The Queen's University of Belfast

DECEMBER 2004

Institutional audit

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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 02/15 *Information on quality and standards in higher education* published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Queen's University Belfast (the University) from 6 to 10 December 2004 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 awards that the University makes.

To arrive at its conclusions the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents 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 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 University's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

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

- teaching awards, which serve as an enhancement tool to promote and disseminate good practice across the University

- the rigour of the University subject review process and associated follow-up activity

- the responsiveness of the University to its students, manifest in the various means by which it ensures that the student voice is heard and in its orientation programme for international students

- the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching which it makes available to all staff of the University, including part-time staff, and its potential for enhancement.

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. The team advises the University to:

- reconsider the terms of reference for the University Learning and Teaching Committee to make explicit the Committee's responsibility for maintaining an overview of academic standards

- further develop the assessment framework with a view to securing greater commonality of judgement and practice across the University with regard to progression rules and degree classifications

- complete the development and publication of distinct programme specifications for all awards of the University.

It would also be desirable for the University to:

- consider whether the pathway approval procedures, as currently articulated, enable it to be satisfied that sufficient use is always made of suitably qualified independent subject and/or professional experts external to the University to advise on the appropriateness of the quality and standards of its provision

- incorporate, within its process of annual review, a means to ensure that all institutions with students registered for awards of the University are aware of the University's expectations in relation to the Academic Infrastructure

- complete the work and training necessary to make fuller statistical data more easily available to schools, faculties and relevant committees to facilitate analysis of student performance across the University

- enhance the quality of the students' learning experience by sharing good practice in the area of student support.

Summary outcomes of discipline audit trails

Anatomy and physiology; chemistry; civil engineering; sociology and social policy; and theology

To arrive at these conclusions the audit team spoke to staff and students, and was given information about the University as a whole. The team also looked in detail at programmes in the discipline

audit trails (DATs) listed above to find out how well the University's systems and procedures were working at that level. The team came to the view that the standard of student achievement in the programmes is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), published by QAA. In each case, the quality of learning opportunities available to students is suitable for a programme of study leading to the relevant 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 suggest that the University is making effective use of the Academic Infrastructure to inform its framework for the management of quality and standards.

From 2005, the institutional audit process will include a check on the reliability of the information set published by institutions in the format recommended in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE) document 02/15, *Information on quality and standards in higher education*, as updated in *HEFCE 03/51, Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance.* The audit found that the University is preparing appropriately for the publication of its information set.

Main report

Main report

1   An institutional audit of the Queen's University of Belfast (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 6 December 2004. 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 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 Northern Ireland 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), together with examples of those processes operating at the level of the institution as a whole. The scope of the audit encompassed all of the University's provision and collaborative arrangements leading to its awards. Institutional audits in Northern Ireland are conducted under the same arrangements agreed for universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) in England. This follows agreement between the QAA and the DEL and reflects the current administrative arrangements in Northern Ireland.

Section 1: Introduction: The Queen's University of Belfast

The institution and its mission

4   The University traces its origin to the establishment in 1845 of Queen's College Belfast. It achieved its independence as Queen's University of Belfast in 1908. Most of the University's estate is located in South Belfast, with specialist accommodation such as that provided by the city's

hospitals within two miles of the main site. The Senate is the governing body of the University, and by Statute it may institute degrees and other academic distinctions on the recommendation of the Academic Council, which has delegated powers to control the internal academic affairs of the University and to make academic awards.

5   In 2002-03 there were just over 21,000 students, of whom approximately one-fifth were postgraduates, studying at the University. Approximately one quarter of the University's students were studying on a part-time basis.

6   There are five faculties: Engineering; Humanities; Legal, Social and Educational Sciences; Medicine and Health Sciences; and Science and Agriculture. Each of the 31 schools and eight of the nine institutes carrying out teaching and research are members of one of these faculties. The Institute of Professional Legal Studies lies outside the faculty structure. Deans of faculty have strategic and managerial responsibilities, and are assisted by associate deans with specific functional duties, including quality assurance. In accordance with the University's intention to provide a comprehensive range of liberal, scientific, professional, and vocational educational opportunities, students have a wide choice of degree programmes available to them.

7   There is an outreach campus at Armagh and the University has particularly close relationships with Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College, whose principal role is to provide initial teacher training. So far as academic matters are concerned, the University regards the university colleges as having the status of schools within the Faculty of Legal, Social and Educational Sciences. There is also an Institute of Theology, located within the Faculty of Humanities, which oversees the provision of theological studies in independent colleges on the University's behalf.

8   The current President and Vice-Chancellor was appointed with effect from 1 August 2004 and will oversee the continuation of a five-year academic plan approved in 2002. This will involve some potential reorganisation of the University in order to further enhance its national and international reputation for teaching and research. The University plays a key role in meeting the needs of the regional community it serves, and has active links with the Northern Ireland government and with the province's employers, including the National Health Service. It is closely involved in nurturing and supporting a range of economic, social and cultural developments in Northern Ireland. Since 1998 the University has been implementing a major programme of strategic change which has focused on the effective

management and development of human resources. Approximately 48 per cent of the current academic staff have been recruited within the last seven years.

9   The mission of the University is 'to provide the widest possible access to learning through international excellence in teaching and research in an environment of equality, tolerance and mutual respect, thereby enhancing educational, economic, social and cultural development in Northern Ireland and throughout the world.'

Collaborative provision

10   The University has entered into collaborative arrangements with a number of other partner institutions, including UK and overseas higher education institutions, and further and higher education colleges in its region. In total there were approximately 100 undergraduate full-time equivalent students, and approximately 100 postgraduate full-time equivalent students, registered for these programmes in 2002-03.

11   The University has also entered into partnerships with further education colleges to provide foundation degrees and, in accordance with the indication that such degrees would become the dominant subdegree provision within the further education sector in Northern Ireland, is taking a strategic approach to its links with such colleges. At present, provision for Foundation Degrees is limited, and the number of students registered for the programmes is small. There are 30 students registered for this qualification with North Down and Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education, or with Omagh College of Further and Higher Education. It has been agreed that, in the future, Foundation Degrees would normally only be developed with institutions designated as partner colleges because they have a mature and active association with the University and can demonstrate an appropriate level of cooperation. The University's collaborative arrangements were included within the scope of this audit.

Background information

12   The published information available for this audit included:

- information made available through the Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO) portal and the University's own website;

- reports of QAA reviews of provision at subject level; and

- the report of QAA's continuation audit of the University published in 2000.

- In addition, an unpublished report relating to one developmental engagement conducted in May 2004 was made available to the audit team.

13   The University initially provided QAA with:

- an institutional self-evaluation document (SED)

- discipline self-evaluation documents (DSEDs) for the five areas selected for discipline audit trails (DATs).

- During the briefing and audit visits, the audit team was given on-site and remote access to a wide range of internal documents on the University's intranet. It was also given on-site access to internal documents in hard copy, and to a range of documentation relevant to the selected DATs, including samples of student work.

The audit process

14   Following a preliminary meeting at the University in March 2004, QAA confirmed that five DATs would be conducted during the audit visit. QAA received the institutional SED in July 2004. On the basis of the SED and other published information, the audit team confirmed that the DATs would focus on anatomy and physiology; chemistry; civil engineering; sociology and social policy; and theology. QAA received the DSEDs, accompanied by programme specifications, in October 2004. Three of the schools, namely chemistry, civil engineering, and sociology and social policy, had recently undergone an internal University subject review (USR). The DSEDs for these schools were based upon the internal reviews and included documentation reflecting the different stages they had reached in the University's follow-up process. The USR of anatomy and physiology was scheduled to take place in October 2005 and the DSED prepared for that purpose was submitted in support of the DAT. The DSED for Theology was prepared specifically for the audit.

15   At the preliminary meeting for the audit, discussions were also held with representatives of the Queen's University Belfast Students' Union (QUBSU) to confirm the contribution of the Students' Union, and the University's students more generally, to the audit process. The student representatives were invited to submit a separate document expressing views on the student experience at the University, and identifying any matters they would wish to highlight with respect to the quality of programmes and the standard of awards. The students' written submission (SWS) was submitted to QAA in July 2004. It had been prepared by members of the QUBSU and included useful feedback from a survey undertaken specifically for the purposes of audit which had elicited 1,300

responses from students across the University. The SWS had been shared with the University and there were no matters within it that would require the audit team to treat it with any level of confidentiality greater than that normally applying to the audit process. The audit team recognised the work involved in the production of the SWS and was grateful to the students for preparing this helpful document. The team did not meet representatives of the Students' Unions from Stranmillis University College or St Mary's University College.

16   A briefing visit took place from 1 to 3 November 2004 with the purpose of allowing the audit team to explore with the Vice-Chancellor, senior members of staff and student representatives, matters relating to the management of quality and standards raised by the SED, the SWS and other documentation provided to the team in advance. At the close of the briefing visit, the main themes to be pursued in the audit visit were signalled to the University, and a programme of meetings for the visit was agreed. The team decided that it did not wish to pursue any thematic enquiries during the audit visit.

17   The audit visit took place from 6 to 10 December 2004, and included further meetings with staff and students of the University, both at institutional level and in relation to the DATs. The audit team consisted of Mr W Askew, Professor J Bailey, Professor B Gower, Dr J Leake, Professor M Stewart and Mr H Woolf. The audit secretary was Ms D Ross-Simpson. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr I Ainsworth, Assistant Director.

Developments since the previous academic quality audit

18   The previous QAA continuation audit report for the University was published in January 2000. The report commended the University for: the development of a learning and teaching strategy; the introduction of the Quality Handbook; the care taken to safeguard the standards of the awards attained by students on programmes provided by overseas partners; the contribution to quality enhancement of the Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT); the work of the University's external examiners and the attention given to their reports; and the mentoring scheme for probationary members of the academic staff. It was invited to consider the advisability of: improving the timeliness with which decisions are taken on matters of academic policy; ensuring that formal five-yearly reviews of approved partner institutions take place, and coordinating its approach to annual reporting and review processes where more than

one faculty is involved in a collaboration; ensuring consistency in its degree regulations and in its definition of 'major' and 'minor' changes to approved modules; ensuring that annual pathway reviews take place, and setting an early date for the introduction of subject area reviews; and reviewing the responsibilities of external examiners. The report also invited the University to consider the desirability of: reviewing the availability of its staff development arrangements to its teaching assistants; and reviewing the academic and pastoral support it provides to its part-time students.

19   A steering group was established to oversee the implementation of the report's recommendations, and to report to the University's Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC). An account of actions taken to address the recommendations was prepared in 2000. Subsequently, oversight of the continuing implementation of the recommendations was transferred to the Courses and Regulations Sub-Committee (CRSC) of the LTC and a final progress report was prepared in 2003. These reports show that the University has addressed all the recommendations arising from the audit. In particular, it has introduced periodic subject reviews and has considered and developed a method for reviewing degree pathways on an annual basis. However, although it is clear that the University has responded to the QAA continuation audit report, the final progress report presented to the LTC in August 2003 indicated that, in certain areas, further evidence was being sought and work was continuing.

20   In 2003 the QAA and the Education and Training Inspectorate surveyed the provision of the pilot programmes of foundation degrees in Northern Ireland. A report on the outcome of the survey, received by the University in October 2003, confirmed the sufficiency of the role of the University in collaboration with its partner colleges in the emerging academic standards and emerging academic achievements of students, and the emerging quality of the student learning opportunities, including monitoring and enhancement arrangements. This report has been considered, and a briefing paper identifying lessons learned and points raised from both the Northern Ireland and UK findings of the reviews of foundations degrees has been prepared.

21   The University has received a number of QAA subject reviews reports since the continuation audit. Schools were required to consider their reports and inform the CELT of progress made in addressing recommendations made. The Quality and Enhancement Sub-Committee (QESC) also considered

the recommendations of the reports, primarily for any central University issues needing further action. This subcommittee considered an analysis of the reports in 2002, which has been disseminated to faculties.

22   A QAA developmental engagement was undertaken of the School of Anthropological Studies in 2004. The SED indicated that the report of its findings will be considered by the LTC 'with a view to enhancing quality assurance procedures'.

Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes

The institution's view as expressed in the SED

23   The University is confident that the mechanisms it uses to assure academic quality and standards are robust and effective. It bases this claim on external sources of advice and information, including external agencies, accreditation reports, and external examiners and advisers, as well as on the outcomes of its internal quality assurance procedures. A large number of pathways (as programmes of study are termed in the University) are externally accredited by professional and statutory bodies, and the University regards the outcome of their processes as providing an important verification of standards. External examiners are used to ensure that the degrees awarded by the University are comparable in standard with those awarded in other UK or Irish universities, and to assure the quality of important aspects of students' learning experience. The report form used by external examiners has been revised in an attempt to encourage them to contribute more expansive and narrative feedback on standards and on teaching and learning methods. External subject experts are used as advisers in internal quality assurance processes, and their contributions are regarded as a particularly important feature of the periodic USR process.

24   The SED emphasised the role that the identification and dissemination of good practice has in enhancing quality and assuring academic standards. Evidence was provided to the audit team, in the course of its meetings with staff, that useful ideas and techniques do attract interest and are taken up. As the SED acknowledged, however, there are challenges that the University faces with regard to internal communication so that awareness of policy and guidance on academic matters is improved. It also identified a need to ensure that learning is supported efficiently and effectively with a view to encouraging students to develop as independent learners. Greater harmonisation of practice between faculties and schools is also sought, as is more sharing of good practice.

The institution's framework for managing quality and standards, including collaborative provision

25   The University's LTC plays a leading role in the management of academic quality and standards, and is required by its terms of reference to act in a proactive and strategic manner. It makes use of a number of subcommittees to help it discharge its duties. The CRSC considers and approves proposals for new pathways and oversees adherence to the FHEQ. The Validation Sub-Committee (VSC) oversees all the University's collaborative arrangements and the QESC is charged with 'promoting a positive student learning experience by developing and refining mechanisms and processes to enhance the quality of learning, teaching and assessment'. The CRSC and QESC receive reports from faculty teaching and learning committees.

26   The reports on the University's response to the QAA continuation audit report (2000) drew attention to suggestions it made as well as to its recommendations. One of the suggestions was that it would be 'appropriate for the University to revise the formal terms of reference of the LTC to ensure it had delegated responsibility and authority for the monitoring and safeguarding of academic standards'. Such a revision, it was further suggested, would help to indicate how the LTC 'was expected to assist the University in discharging its responsibility for safeguarding the academic standards of its awards'. The audit team learnt that the University had recently reconsidered and revised the LTC's terms of reference. Nevertheless, it appeared to the team that although the terms of reference continue to state that, in general, the LTC is expected to monitor and enhance 'the quality and standards of learning, teaching, assessment, and curricula of the subject areas leading to an award of the University', they would be strengthened by specific references to the Committee's responsibility and authority for safeguarding academic standards, and by explicit indications of the ways in which it discharges this responsibility and exercises this authority.

