpinned by a signed Memorandum of Understanding recording the intention of the University and its prospective partner to strengthen mutual ties. Subsequent collaboration involving a teaching partnership leading to a University award must be underpinned by a Memorandum of Agreement, a legally binding, time-limited document describing the specifics of the partnership and signed by a member of Management Board following approval by the Transnational Education Committee. In securing approval the sponsoring school must produce a business case, conduct due diligence enquiries and provide a report of a visit to the partner institution. Any new programmes developed for the partnership need to be approved following the University's standard procedures.

50 After approval, collaborative provision is subject to the normal quality assurance procedures operating within schools. At the time of the audit, the new School Review process had not yet taken in any schools with collaborative arrangements. However, the audit team was able to consider a recent quality audit of the University's only validated programmes. This demonstrated a thorough appraisal of the partner and the programmes, and the final report, together with the partner's response, was duly considered by the appropriate University committees. The outcomes of periodic reviews are used by Transnational Education Committee

when it conducts formal five-yearly reviews of memorandum of agreements with a view to renewal (or possible termination) of a collaborative arrangement.

51 As part of its wider role in respect of transnational education, the Transnational Education Committee has recently produced detailed guidance for schools enunciating the principles governing the quality assurance of provision at the University's international campuses and implementation of the requirements of the Quality Manual in respect of those campuses. This guidance was another example of the integrative activities across separate campuses that the audit team identified as a feature of good practice.

52 The audit team concluded that the University has developed effective mechanisms for the management of the academic standards and quality of its collaborative provision which are appropriate to the scale of this activity.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

53 The University's management of its postgraduate research programmes is largely embedded within the framework described in Section 1. Thus, heads of schools, acting within the parameters of the Quality Manual, are operationally responsible for the standards and quality of these programmes, with checks and balances provided by the faculty vice-deans, academic boards and the Learning and Teaching Committee. In addition, there is a Postgraduate Strategy Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Transfer, which is responsible to Senate for the development, implementation and oversight of postgraduate policy; and an informal Research Degrees Business Group which helps to identify issues of particular relevance to research degree programmes that the Group's Chair, the Dean of the Graduate School, may usefully bring to Learning and Teaching Committee's attention.

54 The quality of the environment for research students is reflected in the broad range of subjects which the University submitted to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, a definitive list of resources and facilities that schools must ensure are available to research students and the existence of the Graduate School, which is responsible for providing training and development and promoting a vibrant postgraduate community.

55 Responsibility for the admission, induction, supervision and progress and review of research students largely rests with schools, operating within the parameters of the Quality Manual. In general, the evidence available to the audit team, including the results of a survey commissioned by the Students' Union specifically for this audit, confirmed that these processes were operating satisfactorily and in accordance with the University's policies. The team noted, in particular, the attention paid by the Learning and Teaching Committee to preparing supervisors which had led to the development of a wide range of training and development opportunities. However, the team also noted that there was no evidence of academic boards employing supervision records in monitoring students' experiences of supervision.

56 Research students' generic training needs, including those areas covered by the Research Councils' Joint Skills Statement, are met by the Graduate School. The School employs a team of researcher development managers to coordinate and promote training tailored to the needs of particular faculties and schools. Research students access the services of the Graduate School primarily through five graduate centres spread across four of the University's UK campuses and one centre on each international campus. The research students whom the audit team met praised the graduate centres for providing convenient access to a range of valuable training opportunities and other support. The team identified the contribution of the graduate centres to supporting and enhancing the student experience, alongside that of the student service centres, as a feature of good practice.

57 The Quality Manual stipulates that research students should undertake some form of training before they teach. Schools retain some discretion over precisely what training is provided, and this was reflected both in the experiences of the research students whom the audit

team met and in the outcomes of the 2007 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, which indicated that postgraduates who teach were not always happy with the support they received. The team concluded that the University may wish to reflect on the consistency of the support given to postgraduates who teach.

