



# Institutional audit

**Nottingham Trent University**

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## Preface

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

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council 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 Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Nottingham Trent University (the University) from 24 to 28 November 2008 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 United Kingdom (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 Nottingham Trent University is that:

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

As the University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision, these judgements do not apply to that provision.

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

It was clear to the audit team that the University has a clear strategy for enhancement of the student learning experience. The team found that this strategy, which is well supported by its structures and processes, to be increasingly effective.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit found that the University's management of support, supervision and assessment of its postgraduate research students to be rigorous and effective. The University's policies, procedures and regulations meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic standards and quality in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

### Published information

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

### Features of good practice

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

- the comprehensive nature and clarity of the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook and the way in which its currency is maintained

- the continued development of links with employers and the embedding of employability across much of the curricula to which this has led
- the University's commitment to research informed teaching and the approach it is taking to ensure that the curricula are informed by research
- the use of the University's Welcome Week as an institutional approach to enhancing the induction and retention of a diverse student body
- the structured, strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the University
- the effectiveness of supervision, support and monitoring of postgraduate research students.

### **Recommendations for action**

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

The team advises the University to:

- consistently apply the policies and guidance provided in the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook with respect to feedback to students on assessment
- remain mindful of the recommendation of the previous Institutional audit with respect to programme oversight, as it assesses the comprehensiveness and fitness for purpose of its new periodic school review process.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider how to make the process for responding to changes in external reference points more systematic.

### **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*
- 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

### Preface

1 An Institutional audit of Nottingham Trent University (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 24 November 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the College's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team was Professor John Baldock, Mrs Elizabeth Barnes, Dr Paul Brunt, Dr Michael Edmunds, auditors, and Dr Christina Robinson, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor Paul Luker, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The origins of the University can be traced back to the establishment of the Nottingham Government School of Design in 1843. In 1966, Nottingham College of Art and Design linked with the Nottingham Regional College of Technology as a Polytechnic designate, which became Trent Polytechnic in 1970. Nottingham College of Education at Clifton was amalgamated with Trent Polytechnic in 1975. The institution was redesignated Nottingham Polytechnic in 1989 before becoming The Nottingham Trent University in 1992. In 1999, Brackenhurst College was added to the University as its Brackenhurst Campus, which lies approximately 14 miles from the city centre. The original two sites of the University, the Clifton Campus and the City Campus, are about four miles apart within the city of Nottingham.

4 In August 2004, the University put in place a structure of four colleges, which between them embrace the nine schools of the University. The colleges (and schools) are the:

- College of Business, Law and Social Sciences (Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Law School, School of Social Sciences)
- College of Art and Design and Built Environment (School of Art and Design, School of Architecture, Design and the Built Environment)
- College of Arts, Humanities and Education (School of Arts and Humanities, School of Education)
- College of Science (School of Animal, Rural and Environmental Sciences, School of Science and Technology).

5 In 2007-08, the University had 18,738 undergraduate students, 4,352 taught postgraduate students and 464 postgraduate research students. Nearly 22 per cent of the University's students study part-time.

6 The University's Strategic Plan 2004-2010 states that the institution's mission is 'To deliver education and research that shape lives and society'. This mission is supported by six aims to:

- develop confident and ambitious graduates equipped to shape society
- provide education that promotes both intellectual initiative and the highest academic standards to prepare students for life and career
- be the university of choice for business, industry and the professions in our areas of expertise
- be recognised both nationally and internationally for the effectiveness of our teaching and the relevance of our research
- transform the learning and working environment to create an inspiring and innovative culture

- have the courage and the will to implement change.

7 The previous Institutional audit in 2004 found that confidence could be placed 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. An audit of collaborative provision in 2006 reached a similar conclusion with regard to the University's awards made through collaborative arrangements with other educational institutions. In 2006, QAA's Review of research degree programmes provided by the University indicated confidence in its ability to secure standards and to maintain and enhance the quality of postgraduate research.

8 The Institutional audit of 2004 highlighted a number of features of good practice, in particular the University's student-centred approach to academic support and its activities designed to add to the employability of its graduates. At the time of the 2008 audit, the University was able to report further developments in both these areas. A new learning and teaching enhancement strategy was in place, which encouraged innovative approaches to learning and teaching. The University had also continued to add forms of work experience within its degree programmes and the success of these were demonstrated by the continuing high levels of employment among its graduates.