27   Faculty learning and teaching committees are responsible for ensuring that the University's quality assurance procedures are carried out, and for disseminating information regarding the development and implementation of the University's quality assurance policies to schools. They receive reports from schools, including reports on annual pathway reviews, and consider all changes to pathways prior to submission to the CRSC. They prepare summary reports of pathway reviews for their faculties which are considered by a subcommittee on behalf of the LTC.

28   Each faculty normally has two associate deans who chair a variety of faculty committees, including faculty learning and teaching committees. They play a major role in quality assurance within their faculties, as well as representing the interests of their faculties on University committees and working groups.

29   Academic staff within schools are expected to implement the University's agreed quality assurance processes and, to assist them, the Academic Council Office maintains a internet-based Quality Handbook intended to be a user-friendly source of information about those processes. There is also a Validation Handbook, a University Subject Review Handbook and an External Examiners Handbook.

30   The audit team formed the view that the Quality Handbook was a valuable source of important information. It appeared to the team, however, that some of the policies and practices it contains lack a clear rationale (for example, variation in progression rules, variation in weighting rules), and that the Handbook might benefit from an introductory section giving an explicit account of the principles guiding those policies and practices, and setting out the broad framework in which they operate. Such information might be of assistance to the University in evaluating the effectiveness of its policies and practices for quality assurance.

31   The University's approach to the assessment of first degree, and taught postgraduate, programmes is set out in the Quality Handbook. It is based on a framework providing guidance on policy and practice in matters of assessment for all taught courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The framework takes the form of an annotated version of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*), *Section 6: Assessment of students,* published by QAA. Each of the precepts in this section of the *Code* is accompanied by a description of the University's policy and practice and by an indication of where further information may be found, usually including the Quality Handbook itself.

32   In the case of classified first degrees, the rules governing progression appear to vary between, and within, faculties with some permitting failure at level 0 and level 1 to be compensated. The Quality Handbook sets out criteria which any mechanism used by a faculty for compensating failure should satisfy, provided only that it is not debarred by relevant validating or accrediting bodies. There is also a provision stating that failure in up to two level 2 or level 3 modules, or their equivalent, does not itself preclude the award of an honours degree. It was not clear to the audit team whether these

provisions might allow a student to proceed and to obtain a first degree without having met all the learning outcomes identified in the pathway followed. There was, however, no evidence that this could occur in the DATs followed by the team.

33   According to recently introduced rules, the classification of a first degree is determined by the weighted marks contributing to the classification. For three-year degree pathways, where level 2 and level 3 marks are used, there is a choice of weighting between 25:75 and 40:60. For extended undergraduate degree pathways, where levels 2, 3 and 4 marks are used, the weighting is 12.5: 37.5: 50. Boards of examiners also use a 'predominance' rule which stipulates that, where an overall percentage mark is within three percentage points of a higher classification, the higher classification will be awarded provided that at least half of the weighted module marks are within the higher classification. Exemption from these rules concerning weighting and predominance is only granted when there is a need to meet the requirements of a validating or accrediting body. Boards of examiners are allowed to use their discretion but must justify their use of it. Discretion may include discounting the lowest module mark, provided that the mark indicates that a pass standard has been achieved.

34   The introduction of these new rules for classified first degrees will be of assistance in promoting further consistency in the assessment of students. There remain, however, some differences in progression rules and in the way first degrees are classified. The audit team appreciated that, in many cases, differences will reflect the requirements of professional and statutory bodies, and that justifications for them will have been given and accepted. The SWS suggested that such justifications can be difficult for students to discern. In other cases, differences do not appear to be explicitly justified (for example, different weightings). The team therefore concluded that in order to demonstrate that all students are treated fairly, the University's assessment rules, as they apply to progression and to degree classifications, would benefit from greater consistency and, where justified differences remain, greater transparency.

35   The University's requirement that boards of examiners provide explicit justifications for the discretion they use when progression and classification decisions are made provides an important safeguard for academic standards. However, although the audit team understood that these justifications might be needed in any appeal process, it could find no evidence for systematic

monitoring of them at faculty or University level. The team noted, therefore, that there was some scope for strengthening this safeguard and thereby increasing the University's confidence that its academic standards are being maintained.

36   The extent of the University's collaborative provision is modest. It is overseen by the VSC, and executive action is taken by the Academic Council Office. Use has been made of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision* (1999), published by QAA and each collaboration with a partner institution is governed by a memorandum of agreement. The Validation Handbook sets out the key principles the University applies in managing its collaborative provision, and explains the procedures used. It also describes the University policy with regard to the development of collaborative arrangements.

37   The audit team became aware, from external examiners' comments on the discretion available to boards of examiners, its reading of the revised classification algorithm and discussions with staff, that potential inconsistencies could arise from the practices of different boards of examiners across the University. Consequently, it would advise the University to further develop the assessment framework with a view to securing greater commonality of judgement and practice across the University with regard to progression rules and degree classifications.

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

38   The SED claimed that taking active steps to improve current practice is a key element in the University's approach to learning and teaching. CELT, together with contributions from the Staff Training and Development Unit, and the Educational Technology Unit, ensures that these steps are taken, and its work is monitored by QESC. The SED included examples of areas in which CELT has been active, including the collection, analysis and dissemination of student views on learning and teaching, the dissemination of good practice in learning and teaching through workshops and seminars, the development of students' key skills, and the development of progress files for students.

39   CELT was in a period of transition at the time of the audit visit, and the audit team learnt of proposals to restructure the Academic Registry which would result in one of its five divisions having responsibility for the enhancement of learning and teaching. This section would integrate the staff and activities of the relevant units, including CELT, and would be charged with developing an overall strategy for supporting learning and teaching. The University wishes to bring

together a number of projects and activities in this new learning and teaching enhancement division of the Academic Registry. Besides the continuing work of CELT, the Division will develop, implement and monitor the University's learning and teaching strategy, and manage the new centres for excellence in teaching and learning areas. It will also work with schools preparing for University subject review, and provide support for follow-up actions. The administration of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching, and of the University's teaching awards scheme, will also fall within the scope of the division.

40   University teaching awards have been established since 1998-99, and are used to reward individuals or teams for their contributions to excellence in teaching. The scheme has been expanded so that up to 13 prizes can be awarded, in three categories of staff: experienced staff, staff who are relatively new to teaching, and learning support staff. Opportunities have been created to encourage the good practice the scheme helps to identify. There is an annual teaching awards seminar which is used to draw attention to the excellence demonstrated by the award winners, and Queen's Online (the managed information technology portal) provides a readily accessible source of innovative practice arising from the awards scheme. The audit team met some winners of the awards who provided examples of the successful dissemination of their work.

41   It was clear to the audit team, from the SED and its meetings with staff, that the University regarded enhancement as an important element in its plans, and the team noted the steps being taken to provide a more coherent focus for the enhancement of learning and teaching. The team considered that there would be benefit in developing an overall strategy for supporting and enhancing learning and teaching, as indicated in the proposals for restructuring the Academic Registry. Such a strategy should be of assistance to the University in determining priorities, and in evaluating the progress it is able to make in the areas it regards as important to enhancing provision.

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

Programme (pathway) approval

42   The SED stated that the Academic Council had endorsed a new approach to the approval of pathways (taught undergraduate and postgraduate) in October 2003. Following an interim stage between November 2003 and June 2004, the development of

new pathways was expected to be integrated with the academic planning cycle. The approval process comprises four main stages, namely: pathway design at school/faculty level; outline approval by the Academic Planning Committee (APC) and resource approval by the Planning and Finance Committee (PFC) which takes account of strategic considerations; the development and approval of course content (the pathway evaluation meeting (PEM) stage); and the final, formal approval of the PEM report and pathway regulations by CRSC.

43   Pathways commissioned by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, delivered by the School of Nursing and Midwifery through a service level agreement, have a different developmental timetable and funding mechanism from other mainstream University pathways. They do not require APC approval but are subject to CRSC approval. Since June 2004, a more streamlined pathway approval process has been adopted for short duration (up to 10 weeks) pathway proposals submitted by the Institute of Lifelong Learning, which are subject to approval by the Faculty of Legal, Social and Educational Sciences.

44   Although faculty evaluation of pathway proposals had occurred in the past, the SED indicated that this had been carried out in an ad hoc manner and the University was not satisfied that there was sufficient evidence to demonstrate that detailed scrutiny of pathway proposals had been undertaken. Consequently, from September 2004, to address this perceived deficiency, a formal faculty pathway evaluation has been introduced to consider new pathways. Convened by faculty deans (or their nominees), PEMs are held to scrutinise the content, regulations, assessment methods, learning outcomes, programme specification and consistency with both *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. The Quality Handbook indicates that the panel assembled for a PEM normally comprises an associate dean from outside the faculty as chair, the faculty dean (or his/her nominee), a member of academic staff from the faculty with some expertise in the subject specialism (but not involved in the design and delivery of the pathway), and an adviser from outside the University, nominated by the relevant school or faculty. The SED stated that an 'important aspect of the new procedures is that external panel members will be consulted'.

45   The Quality Handbook sets out pathway approval procedures and includes a pro forma for new pathway initial approval and a description of the format for the faculty report on the PEM. The Quality Handbook clarifies that new pathways, developed as part of collaborative arrangements, are required to follow University pathway approval procedures. In addition, the University requires approval of the collaboration by APC, the VSC and the LTC. Where existing pathways are to be offered to a collaborative partner, the VSC must seek APC's preliminary approval that the pathway can be offered before the collaboration is considered.

46   In addition to the pathway approval process, the SED indicated that the University has 'developed a devolved framework to Schools and Faculties' for new module approval, inter alia. The previous module approval system had been found to be unduly cumbersome and, in 2002, the University embarked on a pilot phase of a devolved electronic module pro forma scheme, involving each faculty. Under the newly devolved framework, the CRSC receives summary details of new modules and members of the subcommittee conduct audit samples of the approval processes at school and faculty level. Training on the use of the electronic module pro forma was provided in 2003-04 and, later that year, the devolved system was rolled-out to the remaining schools.

47   The pathway approval procedures were said to take account of relevant sections of the *Code of practice*, subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ. Programme specifications for new and existing pathways had been prepared with reference to the relevant subject benchmark statement. The audit team found that the University is moving forward with the production of programme specifications, while noting that some of the programme specifications for existing pathways were still in draft form at the time of the audit. In 2000 the LTC reviewed the University's provision against the FHEQ and identified programmes that were difficult to fit within the Framework, for example, postgraduate conversion courses. The SED indicated that the situation had been re-evaluated in 2004 and the pathways were considered by CRSC in June 2004. This work has been extended to include certificate and diploma awards where anomalies were observed in an internal review in October 2003.

48   The audit team noted that external participants are not deployed in the initial pathway approval process unless the school developing the proposal chooses to include them. The current procedures for pathway approval have only recently been introduced and while internal documentation seen by the audit team suggested that they were working satisfactorily and take account of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme approval, monitoring*

and review, published by QAA, the team found that, in the case of one master's level programme, the completed pro forma did not include, or require, any reference to external advisers. The team noted the significance the SED attached to the contribution of external panel members in the new pathway approval procedures adopted but noted, from the Quality Handbook, that pathway evaluation panels would 'normally comprise' an adviser external to the University, nominated by the relevant school or faculty. This appeared to the team to contradict the statement made in the SED about external involvement at the faculty evaluation stage. The team formed the view that the pathway approval process would be strengthened by ensuring that there is external input in the process. Consequently, the team considered that it would be desirable for the University to consider whether the pathway approval procedures, as currently articulated, enable it to be satisfied that sufficient use is always made of suitably qualified independent subject and/or professional experts external to the University to advise on the appropriateness of the quality and standards of its provision.

Pathway review

49   Pathways comprise modules leading to named awards. Modules are reviewed each time they are taught and involve self-evaluation of staff responsible for them with supporting evidence from external examiners and students. Student views are collected by means of a questionnaire following the delivery of a module. Pathways are reviewed on an annual basis and additional data to support annual monitoring are being made available as the Student Information System improves. The pathway review process has addressed points made in the continuation audit report (2000). The SED indicated that the review procedure is based on the pathway specification and focuses on the links between modules, the balance of content and skills making up the pathway, and the appropriateness of modules to the aims and objectives of the pathway as a whole. In addition, the SED indicated that the process provides a mechanism for informing pathway enhancement and for identifying and disseminating good practice on a University-wide basis given the LTC's consideration of faculty summary reports and its dissemination of examples of good practice and areas for further consideration.

50   The annual pathway review process remains under consideration, however, because of University concerns that 'annual pathway review was becoming a routine administrative burden with little opportunity for in-depth consideration of issues, given the reporting time constraints'. The SED highlighted

changes introduced from the start of the 2004-05 academic session. These included a full pathway review every three years with 'a lighter touch annual exercise' in the interim years, the development of a new template for three-yearly reviews, and the separate review of taught postgraduate provision (and a number of pathways in the School of Nursing and Midwifery) from undergraduate provision with a deadline of the end of November each year to reflect the fact that these pathways end in September rather than June. The SED also indicated that, at the time of writing, discussions were taking place about templates for the lighter-touch interim reviews and postgraduate review.

51   Procedures for the annual monitoring of collaborative pathways are similar to those for the University's internal provision. Coordinators of collaborative pathways submit, with the collaborating organisation, an annual written report on each collaborative pathway (or a single report taking an overview of all pathways) to the relevant faculty learning and teaching committee. This, in turn, reports to the VSC. The proposed arrangements for collaborative provision, which should take effect from 2004-05, will be similar to the procedures adopted by the University for internal pathways, which require external examiners' comments to be taken into account. Hitherto, and unlike internal annual pathway reviews, annual reviews of collaborative provision have not been considered by the relevant schools and faculties.

52   The audit team considered that the procedures for the monitoring of programmes and modules are clearly documented in the Quality Handbook and it found evidence, in the DATs, that the electronic module pro forma was being used appropriately. The team heard from students that module questionnaires were distributed by staff and it discussed the evaluation of these questionnaires with staff in the DATs. It noted, from the minutes of relevant internal committee meetings, that the outcomes of annual monitoring of modules were brought to staff-student consultative committee meetings, thereby involving students in the final evaluation.

