University of Ulster

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Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. QAA operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales.

The purpose of institutional audit

The aims of institutional audit are to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

Judgements

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 quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards
- 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.

These judgements are expressed as either **broad confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

Nationally agreed standards

Institutional audit uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), which include descriptions of different HE qualifications
- The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

The audit process

Institutional audits are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of institutional audit are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the audit visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the audit visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the audit visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the audit team five weeks before the audit visit
- the audit visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the audit team's judgements and findings 20 weeks after the audit visit.

The evidence for the audit

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the audit team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The audit team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work using 'audit trails'. These trails may focus on a particular programme or programmes offered at that institution, when they are known as a 'discipline audit trail'. In addition, the audit team may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality. This is known as a 'thematic enquiry'.

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance,* published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

Contents

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Ulster (the University) from 25 to 29 April 2005 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of its awards.

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

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an academic award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK.

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

In institutional audit, both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

Outcome of the audit

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

- broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the University's demonstrable commitment to, and achievement of, an embedded academic quality culture

- the systematic approach, incorporating effective consultation, piloting, evaluation,

project management and institutional oversight adopted for the introduction of strategic University developments

- the comprehensive provision for the support, training and supervision of research students

- the effectiveness of the University's staff development activity, arising from the range and relevance of provision, the alignment to institutional priorities, and proactive management and coordination

- the University's coherent and comprehensive strategy for the development and implementation of e-learning.

Recommendations for action

The audit team also recommends that the University should consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality and standards of the awards it offers are maintained. It would be desirable for the University to:

- expedite the resolution of the purpose and scope of staff appraisal, and to establish appropriate procedures for consistent and effective implementation across the University

- promote, maximise and render more visible the employer contribution to subject development

- clarify and make explicit the University's minimum requirements for internal moderation of assessment results to ensure appropriate consistency of practice across the University

- clarify, in formal documentation, the extent and limits of external examiners' authority to moderate the marks of individual students to ensure fairness to all students.

Outcomes of discipline audit trails in the built environment; computing; education; environmental studies; and social administration and policy

To arrive at these overall conclusions the audit team spoke to staff and students, and was given

information about the University as a whole. The team looked at the areas of provision above to find out how well the University's systems and procedures were working at the discipline level. The University provided the team with documents, including student work and, here too, the team spoke to staff and students. As well as supporting the overall confidence statements given above, the team considered that the standard of student achievement in the five discipline areas was appropriate to the title of the awards made and their place in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.* The team considered the quality of the learning opportunities available to students was suitable for programmes of study leading to the awards.

National reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings the audit team also investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure, which QAA has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The findings of the audit confirm that the University has embedded these developments in a timely and comprehensive way into its management of quality and standards.

From 2004, QAA's audit teams comment on the reliability of the information about academic quality and standards that institutions will be required to publish, listed in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance.* The University has responded fully and positively to the requirements set out in both documents and the team found that the relevant information had been made publicly available on the Higher Education and Research Opportunities in the UK (HERO) website.

Main report

Main report

1   This is a report of an institutional audit of the University of Ulster (the University). The audit was undertaken during the week commencing 25 April 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility for its awards.

2   The audit was carried out using a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and Universities UK (UUK), and has been endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL). For institutions in England and Northern Ireland, it replaces the previous processes of continuation audit, undertaken by QAA at the request of UUK and SCOP, and universal subject review, undertaken by QAA on behalf of HEFCE, as part of the latter's statutory responsibility for assessing the quality of education that it funds.

3   The audit checked the effectiveness of the University's procedures for establishing and maintaining the standards of its academic awards; for reviewing and enhancing the quality of the programmes of study leading to those awards; and for publishing reliable information. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, the audit included consideration of an example of institutional processes at work at the level of the programme, through discipline audit trails (DATs). The scope of the audit encompassed all of the University's provision, other than collaborative arrangements, leading to its awards. The University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative arrangements in due course.

Section 1: Introduction: the University of Ulster

The institution and its mission

4   The University was established in 1984 with full degree-awarding powers through a merger of Ulster Polytechnic and the then New University of Ulster, in the process becoming the first trans-binary institution in UK higher education (HE). It is located on four campuses across Northern Ireland at Belfast, Jordanstown, Magee in Londonderry and Coleraine, which is also the administrative headquarters.

5   Since its establishment, the University has more than doubled its student population and is now the largest university in the island of Ireland. It currently has over 24,000 enrolled students, of which 8 per cent are studying for sub-degree awards, 72 per cent for degree awards and 20 per cent for taught or research postgraduate awards. Courses have a strong vocational element and the majority include a period of industrial or professional placement. Over 17,000 students are studying full-time, while approximately 1,000 students are enrolled on web-based distance-learning courses delivered through the University's virtual campus, CampusOne. The University describes how the success of its commitment to social inclusion is reflected by 46 per cent of its full-time undergraduate entrants coming from socio economic groups 4-7, 9 per cent in excess of its benchmark. As part of its strategy to promote wider participation in HE, the University has established an extensive network of partner institutions, predominantly colleges and institutes of further and higher education throughout Northern Ireland. Over 5,000 students, the majority of whom are studying part-time, are enrolled on courses offered by the partner institutions and which either lead to awards of the University and provide access routes to University of Ulster courses. This collaborative provision will be the subject of a separate collaborative audit in the future.

6   The major academic groupings within the University are its five faculties: Arts; Business and Management; Engineering; Life and Health Sciences; and Social Sciences, each of which is managed by a Dean. All faculties have provision on more than one campus and comprise a number of schools and a Research Graduate School, which provide both subject foci and supporting management structures for staff and

students. Seventeen Research Institutes have recently been established within the faculties to provide enhanced research focus.

7   There are three Provosts assigned to the Coleraine, Magee and Belfast and Jordanstown campuses, with responsibility for the quality of life on the campuses and enhancing intra and inter-campus communications. Seven Directors are responsible for the administrative functions of the University in the following: Development and Alumni Relations; Finance; Human Resources; Information Services; Physical Resources; Planning and Governance Services; and Public Affairs.

8   Technology and knowledge transfer is promoted through a range of initiatives, including the University's partnership in the Northern Ireland Science Park development, with Science Park sites at the Coleraine and Magee campuses and in Belfast. There are also Innovation Centres at Coleraine, Jordanstown and Magee that provide incubation support to developing spinout companies.

9   The University's vision is to be 'a model of an outstanding regional university with a national and international reputation for quality'. Following extensive consultation, the University mission statement was revised in 2003 to identify the associated objectives to allow this vision to be realised. The University's mission states that it strives to:

- preserve and advance knowledge and enrich social, cultural and sporting life through teaching, learning, research and knowledge transfer

- provide teaching of the highest quality and encourage learning that will meet the personal and occupational needs of society

- contribute to wealth creation and economic prosperity through teaching, research and technology transfer

- stimulate enterprising creativity and promote awareness of the forces of global change

- nurture the values of inclusive citizenship and respect for diversity.

Background information

10   The published information available for this audit included:

- the information on the University's website and its undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses

- the report of a quality audit in November 2001 of the University by QAA, published in September 2002

- the reports of the University's provision at subject level, published by QAA

- datasets available publicly on the Higher Education and Research Opportunities in the UK (HERO) web site.

11   The University initially provided QAA with:

- an institutional self-evaluation document (SED) and separate document containing cited annexes

- the Programme Approval, Management and Review Handbook

- discipline self-evaluation documents (DSEDs) for the provision selected for DATs accompanied by a range of annexes together with a document reference list of extant evidence to be available subsequently.

12   During the audit visit, the audit team was given ready access to a range of the University's internal documents relating to the management of its academic standards and quality at institutional and discipline level for the selected DATs. The latter included examples of student work. The evidence base provided was managed and documented jointly by the University and the audit secretary.

The audit process

13   Following a meeting at the University in July 2004, QAA confirmed that five DATs would be conducted during the audit visit. The audit team's final selection of DATs included undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in built environment; computing; education; environmental studies; and social administration and policy.

14   QAA received the institutional SED and supporting documentation in December 2004 and the DSEDs, accompanied by programme specifications, in February 2005. Both the SED and the DSEDs were written specifically for the audit.

15   The audit team visited the University from 7 to 9 March 2005 for the purpose of exploring, with the Acting Vice-Chancellor, senior members of staff and student representatives, matters relating to the management of quality and standards raised by the SED. During this briefing visit, the team signalled a number of matters for the audit visit. At the close of the briefing visit, a programme of meetings for the audit visit was developed by the team and agreed with the University.

16   At the preliminary meeting for the audit in July 2004, the students of the University were invited, through their Students' Union (SU), to submit a students' written submission (SWS) expressing views on the student experience at the University and identifying any matters of concern or commendation with respect to the quality of programmes and the standard of awards. They were also invited to give their views on the level of representation afforded to them and on the extent to which their views were taken into account. In December 2004 the student body submitted a detailed document to QAA. The submission had been prepared by the SU Executive on the basis of consultation with students on all four campuses. Student feedback was collected using a questionnaire that focused on five main areas: learning resources; teaching and learning; representation; assessment and feedback; and information provided to students. Although the questionnaire was originally intended for on-line completion, technical difficulties meant that it was modified for use in structured focus group meetings that involved over 900 students. The final submission has been shared with the student population and with staff in the University and there were no matters within it that required the audit team to treat it with any level of confidentiality greater than that normally applied to the audit process. The team is

grateful to the students for preparing this valuable document to support the audit.

17   The audit visit took place from 25 to 29 April 2005, and included further meetings with staff and students of the University, both at central level and in relation to the selected DATs. The audit team comprised Professor J Harper, Professor R Davis, Professor R Earnshaw, Dr T Joscelyne, Dr A Lyons, Dr M Stowell, auditors, and Ms P Aldous, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms A Christou, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Developments since the previous academic quality audit

18   The outcome of the November 2001 audit was generally very positive and supported confidence in the University's management of academic quality and standards and in the way it discharges its function as an HE awarding body. Three significant aspects were identified as worthy of commendation. These related to the careful determination and implementation of structures at all levels for the management of quality and standards; the establishment of a coherent system of principles and practices which incorporates the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*), published by QAA, the qualifications framework, subject benchmarks and the outcomes of subject review to assure academic standards; and the development of an effective framework for the identification and prioritisation of corporate and individual staff development needs and the wide range of activities that are offered to meet those needs. The report also identified two advisable recommendations for further consideration: to seek to achieve a more coherent and strategic approach to developing the range of available mechanisms for collecting and utilising student feedback and, given the recent pace of change, to seek to consolidate its new structures and procedures in order to continue to secure the evident support and commitment of staff.

19   The University set about addressing both recommendations in a thorough and systematic manner. Key actions undertaken by the

University in response to the first point included the establishment of a Working Group on Student Feedback which produced a report, by October 2003, highlighting 20 recommendations which were endorsed by the University's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee. The University subsequently secured funding through successful application to the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF) to support the associated development work. This was further supplemented and informed through funded student placements in each of the past two sessions. On reflecting on the second recommendation, the University, while acknowledging that change is inevitable, recognised the potential dangers arising from rapid and extensive changes. In response, the University undertook a number of initiatives to explicitly address the issue. These have included organising three annual senior staff conferences, focusing on communications, leadership and transformation; conducting a Market & Opinion Research International (MORI) survey of the effectiveness of internal communications and implementing a customised senior management development programme to support senior academic and administrative staff with change management. To assist with succession planning in the University, this programme was made available to heads of school and to a limited number of aspiring academic managers.

20   In the period following the 2001 audit, the University participated in two subject reviews, one developmental engagement and a review of its Foundation Degrees (FDs). The outcomes of these events were very positive. Issues requiring action were relatively minor and have been appropriately dealt with by the University.

21   The University has a wide range of programmes with professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) accreditation. Where possible, revalidation/accreditation arrangements are undertaken jointly. Since the 2001 audit, a total of six PSRBs have been involved in such events, all of which resulted in both internal standards approval for the programme and PSRB accreditation. In addition, all PSRB visits conducted independently of validation activity resulted in ongoing accreditation of existing programmes. Further details of the University's approach to the management of PSRB relationships and an evaluation of its effectiveness are provided in a later section of this report (see paragraph 64 below).

22   A number of structural changes have occurred, the most significant of which are the amalgamation of the Northern Ireland Hotel and Catering College at Portrush; the transfer of Queens University Belfast's nursing provision at Altnagelvin to the Magee Campus; the merger of the Faculties of Engineering and Built Environment and Informatics; and the establishment of discipline-specific Research Institutes in order to provide enhanced research focus in preparation for the Research Assessment Exercise 2008. Initially, 13 Research Institutes were established. A further four has augmented these in order to ensure appropriate coverage across the University's discipline base. Considerable consultation has been involved in the establishment of the Research Institutes to ensure clarity of purpose and operation, including effective integration within the governance and management structures of the University.

23   In order to enhance its service culture and ethos of continuous improvement, the University undertook a number of initiatives, including the development of a Student Charter and the establishment of a Business Process Change Group to oversee a three-year programme to improve business processes. The Group employed an experienced systems consultant to review the experience of applicants and students throughout their contact with the University and a number of proposals emerged including the establishment of a more centralised admissions service; the introduction of a One-Stop Shop to deal with student enquiries in each campus; and the establishment of an integrated marketing group. To underpin this, it has been identified that the University's student record and information system requires upgrading, scheduled for implementation by September 2006.

24   Since the 2001 audit, the extent of change within the University has been less than in the

immediate preceding period. This has facilitated a period of embedding of recent changes, consolidation and reflection that the present audit team considers has been of benefit to, and used effectively by, the University. The outcomes of external review undertaken since 2001 have reaffirmed the confidence the previous audit team expressed in the University's ability to manage academic quality and standards. Given the relatively short time since publication of the last audit report, inevitably, not all of the resulting actions arising from issues raised have been fully completed. This is acknowledged in the SED, particularly with respect to student feedback. Further details of the actions taken and their effectiveness are discussed more fully in subsequent sections of this report. The 2005 audit team considered that the approach adopted by the University in both dealing with issues from the previous audit as well as other significant institutional developments, was characterised by effective consultation, including, where relevant, appropriate input from external sources, specification of pilot development work followed by evaluation prior to full implementation.

Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes

The institution's view as expressed in the SED

25   The University separates both managerial and governance responsibility in relation to assurance of standards and quality management. This is underpinned by the establishment of an associated system of principles and practices designed to incorporate the published sections of the *Code of practice*, *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and subject benchmark statements, published by QAA. These are clearly articulated, particularly in the Principles of Standards Assurance and Quality Management and in the Programme Approval, Management and Review Handbook. The SED confirmed that

procedures were largely unchanged since the previous audit and the University expressed the view 'that these continued to work effectively to ensure appropriate rigour in the overview of taught provision'. This was, however, further amplified within the SED by a detailed analysis of the current system, which highlighted both perceived strengths and areas for improvement. These are discussed in more detail in later sections of this report. The audit team considered that the University had adopted a reflective and evaluative approach in compiling its carefully produced SED.