9 The 2004 audit advised the University to refine its internal subject review process so that the Academic Board can be assured that the full range of its programmes align with the appropriate reference points. The University subsequently re-examined its periodic review procedures and conducted a consultation on a revised model, after which it put in place a new system called periodic school review. The first review using this procedure, which focuses on schools and the programmes they provide, is scheduled for April 2009.

10 At the time of the 2004 audit, the University had been about to restructure into four colleges and nine schools and the auditors recommended the University take steps to ensure its Academic Board would continue to have sufficient oversight of standards, quality and enhancement activities within the new structure. A final recommendation suggested the University continue to develop robust and accurate centrally-held data on students' progress to inform the monitoring of quality and standards.

11 The University reported its responses to these recommendations in its Institutional Audit Follow-up Report to the QAA in April 2006, setting out the changes it had made to the processes it used to regularly review the standards and quality of its degree programmes and how these had been adapted to the new structure of colleges and schools put in place in 2004. It also explained how its information systems had been improved by the adoption of a new student record system, better to support the monitoring of student progress and achievement.

12 By the time of the 2008 audit, the college and school structure was well established. The new arrangements for governance of the University, set out in the Strategic Plan 2004-10, had clearly defined both the academic and business management of the University. The colleges and central registry offices were responsible for academic administration, financial operations, marketing and human resources; and the schools were accountable for the development and provision of the educational programmes of the University. The committee structure had been aligned with the new organisation of the University. The Academic Board continued to oversee all aspects of academic provision. The management of finances and resources were the responsibility of the four college management teams, each led by a pro-vice chancellor and head of college who was a member of the Senior Management Team and reported directly to the Vice-Chancellor.

13 The Academic Board, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, has ultimate responsibility for the standards and quality of educational provision. Registry is the source of information for standards and quality information, such as student data and regulatory material. The University's policies, procedures and regulations are set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook, which the audit team found to be comprehensive, clear and regularly and systematically updated.



14 The Academic Standards and Quality Committee, chaired by the Senior Pro-Vice Chancellor, is the key committee that integrates the management of academic standards, quality assurance and the enhancement of learning opportunities. It operates and monitors the systems for programme approval and the five-year cycle of periodic school reviews. The Centre for Academic Standards and Quality is the central department that supports all aspects of the work of Academic Standards and Quality Committee.

15 The Academic Standards and Quality Committee is supported by the Standards and Quality Management Subcommittee, which is associated with programme approval, programme monitoring and annual reporting and receives and considers external examiner reports and issues associated with school-based collaborative activity. At school level, the school academic standards and quality committees have common terms of reference and a remit for advising the appropriate Dean on the development of strategy relating to the maintenance of standards and the enhancement of quality. School committees monitor the achievement of the school's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Plan and take responsibility for the oversight of continual monitoring and annual reporting at school and programme level. They produce annual reports, monitor student assessment, student evaluations, make recommendations for external examiners and evaluate new programme proposals.

16 Through its scrutiny of documentation and its discussions with key staff, the audit team found considerable evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the University's framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The team considered the clarity, quality and currency of information provided to staff within the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook to be a feature of good practice.

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

17 Programme approval is intended to assure the University and its stakeholders that awards are of an appropriate standard and that review of awards and standards has occurred through: the external examiner process; the boards of examiners; monitoring at programme level and annual reporting; and through periodic school review.

18 The Academic Board delegates to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee the responsibility of overseeing the approval of new programmes. The Academic Standards and Quality Committee, in turn, delegates operational responsibility to the Standards and Quality Management Subcommittee to act as a standing approval panel and to monitor the conduct and outcomes of approvals. The approval process is designed to exercise proportionality through combining appropriate rigour with the efficient use of staff time.

19 Proposals for new programmes are presented and approved by the school academic standards and quality committees before the development of a business plan and progression for formal approval by the College Management Team and commencement of programme development. The Centre for Academic Standards and Quality supports the programme team to ensure that the emerging programme fits with University policy and practice. Teams are required to consult with external parties during programme planning.

20 Approval may take place over one or two phases according to the nature and scale of the proposal. In the case of what the University calls 'breaking ground' proposals, or any proposal that involves professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation, the panel may include one or two members external to the University. Written evidence of external consultation by the team is taken into account in determining the need for external membership on the panel. In 2007-08, of 58 final validation and review events reported, 14 had no external member present, although two of these did include written comments from externals. This would appear to dilute the University's statement in its Briefing Paper that the key features of the University's approach to approval include the 'incorporation of external academics on validation panels'. The audit team understood the University's intention for programme approval processes to be proportionate and

flexible but felt that the University might benefit from continuing to assure itself that external participation is proportionate to the level, importance and complexity of the approval in hand.