53   Pathway review reporting templates (for both three-yearly and interim pathway review) and faculty summary reporting templates were included in the Quality Handbook and the audit team found, in the course of the DATs, that the templates had been completed satisfactorily. The templates include checks that account is taken of relevant subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ and that programmes remain in line with professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements. The

team found that the reporting lines, which involve schools reporting to faculties and faculties reporting to deans, together with the reporting deadlines and the use of pro formas, enable faculties to ensure that schools implement documented procedures. They also provide opportunities to identify areas of good practice for wider dissemination.

University subject review

54   Following a recommendation in the QAA continuation audit report (2000) highlighting the importance of establishing subject area reviews in the near future, the USR process was developed and introduced, becoming fully operational in 2001. The USRs, which are conducted at six-yearly intervals, evaluate the quality and standards of educational provision leading to awards within a school, including the quality of learning and support given to research students. USRs consider subject provision against University policy, the Academic Infrastructure and, where relevant, accreditation reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. All taught provision and the quality of learning opportunities are considered against stated criteria. The USR reviewers are recruited from both senior staff and younger staff who have completed the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching. All reports are published on the intranet.

55   The SED and the USR Handbook stated that the Academic Council Office (ACO) manages the review process and the CELT assists schools in preparing for the USR. Review panels include two external reviewers in the subject area from other institutions (nominated by the relevant school), two trained reviewers from other parts of the University and a review secretary. The USR procedure requires schools to prepare self-evaluation documents, providing a critical appraisal of their taught pathways and provision for research students, together with supporting documentation, which inform the review process. Following a three-day visit (two involving school personnel) and the finalisation of the review report, the relevant school submits an action plan to the ACO and a report on progress against the action plan is sent to the Academic Registrar about a year after the date of agreement for the action plan. A formal follow-up meeting, with a panel chaired by a Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students and Learning) or the Academic Registrar, then takes place and successful conclusion of the USR is acknowledged in a brief report of the follow-up meeting.

56   The SED indicated that the USR system is subject to continuous review and is expected to evolve on the basis of the experience of those involved in the process. The University believes that

the signing-off practice provides opportunities for the panel and the relevant school to share views on a wide range of issues to the benefit of all participants in the process. Areas of good practice are identified in USRs and an overview of all reports produced to date has been carried out by the LTC. For collaborative provision, the USR process is based on a four to five-year cycle, and a review of collaborative links is currently in progress.

57   The audit team came to the view that the USR system was working well through all the stages of its operation. It found that the USR Handbook, which is a supplement to the Quality Handbook, details clearly and concisely the full USR procedure. The team saw examples of USR SEDs (see paragraph 55 above), action plans and reports on follow-ups to the action plans and, on the basis of these, considered that the rigour of the USR process and associated follow-up activity made it a feature of good practice.

58   Overall, the pathway approval, monitoring and review procedures support the audit team's judgement of broad confidence in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The team formed the view, however, that it would be desirable for the University to consider whether the pathway approval procedures, as currently articulated, enable it to be satisfied that sufficient use is always made of suitably qualified independent subject and/or professional experts external to the University to advise on the appropriateness of the quality and standards of its provision. The team found the USR process and its associated follow-up activity to be thorough, well supported and rigorously applied, making it a feature of good practice and providing the University with a robust mechanism for identifying good practice, as well as for providing assurances about the appropriateness of academic standards, and the quality of provision leading to its awards.

External participation in internal review processes

59   There is no requirement for external input to module approval and review processes or to pathway monitoring processes although current external examiners' annual reports are considered in annual monitoring and pathway review. The Quality Handbook states that advisers from outside the University are normally included in the pathway approval process at the faculty evaluation stage to ensure that decisions are fully informed. Advisers are nominated by the relevant school or faculty and, if included, contribute to the evaluation of the course

content, regulations, assessment methods, learning outcomes, programme specification and consistency with the Academic Infrastructure. They provide specialist information and guidance on developments in the discipline or the workplace and they can be external examiners from other pathways. External input may be supplemented by contributions from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

60   The audit team noted that, in the case of collaborative activity, the Validation Handbook recommends the inclusion of an external adviser on validation panels. It further noted a requirement that external examiners' comments should be taken into account in the annual pathway review process relating to collaborative provision.

61   USR panels include two external members, chosen by the school undergoing review. The USR Handbook states that external reviewers must not be current or recent (within three years) external examiners and are expected to have subject knowledge and experience to enable them to act as peer reviewers. Their role, functions and responsibilities are clearly set out in the USR Handbook. One external member is asked to act as report coordinator and compiler and should therefore have experience of external review processes.

62   The Quality Handbook acknowledges that external input to pathway approval is considered good practice at the faculty evaluation stage. Nevertheless, it is possible for initial approval of new pathways to be approved without external input and also for the faculty evaluation stage not to include external input (see paragraph 48 above). The audit team considered that the use of external review panel members in the USR process is strong and scrupulous.

External examiners and their reports

63   The University requires its external examiners to fulfil two key roles. They act as moderators, to 'ensure that the assessment system is equitable and is fairly operated in the classification of students' and, as consultants, they ensure the comparability of the standards of the University's awards with those of other universities in the United Kingdom and Ireland. External examiners are required to attend the second semester board of examiners' meeting that considers all modules above level one. These roles are clearly described in the University's comprehensive External Examiners Handbook.

64   The ACO receives external examiners' reports centrally, on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor, ensuring that external examiners have submitted their reports and identifying any institutional issues that need to

be considered by one or more of the University's central committees. Copies of reports are distributed to the relevant dean of faculty and head of school and the latter is responsible for responding directly to the external examiner. The ACO oversees the responses on behalf of the University and 'ensure[s]…issues have been adequately addressed'. The CSRC considers University-wide issues annually and, wherever necessary, consults with schools and faculties to refine or modify existing processes. Urgent matters, however, 'would be dealt with straightaway' by the appropriate head of school.

65   The University has mapped its practices against the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, published by QAA, concluding that 'there was a high level' of convergence between its practices and those set out in the *Code*. The criteria for the appointment of external examiners are one notable example of this convergence. External examiners must follow the same procedures for University and collaborative programmes.

66   Although not formally reported in the follow-up to the continuation audit, the University has modified its external examining policies and practices in a number of areas in its consideration of the continuation audit report. For example, schools are required to specify 'details of the student work to be presented to External Examiners' and further guidance on this requirement is given in the external examiner section of the Quality Handbook.

67   The external examiner report template is now explicit about the areas on which external examiners' comments are required. In addition to their standard annual report, retiring external examiners are requested to submit an overview report covering the whole period of their tenure. The examples of these reports seen by the audit team provided a helpful summary of the key themes that emerged during an external examiner's term of office. The conditions under which an external examiner's appointment may be terminated early have been made more rigorous and are clearly specified in the University's External Examiners Handbook. The University, though, decided not to amend its system for the receipt of external examiners' reports; it was satisfied that the ACO's role provides a straightforward and structured means of ensuring consistency across the University in the treatment of reports. There is provision for external examiners to write in confidence to the University. Such reports are considered initially by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Students and Learning), however, in its enquiries the team found no evidence that external examiners have needed to

use this arrangement.

68 On appointment and subsequently, whenever appropriate, external examiners are provided with all the necessary information that would allow them to understand assessment policies and processes. The design of the external examiner report template requires external examiners to comment on these policies and processes. External examiners have been active participants in the debates on, inter alia, the use of the predominance rule as part of the classification algorithm, the weighting of stages two and three, the conceptual equivalents scale, boards of examiners' discretion, anonymous marking, the role of the viva voce, and penalties for late submission of assignments.

69 The SED noted that 'the External Examiner's visit and interaction with Boards of Examiners, pathway co-ordinators and subject teaching departments form a major contribution to the maintenance of standards and dissemination of good practice'. The ACO and the CRSC provide the opportunity for an institutional perspective to be taken. This mechanism has recognised, for example, that some external examiners' reports offer sparse comments that are unhelpful to the subject or award team. To address this the University has amended its report template, with the consequence that reports are now more detailed. CRSC's consultations with schools and faculties provide an effective means of ensuring that institutional issues raised by one school's external examiner are considered throughout the University.

70 The audit team's findings in the DATs supported the University's view that its processes for managing the external examiner system were effective. By commenting on assessments before they are set and on students' completed work, and through their reports, external examiners contribute fully to the maintenance of standards. The team found that external examiners' reports were read carefully, shared among colleagues in the subject, and responded to in appropriate detail. ACO's overview and CRSC's annual review ensure that any institutional issues arising from external examiners' reports are followed up, and acted upon, at a senior level in the University. The team noted that, in addition to the formal reporting system, there is 'a high level of informal comment and discussion between External Examiners and subject teams', which makes a further contribution to the University's management of quality and standards.

71 The report template and the request for end-of-tenure summaries encourage external examiners to be evaluative in their comments on the standards set by the University, on the standards of students' performance, and on the quality of pathways. From its reading of the University's documentation on the roles and requirements of external examiners and of external examiners' reports, the audit team confirmed that the University is actively using the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, published by QAA to inform the management and development of its external examining system. The team noted that the CRSC had held discussions on the draft revisions to this section of the *Code of practice* and that the University is beginning to engage with the Higher Education Academy's developmental work on support for external examiners.

72 External examiners' reports confirm that the University's standards are appropriate and comparable to similar programmes across the sector. The University makes strong and scrupulous use of its external examiners who play a full and constructive role in the University's assessment processes.

External reference points

73 Through the Quality Enhancement Sub-Committee (QESC) of the LTC, the University has carried out a detailed review relating each section of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA to practices within the University and has recommended action on a number of matters. This work is presented in the 'University Framework on the QAA Code of Practice' document, which is updated from time to time and formally approved by the Academic Council. This document is openly available on the ACO web pages. The University has responded to the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students* by introducing a framework for assessment, which identifies the policies and practices that should be applied to all undergraduate and postgraduate taught provision. For several sections of the *Code of practice*, including *Section 3: Students with disabilities, Section 8: Career education, information and guidance;* and *Section 9: Placement learning*, implementation groups have been set up to continue the work. In addition, future revisions to the Validation Handbook are being considered following the release of the revised *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* (September 2004).

74 It was apparent to the audit team that much has been done to ensure that University practices take due account of external reference points but the team found that it is not always clear, from internal committee recommendations, which body or person is responsible for implementation. In those cases, the mechanism by which QESC is able to monitor progress was not straightforwardly

identifiable. In the context of the *Code of practice* the SED explained that the administrative support structures for postgraduate research students are still evolving but the team came across no evidence of problems in respect of postgraduate students because of this. The team noted that an updated University framework is scheduled for consideration by QESC in February 2005.

75   It was not clear to the audit team how the University monitors adherence to the *Code of practice* in collaborating institutions in that the *Code* is not explicitly mentioned in the monitoring and review procedures section of the Validation Handbook, which is also openly available on the Academic Council Office web pages (see paragraph 138 below).

76   Following earlier work by the LTC and regular requests to external examiners for comments on this matter, the CRSC has recently checked the positioning of the University's pathways within the FHEQ and has identified a number of issues. As a result, a very small number of pathways have been withdrawn. A question had arisen about two of the extended (four-year) undergraduate pathways that lead to a master's degree in the Faculty of Science and Agriculture but the Faculty is satisfied that those pathways do meet the master's qualification descriptors. Nevertheless, the audit team was reassured to note that, for both pathways, the matter has been referred for comment to the external reviewers involved in the USRs scheduled for the current academic year. The CRSC has also noted that there are sector-wide issues in respect of MBA and possibly PGCE pathways and that decisions should await national clarification. The team was not entirely convinced by the view expressed in those minutes about the Certificate in Professional Legal Studies offered by the Institute of Professional Legal Studies, namely, 'that as a professional vocational qualification the Institute's provision falls outside the Qualification Framework' and suggests that, since this is also a qualification of the University, the CRSC returns to this matter.

77   Although it is clear that some work remains to be done, for example in respect of modules that have traditionally been available at both stage two and stage three, the audit team was assured that it is hoped to align the remaining awards with the FHEQ by the end of 2004-05. The SED stated that the development of quality assurance processes and positioning with respect to the FHEQ are checked in respect of collaborative provision and, if necessary, the University is prepared to close down such provision. Thus there is solid evidence of careful

attention to the FHEQ by the central committees although the team noted little evidence in the DATs of explicit reference to the FHEQ in the pathway review process.

78   The Quality Handbook (openly available on the Academic Council web pages) includes the subject benchmark statement as one of the factors to be taken into account in all pathway reviews and the USR Handbook (similarly available) lays down that "The review panel will consider the subject provision in relation to...subject benchmark statements". The audit team was able to confirm that this had happened in those DATs where there had recently been a review. Use of the subject benchmark statements was also confirmed in the other DATs.

79   As indicated previously (see paragraph 23 above), in the University 'programmes' are termed 'pathways'. The development of programme specifications has taken longer than might have been hoped partly because of some confusion in schools over the distinction between pathway regulations and programme specifications. Programme specifications are in an advanced stage of development for all the honours pathways investigated by the audit team although work remains to be done to complete the process and to make the specifications externally available via the internet. In the DATs the team observed that the process of approval of programme specifications could involve several iterations between the relevant school, faculty and the CRSC before final formal approval by the CRSC. The University also acknowledged that further work needs to be done to bring all programme specifications up to the standard of the best and a survey is in progress to identify best practice as a step towards creating a template for upgrading programme specifications.

80   The audit team concluded that careful attention is now being given to the form and content of programme specifications. However, it noted that, while it is possible for students whose performance exceeds an appropriate threshold but falls short of the honours standard to graduate with an ordinary degree, no programme specifications exist for ordinary degrees so that it is not possible for an employer, for example, to know the learning outcomes and skills acquired by such a graduate. The team advised the University to complete the development and publication of distinct programme specifications for all awards of the University.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

81   The University believes that the outcomes of QAA subject reviews justify its confidence in the standards of its awards and in the quality of learning available to students. In the case of each such review, the provision was approved and, in several instances, the maximum grade was attained in all elements of the graded profile. However, some weaknesses in that part of the profile which considered quality management and enhancement were a persistent feature in almost half of the reviews. As the SED acknowledged, follow-up to these reviews was not as systematic as it should have been, and the audit team noted that the analysis undertaken, on behalf of the LTC, of the recommendations of these reviews did not appear to have resulted in specific actions. Accordingly, the team was interested to learn that the USR procedure includes a formal sign-off stage after one year and, on the basis of the evidence of the DATs, appears to be effective. The team also noted that the LTC receives regular reports of USRs and reviews the themes they raise.