The institution's framework for managing quality and standards

26   The SED described how overall responsibility for the academic affairs of the University rests with Senate. In carrying out this task, Senate operates through a number of committees that are responsible for specific functions and have defined terms of reference. For management of academic standards and quality, the key institutional level committees are the Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC), Research Degrees Committee (RDC), Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC) and Student Support Committee (SSC). The Vice-Chancellor and President is the chief academic and administrative officer of the University and the pro-vice-chancellors (PVCs), provosts, deans and directors report directly to him. There are four PVCs each of whom has responsibility for a particular area of work of the University: Teaching and Learning; Research (including technology and knowledge transfer); Quality Assurance and Enhancement; and Student Support. Each PVC chairs the Committee of Senate relating to their portfolio. Faculties are headed by deans who have responsibility for the work of their faculty and its schools. Provosts, deans and PVCs are appointed for fixed terms, up to four years, and may be re-appointed.

27   The University's Principles of Standards Assurance and Quality Management establish the framework for managing quality and standards in terms of executive and committee

structures and processes and procedures. The SED explained that, at institutional level, the primary responsibility for standards in terms of the regulatory framework and procedures for course approval and re-validation lies with TLC, with QAEC taking responsibility for annual monitoring, audit and enhancement activity. Membership of the TLC includes the PVCs, the Deans of Faculty and Director of Lifelong Learning, together with one member appointed by each faculty and two students nominated by the Senate. It is charged with reviewing, providing advice and making recommendations to Senate on matters relating to the operation of academic affairs, including recruitment and admissions, assessment, standards of awards, conferment, planning, design, approval and periodic review of programmes, educational outreach activities and regulations and procedures. The QAEC has responsibility for reviewing, providing advice and making recommendations to Senate on all matters relating to quality assurance and enhancement of teaching and learning, including the arrangements for programme evaluation, monitoring and review, matters relating to equality, staff development and training. Its membership is similar to the TLC. At faculty level the committee structure of Faculty Boards largely mirrors that of the Senate. The University undertakes regular reviews of the effectiveness of its governance structures and during 2004-05 the effectiveness and consistency of arrangements in the faculties is under review.

28   The University indicated in the SED that although the arrangements for quality management and standards assurance continued to work effectively, they were producing 'some inefficiencies and duplication of effort'. At programme and school level there was no expectation that the division of responsibility for quality and standards should be maintained, as it had been 'recognised that standards and quality become more interdependent the closer the point of delivery is approached'. As a consequence, the division was being reconsidered along with a review of the PVC portfolios. At the time of the audit this review

was not completed. The audit team concurred with the University's view that the framework for managing quality and standards continued to be effective, particularly in securing the institutional overview of standards and quality assurance. There was, however, some evidence, particularly at faculty level, that the same items were considered by both the TLC and QAEC, which might give rise to questions of efficiency. The team therefore agreed that it was timely to review the structures underpinning the quality framework as part of the University's normal practices for effectiveness review.

29   A key document for the management of standards and quality is the recently revised Teaching and Learning Strategy approved by Senate in 2004. The Strategy condensed key aspects of existing strategies, notably the Vice-Chancellor's Vision and Strategy, the E-learning and Widening Participation strategies and Faculty Teaching and Learning strategies, together with the main issues arising from QAEC and TLC agenda. The Strategy has a core value of striving for 'excellence by achieving appropriate standards and encouraging a culture of enhancement' and seeks to shape the institutional learning culture and set operational priorities for development. Faculties develop their own teaching and learning strategies for consideration by TLC, and are expected to cover all objectives set out in the University strategy. Through discussions with staff met by the audit team, it was clear that the framework was engaging a significant number of staff in quality processes that resulted in a commitment to, and achievement of, a strong quality culture across the University.

30   The SED stated that the University operates a 'devolved and distributed approach to quality management supported by appropriate reporting and monitoring arrangements and underpinned by an evidence-based risk-management approach'. This gives flexibility to faculties in developing management arrangements which suit their own circumstances, and hence some diversity around matters such as advisers of studies, review of poor performing students, receipting coursework, and penalties for exceeding word limits. Faculties are required to

manage and implement the monitoring processes of the University and take account of feedback from stakeholders, but may do so in ways that are best suited to evaluating their own priorities and objectives. QAEC, however, is responsible for overseeing this activity and ensuring that there is overall consistency and coherence, and that action is taken.

31   The University has in place a number of structures and processes designed to assure the internal and external comparability of the standards of its taught provision. Central to this is the Regulatory Framework comprised of a qualifications and credit framework, graduate qualities and benchmark statements, and University-wide regulations for awards. All of these are regularly reviewed, evaluated and updated in the light of the *Code of practice* and other elements of the Academic Infrastructure. The University's approval and revalidation mechanisms also incorporate elements of externality and University-wide codes of practice, guidelines and other statements are developed to support consistent practice. Consistency in assessment practice and assessment matters has been given much attention.

32   A significant recent project has been the development of an Assessment Handbook, and in the last few years there have been reviews of condonement, use of the full range of marks, regulations relating to full and part-time students, and assessment loads. The University's position on internal moderation and double marking, as stated in the Assessment Handbook, is that each faculty has in place, or is developing, its own policy to establish and apply consistent arrangements. The audit team noted that although the SED stated that internal moderation is 'required' by the University, there is no University-wide standard policy or minimum threshold for internal moderation and no stated process for the approval of faculty policies. While the Assessment Handbook provides guidance on good practice in moderation practices, the team concluded that the current position did not allow the University to be fully confident about either consistency or appropriateness in securing rigour of assessment practice for

awards made in the name of the University. The team noted that the University is currently undertaking a themed audit of the effectiveness of University and faculty policies on moderation. The team formed the view that it would be desirable as part of this internal audit for the University to make clear and explicit University-wide minimum requirements for internal moderation of assessment results.

The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

33   The SED did not identify separately the University's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards, but rather identified these as outcomes of the development of policies, procedures and practices as these appeared in the text of the SED. The University regards enhancement as a process of continuous improvement embedded in a strong culture of review and evaluation. It also considers the period since the last audit as one of consolidation in relation to the embedding of quality processes and cultures. This was evidenced in numerous ways both throughout the SED, in the agenda and minutes of key committees and in discussions with staff met by the audit team. The team formed the view that the University had achieved an embedded academic quality culture, which effectively permeated its processes for quality management and standards assurance. The use of themed audits is an important means of engaging staff in quality enhancement activity.

34   The University uses themed audits to review the effectiveness of processes and procedures in delivering and assuring quality in relation to identified areas of activity. Audits are based on existing documentation, with reports received by QAEC, which then determines further action. To date, themed audits have included the role and responsibilities of the University Assessors, student feedback, the operation of Staff/Student Consultative Committees (SSCCs) and effectiveness of student representation, and programme specifications. The University stated in the SED that, although the number of audits undertaken

in any given year was limited, the approach had proved very effective resulting in the identification of a number of matters requiring improvement. The audit team saw evidence of the thorough and detailed methodology of themed audit, and of improvements that had arisen from the outcomes. The team also noted the planned approach to audits, including consideration of the implications for partner institutions, and the careful monitoring of progress in implementing recommendations.

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

35 The University's processes for approval, monitoring and review of its courses and programmes consist of an initial process of planning approval; the evaluation of course proposals; annual monitoring at the level of the module and subject; and revalidation of approved courses every five years. These procedures are described clearly and comprehensively in the Programme Approval, Management and Review Handbook.

Approval

36 The process of programme approval from planning to final authorisation is overseen by the Course Approval Sub-committee (CASC) of TLC that has specific responsibility for maintaining institutional oversight of new course developments. Proposals for new programmes that have obtained approval from Faculty Boards are assessed by CASC in the context of the University's mission and strategic plan, the evidence of demand and resource issues to 'make explicit the relationship between programme planning and resourcing'. As such, the membership of CASC includes representatives from the key service departments. CASC makes recommendations through TLC to Senate on whether planning and evaluation should proceed. Where planning approval is granted, the course planning committee prepares a detailed evaluation document in line with the format set out in the Handbook.

37 Validation of a new course is undertaken by an Evaluation Panel normally chaired by a PVC, and including two representatives from

other faculties in the University and two external subject specialist members. The purpose of the evaluation is to consider 'whether the key standards appropriate for the new programme of study are met or likely to be met'. Guidance, in the form of a detailed handbook, guidance notes and subject benchmark information is provided to panel members. The SED stated that the Guidelines for Evaluation and Revalidation Panels had been updated in 2003 and were reviewed further in 2004-05 to take account of increased emphasis on student learning, employability, personal development planning (PDP), entrepreneurial skills and preparation for further study. The Panel may recommend approval, with conditions if appropriate, and recommendations for further consideration by the course team. It is the responsibility of the Chair of the Evaluation Panel to agree the course team's response to the written report, and the Academic Office checks the revised programme document for completeness.

38 Reports of evaluation events are considered by CASC, which makes a recommendation on approval to TLC. CASC also receives an annual summary statement of evaluations and revalidations undertaken during the year. TLC receives an report on issues of a general nature. The SED indicated that the main issues in the last three years have been the lateness of some events and submission of documentation (resulting in TLC's decision to bring forward the deadline for submission of final documentation to 31 May), and the achievement of the University's objectives for entrepreneurship. The audit team was satisfied that arrangements for the approval of new programmes are appropriate and rigorous, both at the course planning stage and in relation to the evaluation event. It was also evident that CASC maintained a comprehensive overview of developments, and gave attention to matters of process and timing to further strengthen arrangements for quality management.

Programme revisions

39 Revisions to approved courses are submitted by the Course Committee to the

Faculty Board or Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee for approval, using a standard form. Approved forms are forwarded to the Academic Office where proposed changes are scrutinised in relation to University policies and practices. Changes are reported to CASC for information and some revisions are referred for final approval to CASC itself. The audit team concurred with the SED statement that the programme revision procedure is effective in ensuring that changes are properly scrutinised before introduction, but that the deadline created some constraints on course teams.

Revalidation

40   The revalidation process was designed during 2000-01 in consultation with faculties, and replaced the previous periodic review process conducted on an individual programme basis. All programmes are re-approved on a five-year cycle with cognate groupings of programmes considered together. The process is similar to evaluation and is concerned with 'the re-affirmation of standards for awards and programmes and their continuing currency and relevance to the University's mission'. The SED stated that this reflects the distinction in the University's Principles for Standards Assurance and Quality Management and does not replicate the functions carried out through annual monitoring. The event is very similar to that for course approval, although the panel, which includes external members, meets only with course/subject directors and module coordinators. There are no meetings with students or employers, although it is possible to include an employer representative as a member of the re-validation panel. The most recent annual monitoring report is provided by way of context.

41   As revalidation was a new process its effectiveness was evaluated following a pilot in 2002-03; subject unit coordinators and members of re-validation panels were surveyed and a report made to TLC. Generally the process was considered fit for purpose, although a small number of adjustments were made, including the provision of external examiner reports for two years rather than one

and a requirement for at least two subject specialists. The audit team confirmed that arrangements for revalidation are appropriate.

Monitoring

42   The University operates a devolved approach to annual monitoring in which faculties are responsible for implementing the formal University-wide processes for annual subject monitoring, module monitoring and administering the student questionnaire. In addition, faculties take account of feedback from ongoing quality assurance and enhancement activity, including SSCCs, external review reports, including PSRB reports, external examiners and industrial liaison committees. They also receive feedback from centrally administered surveys such as the Course Experience questionnaire and the on-line student satisfaction survey.

43   Procedures for annual subject monitoring replaced annual course review in 2001, and have been in place for four years. Faculties are allowed flexibility to determine review format and the detail of programme level reporting, but the University requires certain areas of activity to be addressed, standard data sets to be reviewed, and discussion and reporting on core objectives set by the institution each year. The SED stated that the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring and review* has been considered in defining an appropriate balance between annual monitoring and periodic review with the former being undertaken primarily by the providing department. Faculties are encouraged to use the time and resource devoted to annual subject monitoring as effectively as possible by focusing on areas of their activity identified as most at risk, while highlighting good practice for dissemination.

44   Faculty and subject annual monitoring reports are reviewed by a specially constituted subgroup of QAEC, who produce a report and related action plans to QAEC. In 2004-05 the subgroup adopted more of an audit role by reviewing a small number of areas in more detail that raised matters of concern or that demonstrated potential good practice. This

auditing process enabled the subgroup to comment on the specific courses considered in detail and also on the level of confidence provided about the robustness of faculty monitoring processes. The audit team noted that the report produced by the subgroup for QAEC was a thorough and detailed document. It reviewed the effectiveness of annual monitoring at faculty, subject and institutional level, identified good practice and plans for dissemination, as well as making recommendations on general issues for University level consideration.

45   The SED stated that annual subject monitoring has met its identified aims and proved an effective tool in encouraging discussion and critical self-reflection at faculty level. It had, however, 'taken some time to bed down and earlier reports lacked evaluative content and were not well grounded in available evidence'. Steps were taken to address these issues and a move to a more risk-based approach, using quantitative as well as qualitative data, has been effected. The University has, however, identified a number of areas for further enhancement, including the need for more clearly documented follow-up activity; improved presentation of statistics at programme level; a more detailed faculty statement on the use and scrutiny of programme level evidence and how it informs determination of risk; a more strategic approach at both faculty and University-level to the dissemination of good practice; and more clearly relevant benchmark statistics. The audit team saw evidence through the committee papers and minutes of QAEC that implementation of measures to effect these enhancements were in hand.

46   At module level, the University is in the process of changing from a system of module evaluation to one of risk-based monitoring. This followed an evaluation of the process for module evaluation in 2002-03, which recognised that a more effective use of resources would be to allow for lightness of touch in relation to successful modules and for detailed scrutiny of modules at risk. A working group reporting to QAEC was charged with the task of recommending a revised scheme, and it

reported in 2003 and 2004. The scheme was piloted in two faculties in 2004 and, following an evaluation, finalised proposals for University-wide implementation in 2004-05 were presented to QAEC. Module monitoring involves scrutiny by the Head of School of statistical data to identify modules at risk, for example, through high failure or withdrawal rates, or particularly high pass rates. Modules identified as at risk are then subject to detailed review and the development of an action plan.