21 External examiners are appointed to monitor academic standards, moderate assessment processes and to report on their findings. They determine whether standards are appropriate and in line with national subject benchmarks, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), and institutional programme specifications. External examiners comment on moderation, review samples of assessed work and provide advice where differences in marking are highlighted, but they do not arbitrate. They consider the form and content of assessments set.

22 External examiners are appointed by the University after approval at school level. Clear guidance is provided for internal staff and potential and existing external examiners. An induction event is held for new external examiners at which they meet with staff associated with the programme they are examining.

23 An online report template is provided for use by external examiners. External examiners' reports are received by the appropriate programme leader, who reports good practice and responses to actions through the Programme Standards and Quality Report. All reports are read by the Vice-Chancellor. The Programme Standards and Quality Report is considered by programme committees that include student representatives and by school academic standards and quality committees, which invited student representatives from 2006-07. However, the minutes of the school academic standards and quality committees indicate that not all schools were able to secure student representation until 2008-09. School academic standards and quality committees provide feedback on the reports and ensure that all actions raised by external examiners have been appropriately followed up. The Centre for Academic Standards and Quality completes an annual summary report on the external examiners' reports. External examiners receive a copy of the approved Programme Standards and Quality Report.

24 The Centre for Academic Standards and Quality conducts a cycle of reviews of the University's policies and practice against external standards and benchmarks to ensure that they remain relevant and contemporary. Changes to the *Code of practice* are reviewed by a working party to consider the implications and make recommendations to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee.

25 Alignment with the FHEQ and subject benchmarks is evaluated at programme approval. Updates and revisions to subject benchmark statements are communicated via the Head of the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality. The audit team found that continued alignment is not checked systematically. The team considered it desirable that the University consider how to make the process for responding to changes in external reference points more systematic.

26 At the programme design stage, teams are required to produce a programme specification that provides succinct and accessible summaries of the key features of the programme centred on its outcomes. Programme specifications can be accessed by registered students on the intranet, but are not accessible to prospective students. Programme handbooks incorporate and amplify all relevant details contained in programme specifications.

27 A significant number of programmes is governed by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, and a comprehensive database is in place that includes all programmes by school, year of approval and date for re-approval.

28 Assessment policies, principles, procedures and processes are defined in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook and have been mapped against the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*. The principles underlying assessment policies, practices and regulations are: appropriateness to learning and to level; reliability; validity; openness; fairness, and the maintenance of standards. Improved accessibility and inclusivity of assessment for disabled

students has been initiated through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)-funded project, Achieving Accessible Assessment.

29 Information and guidance for assessments is provided to students in module specifications and programme handbooks. Some programme handbooks also provided detailed information on assessment regulations, including calculation of classifications.

30 Appropriate assessment policies are in place to secure the academic standards of the institution's provision. Assessment boards are conducted in line with specified processes and regulations. Regulations appear to be applied consistently and reviewed where concerns are raised by external examiners. However, the audit team found that the implementation of policy with relation to feedback to students was variable and, in the main, did not meet the University's own policy. Consequently, the University is advised to consistently apply the policies and guidance provided in the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook with respect to feedback to students on assessment.

31 In April 2007, a strategic implementation plan for information management and information systems for the following three to five years was adopted. The implementation of the plan is overseen by the Information Management Steering Group. The plan included two initiatives, one to bring together consistent, accurate and timely information to facilitate improved decision-making and inform business decisions, and the other to improve the management of the student recruitment process.

32 The University's student record system is used by Registry to provide information in a common format to programme teams and schools. The reports provided summarise intake, progression and completion data over the last five years. Information is provided at a programme level or for clusters of programmes, but does not provide module-level information.

33 Schools are required to provide an analysis of the data and emerging trends at a programme level within the programme standards and quality reports, and school level within school standards and quality reports. The audit team found that there are ongoing concerns with respect to the timeliness of the data, its accuracy and accessibility. Although this has begun to improve, there is room for further improvement.

34 The audit found that the University's management of academic standards is robust and operating as intended. The consistent application of the University's regulations and policies and associated guidance reflect consideration of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure. The systems in place clearly contribute to the establishment and maintenance of the academic standards of awards, although the use of external input in approval processes could be clarified and the provision and use of management information could be strengthened. There is strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in the summative assessment of provision. All of these features support a judgement of confidence in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards. As the University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision this judgement does not apply to that provision.