82   The University offers a substantial number of pathways that play an important part in training for the professions and which are subject to accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The University regards the successful outcomes of PSRB accreditations as evidence that its standards are appropriate. However, it acknowledged that formal oversight of accreditation visits and their outcomes has been insufficient, and has therefore introduced a new procedure which will ensure that PSRB reports are considered at an institutional level, as well as by the schools directly concerned. The outcome of this consideration will be an annual report to the LTC highlighting examples of good practice. The University has also introduced a formal link between the outcomes of PSRB accreditation reports and USRs which should ensure that the follow-up to any issues raised by PSRBs is effective.

Student representation at operational and institutional level

83   The previous continuation audit report (2000) indicated that the staff-student consultative committees (SSCCs) did not appear to meet regularly and some students had reported that their views were not taken seriously. However, this was not reflected in any of the meetings with students during the current audit, or in the SWS. Students whom the audit team met made it clear to the team that they felt able to make their views known.

84   The SED indicated that student representation is considered to be an integral part of the University's approach to enhancing academic quality and standards. In the course of its discussions with students and staff, the audit team confirmed that students have representation at school and faculty levels, and at a University level, students are represented on the Senate and Academic Council, the PFC, LTC, VSC and CRSC.

85   A programme to assist staff-student consultative committee training has been supported with a contribution to the value of £7,000 per annum for two years from University alumni. The Students' Union, in conjunction with the Academic Registry, organises training for new student representatives of staff-student consultative committees each year which, based on data from feedback questionnaires, has been well received by students. However, there was some evidence from minutes of these meetings that enthusiasm for these committees is stronger at level three than levels 1 and 2, where student representatives were not always present at meetings.

86   Students had a positive view of their ability to contribute to quality processes and they described a number of ways in which students input their opinions, to illustrate the responsiveness of the University to their opinions and concerns, which are detailed in the SWS. Students' Union representatives sit on all University committees from Senate to individual forums. An Academic Board operates as an institutional-level consultative forum for students and staff, and provides an opportunity for discussion of policy and practice affecting the students' learning experience. There are regular meetings between Students' Union representatives and senior members of the University management team. The most notable is with the Vice-Chancellor at the Strategic Advisory Group on Student Matters.

87   In meetings with students, the audit team found no disagreement with statements in the institutional SED, confirming the positive views expressed in the SWS. The team concluded that the University had made strenuous efforts to improve student involvement in the quality process. A feature of good practice is the responsiveness of the University to its students which is manifested at different levels from SSCCs to the Academic Board. Issues which are raised in SSCC indicate student involvement in the processes. Of particular note was the University response to the action points raised in the SWS and responses to student concerns detailed in QESC and Academic Board minutes.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

88   The previous audit report commented on the need to consider further development of the University's student feedback arrangements. Advances have since been made, and the CELT has drawn up guidelines for student evaluation of teaching and format of questionnaires. Student feedback is collected at module level and analysed electronically. It is summarised at the end of each semester and this is considered in the pathway reviews. These are also considered in the LTC.

89   The SED stated, and the audit team was able to confirm in its meetings with students, that student feedback from surveys can influence changes in modules. Students commented that they felt able to make immediate representation to academic staff should any issue arise. The team saw evidence demonstrating that the QESC also considers the results of surveys and responds to student concerns. Examples of matters raised and responded to covered examination dates, (Academic Board), and tutorial times, (SSCC).

90   Feedback from employers was said to be valued. There is input from industrial members who have contributed to the University subject reviews in civil engineering, chemistry and music. However, there was limited evidence of employer feedback, or of input into course development, available to the audit team though there are exceptions, notably their role in the development and approval of a new BA in social work.

91   According to the SED, student surveys have been revised to take account of best practice within higher education. An annual survey of graduating students is carried out and is cited as the main means for eliciting former students' views. These reveal high satisfaction with the overall quality of teaching, with skills development and the impact of the courses on employability. The QESC considers the results of surveys. The University is aware that the move to an on-line survey of graduating students resulted in a drop of response rate to 23 per cent and awareness-raising initiatives will be undertaken prior to the 2004 survey in an attempt to improve the response rate.

92   The SED indicated that the University also plans to survey students prior to their final year, with a pilot survey having been carried out in 2003-04. The results of this pilot show that over two-thirds of students rated the appropriateness of learning resources in the libraries as appropriate or good. Similar levels of positive responses were found with computer resources, guidance and support, teaching, and student services. The main concern was financial support with 72 per cent reporting that they were employed in some capacity, and two-thirds of respondents reporting that their employment had an effect on their academic study. The audit team noted evidence supporting this concern (see paragraphs 95 and 167 below). In answer to questions on social dimensions, over a third of students reported that they felt little part of the University in the light of their personal circumstances and work commitments.

93   The audit team concluded that information on feedback as presented in the SED was accurate with no discrepancies found between the SED, SWS and views expressed in meetings with undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Progression and completion statistics

94   The SED clearly stated that the University recognises that statistical information relating to student retention is an area where further work is required. The desirability of this work was also recorded in the only formal recommendation of the report dated May 2004 of the QAA's developmental engagement in anthropological studies. With a drop-out rate of 11 per cent between first and second years at the end of the 2003-04 academic year this is clearly the case. In May 2004, the Vice-Chancellor's Committee agreed that a working group should be established to address this matter. Much of the work that is now in hand is too recent for its application across the University to have begun to produce many results.

95   The audit team was able to see some evidence of statistics generated for use by central committees and observed, in the DSEDs, the rather variable-level of statistical data generated internally in the schools. The team noted with interest the institutional level data provided in the statistical digest 'Qstats' prepared by the Planning Office, the draft analysis for the Working Group on Supporting Student Attainment in December 2004, the analysis of the surveys of graduating students in 2003 and 2004, in particular the information about hours per week of paid employment during term time, and a LTC report to the Academic Council in May 2004 comparing degree classifications at the University with a number of other comparable universities.

96   Taken together these documents confirm that a lot of data exist. At the same time they illustrate that further development of the analyses is needed. For example, the student progression data in the document prepared for December are not correlated with actual GCE A-level scores. Instead a simple interpretation is presented: 'high entry requirement

subjects having low drop-out rates and subjects with relatively low entry requirements having higher drop-out rates'. Likewise correlation of the aggregated data from faculty student progress committees would be appreciably more informative if correlated with results at entry and in previous years. That the capability of producing a correlation with GCE A-level scores could be performed is illustrated in the document on degree classifications (see above, paragraph 95). It was also apparent from some of the DATs that fuller cohort analysis of student performance, year on year, would support and inform the regular pathway reviews. Part of the problem lies in the difficulty that prospective users have experienced 'in gaining useful management information in support of learning and teaching' and part may indicate a need for training of appropriate members of staff in the faculties and schools in the use of the data.

97   The audit team was concerned about the limited availability and use of progression statistics because of the importance of systematic cohort analysis from admission through to graduation in maintaining standards. The team recognised that considerable efforts are now being made to rectify this position and emphasises that it is desirable to complete the work and training necessary to make fuller statistical data more easily available to schools, faculties and relevant committees to facilitate analysis of student performance across the University.

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

98   The University has a comprehensive human resources strategy which includes equal opportunities and diversity goals and focuses on teaching excellence within a University ethos of 'balanced excellence' between teaching and research. Almost half of the University's academic staff has been recruited since 1997, and appointments procedures and practices are appropriate, well reviewed and incorporate mandatory training for appointment panel staff as part of the University's equal opportunities policy and its affirmative action plan. The probationary period for new staff is three years and staff are well supported during this time by mentoring and development mechanisms within their schools.

99   New full-time teaching staff are required to undertake a postgraduate certificate in higher education teaching. The audit team heard that part-time staff and teaching assistants are supported within schools and that this support can include specific training for part-time staff, who are also

encouraged to take the certificate. The appointment of staff in the associated and collaborative institutions, including part-time staff, was conditional upon being approved and regularly re-approved as recognised teachers by the University in a process overseen by the LTC.

100 Teaching skill is one of three criteria for academic staff promotion in the University and extra pay awards can be made for exceptional performance in teaching. The University teaching awards scheme specifically rewards good teaching by individuals or groups in the three defined categories of: new staff; experienced staff; and learning support staff. The audit team saw good evidence of its popularity, impact and dissemination at school and faculty level, and more widely across the University and most of its partner colleges.

101 The University's appraisal system for academic staff combines an assessment of personal development and performance review for all activity including teaching and involves a formal annual process at school level. The audit team saw evidence that the University was encouraging an approach which addresses both institutional and individual goals and which also addresses training needs in relation to teaching.

102 The audit team concluded that practices for the appointment and reward of staff were clear, understood by staff and effective in the support of teaching and learning. The University's teaching awards scheme demonstrated a commitment to development and dissemination in this area and, in the view of the team, constituted a feature of good practice serving as an enhancement tool to promote and disseminate good practice across the University.

Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development

103 The approach to staff development is based upon a balance between school or faculty, and University provision of opportunities and support. Appraisal at school level informs the University's Staff Training and Development Unit (STDU) of the need for courses and events, and the audit team saw evidence of both an extensive programme of such training events and of their high take-up by academic staff. The team also heard evidence that the STDU, together with the CELT, adopted a proactive approach to engaging schools and faculties in training concerned specifically with learning and teaching and with the use of educational technology. In addition, it promoted a wide range of relevant workshops and seminars. Staff support for teaching

assistants was a particular feature of this approach and the team saw evidence of appropriate training for this group of staff. It was clear that the STDU disseminated good practice and the particular dissemination of the teaching awards fellows' project details was evident and appreciated by staff.

104 In discussions with staff in the DATs, the audit team learnt that schools and faculties provide programme-specific training and support to match the needs of particular subject areas. The team met teaching assistants and heard that they were mentored and supported as a group, with specific needs addressed by the schools. The QESC oversees the work of the STDU and reports to the Learning and Teaching Committee on this aspect of staff development.

105 The University regards sabbatical leave as 'pivotal' in supporting high-quality teaching initiatives as well as research, and as 'a crucial element in academic development'. The provision of sabbatical leave was regarded as valuable by staff but the audit team did not see evidence of it being granted for specifically teaching-related projects. Peer observation of teaching is encouraged in all schools as a way of enhancing staff development, but there has been a variable response across the University. The QESC oversees the considerable variety of schemes and is currently promoting the dissemination and extension of teaching observation as an enhancement of teaching skills. The team concluded that the University provides appropriate and increasingly well-distributed mechanisms for enhancing students' learning through staff development.

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

106 The University offers some (albeit limited) teaching through distributed and distance methods. The use of such methods is mainly in the School of Pharmacy on some of its postgraduate programmes and, to a much lesser extent, in the School of Mathematics and Physics on a postgraduate programme. A total of approximately 200 full-time equivalent students are on flexible and distributed learning programmes.

107 The University considers that a lack of coverage of distributed and distance methods in its internal quality assurance documentation may have adversely affected the scrutiny and review of such programmes and modules although its Educational Technology Unit offers a range of workshops and provides advice to schools on distributed and distance learning.

108 The University has an e-learning strategy and there is brief mention of flexible and distributed learning in the Quality Handbook for developing new programmes. No specific reference is made to the QAA *Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning* in the University's internal quality assurance documentation but the University plans to take action to include specific guidance on distributed and distance methods in its pathway and module approval and monitoring procedures. The University's current practice is being reviewed against the revised *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning* (*including e-learning*) (September 2004), published by QAA and, at the time of the audit, the implications of the revised section of the *Code of practice*, had yet to be discussed by the LTC.

109 The University's Validation Handbook states that programmes delivered through flexible or distributed methods through a collaborative arrangement require special additional matters (listed in the Handbook) to be taken into consideration and relevant information provided to the validation panel. The history and operation of the School of Pharmacy programme involving flexible and distributed learning were explained at the audit. It operates using largely conventional means of communication through hard-copy mailing or email. Examinations must be taken at the University and this is also an opportunity for students to meet the staff. The audit team concluded that the standard achieved and the quality of the University's flexible and distance learning provision over a number of years is evident despite a lack of University guidelines. The University may wish to consider strengthening its guidance for the development and delivery of flexible and distributed learning.

Learning support resources

110 Students who met the audit team confirmed that the existing library facilities are, to an extent, stretched and the situation has been exacerbated by temporary closure of libraries. However, the team learnt from the SED and from its discussions with staff that the University had approved a total investment of £200 million for teaching, research and student facilities including a considerable investment (£41 million) in new library facilities, which are to become operational by September 2009. The current library and information technology (IT) services have been combined in an Information Services (IS) Directorate. IS staff are present on both the QESC and the LTC. IS also make use of returns from graduate student surveys. There are also on-line educational services

supported by Queen's Online and, in the course of its meetings with staff and students, the team heard that this is becoming increasingly important for both students and staff.

111 The SED suggested that arrangements for off-campus access to library resources and increased self-service options in the main library had improved the situation. However, remote access facilities continue to pose some difficulty for part-time and distance learning students in using library services to full effect. Students spoke of some restrictions when accessing Queen's Online remotely, and University College staff indicated that they were unable to access the main library remotely because of licence issues.

112 The student survey conducted as part of the SWS suggested that most students feel they receive the 'right sort of support' and that facilities are good. IS staff work with schools and students to provide information and communications technology core skills. However, the audit team heard from students in the DATs that some issues have arisen over space shortage and IT access, especially in the Medical Biology Centre where refurbishment and redesignation of computer rooms and facilities, coupled with increasing student numbers (including nursing students) has squeezed space considerably. Staff recognised this but drew attention to the opening of new IT facilities in the nearby Elmwood Learning and Teaching Centre. Staff also stated that there were plans for new computer provision in the Medical Biology Centre. In one DAT area, the team heard that computer access for postgraduate students is limited, with computers for personal use often shared between two or more people, but this was not seen to be a major issue because facilities were also available in laboratories.

113 Library provision is spread over several sites but students who met the audit team did not consider that this posed any problems regarding book access. 24-hour study facilities are restricted to one site only and the team heard that this can mean study facilities are restricted. Although the SWS indicated some shortage of library books, meetings with students did not highlight any particular difficulty in this regard. Students welcomed the availability of electronic access to journals though it was stated that access to some specialist journals was difficult in subjects such as law. Given the emphasis that the University's learning and teaching strategy places on fostering a student-centred learning environment, the team would encourage the University to keep its library provision under review to ensure that changes to structure do not have a negative impact on the student experience.

114 The SWS suggested that the use of postgraduate teaching assistants may mean that the quality of teaching is not necessarily of the same standard as that of full-time lecturers. However, meetings with students did not highlight any general dissatisfaction with the quality of postgraduate student teaching.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

115 Academic guidance and support is provided at both school and University level. The University sees its role as beginning before enrolment, in providing clear information and selection procedures to help students choose the appropriate course. A University welcome and orientation programme is provided for all new students together with a separate programme for international students, well in advance of course commencement and the audit team heard from students that this was seen as a valuable service.