47   The audit team formed the view that the University had adopted a careful and evolutionary approach to the development of annual monitoring and in particular towards the adoption of more risk based analysis. The team identified this approach to the review and development of institutional processes, involving as it did effective consultation, piloting, project management, evaluation and institutional level oversight, to be highly effective. This systematic methodology underpinned many of the features of good practice referenced in this audit report. In discussions with staff met by the team through the DATs, there was strong ownership of, and commitment to, the processes of annual subject monitoring both in relation to continual improvement and dissemination of best practice. The team noted the considerable effort and resources invested in annual monitoring, both at faculty and institutional level, but was satisfied that this was kept under review, and that the benefits for quality enhancement were clear.

External participation in internal review processes

48   The audit team established that externality is manifested in a number of internal review processes. Membership of Evaluation Panels that consider a new course proposal includes two representatives from other faculties within the University and two external members who are subject specialists from other universities. If appropriate, representatives from industry or the professions may also be added to the panel. The relevant faculty proposes external members and the same broad principles apply to their approval

as for external examiners. They should have sufficient expertise to cover the provision and have recent experience of curriculum design. Potential conflict of interest is avoided and nominees should not have been involved during the planning stages nor be closely associated with the School, for example, having recently acted as an external examiner, or having recently been a member of staff. They are expected to be familiar with the relevant subject benchmark statement(s) and the national Academic Infrastructure. Internal and external panel members receive guidance on their roles and are assisted in discharging their responsibilities by an aide-mémoire. Joint validation arrangements are in place for programmes awarded jointly with other institutions. With the inclusion of external panel members in the revalidation process, the team was confident that strong and scrupulous use is made of independent external persons both at the point of initial approval and subsequent revalidation.

49   Faculties and schools seek employer input through formal and informal contacts that members of staff have with industry. Formal input is received via Industrial Advisory Panels that, for example, in computing, meet one to two times each year. The aim of such panels is to promote placement arrangements for students, links with regional employers, and support technology transfer schemes. The audit team confirmed that improvements to courses had resulted from this externality in computing, built environment and education, although links were largely informal in the latter. Quantifiable benefits had accrued in the development of new modules, timely updates to existing modules, reconfiguring of the curriculum, and revisions to the University's Placement Code of Practice.

50   The SED is clear about employer liaison in programme planning and revalidation. However, annual subject monitoring procedures require inclusion and evaluation of employer input and the audit team did not find that this was explicit or consistently present in the reports seen at discipline level. It would therefore be desirable for the University to

promote, maximise and render more visible the employer contribution to subject development.

External examiners and their reports

51   External examining arrangements were reviewed in 2000 in the light of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*. The SED described how relevant documentation was updated to include explicit reference to the Academic Infrastructure; stronger expectations regarding examiner involvement in coursework arrangements; reduction by one year of the possible period of extension; and explicit statements in the University's Code of Practice and nomination form to address potential conflict of interest. The SED also stated that further adjustment is planned in the light of revision by QAA of this section of the *Code*.

52   The audit team confirmed that the appointment, induction, and role of external examiners in the schools conform to the University's External Examiner's Handbook, July 2004. Each external examiner is required to submit an annual report commenting on the standard of marking and the quality of candidates' work in relation to the level of the award with reference to standards at other institutions, the FHEQ, and subject benchmark statement(s).

53   The report is a key component in the University's standards and quality assurance procedures. It is received by the PVC (Teaching and Learning) and a detailed response is required from the Course/Subject Committee. The PVC (Teaching and Learning) reviews all reports and provides TLC and QAEC Annual Subject Monitoring Sub-Group with reports on University-wide issues and responds directly to the external examiner on these matters. From 2004, external examiners provided summary reports for publication on the Teaching Quality Information website.

54   External examiners are required to attend an induction visit if they are new to the University, and are supplied with a copy of the External Examiner's Handbook detailing their role and responsibilities. While formal faculty or programme-based induction for external examiners has been a feature for some years,

University-level induction was introduced in 2003. In 2004 all external examiners were issued with a copy of the University's Assessment Handbook. The University is aware that some external examiners in the Republic of Ireland may not have the same degree of familiarity as UK external examiners with regard to the UK Academic Infrastructure and this is addressed in the induction process. The University stresses the importance of early induction and the subsequent ongoing dialogue between the external examiner and the course/subject director, in order to enable both parties to fulfil their responsibilities.

55   The SED stated that the chief responsibilities of external examiners are to ensure that academic standards are maintained and that individual students are treated fairly. Regulations state that Examination Boards decide students' results and classifications, but where there is disagreement the view of the external examiner shall prevail, although the decision is a Board decision. The audit team established that external examiners had conducted viva voce examinations with selected students and had made recommendations to the Board for those students that had been accepted. The team concluded that it would be desirable for the University to clarify, in formal documentation, the extent and limits of external examiners' authority to moderate the marks of individual students to ensure fairness to all students.

56   The SED acknowledged areas for improvement raised by overview reports presented to TLC in previous years and evaluated action taken to address them. In regard to the moderation of draft examination papers TLC considers that faculty processes are satisfactory, and commended the detailed model in the Faculty of Arts as best practice. The audit team confirms that strong and scrupulous use is made of independent external examiners in summative assessment procedures.

External reference points

57   The University stated in the SED that adjustments have been made to the University's

portfolio of awards in the light of the FHEQ, and all programmes within the University's Qualifications and Credit Framework meet the requirements of the FHEQ from the September 2003 intake. Discussions with staff confirmed that one programme remains technically non-compliant with the University's own Framework, the Postgraduate Certificate in Education which, as a two-semester course, attracts a diploma award. The University has retained the existing title pending the imminent national guidance. The programme is to be revalidated later in the academic year.

58   The SED explained that subject benchmark statements are fully incorporated into the University's standards assurance processes and these are key reference documents in evaluation and revalidation exercises. For certain programmes of study, which fulfil professional or statutory requirements, the standards of the relevant PSRB are also addressed. The audit team heard that Teaching Development Advisers (TDAs) provide support for staff preparing for evaluation or revalidation. Targeted workshops in areas such as programme specification, module development and assessment, are also provided and the national framework developments are fully embedded in these activities.

59   The audit team was able to confirm that sections of the *Code of practice* are addressed as new guidance is published, or revisited in the light of internal change. A Working Group on accreditation of prior learning is considering the recently released QAA guidelines. Similarly, recruitment and admissions are again being reviewed to ensure compliance of the University's policies and procedures for part-time and postgraduate students. The major review of the work of the Careers Service is still continuing and a report is due to be presented to the next meeting of TLC. With regard to the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students* it has also been agreed that individual members of staff should be responsible for the archiving of assessed work and that a sample should be kept for a minimum of three years.

60   The previous audit report commended the University on the establishment of a coherent

system of principles and practices which incorporates the *Code of practice*, the qualifications framework and subject benchmarks to assure academic standards. The audit team concluded that the University continues to maintain its policies and procedures under continuous review in the context of sector wide requirements, initiatives and revisions to the Academic Infrastructure. Discussions with staff indicated a high level of commitment to the continued development of staff skills and competencies to facilitate this, and the team considered this to be further evidence of an embedded quality culture seeking enhancements wherever possible.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

61   Faculty responses to the reports of QAA subject review in education and in Celtic studies since the 2001 audit were received by QAEC, and minutes confirmed that issues raised by the review teams had been considered and addressed.

62   QAA and the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) reviewed the University's FDs in May 2003. The University was commended in the QAA/ETI report for its approach to the introduction, evaluation, and enhancement of this new qualification. As a direct consequence of the University's internal review and the QAA/ETI report, the University amended the structure of its FDs and took steps to ensure that all new and proposed courses adopted the enhanced structure. In addition, a number of developmental events were arranged to allow for discussion of enhancement of various aspects of FD provision with partner institutions offering these awards.

63   In its SED, the University identified the developmental engagement in accountancy in November 2003 as a valuable opportunity to explore aspects of the discipline audit approach, which in turn was helpful in preparing the information for the DATs for the institutional audit. A report on the outcome of the engagement, prepared by the Faculty, was considered by QAEC in April 2004. An issue with regard to the level of modules in the

Graduate Diploma, raised by the engagement, has been the subject of further guidance by TLC to all faculties.

64   The University has a wide range of programmes with PSRB accreditation and has a protocol to inform its relationship with these bodies. During the period 2002 to 2004 six PSRBs were involved in validation events. All resulted in both internal standards approval for the programme and PSRB accreditation. In addition, all PSRB visits conducted independently of validation activity from 2002 to 2004 resulted in ongoing accreditation of existing programmes. The University acknowledged in the SED that there were some difficulties in the PSRB arrangements for health-related programmes. In order to address this weakness a process-based intervention proportionate to the assessed risk had been proposed for implementation in 2005-06.

65   The audit team considered that there was good engagement with external agencies and that, in responding positively to their recommendations, the institution was open and self-critical and able to enhance provision accordingly.

Student representation at operational and institutional level

66   The University's SED explained that student representation on senior committees is prescribed by the statutes of the Council and Senate and student opinion is actively encouraged. SU sabbatical officers confirmed that they have a strong voice and a good working relationship with the senior management of the University. Students sit on several subcommittees of Council and Senate: General Purposes & Finance; QAEC; SSC; TLC; Disciplinary Committee/Appeal Board; and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Strategy, where they have full status. SU officers also have scheduled meetings with senior members of the University, including the formal biannual SU Liaison Committee chaired by the Vice Chancellor, and the less formal SU Forum that feeds into the SSC and TLC. Students are involved in ad hoc working groups

where the group's work has a direct impact on student work or life, for example, the Working Group on Extenuating Circumstances.

67   Faculty Boards have provision for six student members. In its SED, the University expressed the view that at faculty level student representation is less effective because of the multi-site nature of the University. Students are reluctant to commit time to travel between campuses to attend faculty meetings, which necessarily rotate. The audit team heard from SU officers and senior staff that they are aware of this difficulty. The 2001 audit report recommended that the University further develop the range of mechanisms for collecting and utilising student feedback. A Working Group was formed to report on the effectiveness of student feedback processes through module evaluation, student questionnaires and SSCCs. The Student Feedback Implementation Group succeeded this and the University also undertook a themed audit on the operation of SSCCs.

68   As an outcome of the themed audit, the University is considering accreditation within the context of PDP as an incentive to increase student participation at this level. In the interim, SU sabbatical officers are to liaise with class representatives and attend faculty committees on their behalf. Procedures for reporting issues from SSCC and Course/Subject Committees to faculty level do operate, and feedback on resultant actions is available from the Course/Subject Director or noted at the subsequent meeting. The audit team supports the use of new technologies, including video-conferencing, proposed to facilitate enhanced participation in meetings at faculty level.

69   There is an opportunity for the student voice to be heard at module level through the SSCCs and, at programme level, through the Course/Subject Committees. The University's Programme Approval Management and Review Handbook states the University requirement for representation of two students per year group and meetings held each semester. In the DATs, the audit team heard from staff and students that student involvement at this level is strong,

with the recognition by students that there is a direct link to their studies. The SU has attempted to further increase representation by offering training that is to be further enhanced and publicised, but there remains some reluctance from students to become involved because of part-time working and other commitments. Knowledge of the class representative system is considered variable by the SU, who expressed concern in their SWS that student representatives may not be fully briefed and then not relay committee decisions back to the student group. However, undergraduate and master's student representatives met by the audit team confirmed that, generally, responses to issues are received within two weeks for them to relay to their cohort of students. Postgraduate students considered that they too are well represented. At an informal level, students agreed that lecturers are very approachable and deal with issues when they can prior to subsequent SSCC meetings. SSCCs are not a requirement for part-time courses. The team heard that the issue of inadequate SSCC cover for distance learning, modular programmes and part-time postgraduate courses was noted by the themed audit and the particular issue of off-campus students is to be addressed by the SU.

70   The recent University consultation paper from the Quality Management and Audit Unit 'Enhancement of the role of Student Representatives', February 2005 developed from the themed audit. The University has now addressed many of the issues raised by the themed audit and expects University staff to value the role of student representatives and to encourage their engagement with academic staff in the timing and formulation of agenda for SSCC meetings. In addition, it proposes that elections for class representatives should be transparent, well publicised and that student representatives should engage with their peer group before and after SSCC meetings. The audit team supports the embedding of this initiative. The team considered that, for part-time students, the website is a very positive means of communication with student representatives.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

71   The Working Group on Student Feedback recommended modifications to student questionnaire processes. The Student Feedback Implementation Group was asked to develop an electronic system, and methods for feeding back survey outcomes to students. The Group developed and piloted an on-line Student Satisfaction Survey which, although well advertised in the University, produced only a low response rate, and the results of the full survey are currently being evaluated. The audit team supports the University's attempts to develop an appropriate system for eliciting student opinion, which incorporates feedback to the student body.

72   Students and SU officers met by the audit team confirmed that under the former Module Evaluation Scheme, students were disinclined to comment on modules after they had completed them, particularly as they did not see the collective outcome of the evaluation. A timetabled discussion on progress during the module was considered preferable, and in cases where current students had received feedback from a survey part way through the module, this was reported to the team as having been useful. In the development from module evaluation to module monitoring, the advice from the Working Group was to remove the requirement for student feedback, except possibly for at risk modules, and to focus on SSCCs as being more responsive to student feedback. The positive commentaries from students involved with SSCCs indicate that this is an appropriate action.

73   The SED described how a paper-based Assessment of Teaching: Student Questionnaire is used to elicit student views on individual staff's teaching at the module level and is therefore used for the enhancement of teaching. The most recent questionnaire in 2003-04 confirmed a broad level of satisfaction among students in relation to the structure and organisation of the teaching received and good responsiveness to students. The results mirrored those of the previous academic year. The audit team also reviewed the outcomes of the paper-based graduate survey, the Course Experience

Questionnaire. Surveys in March 2003 and February 2004 produced response rates of typically 25 per cent and indicated a general satisfaction with course provision. Issues specific to part-time mode postgraduate students included some concern over the responsiveness of staff and the library opening hours. The team noted the University's decision that the National Student Survey will now supersede the graduate survey.

74   Research students are required to write an annual report with the option of including feedback on their supervision. This has been enhanced with the introduction of the formal 100-day review and is additional to their participation in the University-wide Course Experience Questionnaire.

75   Examples of the University's response to student feedback include extended library opening over the Easter week, and the reaffirmation of the policy that there should be no teaching on Wednesday afternoons to support sporting activities. SU officers confirmed to the audit team that the University had made a formal, and satisfactory, response to matters raised in the SWS.

76   Feedback from PSRBs is sought through regular contacts at subject level, through joint validation where appropriate, and through accreditation events. Where PSRBs are not involved, the University seeks feedback from employers in programme planning and approval processes. Some annual subject monitoring reports reflect employer views. In addition Advisory Boards, Industrial Liaison Panels or Forums, informal discussions during placement visits and links with agencies support employer liaison; however, the audit team consider that employer feedback into annual subject monitoring could be strengthened to enhance its contribution to subject development.