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

35 The University's engagement with external reference points has a positive impact on curricula and the student experience. Changes to the *Code of practice* and FHEQ are carefully monitored by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality to inform the development of practice and policy.

36 The University's engagement with employers is exemplary, with evidence at all levels of access to work-based opportunities, the development of employability skills and the involvement of employers in the development of curricula, research and enterprise. The University has clearly set out to ensure that all students are prepared for the world of work, with opportunities to apply their learning in a work context. The audit team found that the continued development of links

with employers and the embedding of employability across much of the curriculum to which this has led to be a feature of good practice.

37 Annual monitoring at programme and school level is seen by the University to assure that there is an ongoing review of standards and quality, which highlights enhancements of the student learning experience and assures the University of the continuing health of its awards. A programme standards and quality report, which incorporates feedback from students and external examiners, is produced for each programme. This then informs the production of a school standards and quality report. The school reports are received by the Academic Standards and Quality Committee, which produces an annual overview report. The audit team found all of these reports to be both critical and informative, thereby making an important contribution to the ongoing monitoring of standards, quality and enhancement.

38 A school rolling action plan, which is reviewed every six months, articulates actions emerging in the school from the range of review and monitoring activities. This provides a comprehensive mechanism for school academic standards and quality committees to monitor actions taken, the dissemination of good practice, and enhancement developments.

39 Periodic school review, which has been introduced for the academic year 2008-09, examines how schools manage quality assurance and enhancement. An audit trail of programmes is used to test the school's quality assurance and enhancement processes and procedures. The review will be conducted by a team that includes external members and students. A progress report on the agreed action plan must be provided by the school to the Academic Standards and Quality Committee two years after the review event. This process will only cover all taught programmes, for a separate procedure is being put in place for research degree programmes (see paragraph 75).

40 As the new school-based periodic review process had not been applied at the time of the audit, the team was unable to assess its operation. Although sampling is no longer used in periodic review, the audit team was not clear how the oversight of all programmes would be maintained through the review process, particularly where reliance is placed on using periodic review as a programme-level check on, for example, engagement with external reference points. The team therefore advises that the University remain mindful of the recommendation of the previous Institutional audit with respect to programme oversight, as it assesses the comprehensiveness and fitness for purpose of its new periodic School review process.

41 The University views its students as partners in the learning experience. Informal feedback is viewed by the University and its students as an important mechanism for receiving feedback that facilitates more timely responses. Students view staff support, availability, accessibility and responsiveness to feedback as a strength.

42 Formal processes for collecting feedback are in place and inform the development of the student experience. Student feedback is an integral part of annual monitoring and periodic review. At programme level, teams are required to collect and evaluate student feedback and include this in the Programme Standards and Quality Report. Although there is no longer a requirement to collect module feedback through a standard format, the use of formal questionnaires is still predominant, but these were often enhanced through informal feedback and the use of structured group feedback. Student feedback is reported through programme standards and quality reports to the school, and informs the development of the rolling action plans.

43 In addition to the National Student Survey, the University administers its own student satisfaction survey, which is more comprehensive than its national counterpart. Student response to the surveys increased in 2008. The regular analysis of both surveys, at school and institutional levels, has informed the development and enhancement of practice. Improved results in the National Student Survey reflect the use of student feedback to improve practice.

44 The University has taken appropriate steps to ensure that student representatives play an effective part in the senior deliberative committee structure of the University and is committed to

expanding this representation. It also actively seeks to involve students at University level in key processes such as periodic school review, and new developments such as the new virtual learning environment. The established student representation on senior committees appeared to be working well. The audit team also found that at programme level the students' views were actively sought and taken seriously, and that this process formed an integral component of quality management and enhancement mechanisms.

45 The audit team found that the University values the input of students, is a responsive institution and has an extensive framework for student participation in its quality assurance processes. The University is aware of areas where student representation might be improved, particularly at programme level, and is taking steps to address this.

46 The University has a clear policy of linking research to teaching and in 2006 set up its research in teaching initiative. It is making good progress in using research to enhance the quality of its learning and teaching. These developments are led by the Working Party on Research Informed Teaching which, in the audit team's view, had played an important role in developments to date.

47 The Working Party has developed a number of initiatives in this area, including the introduction of short-term research leave for staff to work on projects that develop teaching-research relationships; more visible research and research-teaching links at the University events; and the introduction of vacation student scholarships, Scholarship Projects for Undergraduate Researchers. Although it is not yet fully embedded, the audit team regarded the University's commitment to research informed teaching and the approach it is taking to ensure that the curricula are informed by research as a feature of good practice.