116 The core of the University's academic guidance and support approach for undergraduate students is the school or faculty-based adviser of studies. The University considers that the advisers of studies occupy a 'key role' in providing assistance 'on any matter' for students. Advisers of studies are provided for undergraduate students in all schools and faculties, though their remit and operation varies across the University. Training for advisers of studies is offered by the University STDU. Advisers are a principal source of academic and personal guidance and referral throughout a student's course and details of their roles and functions are published in student handbooks and on faculty internet pages. Additionally, school student support committees and faculty student progress committees monitor individual progress and help to identify and respond to students who might be at risk. The audit team also heard that informal routes for advice and information within schools were valued by students and staff.

117 Postgraduate research students now have two supervisors and the University is currently consulting on their respective support roles. New full-time research students must, and part-time students may, attend a University induction course. Staff new to research degree supervision must attend a course organised by the STDU and a supervisor development course is available for further skill enhancement.

118 The audit team heard from students, in a variety of contexts, that these arrangements were, in general, supportive and efficient. However, there was some variability in the knowledge and expertise of advisers of studies between schools, particularly where students were on programmes that transcended school and faculty boundaries, and also where students found difficulty in taking responsibility for

keeping their adviser informed of any difficulties they may experience. The team considered that there is potential for more dissemination of good practice relating to the adviser of studies scheme through training courses offered by the STDU to reinforce the standard of school and faculty-level guidance for undergraduate students.

119 The University has a well-articulated and disseminated internationalisation strategy and has, as a consequence, developed focused forms of support for its international students. The International Office, in conjunction with Student Services, welcomes and provides an induction programme for newly arrived international students, which students told the audit team was well regarded. The team heard from staff that the English Language Support Unit (ELSU), located within the International Office, offers flexible and appropriate forms of language training for international students. The LTC, among other groups, considers the support needs of international students through an international working group, which includes deans among its membership. Students benefit from a wide range of specialist University services relating to accommodation, careers, counselling, disability and health. The team heard from students that these services were used and valued by both part-time and full-time students of the University.

120 The University has developed a student experience strategic plan, overseen by the Student Services Committee, and one aim of this is to provide effective support for students. The audit team was of the view that this was good evidence of a holistic and inclusive approach by the University to the provision of guidance and support for students, which could be further developed by a more direct concern with international students as a group. Overall, the team concluded that, while individual school practice may vary, within the University's overall guidelines, academic guidance, support and supervision were, in general, effective, thorough and appropriate in aiding student learning.

Personal support and guidance

121 The University provides comprehensive information for prospective applicants and students enrolling at the University, through its prospectus, pathway leaflets and open days, for example. Candidates who hold offers with the University receive an information pack outlining procedures in the admissions period and providing information about accommodation. Students whom the audit team met stated that they had found that visits to local schools by academic members of staff had

proved helpful to them in making pathway choices. Two weeks before the start of semester one, the Student Services Directorate organises a Welcome and Orientation Programme. The programme includes orientation sessions and visits to the libraries, learning and teaching centres, the Sport and Recreation Centre and the Students' Union, in addition to the Freshers Festival and an introduction to student computing facilities. Faculty and school induction sessions complement the University programme. International students who met the team indicated that there is also a three-day induction programme for international students and that they had found this programme to be very helpful. Language courses are available and indeed some international students were even taking courses other than English for their personal development.

122 The previous continuation audit report (2000) commented that the level of pastoral and confidential support provided by advisers varied across the University. The SED indicated that advisers of studies (and postgraduate tutors) have a key role to play in providing support and guidance to students including module selection at registration and, subsequently, they provide a source of support for students as they progress through their pathways. In addition, schools and faculties provide additional support through tutors, year heads, module coordinators and module lecturers, thus ensuring that students have several points of contact. Student progress is monitored primarily at school and faculty level and the SED stated that advisers of studies and school support committees 'are the key mechanisms to support students who are experiencing progression difficulties'. Each faculty has a student progress committee, which meets three or four times a year to consider cases of students giving cause for concern.

123 The audit team heard from staff that advisers of studies may have responsibility for a large number of students and many students to see at the busy times. The team noted that advisers of studies do not normally initiate contact with students after the first meeting unless they are notified of a concern about student performance or attendance and they will then contact students. The students who met the team indicated that they feel able to call on their adviser when necessary although the need seldom arises given the range of support mechanisms available to them, including the Students' Union. In the course of its discussions with students, the team was provided with examples of the type of support provided by advisers of studies and the assistance given to students in making pathway and subject changes, for example. Pastoral

support is also provided by the University chaplains, regardless of religion.

124 Heads of school have overall responsibility for postgraduate research students, and changes in the way that such students are supported mean that the University now ensures that each postgraduate research student has two supervisors who can advise and monitor the student's progress. Postgraduate research students who met the audit team indicated that they valued the supervision system. In addition, they stated that they are required to undergo training if they are employed as teaching assistants. They stated that the training they had received, which included courses on teaching methodology organised at school and faculty level, had been very helpful in carrying out their teaching roles. The team also saw evidence, from one of the DATs, that the University's STDU had facilitated a training course for postgraduate demonstrators.

125 The Careers Service provides guidance, offering a professional service comprising programmes of careers education, information and guidance. It helps students to develop work experience and employability skills and links students to placements, overseas programmes, voluntary work and vacation work and courses.

126 The audit team considered that the onus placed on students to seek support from their adviser of studies was a potential weakness in the student support system as it operates at present. While the adviser is notified if the performance of a student gives cause for concern, by then the situation may have become serious. The team concluded that it would be desirable for the University to enhance the quality of its students' learning experience by greater sharing of good practice in the area of student support.

Collaborative provision

127 Collaborative partnerships account for approximately 100 full-time equivalent students at undergraduate level and 100 full-time equivalent students at postgraduate level. There were 16 collaborative institutions involved at the time of the audit. The University collaborates with Omagh College of Further and Higher Education and with North Down and Ards Institute of Further and Higher Education in relation to Foundation Degree provision. At first degree level and above, it is involved in collaborations with Armagh College of Further and Higher Education (partial franchise), CAFRE (partial franchise), and Omagh College of Further and Higher Education (full franchise and validation). In addition, the University has established links with

ESERP, Barcelona and Madrid (partial validation until 2005) and the Institut of Teknologi Brunei (partial franchise). It also has a range of postgraduate-level collaborations with a variety of partners, within the United Kingdom and overseas, involving: joint award, partial franchise, and validation (partial and full) arrangements. Other collaborations have either been recently approved, but not started recruiting, or are in the developmental stage.

128 While student numbers are quite small, there are key areas of provision that have led to some local colleges becoming partner colleges. Partner colleges have to satisfy a number of criteria and provide extensive information to the VSC before being approved and subsequently reviewed, generally every five years. External colleges or institutions, including collaborative partners with active and developing relationships in pathway areas or staff development, can become 'partner colleges', which are linked by a formal memorandum of association. The aim of partner colleges is to enhance educational opportunities. Current partner colleges include Omagh College of Further and Higher Education, Armagh College of Further and Higher Education and Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education. The University is considering granting partner college status to other institutions. Following a recent Department for Employment and Learning initiative, the University has developed a more strategic approach to its links with further education colleges and the SED stated that the delivery of Foundation Degrees in future will only be through partner colleges. It also stated that future expansion of overseas collaborations must be in line with the University's internationalisation strategy.

129 The University's procedures for monitoring collaborations, including quality assurance arrangements, are documented in the Validation Handbook. The quality assurance arrangements permit either the direct application by the University of its own procedures to the provision or by the collaborating institution using its procedures (but reporting at regular intervals) or a combination of both. The annual monitoring reports require certain aspects to be reported but the audit team considered that these could be further strengthened to provide the University with the necessary assurance that the quality and standard of the awards made through collaborating institutions are maintained.

130 As a result of recommendations relating to the University's procedures for the approval of collaborative arrangements in the continuation audit report (2000), the University appointed an administrator to coordinate collaborative reviews for

new developments and to initiate a process for periodic review. The University has been introducing and amending its procedures relating to collaboration since 2000 and its Validation Handbook, approved by the VSC and LTC, has been revised accordingly. The revisions have been prompted by identifying areas for improvement where there could be greater quality and consistency in operation, such as annual monitoring, and eliminating the variability of documentation for new collaborative proposals. The University is prioritising the periodic review of existing collaborations ahead of further expansion although new collaborations are still being processed.

131 While the APC (which reports to Senate) provides initial approval of collaborative proposals taking account of strategic and resource considerations, the VSC has primary responsibility for the approval of pathways offered by the University under collaborative arrangements. The University's Validation Handbook covers approval of both the external institution and the pathways offered. There are agreement templates available to achieve consistency and to support the approval process. Schools (and potential collaborating institutions) receive assistance in preparing documents and a schedule for validation processes. A validation panel is established to visit the collaborating institution and review the pathway written submission.

132 Validation panels comprise trained internal reviewers with experience of pathway review and an external adviser to help maintain quality and standards. The panel's report is considered by the VSC and pathway regulations are considered by the CRCS. The LTC approves the academic aspects of proposed collaborations and makes recommendations to the Academic Council. The final agreement between the University and the collaborating institution is considered by the Registrar's Office, on behalf of the APC, with final approval reported by the VSC to the LTC. The SED indicated that particular care is taken with any overseas collaborations.

133 Articulation arrangements for granting admission with advanced standing follow a similar approval procedure outlined in the Validation Handbook. This involves final approval by the Access and Entrance Sub-Committee after initial approval by faculty learning and teaching committees and the Admissions Office. The development of articulation programmes involving the University and other institutions are underpinned by formal agreements.

134 The University considers applications from all staff at collaborating institutions seeking to teach and examine on University-validated pathways. The audit team noted that these applications, which are made on standard forms, are approved by senior staff of the University. Recognition is granted for a period of between three and five years after consideration of the application and an assessor's report. The University expects collaborating institutions to monitor recognised teachers with respect to continuing professional development in order to ensure that the quality of their teaching meets the University requirements.

135 The audit team considered that the system for the recognition of individual teachers in collaborating institutions provides an opportunity to enhance the quality of provision in those institutions. It noted, from documentation it saw during the audit, that satisfactory continuing and professional development was a condition of University re-approval as a recognised teacher and that, where records of continuing professional development were missing from renewal applications, these were referred back to the proposing institution.

136 The SED indicated that the University has sought to improve the annual reporting process in respect of its collaborative provision. Consequently, with effect from 2004-05, schools should consider the annual review of collaborative arrangements at the same time as the annual pathway review. University coordinators are responsible for compiling annual reports on collaborative activity, in consultation with the collaborating institutions. These reports, alongside other annual pathway reviews, are considered by the relevant faculty LTC and a summary report, identifying areas of good practice and issues to be considered further, is then forwarded to the VSC. As far as possible, the review of collaborative pathways follows the systems used for internal pathways. A schedule for periodic review of the collaborative arrangement is also in place. Review panels have the opportunity to meet students from the collaborative institution during a review visit.

137 The audit team acknowledged that the latest version of the University Validation Handbook (August 2004) was testimony to the work that has been put into this area of provision by the University. However, it was not clear to the team how the outcomes of the University deliberations on policy and procedure are communicated to collaborating institutions after approval, and before renewal, to ensure a mutual understanding of expectations. To work well, the process requires a systematic flow of information from the University to the collaborating institution and, vice versa, about a range of matters, including quality assurance arrangements.

138 The audit team found the latest version of the Validation Handbook to be comprehensive and noted that it articulated a University principle relating to the need for the academic standard of all awards to be compatible with relevant UK referents including the FHEQ and relevant subject benchmark statements. The team noted, however, that the Handbook contained no explicit mention of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA (or any part of the Academic Infrastructure) in the section on institutional approval or in the section on monitoring and review procedures. It was not clear to the team how the University monitored alignment with the *Code* in its collaborating (and other) institutions to satisfy itself that all sections of the *Code* are applied as the University would wish. In the absence of any evidence of a mechanism that would enable the University to ensure that collaborating (and other) institutions are fully aware of their devolved responsibilities to deliver a service that meets the University's expectations in respect of the Academic Infrastructure, the team formed the view that it would be desirable for the University to incorporate, in its process of annual pathway review, a means to ensure that all institutions with students registered for awards of the University are fully updated of the University's expectations in relation to the Academic Infrastructure.

Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trails

Discipline audit trails

139 In each of the selected DATs, appropriate members of the audit team met staff and students to discuss the pathways, 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 pathways. Findings in respect of the academic standards of awards are as follows.

Anatomy and physiology

140 The DAT covered the following pathways offered by the Departments of Anatomy and Physiology:

- BSc (Hons) in Anatomy (including an intercalated degree option for medical and dental students)

- BSc (Hons) in Biomedical Sciences (including intercalated degrees in Pathology, Pharmacology, and Cardiovascular Science)

- BSc (Hons) in Physiology (including an intercalated degree option for medical and dental students).

The Departments are located within the School of Medicine, which is part of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences.

141 The DSED, which included programme specifications for the awards, had been prepared for a University subject review to be undertaken in October 2005. The programme specifications provided clear evidence that the *Subject benchmark statement* for biosciences had been drawn upon in their construction. Curricular maps were also provided, indicating the relationship between the pathway learning outcomes and the specific modules available for each pathway.

142 Detailed sets of progression and completion data for the pathways from 1999-2000 to 2003-2004 were available. Admission numbers to the physiology degree were small and showed fluctuation from year to year (mean over five years, 11 students). Admission to the anatomy degree was also small but with less variability (mean over five years, seven students). Applications to the BSc degrees in anatomy and physiology were over 10 times the number accepted, the number of places available being restricted by the maximum aggregate student number rule (MASN) which means that no more than 55 to 60 science students per year can be admitted within the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences. The number of intercalated students taking pathways in physiology and anatomy was smaller, totalling three in three years (2001-02 to 2003-04) in physiology, and eight in the same period in anatomy.

143 Modules are reviewed at the end of each semester and module review reports are discussed at the Staff-Student Consultative Committee (SSCC) and at the Science Education Committee (SEC). Annual monitoring takes place in the form of a pathway review and is based upon module review. A new procedure from 2004 will involve a three-year review carried out by the SEC and reported through the committee structure.