Progression and completion statistics

77   The Quality Management and Audit Unit provides data to faculties to facilitate review and reflection on relevant qualitative and quantitative statistical data relating to achievement and progression, as part of the annual subject

monitoring process. The information includes a summary statement of entry qualifications, progression and award performance for each academic year for all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. In addition, the data for three previous years are included for the analysis of trends. Annual monitoring also includes comparison of student progress between campuses at school level. The data are used to support the formulation of action plans that respond to arising issues. The Quality Management and Audit Unit generates a broader summary of performance data at University and faculty level. The Unit summarises entry qualifications by programme, including faculty averages. Higher Education Statistics Agency and HEFCE performance indicators are also made available as benchmarks. For academic planning, a range of data, including Universities and Colleges Admissions System statistics, entry-level trends, retention, progression and performance, is made available.

78   The process of module monitoring has been developed through a pilot scheme for two faculties and is currently being rolled out for University implementation in 2004-05. The revised scheme arising from the pilot will ensure the continued production of statistical data for all modules. Statistical reports both rank modules within a school by student success, and also give a more detailed report on each module.

79   From the information available to it in the DATs, the audit team was able to confirm that annual subject monitoring is effective in encouraging critical self-reflection and supporting the culture of enhancement. Faculty staff generally agreed that the quality of the data is improving although the earlier receipt of data would be beneficial. Data is held locally in some schools to support the University data, for example, more detailed retention information. The data sets used for annual subject monitoring in the Faculty of Engineering provide a clear and comprehensive exemplar, and provided evidence of the process working well. This includes the use of data to support the at risk approach to module monitoring, where authority is devolved to the faculties to

set benchmarks for focussed analysis, for example, low or very high pass rates.

80   The SED Annex listed the degree classification data trend over three years, also the Performance Indicators in UK HE both for performance against national data and against other institutions with the same benchmark. Completion rates are monitored by the DEL. The University exceeds its DEL targets and national benchmarks, and has a good record in completion rates for part-time students.

81   The University's senior management has confidence in the fitness for purpose of the University statistical data, but there is the intention to replace the current management information system. The Business Process Change Group is currently identifying requirements for a new student record system that is not anticipated until 2006. The audit team supported the University's intentions to enhance further an accurate and accessible data system to inform judgements and support its decision-making processes.

Assurance of the quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward

82   The University sees the recruitment and selection of high quality, high performing academic staff, together with their support and development, as key to its success. The strategy for achieving these aims is contained in the Human Resources (HR) Strategy 2002-05, which is clearly aligned with the overall vision and strategy of the University. It requires faculties to develop three-year rolling staffing profiles that address their changing needs. This, in turn, enables the University, through its HR Strategy and its financial planning by the Financial Planning Group, to map both the need and the resources to recruit, retain, reward and develop its staff. The University is currently engaged in an Equality Impact Assessment of its recruitment and selection methodology as required by the Northern Ireland Act, 1998. On the basis of this, it is intended to produce a revised recruitment and selection policy.

83   The University operates induction sessions for new staff, who are subject to probationary processes and are supported by a mentor. There is also an induction programme covering e-learning and the virtual learning environment (VLE). There is a separate induction programme for part-time teaching staff, which is specifically tailored to their needs both in terms of content and timing. Postgraduate students who teach are also required to follow appropriate induction programmes and there is clear written guidance on all aspects of their roles and those of the module coordinators with whom they work.

84   All staff new to teaching are required to complete the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice (PGCHEP). A recent review of the PGCHEP has addressed the need for more flexibility and the introduction of a module on e-learning pedagogy. An Associate Higher Education Teacher Award (AHETA) has been introduced for part-time lecturers. Postgraduates who teach also follow elements of the PGCHEP or the AHETA.

85   The SED claimed that appraisal is well established as a process for the development of staff, particularly academics. However, the audit team noted that the scheme for academic and academic-related staff is not mandatory and hence not universally implemented, and that there is no scheme for clerical, technical or manual/crafts staff. The University is currently reviewing the appraisal scheme for academic and academic-related staff. The stated objective of the review is 'to make appraisal an integrated means of delivery of a truly corporate culture which embeds core values, enhances individual potential and which is centred on the University mission'. It will also examine potential links of appraisal to reward. The team formed the view that there was a lack of clarity about the University's intended purpose for an appraisal scheme and encourages the University to expedite the resolution of the purpose and scope of staff appraisal, and to establish appropriate procedures for consistent and effective implementation across the University.

86   Through its Annual Review Process (ARP), staff are rewarded on the basis of meritorious performance. Clear criteria have to be met for performance bonus payments, accelerated increments or discretionary points, as well as for promotion.

87   Three criteria have been established for promotion of academic staff and benchmarks established for the level of professor, reader and senior lecturer for each criterion. The criteria are achievement in Teaching and Learning, in Research and Development and in Academic Enterprise. For promotion to professor or reader, applicants must meet the benchmarks of one of the criteria with supporting evidence of achievement in the others. Promotion to senior lecturer requires achievement of the benchmarks in at least two of the criteria. During the last two academic years, virtually all successful candidates for promotion to senior lecturer have included Teaching and Learning as their principal or supporting criterion, whereas all successful readership candidates and 94 per cent of successful professorial candidates have satisfied the Research and Development criterion. So far, only one professor has been appointed as a result of meeting the benchmarks of the Teaching and Learning criterion.

88   The audit team concluded that the University has a comprehensive set of policies and requirements for the promotion of academic staff with appropriate advice for managers. Implementation of the ARP is reviewed annually by senior committees and brought to the Council to ensure equality of opportunity.

Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development

89   One of the recommendations of the 2001 audit related to securing the evident support and commitment of staff given the recent pace of change. In its response, the University considered continued change inevitable and recognised the need to improve its internal communications. MORI was commissioned to review internal communications in 2002-03. The Senate endorsed its recommendations for improvement and responsibility for progress was given to the PVC (Quality Assurance and

Enhancement). One of the agreed actions was that the University would affirm, through consultation with staff, a set of core values which underpin its enhanced service culture. The need to support senior academic and administrative staff with change management was also recognised. These and other needs are incorporated in the Priority Goals to support the Staff Development Strategy.

90   The University has implemented a substantial management development programme that has been made available to all senior managers. A significant number of the next tier of managers (heads and associate heads of school) have also benefited from this, as have some more junior academics who wish to develop into middle academic management roles. To make the programme more meaningful, it was structured around a series of projects of current strategic importance to the University, such as Appraisal Review. Work on these projects has continued since the initial development conference and is under continuous review. As a result, the programme has advanced to a further stage in the area of Scenario Planning in which a three-stage externally facilitated process will be used by the Planning Committee to generate the new Strategic Plan.

91   There has been considerable enhancement of the Staff Development Unit (SDU) which has a complement of 15 staff primarily based at Jordanstown, but operating on all campuses and linked to individual faculties. The SDU has developed a process of Annual Staff Development Audit, whereby previous activity with individual schools is reviewed and new plans developed arising from each school's needs as they emerge from annual subject monitoring, course approval and revalidation, the need to support e-learning and the need to support research. Consequently, staff development activities are planned on the basis of strategic University-wide priorities and local need, as well as external developments in the sector.

92   The SDU includes TDA who support all schools, primarily in the area of curriculum enhancement. They act as internal consultants working alongside faculty and school coordinators supporting activities such as programme revalidation, annual subject monitoring and the development of programme specifications for new and existing programmes.

93   The SDU offers a considerable range of staff development opportunities for academic and academic-related staff who widely avail themselves of these, as evidenced through the audit team's discussions with staff and consideration of documentation. Leadership Development programmes are available for staff involved in all levels of academic management. There is also a programme for senior administrators that, the team was informed, has been well received.

94   The SED described how the SDU has introduced a Professional Development Framework for those with a teaching role that encompasses a range of induction and development activities. By working with the School of Education, they have produced a range of flexibly delivered accredited modules, which are responsive to the needs of staff and also meet the continuing professional development (CPD) requirements of the Higher Education Academy. Sessions are also provided by the TDAs that disseminate information and advice in relation to national developments. The open rolling programme of support is disseminated in a Staff Development Newsletter and information is also available on-line. An on-line good practice database is in the early stages of development.

95   Local staff development includes a Peer Observation Scheme for which guidelines are available. This scheme is being reviewed. It is currently viewed as an enhancement tool designed to encourage individuals to share experiences and engage in sharing of good practice and innovation in teaching. It is currently confidential to the observer and the observed and, while the University claims it to be effective at that level and to monitor its use, it does not monitor its effectiveness at institutional level.

96   The audit team found ample evidence of the University's commitment to the development of internal communications and saw how it had been improved. The

development of a set of institutional core values was facilitated by this improved communication and the University is now beginning to address the challenge of embedding these values in its processes. Overall, the University has developed a comprehensive range of staff development activity with a good take-up by staff of the opportunities on offer.

Assurance of the quality of teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods

97   Given its widely distributed geographical locations, the University has taken the strategic decision to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by information and communication technologies, and in particular by e-learning, both to enhance learning experience on campus and to extend access to elements of its provision throughout Northern Ireland and beyond through on-line distance learning. The University has established a virtual campus, CampusOne, as the vehicle through which to offer its distributed e-learning provision. It is moving to an upgraded version of its current delivery platform. To date, the University has validated 20 awards available as on-line, professionally-related distance learning programmes and is currently offering 18 such courses.

98   The University has established an e-learning subcommittee of TLC, which has produced an e-learning strategy. Faculties have developed Teaching and Learning strategies within the context of the University framework. The key agency in the development of e-learning strategy and provision is the Institute of Lifelong Learning. The Institute works alongside course and subject teams to support and ensure the quality of e-learning materials according to an established framework for e-learning standards that is provided to schools for guidance. The University's TLC has also approved a number of models for tutoring and student representation and feedback for on-line programmes. The University described how the practice of the Institute of Lifelong Learning has taken cognisance of former QAA guidelines on open and distance learning (now updated and

incorporated into the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning*) and other external reference points.

99   The Institute and the University are moving from the initial phase of the establishment of infrastructure, covered by the existing strategy, to the transition phase of extension of provision both on and off campus to be covered by a revised strategy. The revised strategy encompasses three categories of e-learning provision and has set targets for the attainment of each within the next three-year period: web-supplemented at over 50 per cent of provision; web-dependent at 20-50 per cent; and full on-line programmes at 10-20 per cent. In the case of the third category, piloted in the initial phase, standard University processes approve programmes but, given the level of investment required, undergo a parallel planning-approval process via the Planning Committee. Courses identified and prioritised for full on-line development emerge from School-Institute consultations and currently tend to be professionally related master*'s* with a CPD market.

100   Through the Institute the University makes provision for staff development in order to assist staff to engage with the development of e-learning materials and on-line programmes. The University is particularly aware of the need to develop the skills of tutoring for on-line programmes and to this end all staff teaching on-line courses are required to complete successfully the e-moderation programme. All new full-time teaching staff must now complete the e-learning module within the CPD framework, while established staff undertake the module voluntarily. Students enrolling for on-line programmes are provided with an on-line induction and learner support programme as described in paragraph 112 below.

101   The University in its own evaluation proposed the beneficial impact of its e-learning provision on the wider learning community as an area of good practice. The audit team would commend the coherent and comprehensive nature of the University's e-learning strategy as an example of good practice, both in the design and implementation of new courses and

in the supportive frameworks for staff development and quality assurance.

Learning support resources

102 The University's system for the planning and support of academic provision is part of an integrated approach to the establishment and maintenance of academic standards and the management and enhancement of the quality of provision. Within this system the activity of the Planning Committee is informed and guided by the Principles of Standards and Quality Management, endorsed by QAEC, RDC and TLC in 2001 and reviewed by QAEC in 2004.

103 The Planning Committee holds the key responsibility for the coordination of corporate, operational and resource planning. A key term of reference of the Committee indicates its function 'To produce, keep under review and forward recommendations and reports to the Senate and the Council in relation to the overall academic and resource plan of the University.' As such, within the framework of the University's governance and management, the Planning Committee constitutes the vehicle for ensuring the parallel development of the University's academic provision and of the learning resources to support this. The SED described how this firm committee control of the matching of learning resources to academic development is further supported by a management structure that provides parallel Directors of Information Services and Physical Resources.

104 The operation of the Committee is guided by the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy which has as a leading tenet the aim to 'support a culture of understanding and which progressively equips…students to take responsibility for their own learning'. In line with this philosophy, the University is able to document a number of realised and planned developments focused around a successful model of campus-based integrated learning resource centres (LRCs) and which include the enhancement of information resources and particularly electronic ones, increased access to workstations, improved design of information technology (IT) teaching and learning laboratories, instruction in information and ICT skills and other support for independent learning, enhanced technical provision in classrooms, and a video-conference service.

105 Library, IT and Media Technology services all constitute part of an integrated Information Services Department (ISD). The University has an Information and ICT Strategy and the ISD operates according to a documented planning cycle and to its own Student Support Charter in order to realise and deliver the Strategy. Both programme approval and annual subject monitoring are required to take account of resource needs and resources provision and the ISD is involved in these processes. ISD has also gathered information on user experience of its services in a variety of ways but has acknowledged that analysis and evaluation of its provision was not entirely effective. ISD consequently introduced service targets for its range of services in 2003-04 and analysis of performance against targets is to be reported to Planning Committee in May 2005. Comparatively, with reference to the Society of College, National and University Libraries measures, the learning support services of the University can be shown to be performing above the national average in most areas.

106 The audit team formed the view that the University undoubtedly has a strong commitment to enhancement of its learning resource provision and to the development and delivery of learning support services that match the demands of provision and the needs of students. It is clear that this is a cross-campus strategy and equally evident that needs differ across campuses according to their discipline base. The SWS identified some areas where provision appeared to fall below student expectation, particularly with regard to IT provision, printing and photocopying services, and library opening hours. It is evident that for reasons of history and culture, provision across the campuses is not uniform, nor perhaps entirely equitable. For example, issues regarding noise and the level of the book stock at the new Magee LRC were noted. The team, nonetheless, remained confident that these,

and other such issues, were in part mitigated by systems in place, such as inter-campus book loan, and also were subject to specific address. Furthermore, discussion through DAT meetings led the team to the general view that both staff and students were satisfied that the learning resource provision enabled them to deliver and undertake their courses effectively.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

107 The core of the University's system for academic guidance and support of students lies in the role of the Adviser of Studies. Every student on a taught programme is allocated such an Adviser who is responsible for guiding students in their studies and also acts in a general advisory and pastoral capacity. Particular attention is paid to first-year students. The Advisers or students themselves may also have recourse to the specialist services within the Student Support Department as necessary.