48 The University reported that it had 20 programmes involving substantial flexible and distributed learning spread across four of its schools. The 2006 audit of the University's collaborative provision recommended that the University's guidance on the approval of flexible and distributed-learning programmes, mapped against the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, and first published in 2006, be applied to all flexible and distributed-learning programmes at the first opportunity. It expressed concern that employing sampling methodology in the then subject review process (from 2009 the new periodic school review) could mean that programmes using flexible and distributed learning would not be reviewed in detail, nor their learning materials exposed to external scrutiny, for some considerable time. The report also noted sparse consideration of flexible and distributed learning issues in monitoring reports. The 2008 audit team found little consideration of flexible and distributed learning in the minutes of relevant school committees. Flexible and distributed learning learners currently also generally appear to be less satisfied with their student experience than their full-time equivalents.

49 The University launched their virtual learning environment in September 2008. Training in the operation and use of the system was provided for staff and students. The audit team found that the virtual learning environment appears to work well and has been welcomed by staff and students as a significant improvement on its predecessor. NOW provides a platform for significant improvement in the quality of learning opportunities offered to students at the University. In the team's view the University needs to provide more training in regard to the pedagogic aspects of working with a modern virtual learning environment, if these opportunities are to be exploited to the full. The University also needs to take further steps to ensure that, in accordance with its own policy, there is an appropriate and consistent level of 'presence' on the virtual learning environment for modules at all levels and across all Schools.

50 Libraries and Learning Resources has been restructured under new management since the last Institutional audit and the provision has been enhanced through greater strategic alignment with the Strategic Plan and key strategies. The Library Information Resources Policy was discussed widely with schools and the research community. Libraries and Learning Resources is developing

their use of benchmarks, implementing 'Key Performance Indicators', and using survey results to review its performance. It also conducted the LibQual survey in 2007 to get direct student feedback, and to provide benchmarking against UK and international libraries.

51 The Libraries and Learning Resources provision is subject to an annual process of professional service review. This provision is also reviewed indirectly through the University's normal approval, monitoring and review processes. The audit team saw frequent and consistent evidence of libraries and learning resources issues being considered appropriately in such processes and events.

52 The University is undertaking significant development of its estate, much of which provides excellent state-of-the-art facilities. Students indicated high levels of satisfaction with accommodation, but expressed some limited concerns in regard to a few specific facilities. The two periodic reviews the audit team examined both commented favourably on the facilities available to students and the students' view of these facilities. Research and taught postgraduate students were also generally complimentary concerning the facilities provided for them.

53 The procedures for all admissions have been aligned with the *Code of practice Section 10: Admissions to higher education*. The implementation of this guidance is monitored annually at college, school and programme level. During 2007, the University undertook a full and detailed business process review of its applications processing. The review found much good practice, but some areas that lacked clear and consistent guidance and direction. The review has resulted in a complete overhaul of the applications process, the first phase of which will be implemented in October 2009.

54 The University has a student charter that defines the levels of support a student should expect. The University has traditionally used a mixed model that combines institutional and local delivery of learning support. Most academic programmes contain embedded learning support, usually taught in the first year. The University does not provide explicit central guidance on the level of academic or personal support that should be provided by programme teams, allowing schools to develop a range of different personal and academic tutorial systems to suit the particular needs of their students. The University's own analyses, and the students the audit team met, however, suggested that there is a greater need for clarity and consistency in the provision of personal tutors. The University is addressing this.

55 The web pages available to staff and students that describe the support available to students are comprehensive, well structured and readily available. They include specific headings for mature students and international students, which lead to specific advice services geared to meet the needs of these groups. The University has also recently launched an e-tutoring initiative primarily aimed at distance-learning students. The University's first Disability Equality Scheme and Action Plan were published in December 2006 with implementation progressing according to plan.

56 The University has developed a Welcome Week, which has a focus on student health and well-being, which has evolved over recent years to become a key component of its induction and retention strategies. It is rated highly by students and would appear to have had a significant impact on retention rates. The audit team found the use of the University's Welcome Week as an institutional approach to enhancing the induction and retention of a diverse student body a feature of good practice.