144 The ACO considers external examiners' reports and they are then sent to the Dean of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences and the Head of the School of Medicine. Responses from the Head of School are copied to the Academic Council Office and to the Dean. From the sample of external examiners' reports available, and annual monitoring reports provided by the University, the audit team was able to identify a number of matters which had been raised by external examiners and the responses resulting. In subsequent years, the external examiners reported that they were impressed by the willingness of staff to standardize practices and

modify methods, and added that the changes made had been helpful to the examining process.

145 The assessment policies are consistent with the University's procedures detailed in the University 'Framework for the Assessment of Students'. The approaches to assessment are set out clearly in study guides and are directed to achievement of learning outcomes. Assessment methods are varied, and include formative and summative means. They comprise oral and written group reports with elements of peer assessment. Examinations are by way of assessment of practical work and unseen examination papers. Examination papers are anonymised and external examiners play a role in the moderation of marking. The School of Medicine uses a conceptual mark scheme in examination gradings.

146 Examples of assessed work at each of levels 1 to 3 in anatomy and physiology were reviewed and indicated a high standard of achievement, as attested by external examiners' reports, and the quality of material available to the audit team. Particularly notable was the almost universal use of a laboratory-based research project by level 3 students rather than a library-based dissertation. Each student project received financial support from the Faculty to the value of £350, and the external examiners' reports were especially fulsome in praise for this practice. The standard of student achievements was considered to be appropriate for degree awards in anatomy and physiology.

147 There is a single student handbook for anatomy, biomedical science and physiology. This includes aims and describes objectives (rather than learning outcomes) and lists the support services available. These include support and guidance from staff, both of an academic and pastoral nature, library services, and curricular timetables. Details of examination and assessment regulations and attendance requirements, examples of extenuating circumstances that can be considered, and pass requirements for a degree award are provided, though the details of degree classification were in the process of revision and were not included in the student handbook.

148 The main learning resources comprise lecture rooms, laboratory facilities (which are also used by the School of Nursing and Midwifery) and equipment located in the Medical Biology Centre. The audit team heard from students that the space is somewhat limited. It was told by staff that much of the equipment and facilities has been, or is, in the process of being upgraded and that some of the laboratory refurbishment has resulted in a temporary reduction in availability of IT facilities. Although computers are available in the nearby Elmwood

Learning and Teaching Centre, the situation is not entirely satisfactory because students from other areas of the University share these facilities. However, staff envisaged that the situation will be alleviated when new computing facilities are introduced in the Medical Biology Centre in the near future.

149 Formal and informal support mechanisms are available to students. An adviser of studies is appointed in the first year and meets each student on at least one occasion during that year; thereafter the adviser is available for consultation throughout the remaining years of the pathway. Examples of students approaching their adviser for help and advice were given in meetings with students, who found the adviser particularly helpful when wishing to change degree pathway, especially from biomedical subjects to medicine. There is also an open door policy, which enables students to approach staff at all levels if any issues or questions should arise, and meetings with undergraduate and postgraduate students confirmed that this was indeed useful.

150 For intercalated BSc students taking anatomy or physiology there is a student mentoring scheme in which a medical student who has graduated in the previous year acts as a mentor for a group of intercalated students. This was viewed as very helpful by the undergraduate students who met the audit team.

151 The relatively small number of students taking modules in anatomy and physiology facilitates contact with staff in practical classes and tutorials and ensures that problems with non-attendance or poor performance can be dealt with quickly. Poor performance by students results in an interview with the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Student Progress Committee following the end of semester examinations.

152 Arrangements for placements for a year of research study in Nevada, by students in physiology who have studied a neuromuscular physiology module, is taken up by a small number of students. Students and staff viewed this experience as a very positive contribution to their skills and career development. Students are supported during their placement by the University's staff by email, and by former staff of the University in Nevada and a member of the University normally visits Nevada at least once a year.

153 Students are represented on the SSCC which meets at least once each semester; there is one committee for undergraduate students and one for postgraduate students. The SSCCs receive input from module and pathway review processes. Student

feedback from modules is anonymised and analysed by the Medical Education Unit using an optical mark reader. Ratings overall are high with, in particular, positive comment on the quality of teaching, and on peer-group assessment which occurs when students work together at level 1 on a module entitled 'Learning skills for Biomedical Science'.

154 Minutes of SSCC meetings provided examples of changes in teaching and scheduling resulting from student input, including tutorial provision additions and suggestions that module reviews should be placed on Queen's Online. Students are also represented on the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences Learning and Teaching Committee where problematic issues, such as feedback on assignments and employability skills, are addressed.

155 The audit team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities available was suitable for programmes of study leading to the named awards, and that these awards were appropriately situated within the FHEQ.

Chemistry

156 The DAT covered the following pathways offered by the School of Chemistry which is located within the Faculty of Science and Agriculture:

- BSc (Hons) Chemistry

- BSc (Hons) Chemistry with extended studies in Europe

- BSc (Hons) Chemistry with a year in industry

- BSc (Hons) Medicinal Chemistry

- BSc (Hons) Medicinal Chemistry with a year in industry

- MSci (Hons) Chemistry.

157 The DSED was based on the documentation arising from a recent University subject review (May 2003) and included an explanatory introduction, a revised version of the School's submission to the University, the full USR report and the resulting action plan, along with supporting documentation.

158 Provisional programme specifications were provided for the BSc (Hons) Chemistry, MSci (Hons) Chemistry and BSc (Hons) Medicinal Chemistry, including reference to the intercalated years in Europe or in industry where appropriate. Detailed links to the FHEQ are not indicated but the FHEQ level of each final award and the QAA Subject Benchmarking Group are explicitly stated. The specification for the final year of the MSci (Hons) pathway is appropriate for that award. Professional recognition by the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC)

is also recorded. The School's pathways were recently reviewed in the internal University subject review process and are due to be reviewed by the RSC shortly, as part of the process of accrediting the relatively new MSci (Hons) programme and that process will provide a further assessment of the level and completeness of the subject coverage.

159 It was made clear to the audit team that these programme specifications were drafts in an advanced stage of completion but still subject to final approval. It is to be hoped that the final stages will include clarification of the note at the foot of the first page of each specification which states that the specifications summarise 'the programmes and learning outcomes that a typical student might reasonably be expected to achieve and demonstrate if he/she takes full advantage of the learning opportunities that are provided'. Notwithstanding the use of such wording in the guidelines for preparing programme specifications, the team would suggest that the specification should reflect the rather firmer intention, also stated in the guidelines, that a specification should give 'the intended outcomes of the programme in terms of the knowledge and understanding that a student will be expected to have upon completion'.

160 The DSED included some basic progression statistics but the audit team was of the view that a more thorough analysis of the figures should have been undertaken. For example, it would have been instructive to know whether there were correlations between the 'permanent withdrawals' and the grades at GCE A-level obtained by those students in comparison to the average grades of the cohort as a whole, particularly in respect of their grades in chemistry or mathematics, even though the mathematical demands in the earlier years of the pathway have been reduced. It considered that there may be important lessons to be learnt about the content and sequencing of modules that, at best, are perceived only qualitatively at present. These observations, and others noted elsewhere in this audit report, have led the team to advise the University to press forward with its ongoing work in this area.

161 The School had recently undergone a thorough USR. It was clear from the documentation, and from meetings with staff in the School, that the USR had contributed to helping the School continue to develop the improvements that were initiated a few years ago. This included the appointment of several new members of staff, who had been encouraged to introduce new methods of teaching, in which they were helped by their experience on the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education

Teaching. The USR report (May 2003) commended the School on a range of activities and made a number of recommendations. Most of the recommendations have already led to action and the audit team noted that completion of actions by the School on the remainder was close at hand, at which point the process would be formally signed off (see also paragraph 166 below).

162 In addition, individual modules and pathways are reviewed annually through a process that includes input from students and, in the case of the more detailed triennial review of each pathway, some representative employers, as advocated in the University Quality Handbook. The School has devised its own template to assist it in implementing the University recommendations for module review and follows the University procedure for pathway review. Peer observation of teaching is also now being piloted.

163 External examiners' reports are received centrally and copied to the Faculty and School. A printed panel on the front of the standard report form enables the progress of responses to any issues raised to be monitored and, by and large, this process appears to work smoothly. Issues relating solely to the School of Chemistry are dealt with quickly. For example, the recent USR and an external examiner in the same year made recommendations relating to the distribution of relatively demanding topics between stages two and three and the School took effective action. Some issues raised, such as the 'predominance rule', are University-wide in nature and a response to these takes longer because wide consultation may be necessary and because of the relatively long intervals between meetings of some central committees. In such circumstances, the external examiner is sent an interim response soon after receipt of the report.

164 The School makes good use of the methods of assessment expected in chemistry, following University practice and the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*, published by QAA. In accordance with University guidance, the weighting of marks from individual years in determining a student's final classification has been revised recently. In the absence of central guidance on the weighting for a placement year, the School has assigned a weight of 10 per cent to that year and reduced the weight of the second year so as to leave the weight of the final year unchanged. The School has developed the use of spreadsheets for handling the accumulation and analysis of marks from examinations and coursework and has propagated them more widely through the Faculty.

165 The School made available to the audit team a full range of examples of all the different types of assessed student work used in the School. The standard required in the work was appropriate to the qualifications, as confirmed by the external examiners, and the work produced by the best of the students was very good indeed. An interesting development noted in one of the first-year modules was the use of occasional class tests, which were peer-marked using a carefully prescribed marking scheme and then moderated by the responsible member of staff. This team saw evidence that students appreciated this development. In response to a recommendation of the USR, undergraduate and postgraduate student handbooks have recently been introduced. The students assured the team that these have been well received.

166 Staff of the School reiterated two concerns that had been made clear in the DSED. Firstly, as noted in a USR recommendation, the undergraduate laboratories require refurbishment in the near future if they are to remain fit for purpose, a matter which the Dean is reported to be taking forward. Secondly, the central system for allocating lecture rooms can lead to successive lectures in a module being given in different lecture rooms, only one of which may be equipped with a data projector, for example. However, students told the audit team that they are happy with the learning resources available. The team concluded that the apparent inconsistencies can be explained by the students being unaware of the ever-increasing legislative requirements for laboratories, and by the staff making successful efforts to cope with the differently equipped lecture rooms.

167 Staff and students confirmed what the DSED said about student support. Although use of progression and completion statistics is still at a basic level, the School is qualitatively aware of progression issues. Steps have been taken to encourage attendance at tutorials (by assigning a component of coursework credit to them) and, as the students confirmed, by seeking to monitor the commitment of many students to part-time employment, which members of staff believe is having a deleterious effect on the academic progress of some. The postgraduate students who met the audit team were satisfied with the support and facilities available to them and confirmed that those who teach in undergraduate laboratories have to undertake training beforehand.

168 The School consults its students in a variety of ways. The audit team saw evidence of the use of questionnaires, of consultative committee meetings and of student involvement in module and pathway

reviews. In addition, the students confirmed that there are many opportunities for informal interaction with members of staff. Issues raised covered matters ranging from details of timetabling to unsuccessful practicals and the team saw evidence of remedial actions taken, for example, the removal of a practical from the undergraduate series and its use instead to provide an example of a good practical report. The Postgraduate SSCC has recently been rejuvenated and has demonstrably been active, to the satisfaction of the students who met the team.

169 In practice the feedback mechanisms appear to work well and to be effective but the minutes of many of the SSCC meetings are records simply of the discussions in the meetings recorded with no reference to actions taken on points raised at previous such meetings. Furthermore, the system of having lots of separate meetings for individual modules or small groups of modules makes it less easy for students to comment on broader matters within the School other than in the formal context of pathway review.

170 In general, the audit team considered that the learning opportunities are suitable for the pathways offered although the teaching laboratories are in need of refurbishment if the quality of the learning opportunities is to be maintained. In addition, it came to the view that the students are able to achieve a very good grounding in chemistry but believed that there is potential to improve the pathways by making fuller use of progression and completion statistics to inform their further development. The team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities available was suitable for programmes of study leading to the award of the named awards in the School of Chemistry and that these awards were appropriately situated within the FHEQ.

Civil engineering

171 The DAT covered all the taught provision in the School of Civil Engineering, which is located within the Faculty of Engineering, as follows:

- BEng Civil Engineering
- MEng Civil Engineering
- MEng Environmental and Civil Engineering
- MEng Structural Engineering with Architecture
- MSc/Diploma Environmental Engineering
- MSc/Diploma Engineering Computation.

172 The DSED was based on the documentation arising from a recent University subject review (December 2003) and included an explanatory introduction, the original SED produced by the

School for the USR, the USR report, the resulting action plan and draft programme specifications for all the awards with the exception of the MSc/Diploma Engineering Computation, which is largely a conversion course that does not meet the FHEQ requirements for master's programmes. The School offers all its undergraduate programmes in full-time or sandwich mode, and offers a City and Guilds Senior Award to those who satisfactorily complete industrial placements. The School also operates a collaborative partial franchise with the Institut of Teknologi in Brunei.

173 The School had recently undergone a professional body accreditation visit in October 2004 and was awaiting the visit report. A copy of the PSRB submission by the School was made available to the audit team on request.

174 All programme specifications make reference to the appropriate subject benchmark statement (SBS) and the learning outcomes reflect consideration of the SBS. While the modules clearly denote the level of attainment, the audit team noted that the learning outcomes for the BEng and MEng Civil Engineering programmes are currently identical, though achievable at different levels. The team considered that demonstrable achievement of learning outcomes at appropriate levels could be mapped more clearly to give confidence that graduates from the two courses do meet the stated learning outcomes. The aims of the BEng and MEng Civil Engineering programmes are marginally, but suitably, distinguished from each other.

175 Comprehensive progression and completion data for the BEng and MEng pathways were available. These are required by the accrediting body and the monitoring of such data is an important consideration in gaining the accredited status that the School's undergraduate courses hold. Issues regarding progression through the early stages, especially level 2, are being addressed. The School uses the data for reporting on entry, progression and completion in pathway monitoring. It has done well, in recent years, in obtaining employment destination information from its graduates. Limited data were provided for the MSc/Diploma pathways but the data show variable, albeit healthy, levels of intake and achievement.

176 The School's internal monitoring and review system is thorough and is set out in its strategy for learning, teaching and assessment. A teaching coordinator manages learning and teaching. At undergraduate level, subject areas have teaching groups for vertical management, and level

coordinators for horizontal management. Postgraduate courses have a course leader. An adviser of studies provides overall support for undergraduate students. All of these personnel and the Head of School are members of the School Learning and Teaching Committee (SLTC), which carries out annual pathway review and module review and reports to the School Board. Individual teachers carry out self-evaluation through feedback from students, module evaluations, peer observation of teaching, external examiners' comments, staff appraisal and other means. The audit team saw from internal documentation, and heard from staff and students, that internal monitoring and review work well within the School. The School has also recently undertaken an internal review of its MSc/Diploma Environmental Engineering postgraduate provision using the undergraduate pathway review practice methodology.