108 The University has a Code of Practice for Advisers of Studies that provides broad guidance on the role, while faculties have detailed statements on operational practice in line with the Code. With the outcome of a review of the Code in 2000 having permitted greater flexibility in the frequency, timing and format of meetings and with some experimentation in the use of year tutors, there is variety of practice in arrangements across faculties and schools. Notwithstanding, students in DAT meetings confirmed a high level of student support being exercised in these various forms.

109 The University has published a Student Charter that the SWS described as being much valued and which, among other matters, establishes expectations regarding student induction. Students confirmed that they received both induction to their location and its facilities and induction to their faculty and programme. Students are given both generic and tailored introductions to library and IT resources by ISD staff. Introduction to Careers and Student Support Services appears, however, not to be provided in all cases. Programme induction is the responsibility of

the Course/Subject Committee and includes introduction to staff and facilities as well as to course documentation on the programme and its constituent modules. Additionally, students are provided with course or subject handbooks.

110 The University is undertaking a number of initiatives to address the recognised issue of retention. In particular, it has been seeking to enhance the student experience of transition into HE during the first year. It has established a Progress Files, Induction, Retention and Progression Working Group, as part of a TQEF project on the introduction of PDP. The Group has within its remit the review of the Adviser of Studies role. In biosciences, the University is participating in a consortium-based initiative (STAR), which is addressing, nationally, student transition and retention in this subject area. Despite the evidence of systems in place and concern with retention, the SWS indicates some student dissatisfaction with accessibility of staff and response to email communication, but such views were not borne out by the evidence of student experience gathered through DAT meetings.

111 Research students receive the Research Studies Handbook and are provided with a cross-campus induction programme that incorporates training in generic research skills. Research is organised within a Research Graduate School in each faculty within which research supervision is provided, normally by two supervisors. Both supervisors and students undertake annual reporting. There is a comprehensive set of Research Forms designed to track the progress of students and these include both an initial (100 day) review and a final assessment. All such forms are reviewed by the Head of the Research Graduate School and are forwarded to the Chair of the RDC. Research Graduate Schools themselves are reviewed every two years. While there is some potential for variation of practice at faculty level, the framework to support and train research students and to ensure the quality of research supervision and report is very comprehensive and effective and is commended by the audit team.

112 Students on e-learning programmes have access to a specially designed CampusOne

induction package. The package, which has undergone piloting, evaluation and further development, supports students through the enrolment process and provides orientation to e-learning, including training in the use of VLE tools, study skills, self management skills, on-line searching and evaluation of internet resources and guidance on plagiarism. Access is provided to students at the earliest opportunity, as soon as they achieve 'expected to enrol' status and remains available to them in the early stages of their course, enabling them to revisit guidance and refresh skills as necessary. Students of the MSc Lifelong Learning programme confirmed the quality of this learner support package, which has been positively highlighted in a number of validations and reviews.

Personal support and guidance

113 As indicated above, the Adviser of Studies is responsible for providing personal support and guidance as well as academic guidance to students. In so doing, they are able to call upon the specialist services of the Department of Student Support Services as appropriate and as guided by the Code of Practice for Advisers of Studies. As with academic guidance, the arrangements for meetings regarding personal support and guidance are flexible and consequently there is inevitable, but appropriate, variety of practice across faculties and schools.

114 Student support services constitute the portfolio of the PVC (Student Support) in recognition of the importance of the University's support structures to achieving its Vision and Mission. The portfolio embraces the following services: Student Welfare Services, Residential Services, Sport and Recreation Services, and Catering Services. The PVC (Student Support) also has responsibility for relations with the SU, including the recently established Sports Union. SU officers confirmed the positive benefits of a constructive relationship with the University through the PVC (Student Support). SU officers acknowledged a primary identification of students with their subject area and campus,

but also indicated the ways in which the SU fostered an inclusive ethos and University-wide activity, especially through sport. The audit team formed the view of a committed and responsible SU engaged in a constructive dialogue with the University for the benefit of students. The team also noted the elite athlete entry programme and the developments around the Sports Institute of Northern Ireland as an interesting innovation.

115 Following establishment of the Department of Student Support in 2000, each service has been subject to a review and restructuring exercise. This has resulted in each service now being managed by a Head of Service and the establishment of clear line management and reporting structures. Service Heads together with the centre of service activity are variously distributed across the four campuses. Each division has developed a strategic plan and all services report to the SSC of Senate, though there remains some duplication of groups related to student issues and the area might well benefit from further development of a single focus of reporting and evaluation. Students do, however, evaluate their experience of support services at the end of their final year and the outcomes are reported to the SSC in what appears to be an effective mechanism.

116 Provision of services across the four campuses is not uniform but aims to meet the needs of students at each campus and across the University as a whole. The audit team recognised the challenge of ensuring efficient and consistent provision of student services across a multi-campus university with wide geographical distribution. At the same time it notes the perception of the SWS that services are variable and at some campuses fall short of expectation, for example access to crèche and disability services at Belfast, or that the level of some services, for example careers and financial services, are disappointing more generally. The team's overall view in the light of its evaluation of available evidence, and discussions with staff and students, was one of general satisfaction with student support. In particular, the counselling provision is much valued by students

and there is good support for international students via the International Office. Additionally, the protocols and arrangements established to assist students with disabilities appear well developed and effective and discussion with students and staff through DAT and institutional meetings confirmed a high quality of service to students with disabilities.

Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trails and thematic enquiries

Discipline audit trails

117 In each of the selected DATs, appropriate members of the audit team met staff and students to discuss the programmes, studied a sample of assessed student work, saw examples of learning resource materials, and studied annual module and programme reports and periodic school reviews relating to the programmes. Their findings in respect of the academic standards of awards are as follows.

Built environment

BSc and BEng full and part-time undergraduate programmes in Civil, Construction, Building Services and Environmental Engineering, Architectural Technology, Building and Quantity Surveying, Housing, Property and Transport and Environmental Health

Postgraduate (Pg) Certificate/Diploma/ Master's programmes in Construction and Energy Management, Environmental Health Protection, Fire Safety, Housing and Renewable Energy

118 The School of the Built Environment resides within the Faculty of Engineering, and provides a range of undergraduate, graduate and research programmes, delivered on the Jordanstown Campus. The majority of the programmes are professionally accredited, with most recent accreditation visits for undergraduate programmes taking place between 1999 and 2004. The majority of programmes also incorporate a placement leading to the bachelor qualification with Diploma in Industrial Studies.

119 The Faculty provided a DSED written for the audit with a full complement of programme specifications appended to the documentation. The DSED gave an overview of the School's provision and processes, including the broad educational aims and academic context for the formulation of learning outcomes, curricula and assessments. The key features of the teaching and learning strategies, learning resources and the processes for maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards were outlined with listings of supporting evidence.

120 The programme specifications did not explicitly refer to the relevant subject benchmark statements, the FHEQ and the relevant *Codes of practice*, but examination of the aims and skills described showed that they were aligned to these criteria. In addition, PSRB accredited courses were appropriately cross-referenced to the requirements of the relevant professional bodies.

121 Clear progression and completion data is generated for all programmes and used effectively in the annual subject monitoring process. The process involves analysis to determine issues requiring attention or for noting as good practice, followed by more focussed attention on at risk areas. Staff confirmed confidence in the quality of data, which is now more reliable than in previous years. Data presented at module level is currently used for the evaluation of all modules, whether at risk or not. Staff supported the process, as it was perceived to promote enhancement.

122 Revalidation is due in 2005-06, but the annual subject monitoring process routinely reviews external examiners reports and feedback from PSRBs. Recent external examiners' reports were positive in confirming the standards of the programmes, and evidence showed that they had been followed up appropriately. The Associate Dean ensured that procedures were followed, whereby the programme committees' responses to reports are considered by the School Board, and the Head of School verifies that issues have been

addressed. The audit team confirmed the operation of this process.

123 Student questionnaires operate at two levels. Issues arising from the module-based Assessment of Teaching: Student Questionnaire are discussed between the Head of School and module leader to ensure enhancement for the following academic session. The Course Experience Questionnaire data has fed into the annual subject monitoring process, and the audit team encourages feedback from the National Student Survey to be utilised in this manner.

124 The University's Assessment Handbook is used as a key reference in the School of the Built Environment. Staff confirmed that the use of this document had led to a wider variety of assessment procedures being used and a greater consistency in their application. Sampling of the assessed work confirmed that blind marking is used for examination scripts and that dissertations are all double-marked. However, it was not clear to the audit team what the minimum University-wide requirements are for internal moderation of assessment results. Standards confirmed by the external examiners and by the team's sampling of assessed work, are appropriate to the bachelor's and taught master's degrees awarded by the University.

125 The various industrial liaison groups associated with the built environment courses meet two or three times per year. Minutes of these meetings are attached to the annual subject monitoring reports.

126 Students confirmed the accuracy of handbook information, both printed and available on the web, the latter being particularly useful for part-time and international students. Assessment criteria, required standards and appropriate guidance were given in module handouts. However, the quality of feedback to students on their submitted work was variable with some members of staff giving timely written commentaries and others only giving a mark.

127 A range of general and specialist student support systems operates within the School. All students have an Adviser of Studies, who has formal timetabled meetings with first year

students as an extension of the induction process, but who meets on an 'as-required' basis in subsequent years. The audit team heard that this latter system operates well for part-time students. Students met by the team explained that they know how to access specialist support in respect of careers and disabilities including dyslexia. International undergraduate student support is effective with a 'buddy' mentor system and English language workshops provided by the International Office. Industrial placement support covers accessing the placement and two formal visits by academic staff to assure the quality of the learning experience. Students are aware of their relevant professional bodies through visiting lecturers and teaching staff.

128 The audit team noted the comprehensive supervision and support given by supervisors and senior research staff to research students. Research induction commences with appropriately focussed library and methodology training courses. The development of e-learning training courses giving increased accessibility to part-time students is supported.

129 Students were very positive in respect of the library and confirmed that the physical resources for their programmes were appropriate with only minor concerns expressed over remote software access limited by licensing arrangements. The annual subject monitoring process records significant issues raised by students through the SSCC and course committees and resultant actions taken. Recent concerns raised by students within SSCC meetings include coursework submission dates, specialist laboratory matters and the use of computer memory sticks.

130 Within the School, CPD both for new staff induction and for advancement of current academic staff is comprehensive. The audit team noted the uptake by staff of the training courses on e-learning, which the team confirmed is a strategic development across the University. Staff appraisal is undertaken every two years; the Head of School dealing with the staff during their probationary period. Appraisal informs the staff development needs of the

School, which are discussed annually with the SDU. Peer Observation is part of appraisal and is now this year being monitored and recorded.

131 The audit team confirmed that the quality of learning opportunities was suitable for the range of programmes of study leading to the named awards and that these were appropriately located within the FHEQ.

Computing

Coleraine: Associate Bachelor's degree (AB) in Computing; BSc Hons Computing; Undergraduate Hons Subject: Computing (Major/Main/Minor); PgDip/MSc Telecommunications and Internet Systems

Jordanstown: AB Computing Science; BSc Hons Computing and Information Systems (with Fermanagh College); BSc Hons Computing Science; BSc Hons Information and Communication Technologies; BSc Hons Interactive Multimedia Design; BSc/BSc Hons Mathematics with Computing; BEng Hons Software Engineering; MSc e-Learning: Interactive Teaching Technologies; PgCert/Dip/MSc Computing and Information Systems; PgDip/MSc Informatics; PgCert/Dip/MSc Web Information Systems

Magee: Integrated Foundation Year (with Outcentre NWIFHE); BSc Hons Computer Science; Undergraduate Hons Subject: Computing (Major/Main/Minor); BEng Hons Electronics and Computer Systems; PgCert/Dip/MSc Computing and Information Systems; PgCert/Dip/MSc Computing and (Design, International Business/Information System Management/Intelligent Systems)

132 The subject of computing spans three Schools: the School of Computing and Mathematics (Jordanstown), the School of Computing and Information Engineering (Coleraine) and the School of Computing and Intelligent Systems (Magee). Computing has had provision on these three campuses since the University was formed in 1984. The Schools are in the Faculty of Engineering and work collaboratively in defining, operating, and maintaining the Computing programmes across the University.

Computer Science is also one of the Research Institutes recently formed by the University.

133 The DSED was produced by the Schools following extensive internal review and consultation among staff. Programme specifications for all courses were appended. The audit team was impressed by the quality and extent of the work that been put in to preparation for the DAT, and the commitment of the staff across the Schools.

134 Each programme is defined by learning outcomes at various levels within the FHEQ and references the *Subject benchmark statement* for computing. Information on programmes, modules, and learning outcomes is provided to students in the Student Handbook, available on the web and on CD, and in discussions with the audit team students confirmed the quality and availability of information provided by the Schools. Programme development teams ensure that British Computer Society (BCS) requirements are met and the most recent BCS accreditation visit took place in October 2002. The BCS Panel was pleased with the overall quality assurance processes operating consistently across the Schools. The Panel commended the Faculty on the staff/student ratio which had been maintained since the last visit and also for the apparent involvement of Faculty staff with the Society and, in particular, collaboration with the Belfast Branch. The outcome of the visit was successful with six programmes being granted full exemption and a further six granted exemption. The MSc in Computing and Design was judged to fall outside the exemption rules of the Society. The report also identified some areas for further consideration including greater involvement from the industrial members of the Industrial Liaison Panel in the content of the courses, improvement of less demanding examination papers, and more timely appointment of external examiners. The audit team confirmed that the Faculty is addressing these matters.

135 Annual subject monitoring report provided evidence that good use is made of available data to monitor progression, retention and completion. The DSED stated that the

Faculty recognised that year one for intermediate and honours level programmes presented some concerns in retention and progression and the annual subject monitoring for 2002-03 led to a number of measures being taken to address this. For staff there were Faculty conferences, and courses from the SDU on teaching and assessment issues and retention. In order to assist the student learning experience, the staff implemented modifications to the syllabus, small group tutorials (less than 12 students), rapid response lecture attendance monitoring and text messaging to the students, focused studies advice, enhanced and extended timely student induction, and revision classes prior to examination resits in August. Staff and students confirmed that text messaging had been very well received by the students as a proactive mechanism for seeking to provide them with support and help at the point of need.