57 The University's Student Support Services come within the scope of the University's professional services review procedure. The service achieves high levels of satisfaction in the University's student satisfaction survey, and was favourably commented on in the student written submission. Some aspects have attracted national recognition as examples of good practice. Careers advice is provided by a separate function. Discussions with students, and some documentary evidence, indicated that while those who had used the service found it helpful, there was significant scope for increasing awareness and usage of the careers services offered by the University.

58 The University makes clear the links between staff development and its strategic priorities. It has developed a learning and development strategy to support the Strategic Plan. The strategy is intended to act as a framework against which learning and development activity can be planned centrally and locally. The audit team saw evidence that suggested a positive approach to staff development.

59 All full and part-time permanent employees, as well as those appointed to a fixed-term contract of a minimum of three years, are required to complete the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, which is accredited by the Higher Education Academy. The audit team also noted the work of the Educational Development Unit and the more recently established Centre for Professional Learning and Development. These offer, respectively, assistance with the implementation of NOW, and generic and bespoke staff development. The Annual Learning and Teaching Conference is also an important vehicle for sharing of ideas involving staff development.

60 The audit team learned that staff, with a few specified exceptions, are meant to undergo Peer Observation of Teaching on a two-yearly basis and appraisal or performance development review on an annual basis. Documents examined by the team, however, indicated that there was some variation in the coverage and practice in these areas and staff development generally. Given the importance of these processes to enhancing the quality of the learning experience of students, the University will need to ensure the consistent implementation of practice across schools.

61 The audit team found that the University's systems for the management of learning opportunities were comprehensive, fit for purpose and operating as intended. The University engages well with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points. There is an extensive framework for student participation in quality assurance. The University maintains links between research, scholarly activity and the curricula through a clear strategy to embed research informed teaching. Well-established resource allocation procedures are effective, as are the University's arrangements for student support. There are effective arrangements for staff development and support, although the University might wish to consider ways of securing more consistent application of peer observation and appraisal across the institution. These features support a judgement of confidence in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of learning opportunities. As the University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision, this judgement does not apply to that provision.

#### **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

62 Since the last audit, the University has increased its focus on enhancement through both strategic and structural changes. Explicit strategies exist at all levels. New posts have been created to help deliver the strategies, and regular reviews of progress are a routine part of the business of the main academic committees, the academic standards and quality committees at University and school levels.

63 The overall approach to enhancement is set by the Institutional Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy 2006-10, which established a framework of staff roles and activities that promote improvements in learning and teaching by conducting reviews of current practice and by developing, testing and then implementing innovations and enhancements. The current strategy defines a set of priority areas for enhancement activity. At the time of the audit, there were four priority areas: creating an innovative and inclusive learning environment; encouraging excellence in professional development; enhancing learner support systems; and creating a modern and inspiring curricula.

64 The approach to enhancement is supported centrally by the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality, but leaves scope for schools to identify and pursue additional priorities. The commitment to improving quality is reflected not only in the structure of the committees that have responsibility for academic provision, but also in their names and terms of reference. As noted above in paragraph 15, all academic activity in each of the nine schools is overseen by a school academic standards and quality committee, which reports to the Academic Standards

and Quality Committee. The audit team found that the minutes of these committees demonstrate clearly that a substantial proportion of their business is focused on the quality of support for students' learning and the progress of strategies and projects designed to enhance that quality.

65 An important part of the University's approach to enhancement is to develop the skills of its staff and students. At the time of the audit, examples included: a three-stage programme of courses on teaching skills and methods available to staff and postgraduate students; a secondment scheme for academic and professional staff allowing them to develop educational initiatives; the appointment of a project support officer to work with the Students' Union in further developing work placements and volunteering; the Research Informed Teaching Initiative (see paragraphs 46, 47); and the development of enhanced undergraduate induction in the form of the Welcome Week, first delivered in 2005 (see paragraph 56).

66 Enhancement activities were also facilitated by a scheme that seconds academic and professional staff to the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality for a fixed period, usually a term or a year, in order to allow them time to develop particular learning and teaching initiatives. Examples of activities pursued during secondments were: actions to promote research-led teaching within a school; development of the virtual learning environment; and enhancements to the teaching of science and technology. Secondment opportunities are evaluated annually.

67 Each school has an institutional learning and teaching enhancement strategy action plan led by an academic appointed to the role of Learning and Teaching Coordinator. The learning and teaching coordinators chair their individual school learning and teaching committees and are also closely linked to the work of the Centre for Academic Standards and Quality. The learning and teaching coordinators met by the audit team clearly played an important role of linking the institutional-level enhancement strategy and particular initiatives in schools.