177 The School possesses comprehensive minutes of its boards of examiners' meetings and addresses points made in the external examiners' reports within the required reporting deadlines. Matters are taken to the SLTC as required. The School operates a thorough system of overlapping (by one year) external examiners by appointing a new one every two years.

178 A wide variety of assessment methods are used. As a result of the USR, the School has conducted an exercise to match learning outcomes of modules and pathways in respect of assessment methods. Particular attention has also been paid to assessment methods in levels 0, 1 and 2 to assist student progression. The assessed work seen by the audit team showed evidence of careful marking in accordance with stated procedures as documented in a noteworthy manual of good practice for staff. External examiners have commented on the high standard of setting and marking examination papers. A variety of types of coursework, including projects and surveying work, was scrutinised and found to be suitably demanding, testing a range of skills. The standard of student achievement is appropriate to the title and type of award within the FHEQ.

179 The postgraduate handbook is very comprehensive, while the undergraduate handbook is rather thinner but is supplemented by further information handed out at registration, or at the commencement of modules. Overall, the students were satisfied with the information provided and they also commented on the accessibility of the adviser of studies for further information, as required.

180 Students indicated that learning resources were adequate but stated that some proposed changes to the space in the School would impact on the IT facilities and space available to them. They also

commented on a general lack of communal space in the School. The staff were generally sympathetic to the students' observations and were also concerned about the loss of space.

181 The School operates three SSCCs, one for undergraduate programmes, one for postgraduate taught courses and one for postgraduate research. Both the postgraduate taught and research SSCCs are chaired by a member of academic staff and supported by a student elected as secretary. The undergraduate SSCC is chaired by the Learning and Teaching Coordinator and supported by a permanent member of clerical staff as secretary. Issues raised tend to be concerned with matters related to pathways, the assessment of modules or the availability of facilities. The SSCCs meet as required by the University, reporting to the SLTC and incorporating annual review of modules (and pathways) in their business through joint meetings with the School's Curriculum Review Group. All matters raised are addressed appropriately and involve the students in the management of quality in the School. One member of the undergraduate SSCC is also a representative on the University Academic Board. The students were very supportive of the School and the guidance they receive.

182 The audit team considered that the industrial liaison activity is exemplary in its thoroughness and in the opportunities afforded to students. Full-time students and sandwich students are able to gain extra qualifications through a structured amount of work experience or placement activity. The involvement of external practitioners in the delivery of modules is also a positive feature. The School's engagement with, and subsequent follow-up to, the USR demonstrates that the USR system is working well. The team considered that the programme specifications, as presented, would benefit from more demonstrable statements confirming engagement with the FHEQ, the relevant *Subject benchmark statement* and the mapping of learning outcomes.

183 The audit team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities available was suitable for programmes of study leading to the named awards, and that these awards were appropriately situated within the FHEQ.

Sociology and social policy

184 The DAT covered the following pathways in the School of Sociology and Social Policy, which is located within the Faculty of Legal Social and Educational Sciences:

● BA (Hons) Sociology

● BA (Hons) Women's Studies

- BA (Hons) Policy Studies
- BA (Hons) Social Policy joint with Sociology and Women's Studies
- MA in Religion and Society
- MA in Women and Gender Studies
- MRes in Social Research Methods.

185 The DSED comprised the 2002 University subject review (USR) documents and the subsequent reports and recorded responses, together with programme specifications and a statistical update. The *Subject benchmark statement* for sociology and social policy clearly and appropriately underpinned the programme specifications for the sociology, social policy and policy studies undergraduate programmes and it had been used to support the curriculum design of women's studies and to inform that of the MA pathways. The aims and learning outcomes of the pathways reflected the appropriate levels of the FHEQ.

186 Basic data on student progression and awards is collected and distributed to the pathway teams by the University. This is augmented by additional data collected by the School staff, from central and local sources, and this is used imaginatively and analytically to inform the School's projects on student performance, and to monitor both marking and performance standards across the pathways. Progression and award data are used as part of module, pathway and subject review and clearly support the various School committees and groups concerned with curricular design and student achievement.

187 Module evaluations, now collected both electronically and on paper, were valued as performance indicators to support regular modifications to teaching practice. The audit team heard, and saw good evidence, that the culture of the School was one which prioritised the student experience and in which review of that experience, in terms of the curriculum and its delivery, was embedded. Modifications to teaching and learning practice within the School were both regular and well analysed. The USR had been a thorough and focused mechanism for managing change in the pathways and review, in general, was seen as a progressive and practical form of enhancement as well as of monitoring. Module, pathway and subject review were coherently connected. This overall School ownership of review generated distinctive School enhancement projects and also encouraged constructive responses to Faculty and University initiatives.

188 Curricular review was substantially driven by a concern, in all pathways, for improved student learning. Part-time staff and teaching assistants were fully incorporated in this approach and the audit team saw good evidence of the School's concern for the training, mentoring, development and integration of these teachers and of new staff members, specifically in support of teaching and learning.

189 External examiners' reports, which were constructive and expressed general satisfaction with the programmes, were reviewed by the School Learning and Teaching Committee (SLTC) and prompt and full responses sent to external examiners by the Head of School. External examiners' reports were used in pathway and subject review processes. The School had undertaken an audit of its pathway assessment strategies as part of the USR which had been used subsequently as a potential model for the University. The wide range of assessment techniques across the modules supported the learning outcomes in the programme specifications and useful and accurate summaries were detailed in the student handbooks. The audit team was able to see a variety of assessed student work in all pathways which was moderated using a consistent procedure and, on this basis, was able to conclude that the standard of student achievement is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location in the FHEQ.

190 The audit team heard from the students that the programme student handbooks, also available on-line, and which contained extensive information about most aspects of the pathways including information relating to advisers of studies, were detailed, practical guides. The adviser of studies system provided personal and academic support for students both in the form of direct advice and referral to other services. Although the University provided training for advisers of studies, some students were concerned about the level of appropriate knowledge of some advisers. The School is encouraged to develop further its current response to students' concerns by considering the more systematic provision of academic advice.

191 Library materials and access to computers were appropriate, but there were some student concerns that study space had become restricted following the temporary closure of some library areas. Student use of Queen's Online, which was seen by the students as a useful support, was being reviewed by the SLTC after discussion in the Staff-Student Consultative Committee. The latter committee, which is chaired by a student, is the formal mechanism for collective student feedback to the School on most pathway matters. This is supplemented by strong informal communication mechanisms, aided by good staff availability in published office hours.

192 The audit team concluded that the quality of the learning opportunities available to students was suitable for programmes of study leading to the named awards and that these awards were appropriately situated within the FHEQ.

Theology

193 The University's Charter precludes the employment of staff to teach theology. Consequently, theology is taught in a number of independent colleges, which have been formally recognised by the University for over 70 years, to provide that teaching on its behalf. The work of these colleges is coordinated by the Institute of Theology, a unit within the Faculty of Humanities, and headed by a Director who is appointed from among the University's full-time, senior academic staff within another discipline. Four colleges, namely: Belfast Bible College; Edgehill Theological College; Irish Baptist College; and Union Theological College currently teach theology pathways. In accordance with the provisions of the University's Charter, no test of religious belief is imposed on any person as a condition of being a student for any degree, diploma or certificate, or of passing any examination in theology. The denominational character of the colleges refers only to their foundation, and each college welcomes students from a range of religious affiliations and ethnic backgrounds.

194 The member colleges of the Institute are 'integrated into the Faculty of Humanities' quality assurance procedures'. The VSC is responsible for assuring the University that those who teach on the University's degrees in theology are of a suitable academic standard and the colleges have the necessary resources to deliver the pathways effectively. The University makes no input to the appointment of members of staff in the theological colleges and is not obliged to accept any individual member of college staff as a recognised teacher. The VSC vets all requests for such recognition.

195 The Director mediates and manages the relationship between the University and the member colleges, interprets the University's requirements in the light of the colleges' distinctive characteristics and provides one of the means of ensuring consistency across all the colleges. A range of active strategic and operational committees, including the Institute Board, which comprises Institute and University members, inform and guide the Director's work.

196 The DAT covered all the undergraduate and postgraduate pathways offered by the Institute of Theology as follows:

- Bachelor of Divinity in single honours

- Bachelor of Theology in single or major honours
- Bachelor of Arts in joint honours
- Master of Divinity
- Master of Theology
- Diploma in Theology
- Postgraduate Diploma in Theology.

197 The DSED, which was compiled specifically for the DAT, comprised an introductory commentary on the Institute's structure, the aims of its provision, its curricula and their assessment, learning opportunities, its quality processes, a series of supporting statistical and related appendices, and programme specifications for all the pathways.

198 Programme specifications have been informed by the FHEQ. However, the current specifications were produced before the University decided to require all pathways to differentiate between levels two and three. Consequently, the Institute is revising its programme specifications to meet these new requirements. All the pathways make full and explicit use of the *Subject benchmark statement* for theology and religious studies. As the Institute follows the University's quality assurance policies and practices, the 'University Framework on the QAA Code of Practice' underpins the provision. In particular, the DSED explained how the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA, is being used in the Institute. Through the involvement of staff in key committees of church and voluntary and other employers' organisations, the Institute is able to make its curricula responsive to external needs. The Institute is actively considering ways in which it can extend and formalise its external relationships.

199 The DSED reported on the very low rate of non-completion among its students: some 97 per cent of the undergraduate and postgraduate students admitted in the last three years have achieved the award for which they registered. This represents an average of five or six students a year who fail to complete. The DSED presented data on admissions, progression and achievement, which are considered by the Institute during the annual pathway review process. The relatively small numbers of students taking theology pathways, and the very low level of non-retention, limit the demands the Institute makes on central University data. However, Institute staff were aware that there are additional data sets available as standard reports for student information, which can supplement their own detailed local knowledge of the student cohorts.

200 The Institute compared the distribution of its students' degree classifications with schools in the Faculty of Humanities and with the subject across the higher education sector and concluded that the Institute awards more Firsts and Upper Seconds than 'the majority of Schools in the Faculty of Humanities, and…[was] very similar to the national norm'. As evidence of the Institute's success in teaching a diverse student population, the DSED noted that 79 per cent of mature students admitted with 'non-traditional…or with low entry qualifications (10 points and under)' obtained firsts or upper seconds.

201 The audit team found that the Institute follows the standard University procedures for annual module and pathway review. Students' evaluations of modules, which provide helpful information to module convenors, contribute to the pathway review meeting, as do the deliberations of the intercollegiate subject boards. The Faculty of Humanities Learning and Teaching Committee considers the resulting report before incorporating it into the Faculty's overview report to the University's LTC. The team saw evidence that, where necessary, the Faculty requests further clarification or information from the Institute. The process, thus, provides feedback at both module and pathway level, and functions effectively as a mechanism for both quality assurance and quality enhancement.

202 From its reading of external examiners' reports, the audit team confirmed that, as stated in the DSED, external examiners have, 'been extremely complimentary about…standards and course content'. The Director responds to the reports from the six external examiners usually within three weeks, and often within a week, of receiving a report, explaining fully and clearly the Institute's or the University's position on matters raised or action to be taken. The external examiners are satisfied with this process, which is monitored by the ACO and, through the pathway review, by the Faculty Learning and Teaching Committee.

203 Different types of assessment tasks have been introduced to the Institute's assessment strategy in recent years, so that now, for example, reflective journals and tutorial contributions supplement essays and timed unseen examinations. As part of the debate on the introduction of levels 2 and 3, the Institute has rethought its standard pattern of assessment to reflect the differing intellectual demands expected of students at each level. The audit team learned from the DSED, and from staff in the discipline, that assessment is implemented consistently across the Institute's provision through its seven subject boards. The boards operate an effective system of internal

moderation of examination scripts. The Institute's approach to assessment was found to be congruent with the University assessment strategy as described in the University Quality Handbook and reflects the principles of the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*, published by QAA. In particular, the students commented on the timeliness with which assignments are returned, at most within three weeks and frequently well before that, and the helpfulness of the tutors' comments on the cover sheets and on the assignments themselves. The examples of the assessed work read demonstrated that the aims of the pathways were being met, that the range of learning outcomes set out in the programme specifications were being achieved, and that the standards were consistent across the four member colleges.

204 Students indicated that they were entirely satisfied with the volume, type, clarity and usefulness of the information they received. This information includes separate handbooks for undergraduate and postgraduate students, brief module descriptions, which are available through Queen's Online, to give students an initial indication of a module's aims, content and assessment regime, and a fuller module guide, which is distributed at the start of a module. The students noted some variability in the level of detail in the module guides. Although the Institute has developed separate programme specifications for all its awards, it has taken the view that it wants to do more work on the specifications to ensure that the documents are of maximum use to all the intended users. Once the Institute is satisfied it has achieved this goal, it intends to make the material available on its website.

205 Students have access to their own college's library, IT and other learning resources; to the libraries of the other colleges in the Institute; and to the University's resources. Students make use of all three sets of resources and are very positive about the range and quantity of the resources available to them. They are equally positive about the academic and pastoral support to which they have access. Undergraduate, postgraduate taught and research, full-time and part-time students are all provided with exemplary formal and informal support. While regular and frequent academic and pastoral tutorials form part of the students' structured timetable, all tutors are readily available for additional, unscheduled discussions about academic or personal matters.

206 The interactive nature of the teaching provides another source of immediate academic support. The students emphasised that the Institute and the colleges' administrative and secretarial staff also play an important role in the network of support. The audit

team fully endorses the Institute's judgement that the 'progress of our students is a matter of primary concern to all staff within the Institute. The success of our students is enhanced by the pro-active concern…for students' development and future careers…'. All the undergraduate students who met the team were aware of the senior adviser of studies and of the support services in the University, which a number of the students had used. Students noted that Queen's Online is a valuable resource that is being used increasingly by staff. Students were enthusiastic about the joint teaching on modules by staff from two or more of the colleges, and the opportunity to take modules on offer in other colleges. Both of these strategies enriched the curricula.

207 Pathway reviews provide an opportunity to monitor resources. In addition, subject boards have an overview of the provision in their specialist areas, and the Institute Board and Standing Committee of the Director and the Principals review resource matters, as necessary and appropriate. In response to these reviews, the Institute is able to fund the purchase of cross-college learning resources such as costly databases.