136 The Faculty had its own assessment strategy aligned with that of the University and the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*. External examiners confirm the standards of student achievement and samples of assessed work reviewed by the audit team were consistent with the programme specifications. The standard of student achievement is appropriate to the title of the awards and their location within the FHEQ. External examiners' reports are received, responded to and followed up appropriately. However, external examiners do have the authority to viva voce selected students and propose changes to individual marks. It was the team's view that it would be desirable for the University to clarify, in formal documentation, the extent and limits of external examiners' authority to moderate the marks of individual students to ensure fairness to all students.

137 Students and staff make good use of the University's VLE for dissemination and assessment. Although one laboratory in Jordanstown ran an old version of Windows, plans were in process for its upgrade and the students considered this was satisfactory. Students met by the audit team confirmed that learning resources are satisfactory and that staff

are very approachable and helpful, and stated that this contributed significantly to a positive student learning experience. Students were also very pleased with the timely response of the staff to issues they had raised informally, and formally via questionnaires and SSCCs. The team concluded that the quality of the learning opportunities is suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Education

PgDip/MSc in Lifelong Learning (by distance learning); PgDip/MSc in Education with five of eight available pathways being offered at the time of the audit: Careers Education and Guidance; Education and Contemporary Society; Education Management; Learning and Teaching; and Information and Communication Technology (by distance learning)

138 Together with the three pathways that were currently not on offer: Education for International Development, Local and Global Citizenship; Inclusive and Special Education; and Technology Education, these programmes constitute the continuing professional development provision of the School of Education and are made available, differentially, across the Coleraine, Jordanstown and Magee campuses and in some cases at off-campus centres. Plans are under consideration to develop a new pathway from elements of Education for International Development (from which a tailored programme for Sri Lankan students was run in 2002-4) and of Education and Contemporary Society, which has small numbers of students. The distance-learning courses are fully on-line e-learning programmes. Thus these programmes, in design and delivery, extend provision throughout Northern Ireland for the continuing development needs of professionals in education and related sectors.

139 This group of programmes forms a single revalidation unit within the University. The PgDip/MSc Education was revalidated in 2001, while the PgDip/MSC Lifelong Learning was approved in 2001 for a first intake in October of that year. The DSED was specially prepared

for the audit, but was based on the outcomes of these processes. Programme specifications were provided. Although these do not refer explicitly to the Academic Infrastructure, they are approved through the validation/revalidation process in conformity with the University awards framework and procedures which are, respectively, compliant with the FHEQ and the *Code of practice*.

140 Statistical data provided evidence of satisfactory progression and completion rates. Staff confirmed to the audit team that the data now made available for monitoring quality and standards had improved considerably since the last institutional audit. The principal vehicle for monitoring and review was confirmed to be the annual subject monitoring process undertaken in accord with the Quality Management Framework as outlined in the main body of this report. The Course Director's report on each programme and its constituent modules is scrutinised by the Course Committee and the Head of School prior to incorporation into School reports submitted to the Faculty and University QAEC. Likewise, responses to external examiner reports, which constitute an element of the annual subject monitoring procedure, are undertaken by the Course Director in consultation with the Course Committee and under the guidance of the Head of School. Recent reports seen by the team, with one exception, were generally very positive and supportive, while the response process demonstrated appropriate reply within a reasonable timeframe. The exception was the outcome of a difference of procedural expectation between the external examiner and the University.

141 The CPD programmes in education are delivered within a framework of University and Faculty Teaching and Learning strategies. Teaching staff met by the audit team considered that the Faculty strategy, to which they had contributed, provided sufficient flexibility for them to cultivate a high quality, collaborative approach to teaching and to the facilitation of learning appropriate to a community of practitioners of which both they and the students formed part. Staff valued the institutional

Assessment Handbook which they considered aided consistency and the sharing of innovation and good practice, for example, with reference to the criteria for dissertation marking. Assessment practice is sensitive to the continuing professional development needs of students and in line with the *Code of practice.* The overall approach to teaching, learning and assessment provided evidence of an embedded quality culture. Students met by the team praised, in particular, the transparency of the assessment process and the clarity of assessment expectations, communicated via assessment and grade criteria contained within student course handbooks.

142 Samples of assessed work reviewed by the audit team indicated that assessment matched learning outcomes identified in programme specifications. External examiner reports generally confirmed that the standards set and levels of student achievement attained were comparable with national practice and merited the levels and titles of awards conferred. The PgDip/MSc Lifelong Learning is also recognised as having embedded and met the professional standards of the Royal College of Nursing resulting in accreditation as Professional Facilitator of Learning and Development.

143 Both staff and students confirmed to the audit team the appropriateness and sufficiency of resources required to deliver and undertake the designated programmes. The team saw evidence that staff are well qualified and programmes are informed by staff research and by latest developments in the rapidly-changing world of education. While curriculum development obviously benefited from staff engagement with the world of education, the ways in which contact with employers and managers in education might benefit subject development could be maximised and rendered more visible. Subject team development might also benefit from the application of a more developed institution-wide staff appraisal system.

144 Students were appreciative of the quality of teaching and the level of care, also indicating that access to learning materials was satisfactory. The quality of the innovative distance-learning programme for the PgDip/MSc in Lifelong

Learning was identified as especially high and the value of the on-line induction and learner support package within it was recognised. The development of this programme had obviously benefited form the institution's systematic approach to the development and implementation of on-line e-learning courses. All students met by the audit team valued the access to electronic materials via ATHENS. There was some evidence that the blended learning format of the PgDip/MSc Education and Contemporary Society, which has a small number of students distributed between the Coleraine, Jordanstown and Magee campuses gave rise to more issues, such as students having to engage in a significant amount of video-conferencing, sometimes without technical support available. However, students acknowledged that the programme format had been modified for the future in order to address such matters. Provision for the induction, support, training and supervision of research students was comprehensive and well structured in line with the team's perception of such arrangements across the institution.

145 Resourcing, including learning resources, for programmes is first assured through the validation and re-validation procedures, which require detailed documentation of resource provision. Subsequent monitoring occurs through a variety of means. Students provide feedback through a number of formal mechanisms, including module evaluation (even though no longer an essential requirement) and course experience questionnaire (in the final year of study) and through SSCC meetings. At the same time, the audit team was advised that with students being part-time and widely distributed much feedback and resolution of issues occurred through informal means. Consequently, the issues brought to consultative meetings tended to be those beyond the immediate resolution of individual staff members. Examples included some dissatisfaction with the library experience at Magee, difficulties with on-line registration for e-learning programmes, and concern over the downgrading of provisional marks by one external examiner. The team was, however,

able to ascertain that these were issues that were subject to address and resolution by both School staff and other relevant University staff.

146 Despite minor and occasional limitations of this nature, the audit team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities in the CPD education programmes is suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards. Students are very satisfied with the quality of provision and with the way in which the content and delivery formats of these programmes are meeting their professional development needs and enhancing their personal and career development. The performance of students is deemed appropriate by external examiners for the standard and level of the designated awards with reference to the FHEQ and this is confirmed by the scrutiny of the team.

Environmental studies

Associate Bachelors (AB) degree in Environmental Studies; BSc (Hons) programmes in Environmental Sciences (full-time and sandwich modes, the latter with either a Diploma in Industrial Studies or in Area Studies). PgDip/MSc programmes in Environmental Toxicology and Pollution Monitoring

147 The scope of the DAT comprised provision in the School of Environmental Sciences. The PgDip/MSc in Environmental Toxicology and Pollution Monitoring was representative of a suite of postgraduate courses, all of which are available in part-time and distance learning modes, with only the PgDip/MSc in Geographic Information Systems additionally offered on a full-time basis.

148 The DSED was specially written for the audit and programme specifications were provided in each case that clearly matched to the FHEQ. They displayed appropriate learning outcomes linked to teaching, learning and assessment strategies with course descriptions aligned to the subject benchmark statement. Programme structure and content are now being informed by an External Advisory Panel of environmental science professionals. The audit team noted the School's intention to engage even more strongly with the Panel in future and to feed the outcomes into the

annual subject monitoring process and considered that this was a positive development. The team also concurred with the School's view of the beneficial effect of it engaging in teaching and learning informed by its strong research culture. Students met by the team clearly valued this aspect of their education.

149 Examination of statistical data provided during the audit visit established that both the BSc (Hons) and PgDip/MSc courses had good progression and completion rates. The AB course is relatively new and caters for those students with non-standard academic backgrounds, allowing those who succeed to progress to the BSc (Hons) degree. The success rate of the first cohort of AB students was not high, but a number of steps have been taken to address this and these have resulted in much improved performance by more recent students. The School is engaged in a continuous process of seeking improvement in progression and completion for all programmes. To this end they have taken a number of steps to further support students. There is a strong Adviser of Studies scheme linked to student PDP, attendance monitoring in the AB course and the first year of the BSc (Hons) course and a senior student-led tutorial scheme involving final year students supporting the learning of those in the first year. Although it is too early to judge the success of attendance monitoring and the senior student tutors, the audit team noted the appreciation of students for the efforts being made to support their learning.

150 The audit team found the procedures used for the approval and revalidation of programmes to be sound and in line with University requirements. Use is made of external input from academia and, more occasionally, from industry, as well as from staff in other schools. The School also pays great attention to the annual subject monitoring process, fully following University requirements. The team considered that approval, revalidation and the annual subject monitoring process ensured a rigorous scrutiny of the standards and quality of programmes and their relevance to students and employers.

151 The audit team studied external examiners' reports, all of which expressed satisfaction with the standards achieved by the students and the quality of the courses they had followed. The Head of School and the appropriate course committee consider the reports. Points raised by external examiners are responded to and action is taken where appropriate. This also forms part of the annual subject monitoring process and the team was satisfied that matters were dealt with in a timely manner.

152 The School has produced an Assessment Strategy, which is in line with the approach in the University's Assessment Handbook and the relevant section of the *Code of practice*. The audit team found students to be fully aware of assessment requirements and to value the rapid feedback they received on their work.

153 The audit team reviewed a range of assessed work by AB, BSc (Hons) and postgraduate students and was satisfied that the nature of the tasks and the standard of student achievement were appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location in the FHEQ. Assessment methods were varied and appropriate to the discipline with considerable emphasis being placed on the assessment of fieldwork.

154 The students met by the audit team considered the handbooks, module guides and other information provided by the School to be informative. They particularly appreciated much of this being available on-line. They also valued the efforts being made to aid their learning through use of the VLE. The team found that there was good support for those postgraduate students following distance-learning programmes. There are both on-line induction and learner support packages.

155 The School manages resources effectively. Students were appreciative of the laboratory, library and computing facilities available to them and particularly valued the School's Open Resource Centre providing 24-hour access, and the range of on-line journals and other electronic resources which they could access. A range of relevant field courses provides a well supervised learning experience. These

enhanced both their subject studies and the acquisition of wider skills. Support for research students was particularly noteworthy, both in terms of supervision of their research projects and the range of training courses, both related to development of their research capabilities and their roles as teachers and demonstrators. Staffing resources were adequate and most staff are engaged in research. The School operates a comprehensive peer observation scheme based mainly on fieldwork teaching, but the audit team formed the view that staff appraisal was in need of enhancement. Recently, the School has concentrated its appraisal on staff's research performance and the audit learnt that appraisal of staff who are not research active might only occur at four to five year intervals.

156 The audit team was able to examine student feedback questionnaires. These provide useful information to both individual teachers and the School as a whole. Questionnaire returns are analysed before the end of each module, allowing feedback to students on outcomes and actions before the module is completed. The responses to the University-level Course Experience Questionnaire are disaggregated to course level giving the School further information in responding to students' concerns. The SSCC was viewed by both students and staff as being highly effective. Students were able to provide the team with examples of improvements to their learning experience arising from both questionnaire responses and issues raised at the SSCC. Students also praised the approachability of staff and the inclusive and supportive atmosphere within the School. Staff in the School make determined efforts to respond to the concerns of those engaged in distance learning. Help is available from lecturers and specially trained e-tutors. The success of this support and its role in tackling possible feelings of isolation is much appreciated by these students. The team considered the overall standard of pastoral care for students to be high.

157 The audit team was satisfied that the standard of student achievement in the programmes covered by the DAT is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location

within the FHEQ and that the quality of the learning opportunities is suitable for the programmes of study in environmental studies leading to the named awards.

Social policy and administration

BSc (Hons) programmes in Social Policy; Criminology and Criminal Justice; and Health and Social Care Policy based on the Jordanstown and Magee campuses. A postgraduate distance-learning programme in Social Research Skills will recruit from September 2005

158 The subject is based in the School of Policy Studies, which is one of the six Schools in the Faculty of Social Sciences. Three of the undergraduate programmes will have their first graduates in 2005. The subject revalidation document and report of 2003, and the course validation document and evaluation report for the new postgraduate course, accompanied the DSED, which was specially written for the audit.

159 Programme specifications are available for all courses and, although they do not make explicit reference to the FHEQ or subject benchmarks, the subject revalidation document sets out how the course reflects relevant subject benchmark statements and is aligned with the FHEQ. This was borne out by an examination of the aims and intended learning outcomes for each course. Several of the courses also include work experience or placements, and particular attention has been given to the *Code of practice, Section 9: Placement learning*. Students indicated an awareness of programme specifications through their availability on-line and in programme handbooks. The audit team noted the careful mapping of curricula against learning outcomes for subject related qualities of knowledge and understanding, intellectual qualities and professional/practical and transferable skills.

160 Data on applications, enrolments, progression, retention and achievement are made available to the School for individual modules and programmes. Staff acknowledged that the quality of data had improved in recent years, and there is an ongoing dialogue to refine accuracy and validity. The School took part in

the pilot of the module monitoring initiative in the second semester of 2003-04, where modules with relatively high failure rates were identified for further investigation. The annual subject monitoring report documented this investigation and noted that overall staff involved in the pilot felt that there was 'still a place for qualitative as well as quantitative data'. In the view of the audit team, the use of statistical data at module, programme and subject level is helping to further embed the quality culture within the School and the Faculty.

161 The development of a more risk-based approach to annual monitoring was seen by the subject staff, as designed to obtain full staff engagement in the whole process. At Faculty level the process begins with briefings for staff, including a very useful published summary of the process and what is required at each stage, and culminates in an annual 'best practice' day to which all Faculty staff are invited. The annual subject monitoring report includes careful analysis of a range of statistical indicators, reflection on the impact of new initiatives to deal with retention, as well as summaries of issues raised by students and external examiners. It concludes with an action plan and a 'good practice table'. The audit team noted, however, that it did not include a section on feedback from employers and the subject may wish to consider how this can be captured for the future. A copy of the full report is sent to all staff in the School for the purposes of dissemination. The DSED demonstrated that issues arising from course approval, revalidation and annual monitoring are fully addressed and documented. Staff acknowledged that the process is time-consuming, but recognise the benefits in terms of the impact on improving the student experience. It was clear to the team that annual monitoring in the subject is well managed, and that there is a strong commitment to ensuring the process brings direct benefits to the subject and students.