68 It was evident to the audit team that the University is engaging fully with the enhancement agenda. Through its examination of minutes and other documentation, and through its meetings with staff and students, the team was able to confirm that the Institutional Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy and the University, college and school structures that support it, were becoming increasingly effective in driving and monitoring an institution-wide programme of enhancements to learning experience of students. The team found that the structured, strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the University to be a feature of good practice.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

69 The University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

70 In 2008-09, 527 students were registered for research degree programmes awarded by the University. Of these students, 54 per cent were registered full-time and 46 per cent part-time. The University has created a Graduate School to coordinate postgraduate research and training. The Graduate School is organised into four constituent parts, one in each of the colleges. The four college associate deans, research and graduate studies manage the Graduate School at college level, and have a line of accountability to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor whose responsibilities include the role of Head of the Graduate School.

71 The Graduate School provides facilities for research students including access to computers, desk space, quiet working areas and common room facilities. The postgraduate students who met members of the audit team reported that these college-based arrangements created a critical mass of research students and allowed them to feel part of a wider research community. In the opinion of the team, the University, in developing the Graduate School and the college-based support arrangements, has created a coherent cross-disciplinary framework which addresses the risks of isolation that can hamper research students.



72 Research activity at the University is well developed. In the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2001, four areas of work achieved a Grade 5 and all those submitted were achieving work of at least national standard, and 30 per cent of academic staff were submitted to the RAE 2008 in 16 Units of Assessment. Of the research, 74 per cent of activity achieved international status (a rating of 2\* or more) and 8 per cent was classed at the highest level, world-leading (4\*). Research income, including grants from the research councils and a substantial EPSRC Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council doctoral training grant, has been growing significantly and in 2007-08, was over £5 million. The University also supports postgraduates through a bursary scheme.

73 All procedures governing provision for postgraduate research students are set out in the University Regulations, which comply with the requirements of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and have been regularly updated. The regulations are accessible on the University's website and are also set out in the Academic Standards and Quality Handbook. Each college has a research student handbook that provides information for students on their entitlements and responsibilities. The handbook is distributed to students at induction and available on the research and graduate studies intranet,

74 Overall, managerial responsibility for research programmes lies with the University Research Degrees Committee, which is chaired by the Head of the Graduate School and reports through the University Research Committee to Academic Board. Each college has a research degrees committee, chaired by the Associate Dean, Research, which reports each term to the University committee. The associate deans, research are all ex officio members of the University Research Degrees Committee. The audit team was able to confirm that these arrangements worked effectively and that appropriate attention was given to the standards and quality of postgraduate research activity.

75 Up to the time of the audit, research degree programmes had been regularly reviewed as part of periodic subject review. With the introduction from 2008 of the new arrangements for periodic school review (see paragraph 39), the University decided to set up separate arrangements for the periodic review of research programmes at college level. At the time of the audit, the University Research Degrees Committee had approved in principle a draft set of proposals under which each college will be reviewed every five years, beginning in 2010. The College research degree reviews will be chaired by the chair of the University Research Degrees Committee and involve an appropriately qualified external academic.

76 The selection, admission and induction of research students is managed at college level. The process includes an interview. An offer of a place is made only where appropriate resources are in place, which includes suitably qualified and approved supervisors, and after an initial training-needs analysis has been carried out. An induction programme is provided for all new research students that includes University, college and school elements. Students met by the audit team reported that the induction, training and provision of information were comprehensive and good.

77 Students meet regularly with a supervisory team of three supervisors, one of whom is designated the Director of Studies. Each college has a code of supervisory practice, which is incorporated within the research student handbook or a staff handbook. College research degree committees set out minimum frequencies for supervisory meetings for each discipline. Supervisors and students agree on the frequency of meetings and a written record of each meeting is kept. Students told the audit team that supervisions took place as agreed and that supervisors were readily available at other times and that the quality of their supervision is good.

78 All research degree students are formally monitored twice a year. The main annual monitoring meeting involves written and oral submissions from the student which are considered by a panel consisting of the supervisors and an independent member appointed by the College Research Degrees Committee. Key decision points in the progress of a student, such as upgrading

from an MPhil to PhD programme, are incorporated into the annual monitoring cycle. Where a student's progress is a cause for concern, it will be further reviewed by the College Research Degrees Committee, including an independent academic from outside the school.