58 The audit team noted that the University's Regulations for research degrees are rigorous, clear and consistent with the criteria for assessing research degrees provided by *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, and that their development involves careful consultation with all relevant groups within the University. The team also observed, however, that the regulations give schools discretion over the appointment of an independent, non-examining chair to preside over the viva voce examination and observed that the use of independent chairs in only some examinations had the potential to promote inconsistency among different submissions. The team concluded that the University may wish to consider whether harmonisation in the use of independent chairs might achieve greater consistency. The team further noted that the University's procedure for monitoring research degree examiners' reports largely relies on Registry, which is responsible for considering the reports and raising any issues with the Dean of the Graduate School who may, in turn, raise these issues at the Learning and Teaching Committee. This contributed to the team's recommendation with respect to the scrutiny of external examiner reports, set out in paragraph 22.

59 The audit team concluded that the University's management of its research degree programmes met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

60 The University's Publication Scheme provides access to a range of internal and external information sources including Unistats. This latter is fully populated with the requisite data. The University has an extensive public website containing comprehensive information for a wide range of audiences. Schools supplement this information on their own dedicated web pages which include information on their taught provision, research, administrative guidance and links to other sources.

61 The University publishes an online Programme Specification Catalogue and a Module Specification Catalogue which the audit team found to be comprehensive and up to date. The accuracy of these catalogues is monitored centrally in conjunction with schools through a dedicated audit website. The central student record system provides a definitive single source of student information.

62 The accuracy of other information relevant to students in relation to their programmes of study, including relevant handbooks, is the responsibility of schools operating within the confines of the Quality Manual. Although a selection of such handbooks forms part of the information base for School Review, it is not clear if their contents are checked systematically. The University may wish to reflect on this in its review of the new School Review process.

63 The Quality Manual identifies student-staff feedback committees as the primary means of sharing external examiner reports with students. However, the documentary evidence provided in conjunction with the two extant School Reviews indicated that external examiner reports had been considered at only one of the 10 or so feedback committee meetings held in two schools over the course of two years. The audit team therefore considers it desirable that the University reflect on how it may satisfy itself that its policy in this area is implemented consistently in all schools, particularly given the team's recommendations on annual monitoring and School Review.

64 The University prospectuses are produced centrally in consultation with schools. The programme and module information in the prospectuses is derived from the definitive catalogues outlined above.

65 Overall, the evidence from students, including the student written submission and meetings held during both the briefing and audit visits, indicated their satisfaction with the information provided to them by the University and schools. The audit team concluded that reliance 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.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the University's systems for listening and responding to the student voice (paragraph 30)
- the integrative activities across separate campuses that help to secure equivalence of the student experience (paragraphs 29, 38, 51)
- the contribution of the graduate and student service centres for supporting and enhancing the student experience (paragraphs 37, 56).

Recommendations for action

67 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- strengthen institutional oversight of the outcomes of annual monitoring conducted by schools (paragraph 17).

68 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- in its review of the new School Review process, to consider strengthening the evidence base used in order that the process may contribute more fully to the assurance of quality and standards (paragraph 20)
- extend the academic scrutiny of external examiner reports at institutional level (paragraph 22)
- expedite the planned harmonisation of its assessment practices (paragraph 25)
- reflect on how it may satisfy itself that its policy on sharing external examiner reports with students is implemented consistently (paragraph 63).

Appendix

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

The University of Nottingham welcomes the report's conclusion of confidence in the soundness of our present and likely future management of the academic standards of our awards and the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The University is committed to ensuring that the quality of its provision is of the highest possible standard and is therefore pleased to receive such an endorsement after undergoing a rigorous audit. The content of the report affirms our view that we have a talented and conscientious body of staff and students who share a common commitment to academic excellence.

We note that the audit team specifically identified the following areas of good practice:

- the University's systems for listening and responding to the student voice
- the integrative activities across separate campuses that help to secure the equivalence of the student experience
- the contribution of the Graduate and Student Service Centres to supporting and enhancing the student experience.

Good practice in these and the other areas highlighted in the report will continue to be worked upon as part of the University's commitment to continually enhancing the quality of the student experience at its campuses in the UK, Malaysia and China.

The University, through its Teaching and Learning Board, is scrutinising the report's recommendations. Appropriate action has already been taken on most points, and our follow-up programme will be completed in 2010/11.

The University would like to thank the audit team for the professional, thorough and courteous manner in which the audit was conducted. The audit was a welcome opportunity to examine and confirm the effectiveness of our management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and the standards of our awards.

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