162 The reports of external examiners for the undergraduate programmes expressed positive views about the standards set for the awards, about the achievement of students and the conduct of Boards of Examiners. They also made a number of suggestions regarding assessment strategies for some individual modules, and procedural matters about sample size and content. It was clear from the DSED that such recommendations are readily addressed. Course directors in consultation with the Head of School and the course committee respond to the report. Responses to external examiners are incorporated into the annual subject monitoring report, and commendations and any proposed actions are also recorded on a Faculty pro forma and incorporated into the Faculty annual monitoring report.

163 Subject staff expressed the view that the University's Assessment Handbook was a useful guide and source of advice on good practice, especially for new members of staff. The Faculty has recently reviewed its own assessment strategy, noting that although the University does not have a standard requirement for moderation 'the Faculty would benefit from having some clarity on minimum standards and good practice'. It appeared to the audit team that the subject would benefit from such clarity. The team noted that external examiners had commented on the need for evidence of double marking to be made explicit, and also that the evidence of moderation for the dissertation module suggested some confusion as to whether blind double-marking or second marking was in operation. The team was also informed that external examiners could adjust or adjudicate on individual marks. The team noted that a University audit on the moderation of assessed work and the provision of feedback to students was currently being carried out, and the University may wish to consider providing more explicit guidance on moderation of assessed work.

164 The audit team reviewed examples of students' assessed work from a sample of modules. These examples included work demonstrating achievement across the range of marks. The team noted the involvement of the Northern Ireland Science Shop, which links interested staff and students with community based research requests, in dissertations across all

programmes, as a particularly valuable opportunity for students. The team considered that levels of achievement seen in the assessed work were appropriate to the relevant awards and their location in the FHEQ. Students who met with the team stated that course handbooks gave clear information on assessment criteria and standards, and that they received prompt and detailed feedback on assignments via assessment coversheets, and were able to request more detailed oral comment where necessary. The team also saw some examples of good quality course and module guides, which detailed information about learning outcomes, reading and assessment tasks.

165 The DSED stated that subject resources were 'checked by validation and revalidation panels and cited as 'impressive''. Staff are well qualified and a range of research initiatives within the subject contribute to student learning. There is good provision and take up of staff development and almost all staff have completed VLE training, although appraisal of staff takes place only biennially. In relation to learning resources students indicated some local difficulties with the Learning Resources Centre at the Magee campus, in relation to noise and library stock availability. In response they made good use of inter-campus loan facility and ATHENS accounts for accessing electronic journals. The audit team noted that stock from the Coleraine campus would be moved to Magee in due course. Opening hours were regarded as less satisfactory for part-time students who would make more use of weekend opening. IT provision was regarded as satisfactory. The team noted that students had opportunities to make known concerns about resource provision via SSCCs.

166 Student representatives attend SSCC meetings once each semester. The minutes of these meetings showed that a range of issues are discussed, and students were able to cite a number of issues, for example relating to assessment deadlines and weighting of the dissertation, where suggestions had been accommodated. Students who met with the audit team commented that they were aware that training for student representatives is

available, but information about such opportunities did not appear to be well publicised. Students indicated that feedback is also obtained via end of module questionnaires using a standard form. Students were generally satisfied with the opportunities to participate in quality management, and appreciated the accessibility of staff. The team formed the view that staff responded readily to student concerns. Overall, the team found the quality of learning opportunities to be suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Section 4: The audit investigations: published information

The students' experience of published information and other information available to them

167 The University publishes three prospectuses: for full-time undergraduate courses, for postgraduate and part-time courses and for research opportunities. Information is also available on the website. Responsibility for these documents rests with the Public Affairs Department and the Access and Educational Partnerships Unit. These work with the University's faculties and support departments to ensure continued accuracy of information, a task that is facilitated by a central programme database. This is the definitive single source of information on programmes for on-line and printed prospectuses and promotional materials. Increasing use is being made of document management software to properly review versioning and to ascribe editorial changes to named individuals, thereby maintaining an auditable trail. Use of the central programme database has also allowed the University to move away from costly and potentially inaccurate leaflets for individual programmes to a 'print on demand' service that enables users to download information via their PCs. This system is also used by the Academic Registry in responding to individual programme and prospectus enquiries.

168 The University has been very proactive in the development and management of its website and in 2003 it won both a Higher Education Information Services Trust award for the Best Website for Marketing and a BritishTelecom Goldeneye award for the Best Public Sector Website in Northern Ireland. The growth of the website to more than 100,000 pages in 2004, raises issues concerning the quality and accuracy of the information. This is also the responsibility of the Public Affairs Department, working with both faculties and departments. There is a clear policy on web development aimed at ensuring the quality and accuracy of information.

169 The website, life@uu.com has been developed as a marketing tool to present a credible yet authoritative source of information on the University of Ulster student experience, to use as a platform for marketing to prospective students and to act as a portal to the University's website, from which it is quite distinct. The content is a mixture of recast corporate information and student comment, the latter being gathered from interviews with current students. The overall ethos of the site is claimed to be one of 'up-beat honesty', a view with which the audit team concurred. A promotional magazine, *On Course*, is also produced in hard copy.

170 Students are provided with appropriate University-level handbooks: the University Student Handbook; the International Student Handbook; and the Research Studies Handbook. The audit team found these to be comprehensive and useful documents. Students also receive Course/Subject Handbooks and module guides and, during the DATs, student groups told the team that they found these helpful. They also valued efforts to make these increasingly available electronically. The team found these documents to be well presented and user-friendly.

171 The SWS reported that a large percentage of students sampled were more than content with the accuracy and clarity of the information contained in the prospectuses and the Student Handbooks. Where criticisms were voiced, for example, making prospective students aware of the limitations to facilities on the Belfast campus during major refurbishments, the University has successfully addressed the issues. The SWS also reported that the majority of students were complimentary about the course and module information they received, although there is some concern over the variability of this between different courses and modules and a desire from current SU officers to see a set of threshold requirements established by the University. The officers also viewed the University website and life@uu.com very favourably. There was some concern over some school websites in the SWS, with a need for more regular updating of content.

172 The University is following QAA Guidelines for programme specifications and a standard template has been integrated into the programme approval and revalidation processes. The QAEC undertook a themed audit of programme specifications in 2003-04, the outcome of which set a deadline of June 2004 for their completion, with the exception of programmes being revalidated in semester 1 of 2004-05. To date, about 90 per cent of the programme specifications are now available electronically. Overall, the information provided to students appeared to be appropriate and effective and no problem areas were identified.

Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information

173 The University reported to the audit team on its progress towards meeting the requirements of the HEFCE document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*. External examiners reports for undergraduate courses are now publicly available on the HERO website and those for postgraduate courses were to be available by May 2005. The University's Teaching and Learning Strategy and its document on Employer Needs and Trends are also available on HERO. There is a link from HERO to the University's website and this provides access to programme specifications and other relevant course information. Responsibility for the accuracy of

qualitative information lies with the Academic Office of the University. University responses to external examiners' reports, where necessary, are authorised by the PVC (Teaching and Learning) and the summary revalidation report by the Chair of the course approval or revalidation panel concerned. Overall, the team concluded that reliance could be placed on the accuracy of the University's published information.

Findings

Findings

174 An institutional audit of the University of Ulster (the University) was undertaken during the week 25 to 29 April 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility as a UK degree-awarding body. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Standing Conference of Principals and Universities UK, five discipline audit trails (DATs) were selected for scrutiny at the level of an academic discipline. This section of the report of the audit summarises the findings of the audit. It concludes by identifying features of good practice that emerged from the audit and recommendations to the University for enhancing current practice.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

175 A feature of the University's approach to the oversight of the quality and standards of its taught provision is the deliberate separation, at management and governance levels of responsibility for the assurance of standards and management of quality. At institutional level, responsibility for standards is assigned at executive level to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (PVC) (Teaching and Learning), and at committee level to the Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC). Responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement is assigned to the PVC (Quality Assurance and Enhancement) and to the Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (QAEC). This delineation between quality and standards is also reflected in the associated quality assurance procedures that apply at programme level. Programme approval and revalidation is designed primarily to assure that key standards appropriate to the programmes are met or are likely to be met, while annual monitoring focuses on monitoring and enhancing quality.

176 These arrangements have remained largely unchanged since the previous audit. The University stated, in the self-evaluation document (SED), that 'these continued to work effectively to ensure appropriate rigour in the overview of taught provision', drawing on the outcomes of recent subject reviews and a developmental engagement to justify this opinion.

177 The programme approval process consists of two stages; an initial process of planning approval, followed by an evaluation of the detailed course proposals. The Course Approval Sub-Committee (CASC) of TLC oversees the process. The initial planning approval process considers resource issues, evidence of demand and the appropriateness of the proposals within the context of the University's mission and strategy. Following planning approval, the course proposal is developed fully in terms of standard University guidance and submitted for scrutiny by an evaluation panel which consists of at least two external subject specialists. Guidance, which includes details of internal University standards and subject benchmark information, is provided to panel members in order to ensure consistency of implementation. The audit team noted that this guidance is updated regularly, the most recent being during the current session to take account of increased emphasis on student learning, employability, personal development planning, entrepreneurial skills and preparation for further study.

178 All programmes are re-approved on a five year cycle, with cognate groupings of programmes considered together, as opposed to on an individual programme basis. The process and purpose is similar to evaluation and is concerned with the reaffirmation of standards for programmes and does not replicate functions carried out through annual monitoring. The most recent annual subject monitoring report is provided simply by way of context, along with the last two years' external examiner reports. The revalidation event is similar to course approval, although the panel, which includes external members, only meets with course directors and module coordinators. The University undertook a recent evaluation of the effectiveness of the revalidation process and as a result of this a small number of adjustments were made.

179 It was evident to the audit team that CASC maintained a comprehensive and effective overview of the programme approval and revalidation processes which, in turn, were also deemed appropriate and rigorous.

180 The University has a wide range of programmes with professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) accreditation. Where possible, revalidation/accreditation arrangements are undertaken jointly. In the period since the last review, the University has critically reviewed the robustness of its arrangements for maintaining good PSRB liaison and the extent to which PSRB reports are given consistent and effective consideration at all levels within the institution. In order to address this, a Protocol for the Management of Professional and Statutory Body Relationships was introduced. This has subsequently been evaluated, and further enhancements introduced. In particular in areas where accreditation may be deemed at risk, University intervention in the form of additional support is proactively provided.

181 Annual monitoring is conducted at subject and module level, with faculties being afforded a degree of flexibility in the implementation to take account of local priorities and circumstances. This is illustrated within annual subject monitoring, where faculties determine the review format and detail of programme level reporting, while the University stipulates the areas to be addressed, standard data sets to be reviewed, and the core annual institutional objectives to be discussed and reported on.

182 The faculty and annual subject monitoring reports are reviewed at a specially constituted subgroup of QAEC. A report is produced on the effectiveness of annual monitoring at faculty, subject and institutional level, good practice identified and plans for dissemination, and recommendations on general issues for University level consideration. This process was effective in highlighting some deficiencies in the early implementation of the annual subject monitoring procedures and has resulted in the adoption of a more risk-based approach, using quantitative as well as qualitative data to focus attention and make more efficient use of both time and

resource. The audit team also saw evidence that further enhancements identified by the University were in the process of being implemented.

183 During the current session, the University has extended the risk-based monitoring approach to module monitoring, following an initial pilot and evaluation within two of the faculties. This approach requires heads of school to identify modules that are at risk based on statistical evidence. These modules are then subject to detailed scrutiny and the production of an action plan.

184 The audit team considered that the developments which the University has made to its annual monitoring procedures are appropriate and formed the view that the evolutionary and consultative approach adopted to these changes has engendered staff ownership of, and commitment to, annual monitoring. Considerable effort and resources are being invested in annual monitoring at both faculty and institutional level and this will need to be continuously reviewed against the demonstrable benefits for quality enhancement. The University acknowledged, in the SED, that the separation of standards assurance and quality management was resulting in 'some inefficiencies and duplication of effort'. The team saw evidence of this at faculty level, with the same items being considered by both faculty TLC and QAEC. The division of responsibility is currently being reconsidered at University level, along with a review of PVC portfolios. It is the view of the team that this review is timely.

185 Students' views on the quality of their learning experience are obtained through a variety of formal mechanisms, including representation on committees at module, subject, course and faculty level and through questionnaires. Following the recommendation from the 2001 audit, the University embarked on a programme to revise and enhance the range of mechanisms to receive and utilise student feedback. This work is still ongoing but, to date, has identified the need to exploit communication and information technologies to facilitate the engagement of part-time and distance learning students in staff/student

consultative committees (SSCCs) and to more effectively feed back information to students on actions taken against issues raised. An on-line Student Satisfaction Survey has also been developed and piloted and is currently being evaluated following full implementation.

186   Comments made within the students' written submission (SWS) raised initial concerns with the audit team with regard to the effectiveness of monitoring student views at institutional level. However, subsequent meetings with representatives responsible for preparing the SWS, senior staff and students met during DATs, largely assuaged these fears. Students generally confirmed their satisfaction with the responsiveness to issues raised at programme level, illustrating this with specific examples. They also stressed the value that they attach to informal communication with staff and the effectiveness of this in the resolution of issues.

187   The University has used some form of questionnaire-based graduate survey since 1995 to ascertain graduate perceptions of their overall experience at the University. This was revised following the previous audit, but its effectiveness has been undermined by the relatively low response rates. The University has decided to cease this form of survey when the National Student Survey is fully implemented.

188   As a result of the vocational/professional nature of a significant proportion of the University's courses, there are high levels of ongoing engagement with employers. This is achieved through a variety of mechanisms including placements, employer liaison groups and through employer participation as external members of approval/accreditation panels. The positive impact of these interactions on course/subject development was clearly evidenced through some of the DATs. The audit team did, however, form the view that the University could do more to promote and realise the benefits of these employer engagements to inform subject and programme developments.

189   There are currently 18 courses delivered fully on-line through the University's virtual campus, CampusOne, with further expansion of course provision planned. The principles and

procedures associated with the assurance of quality of distributed e-learning provision incorporates those for on-campus provision, but are extended to take cognisance of the relevant sections of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA. This is encapsulated within the Framework for e-Learning Standards and through guidance provided to Schools by the Institute of Lifelong Learning. The audit team considered that the emphasis given by the University to the assurance of quality in the development and implementation of its distributed e-learning provision was thorough and rigorous.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

190   The University has well-developed processes and procedures for the assurance of the internal and external comparability of the standards of its awards. These are supplemented by University-wide regulations, an awards framework, Codes of Practice and guidelines designed to ensure consistency of practice. A recent and significant development has been the production of an Assessment Handbook that provides good practice guidelines. While acknowledging the overall contribution this development makes to the enhancement of the security of standards, the audit team did, however, form the view that further clarification would be desirable in respect of the University's minimum requirements for internal moderation of assessment results in order to ensure appropriate consistency of practice across the University.