79 The development of research and other skills begins with the assessment of the student's training needs and a statement of study and training needs is a formal part of project approval. Further training needs are assessed through the annual monitoring cycle. The Graduate School provides a programme of generic and specific skills training that meets the requirements of the research councils that fund students at the University. Where research students are engaged in teaching or demonstration activities, support and mentoring had been provided.

80 Feedback from students is obtained regularly in a variety of ways. The annual monitoring procedure involves a joint report from the student and supervisor. Research students are represented on the college research degree committees and the University Research Degrees Committee, at which examiners' reports are scrutinised. Students spoken to by the panel indicated the most common form of feedback was directly to their supervisors, but they were aware of other avenues should they need them.

81 The University's research degree regulations prescribe the process for appointing examiners, the conduct of the examination and the assessment criteria. Externality is assured by the requirement that at least one of the examination panel of three examiners should be an appropriately qualified person from outside the University. An independent, experienced person chairs all viva voce examinations.

82 An appeals procedure, including appeal against an examination decision, is set out in the regulations for research degrees. The University also has a comprehensive complaints procedure. Research students are made aware of these avenues during induction, on the University's research and graduate studies intranet, on links to them prominent on the virtual learning environment, and they are clearly set out in the colleges' research student handbooks.

83 The evidence considered by the audit team led it to conclude that the arrangements for postgraduate research students, including those for support, supervision and assessment, were rigorous and effective, and fully met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The team found the effectiveness of supervision, support and monitoring of postgraduate research students to be a feature of good practice.

## **Section 7: Published information**

84 The audit team had access to a wide range of information published by the University, which included prospectuses, module handbooks, programme handbooks and student handbooks. The team was provided with access to the University's website and intranet, where a large body of University publications and regulations are available. The production of student handbooks is informed by guidelines and templates, although some module handbooks varied in depth and detail. The team found that the University provides information that covers that listed in Annex F of the HEFCE publication, *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework, Phase two outcomes*, October 2006/45.

85 It was clear to the audit team, via its scrutiny of documents and discussions of protocols, that the means by which the University maintains the accuracy, quality and completeness of its published information are generally robust and effective. Students confirmed that the material they received prior to admission and throughout their programmes was comprehensive, and provided the information that they needed to understand the requirements to qualify for the award for which they were registered. One area where students indicated that differing practice was apparent was in the area of the return of assessed work to students. It was clear to the team in its review of documentation and in meetings with staff that this was the case, and that published information to students in programme handbooks was not consistent, and in some cases was contrary to the policies and guidance provided in the University's Academic Quality

and Standards Handbook. The team found that there needed to be consistent guidance on the production of programme handbooks in terms of the return of assessed work, and that adherence to the guidance needs to be monitored (see paragraph 30).

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

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

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the comprehensive nature and clarity of the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook and the way in which its currency is maintained (paragraphs 13, 16)
- the continued development of links with employers and the embedding of employability across much of the curricula to which this has led (paragraph 36)
- the University's commitment to research informed teaching and the approach it is taking to ensure that the curricula are informed by research (paragraphs 46, 47)
- the use of the University's Welcome Week as an institutional approach to enhancing the induction and retention of a diverse student body (paragraph 56)
- the structured, strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the University (paragraphs 62 to 68)
- the effectiveness of supervision, support and monitoring of postgraduate research students (paragraphs 76, 77, 83).

### **Recommendations for action**

88 Recommendations for action that are advisable:

- to consistently apply the policies and guidance provided in the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook with respect to feedback to students on assessment (paragraph 30)
- to remain mindful of the recommendation of the previous Institutional audit with respect to programme oversight, as it assesses the comprehensiveness and fitness for purpose of its new periodic school review process (paragraph 40).

89 Recommendation for action that is desirable:

- consider how to make the process for responding to changes in external reference points more systematic (paragraph 25).

## **Appendix**

### **Nottingham Trent University's response to the Institutional audit report**

The University warmly welcomes the judgement that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to its students.

The University was pleased that the audit team saw fit to support many features of good practice. In particular the commendation of the structured, strategic approach taken to learning opportunities recognises the way the University has enhanced the student learning experience both for undergraduates and postgraduate research students. The echoing from the University's previous institutional audit report of its links with employers and the embedding of employability across the curriculum reinforces its position as being at the forefront in providing education focused towards the future needs of its graduates.

Nottingham Trent University has a robust and mature approach to the quality assurance of its standards and awards. As such it will feed into these processes consideration of the recommendations made by the audit team.

The University wishes to thank the audit team for the constructive yet searching manner in which it undertook the institutional audit and for the open manner in which it engaged with the staff it met.

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