191   Boards of Examiners, which include external examiners, assume operational responsibility for standards, including recommendations for the progression of, and awards to, students. The appointment, induction and roles of external examiners are detailed in the University's comprehensive External Examiner Handbook, which has been updated regularly to reflect both internal and external benchmarks and Codes of Practice. In the course of the audit, the team identified an area of practice that would benefit from greater clarity within this

Handbook, in order to ensure fairness to all students. This related to clarifying the extent and limits of external examiners' authority to moderate the marks of individual students.

192 External examiners' reports are a key component in the University's quality assurance procedures and the audit team was able to confirm that these were being effectively analysed and responded to at both programme and University level.

193 A range of statistical data relating to student performance and achievement at programme level is provided centrally to inform the annual subject monitoring process. Comparable data for the previous three years allows for trend analyses to be undertaken. High-level summaries and relevant external benchmark data are used to inform University-level analyses. Statistical data is also produced to inform the 'at risk' approach now being adopted within module monitoring. The audit team was able to confirm that the effectiveness of the use of statistical data within the annual monitoring processes was improving as a result of staff having increasing confidence in the reliability of the data provided. The University has recognised the need to replace its current management information system, in order to enhance the utility and reliability of data available to both its monitoring and decision-making processes. The team would endorse this decision.

194 The audit team concluded that the University's processes and procedures for the assurance of standards were sufficiently robust to support a judgement of broad confidence in the effectiveness of the University's present, and likely future management of the standards of its awards.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

195 Given its multi-campus organisation and geographically dispersed location, the University faces particular challenges in providing comparability of provision of learning resources and student support services.

196 The Planning Committee has primary responsibility for ensuring the parallel development of the University's academic provision and of the learning resources to support this. It is supported operationally in the achievement of this by the Departments of Information Services and Physical Resources. The operation of the Committee is guided generally by the University's Teaching and Learning Strategy, while specific resourcing issues are highlighted through the programme approval and annual monitoring processes. The University was able to evidence a number of recent and planned developments that confirm its strong commitment to the enhancement of its learning resource provision. The most significant of these relate to the development of campus-based integrated learning resource centres that support the University's strategy for the development of independent learning. The SWS identified some areas where provision appeared to fall below student expectation. The audit team was, however, reassured that the University had plans to address these.

197 Every student on a taught programme is assigned an Adviser of Studies, who provides academic guidance and acts in a general advisory and pastoral capacity. The Code of Practice for Advisers of Studies provides broad guidance on the role, while permitting flexibility of implementation across Schools and Faculties. Students met during the audit confirmed that a variety of practices operate, but all endorsed the high level of support provided by Advisers of Studies. The Advisers, or students themselves, also have recourse to the specialist services within the Student Support Department, which includes student welfare, residential, sport and recreation and catering services. The SWS highlighted concerns about the provision of some of the support services at certain campuses. Discussions with students in DAT meetings, however, confirmed general satisfaction with student support services and, in particular, praised the counselling provision, support for international students, and the assistance for students with disabilities.

198 Students confirmed that they receive a comprehensive induction, both to their location and its facilities and to their faculty and programme. The audit team particularly noted the specialist induction programme developed

for students on e-learning programmes as being very helpful. This supports students through the enrolment process and provides orientation to e-learning, including training in the use of virtual learning environment tools, study skills, self-management skills, on-line searching and evaluation of internet resources and guidance on plagiarism.

199 Another aspect of commendable practice identified by the audit team was the comprehensive provision of support, training and supervision of research students and the central role played in this by the Research Graduate Schools. The University is currently undertaking a number of initiatives to enhance student retention. These are focused particularly on the transition into higher education and the first year experience. An evaluation of the effectiveness of these initiatives had not been completed at the time of the audit visit.

200 The audit team considered that the University-wide staff development activity was very effective. The Staff Development Unit has been proactive in the development and coordination of an extensive range of staff development opportunities for academic and academic-related staff that addresses University-wide priorities, local needs and external developments in the sector. The University has recently introduced a Professional Development Framework for staff with a teaching role and this encompasses a range of induction and development activities. This is available in the form of a range of flexibly delivered accredited modules that also meet the continuing professional development requirements of the Higher Education Academy.

201 The University is currently reviewing its Peer Observation Scheme. At present, this is used to support local staff development and is viewed as an enhancement tool, with the outcomes remaining confidential between the observer and the observed.

202 The SED claimed that appraisal is well established as a process for the development of staff, particularly academics. However, the audit team found that the scheme is not mandatory and hence not universally implemented. The University is currently reviewing the appraisal scheme and examining potential links of appraisal to reward. The team formed the view that there is a lack of clarity about the University's intended purpose for an appraisal scheme and encourages the University to expedite the resolution of this and to establish appropriate procedures for a consistent and effective implementation across the University.

Outcomes of discipline audit trails

Built Environment

BSc and BEng full and part-time undergraduate programmes in Civil, Construction, Building Services and Environmental Engineering, Architectural Technology, Building and Quantity Surveying, Housing, Property and Transport and Environmental Health

Postgraduate (PG) Certificate/Diploma/ Master's programmes in Construction and Energy Management, Environmental Health Protection, Fire Safety, Housing and Renewable Energy

203 Undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are defined appropriately with specifications incorporating relevant educational aims and learning outcomes. Where programmes have professional accreditation the appropriate criteria are incorporated into the specification. Student evaluation of their programmes is very positive. Staff are seen as accessible and responsive to student issues arising through the various channels of communication. Annual subject monitoring is confirmed as an appropriate mechanism for the assurance of quality and standards and for ensuring continued programme development underpinned by a strong research profile. From a study of the assessed work, and from discussions with staff and students, the audit team find that the standards achieved in the programmes are appropriate to the undergraduate and graduate titles of the awards, and commensurate with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The quality of learning opportunities is suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Computing

Associate Bachelor's degree (AB) in Computing; AB Computing Science; Integrated Foundation Year; BSc Hons Computing (Major/Main/Minor); BSc Hons Computing and Information Systems; BSc Hons Computing Science; BSc Hons Information and Communication Technologies; BSc Hons Interactive Multimedia Design; BSc/BSc Hons Mathematics with Computing; BEng Hons Software Engineering; BEng Hons Electronics and Computer Systems; PgDip/MSc Telecommunications and Internet Systems; MSc e-Learning: Interactive Teaching Technologies; PgCert/Dip/MSc Computing and Information Systems; PgDip/MSc Informatics; PgCert/Dip/MSc Web Information Systems; PgCert/Dip/MSc Computing and (Design, International Business/Information System Management/Intelligent Systems)

204 Computing programmes in the three Schools are defined appropriately and satisfy the requirements of professional accreditation where relevant. A review of assessed work confirmed that the standards achieved by students are appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location in FHEQ. The quality and extent of the DSED impressed the audit team, as did the articulation by staff of their commitment to the continual development and refinement of their courses and their attendance to issues such as student retention in very positive and supportive ways. Students felt that staff were very approachable and helpful, and this contributed significantly to a positive student learning experience. The quality of learning opportunities is suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Education

PgDip/MSc in Lifelong Learning (by distance learning); PgDip/MSc in Education with five of eight available pathways being offered at the time of the audit: Careers Education and Guidance; Education and Contemporary Society; Education

Management; Learning and Teaching; and Information and Communication Technology (by distance learning)

205 The continuing professional development courses in education offer curricula and learning formats designed to meet the needs of education professionals across Northern Ireland. The courses are offered at the campuses of Coleraine, Jordanstown and Magee and at off-campus centres through blended learning and in some cases via full on-line e-learning programmes. The level of student satisfaction is generally high, with particular praise being given to the on-line distance learning MSc in Lifelong Learning. The audit team was able to establish a view of confidence in the quality of learning opportunities afforded by the programmes and to confirm that the performance of students justified the levels and titles of award being conferred in this subject area by the University.

Environmental studies

AB degree in Environmental Studies; BSc (Hons) programmes in Environmental Sciences (full-time and sandwich modes, the latter with either a Diploma in Industrial Studies or in Area Studies). PgDip/MSc programmes in Environmental Toxicology and Pollution Monitoring

206 Programme specifications set out appropriate learning outcomes linked to teaching, learning and assessment strategies and the subject benchmark statement. Progression and completion rates are good and the School is engaging in a number of initiatives to enhance them further. From its review of students' assessed work and from discussions with staff and students, the audit team found the standard of student achievement to be appropriate for the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ. Student evaluation of the provision was positive. Students are well provided in terms of resources and tutorial support and their views noted and acted upon appropriately. Research activity is high in the School and increasing use is being made of the views of an External

Advisory Panel of environmental science professionals enabling staff to set teaching and learning in the context of research and the needs of the profession. The team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities available to students was suitable for the programmes of study leading to the awards.

Social policy and administration

BSc (Hons) programmes in: Social Policy; Criminology and Criminal Justice; and Health and Social Care Policy based on the Jordanstown and Magee campuses. A postgraduate distance-learning programme in Social Research Skills will recruit from September 2005

207 From its study of students' assessed work, and from discussions with students and staff, the audit team concluded that the standard of student achievement was appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location in the FHEQ. The programme specifications set out appropriate educational objectives and learning outcomes, and linked these to the learning and teaching and assessment that students could expect to receive. Relevant subject benchmark statements have informed the programme specifications. There is a demonstrably strong commitment to and achievement of a quality improvement culture within the subject, and students have good formal and informal opportunities to contribute to quality enhancement. Some matters regarding the moderation of assessed work will be addressed through the University and Faculty themed audit on moderation. Overall, the team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities provided for students was suitable for the degree programmes offered by the subject.

The use made by the institution of the Academic Infrastructure

208 The previous audit report commended the University on the establishment of a coherent system of principles and practices which incorporated the *Code of practice,* the Qualifications Framework and subject benchmarks to assure academic standards.

Adjustments have been made to the University's portfolio of awards in the light of the FHEQ and, since Session 2003-04, all programmes now meet the requirements of the FHEQ. The audit team was able to confirm that sections of the *Code* are addressed as new guidance is published or revisited in the light of internal change. In particular, a working group on accreditation of prior learning is considering the recently released QAA Guidelines. Similarly, recruitment and admissions are again being reviewed to ensure the University's policies and procedures for part-time and postgraduate students address the precepts, while the major review of the work of the Careers Service is being informed by the relevant section of the *Code.*

209 The audit team concluded that the University continues to maintain its policies and procedures under continuous review in the context of revisions to the Academic Infrastructure.

The utility of the SED as an illustration of the institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to act on these to enhance quality and standards

210 The SED was produced to a very high professional standard and incorporated comprehensive references to supporting documentation. The document provided a very clear overview of the structures and processes that the University adopts to manage its quality and standards. It also described, and critically evaluated, the key elements of these processes, identifying their strengths and limitations and the ways in which these had been or are planned to be acted upon to enhance quality and standards assurance. Overall, the SED conveyed the impression of a mature, self-critical organisation committed to continuous enhancement. This view was endorsed through the audit visit in meetings with staff who, at all times, were willing to engage in honest and constructive discussions with the audit team.

Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

211 The University regards enhancement as a process of continuous improvement, informed by review and evaluation. Accordingly, the SED did not identify separately the University's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards but, instead, integrated this as outcomes of its critical evaluation of policies, procedures and practices within the text of the SED. Many of these have been referred to in previous sections of this report and the audit team endorsed all planned enhancements.

212 The University has developed the use of themed audits as a means of reviewing the effectiveness of processes and procedures associated with specific areas of activity. Audits are based on existing documentation and have provided an important and effective means of engaging staff in quality enhancement activity. To date, themed audits have included the role and responsibilities of the University assessors, student feedback, the operation of SSCCs and the effectiveness of student representatives and programme specifications. The University stated in the SED that the use of themed audits had proved very effective, resulting in the identification of a number of improvements. This was evidenced by the audit team who also formed the view that, in the period since the previous audit, the University had been successful in engaging staff in quality enhancement and, in turn, engendering an embedded quality culture.

Reliability of information

213 The audit team was able to confirm that external examiners' reports for undergraduate courses are now publicly available on the Higher Education Research Opportunities in the UK (HERO) website, while those for postgraduate courses will be available by May 2005. The University's Teaching and Learning Strategy and its document on Employer Needs and Trends are also available on HERO. There is a link from HERO to the University's website and this provides access to programme specifications and other relevant course information.

214 Students, both through the DATs and the SWS, commented favourably on the accuracy and quality of information contained in University and course level handbooks and documentation. Overall, the audit team concluded that reliance could be placed on the accuracy of the University's published information.

Features of good practice

215 The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

i   the University's demonstrable commitment to, and achievement of, an embedded academic quality culture (paragraphs 29; 60)

ii   the systematic approach, incorporating effective consultation, piloting, evaluation, project management and institutional oversight adopted for the introduction of strategic University developments (paragraph 47)

iii   the effectiveness of the University's staff development activity, arising from the range and relevance of provision, the alignment to institutional priorities, and proactive management and coordination (paragraphs 82; 91)

iv   the University's coherent and comprehensive strategy for the development and implementation of e-learning (paragraph 101)

v   the comprehensive provision for the support, training and supervision of research students (paragraph 111).

Recommendations for action:

216 The audit team also recommends that the University should consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality and standards of the awards it offers are maintained. It would be desirable for the University to:

i   clarify and make explicit the University's minimum requirements for internal

moderation of assessment results to ensure appropriate consistency of practice across the University (paragraph 32)

ii   promote, maximise and render more visible the employer contribution to subject development (paragraphs 50; 76)

iii   clarify, in formal documentation, the extent and limits of external examiners' authority to moderate the marks of individual students to ensure fairness to all students (paragraph 55)

iv   expedite the resolution of the purpose and scope of staff appraisal, and to establish appropriate procedures for consistent and effective implementation across the University (paragraph 85).

Appendix

The University of Ulster's response to the audit report

The University welcomes the positive findings of the report and is pleased to note that there are no essential or advisable recommendations. The full report and the desirable recommendations arising therefrom will be considered by the relevant University committees in due course and in the spirit of continuous improvement, the University will be seeking to ensure that they are adequately addressed.

On behalf of the University I would like to thank you and other members of the review team for the professional way in which all stages of the audit were conducted and the University looks forward to a further positive engagement with the QAA in the forthcoming collaborative provision audit.