208 All students feed back on modules through the end of module evaluations and contribute to the annual pathway review. Student representatives participate in the SSCC, which meets once a semester and is chaired by the Senior Adviser of Studies. Students sit on the Institute's learning and teaching and postgraduate committees. The introduction of learning journals has provided a further source of feedback for staff. The SSCC has been given opportunities to comment on, inter alia, the new classification algorithm, the changes in the assessment regime, the intended review of the level one curricula, the restructuring of the M Theology, IT provision and the development of on-line learning materials. The Director and the Senior Adviser of Studies respond to students' concerns and any actions are reported to the next SSCC.

209 From its reading and discussions with the students, the audit team concluded that students' concerns were dealt with appropriately. Although SSCC minutes are posted on notice boards in each of the colleges and the Institute's University Office, not all students were aware of the outcomes of the Committee's deliberations, nor of the follow-up to module evaluations. While the closeness of the college communities facilitates very effective informal communications between students and staff, as the DSED observes, the Institute might like to consider how it can extend the ways in which its students are more extensively informed about the Institute's quality processes.

210 The audit team concluded that the range and scale of learning resources available to the students and the outstanding pastoral and academic support provided in the Institute were suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards and that these awards were appropriately situated within the FHEQ.

Section 4: The audit investigations: published information

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

211 Intending students have access to printed and internet-based versions of the University's prospectus. New students are provided with a helpful array of pre-entry and joining instructions. As a minimum, all students receive a handbook appropriate to their pathway and/or school. Module descriptions and more detailed module guides are also widely available. The website for current students provides easily navigable links to all the University's key services, including the secure examination results page. Each school has created its own website, which contains a variety of school-based information, as well as links to other University web pages. These sites are at different stages of development, as is the use of Queen's Online, the University's virtual learning environment. Some schools publish programme specifications on an intranet or in handbooks but this is not universal practice at present. It is intended that all programme specifications will be published once revised specifications have been developed.

212 Other than referring to the University's publications scheme, which is a response to the Freedom of Information Act, the SED does not comment on the University's processes for assuring the quality of published information. However, the audit team learned from its discussions that heads of school are responsible for ensuring the accuracy of any information produced centrally that is published about their school. Faculties undertake a further 'filtering' before the material can be distributed by the University's Information Services. Implementation groups, established to monitor the application of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, have an overview of the information relevant to each section of the *Code*. When necessary, a University committee will recommend the review of material pertinent to its work. For example, the LTC commissioned work on admissions information in the light of the relevant section of the *Code*.

213 The SWS indicated that students are very positive about the quality and clarity of information they receive although some handbooks need to be updated, and 'course information [is] clear and concise'. However, students desire greater clarity about the standards required for, and the method of calculation of, degree classifications and the difference in standards between stages one and two. The SWS suggested that the compulsory module requirement also causes 'some confusion'. The University addressed these concerns as part of the dialogue between the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students and Learning) and the Students' Union President. Appeals and complaints procedures are readily accessible in printed handbooks or through the University website.

214 In the DAT meetings, students reinforced the SWS' view that the information they receive, both on-line and in paper form, is reliable and clearly presented. The students reported that the handbooks and related documentation provided all that they needed to know about the operation, structure, curriculum and assessment of their pathway. Queen's Online was regarded as a particularly valuable source of information. Although there is not a single template for the production of handbooks, all those seen by the audit team included similar core items.

215 The audit team agreed with the students' perception that there was a suitable range of well-produced, accurate and accessible information available in appropriate formats. However, programme specifications are the one item of information that is not routinely available to students and other interested groups, such as employers. The systematic publication of programme specifications for each pathway would make it easier for students and others to have a fuller understanding of a pathway's outcomes and standards.

Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information

216 The uploading of the summaries of external examiners' reports was in train at the time of the audit and the University is confident that it will meet the current deadlines for Teaching Quality Information (TQI) requirements. A summary of the University's learning and teaching strategy and an account of how the University 'measures and responds to' employers' needs have been posted. The LTC has approved summary reports of two University subject reviews (for Environmental Planning and the Institute of Professional Legal Studies) for publication as the start of its schedule for making internal periodic reviews widely available.

217 The University holds all the other information and datasets required by HEFCE 03/51, *Information*

on quality and standards: Final guidance. As noted earlier, the exception to the University's preparedness for meeting HEFCE 03/51 is the variable availability of programme specifications. The audit team learnt that, initially, some parts of the University had interpreted these in terms of the codification of pathway regulations. The wider aspects of the specifications had been used as a developmental tool for staff teams. However, the University subsequently adopted full programme specifications and now requires these as key documents for University subject review. (All the discipline audit trails provided programme specifications.) By the summer of 2005 it is intended that specifications will be in place for all undergraduate and taught postgraduate pathways. In moving towards that goal, the CRSC has received a range of programme specifications.

218 In addition to internet access to the Quality Handbook and related documents, all key staff, such as deans, heads of school, and Chairs of faculty learning and teaching committees, receive hard copies of this documentation. The audit team noted that some schools have developed their own staff handbooks, particularly for part-time staff.

219 Based on written evidence and discussions with key staff, the audit team concluded that the University is making good progress in meeting the TQI requirements. The published TQI information reflects accurately what the University reported it intended to publish. The statements on the learning and teaching strategy and employers' needs are informative. The University has followed the template included in HEFCE 03/51 and the external examiners' summaries adhere to the template.

220 The University website is a well-designed resource that provides considerable, up to date detail on all aspects of the University for internal and external users. There are dedicated pages for business and the community. Documentation intended for internal users, such as the Quality Handbook and related documents, is thorough in its coverage and provides all staff with clear guidelines on the University's processes.

221 As the University acknowledged, the current work on programme specifications is designed to introduce their use systematically across the institution. Once this has been achieved, the University will have in place a further mechanism for assuring itself through its committees, its students and its external stakeholders of the appropriateness of the standards of its awards.

Findings

Findings

222 An institutional audit of the University was undertaken during the week 6 to 10 December 2004. 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 HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, five audit trails 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

223 The University's procedures for quality management are documented in the Quality Handbook and three supplementary handbooks for subject review, external examiners and validation of collaborative provision. Many of the procedures have recently been modified and redefine roles for individuals and committees. The main committee with responsibility for the quality of programmes is the University's Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) which has five sub-committees, including the Courses and Regulations Sub-Committee, (CRSC), the Validation Sub-Committee (VSC) and the Quality and Enhancement Sub-Committee (QESC). CRSC grants final approval of pathway content on behalf of the LTC, the VSC is responsible for collaborative arrangements and the QESC considers good practice, recommendations and trends for wider dissemination and the development of enhanced procedures. Faculty learning and teaching committees, which report to the QESC and CRSC, are responsible for ensuring the University's quality assurance procedures are carried out and for disseminating information about the University's quality assurance policies to schools within each faculty.

224 In matters of quality enhancement, apart from the QESC, the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) plays a key role in supporting schools, monitoring University subject review follow-up actions and identifying good practice for wider dissemination across the University. The audit found that the University's teaching awards scheme, the availability and content of the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching (PGHET) programme and the University's responsiveness to students constituted areas of good practice within the University.

225 Pathway approval procedures, reviewed in 2003, have resulted in a stronger role for the dean and a strengthened faculty evaluation stage. The audit team considered that the system adopted was comprehensive, provided that appropriate use was made of externality in the approval process. The team noted from the Quality Handbook that pathway evaluation panels would 'normally comprise' an adviser external to the University and formed the view that the quality of pathways could be ensured, and possibly enhanced, if the pathway approval procedures required external input to the programme design, initial approval and membership of the pathway evaluation monitoring panel. Consequently, the team believed it would be desirable for the University to consider whether the pathway approval procedures, as currently articulated in the Quality Handbook, enable it to be satisfied that sufficient use is always made of suitably qualified independent subject and/or professional experts external to the University to advise on the appropriateness of the quality and standards of its provision.

226 The pathway and module monitoring procedures have recently been changed in order to make better use of resources. School and faculty consideration of new modules/amendments to existing modules or withdrawal of modules involve the use of an electronic pro forma, while retaining the need to review modules against external examiner comments and student feedback. The new system for pathway review requires a full review every three years and a 'lighter touch' in other years. The audit team found, through the discipline audit trails (DATs), that good use was made of the new reporting systems for module and pathway review and appropriate consultations were carried out. However, the team found that there was potential to make greater use of progression and completion statistics to inform the annual monitoring process. School systems fed into the appropriate faculty learning and teaching committee, which forwarded summaries to the QESC to identify good practice for wider dissemination.

227 The early development of a system for periodic subject review was recommended in the continuation audit report (2000), resulting in a comprehensive University subject review (USR) process that is fully documented in the University Subject Review Handbook. Through the DATs, all stages of the USR process were observed and found to be executed rigorously with evidence of significant involvement of external advisers in the process. The audit team concluded that the USR process, as implemented by the University, was a feature of good practice.

228 The University has around 200 full-time equivalent students on collaborative pathways. The Validation Handbook covers the approval, monitoring and review of all collaborative provision, including articulations and has been updated regularly, most recently in August 2004. Further revision will be required to accommodate more information for distributed and distance learning programmes following the release of the revised *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*), *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning* (including e-learning) (2004), published by QAA. The Validation Handbook is a comprehensive document, incorporating systems for collaborating institutions to be recognised as partner colleges and for teachers in collaborating institutions to acquire recognised teacher status. The University system requires separate approval of the collaborative partner and the collaborative pathway. However, it was not clear to the audit team how collaborating institutions were kept informed of the University's expectations concerning their implementation of the Academic Infrastructure, or how the University monitored responses to those expectations. Consequently, the team concluded that the University could strengthen its assurance that the quality and standards of its collaborative provision are satisfactory, by incorporating into its process of annual review a means of ensuring that all institutions with students registered for awards of the University are aware of the University's expectations in relation to the Academic Infrastructure.

229 The audit team considered that there was inconsistent quantity and use of information from employers although it believed that the new approval, monitoring and review procedures should lead to greater consistency across disciplines. The University has developed a new system for handling reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) which should enable the University to ensure that good practice is disseminated and recommendations are responded to effectively.

230 Student representation at an operational level was appropriate through staff-student consultative committees and the Academic Board, There was evidence that students contribute to curriculum review as well as providing feedback on modules to the relevant school. Students were generally very supportive of the staff in their schools and of the academic support services provided by the schools and the University, in general. Officers of the Students' Union were represented on key committees at an institutional level and the Students' Union offered training to course representatives.

231 The findings of the audit confirm that broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's current and future management of the quality of its provision. The USR system is indicative of good practice and the University is encouraged to consolidate the use of external advisers in the pathway approval process and to ensure that University policy and practice is communicated to, and implemented by, all institutions that contribute to awards of the University.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

232 Standards for awards are established as part of the pathway and module approval processes. They are confirmed by external examiners, annually at pathway review and, periodically, at University subject review. The LTC is, in effect, the key University body for 'the monitoring and enhancement of the quality and standards of learning, teaching, assessment and curricula of the subject areas leading to an award of the University'. It is supported in its work by the VSC, which is responsible for assuring the academic standards of the relatively small amount of collaborative provision; and by the CRSC, which approves new courses, revisions to pathway regulations and oversees the implementation of the FHEQ. Each faculty and school has its own learning and teaching committee to take forward University and local issues. Associate deans in each faculty play a major role in quality assurance at faculty level.

233 The University recognises that its use of statistical data to inform decisions about, for example, the design of the curricula, learning and teaching strategies, and student support mechanisms needs to be further developed. It is working on a range of projects to enhance this element of its decision-making and has introduced a working group on supporting student attainment. The introduction of the new classification algorithm illustrated how the University could make effective use of the data it had collected.

234 Boards of examiners play a key role in confirming the standards of achievement of students at module and award levels. Informal feedback from external examiners at the boards complements the formal external examiner reporting system to ensure that standards are maintained and enhanced. In an attempt to achieve greater consistency in the implementation of its classification algorithm, the University has introduced a new rule that requires faculties to select one of two weightings between stages two and three for three-year honours degrees. (There is just one model for extended undergraduate

degrees.) As part of its review of the degree classification algorithms, the University clarified the processes for rounding a student's final mark. Boards of examiners still have discretion to discount 'a low scoring module for classification purposes, where there is clear evidence that the module mark...does not reflect the student's normal level of performance'. External examiners appointed to collaborative programmes make their reports according to the University's standard procedures. These reports are considered by the relevant faculty learning and teaching committee and are summarised for the VSC.

235 The SED concluded that 'The University has confidence that the quality assurance mechanisms in place for the control of quality and standards and the reliability, accuracy and completeness of information are robust and effective...'. The SED identified and cited examples of specific strengths and limitations of the system Examples of the former included the value of external examiners' visits to collaborative institutions and the effectiveness of cross-moderation in collaboration while examples of the latter included the laconic nature of some external examiners' reports, and the lacunae in the University's former approach to module and pathway approval, periodic review and the follow-up to external accreditations.

236 The committee structure is well understood in the University. There is considerable cross-membership of school, faculty and University committees, which allows a common understanding of how standards are managed and secured. However, the audit team noted that the LTC's terms of reference imply, rather than state explicitly, its role as the University's senior committee for assuring the standards of the University's awards.

237 External examiners' reports are scrutinised with care at subject, school and, via annual review, at faculty level. Heads of school respond to external examiners to demonstrate how their comments will be acted on in the coming year. The CRSC's annual analysis of institutional issues raised by external examiners provides an effective mechanism for the consideration of how issues might be resolved and for ensuring that all schools and faculties are made aware of matters that have been identified in other parts of the University.

238 Although the University is working actively on the development and use of datasets that can support judgements about assessment, learning and teaching, the audit team agreed with the University's own evaluation that there remains a considerable amount of work to be done in ensuring that the data, especially on progression and

achievement, are regularly and easily accessible to all staff who need them and that staff are appropriately prepared to make use of the data.

239 Despite the move to a reduced number of options for the weighting of stages two and three, and clarification of the procedures for rounding, the audit team concluded that inconsistencies in the treatment of finalists could still occur under the new regulations. For example, students with the same profile of module grades could be awarded a different classification according to the weighting used by the students' faculty. Some boards of examiners may choose to exercise their right to discount a module, while others may not. The team also noted that the rules for progression from one stage to the next and for compensation could be applied differently across faculties. However, the team found no evidence that the variations in the application of the University regulations for classification, progression or compensation threatened the standards of the awards made and external examiners confirmed the appropriateness and comparability of standards in all the DAT subjects.

240 In view of its findings, the audit team concluded that it would be advisable for the University to reconsider the terms of reference of the LTC to make explicit the Committee's responsibility for maintaining an overview of the academic standards of the University's awards. Furthermore, the team considered that the variations in the application of the University regulations for classification, progression or compensation have the potential for creating differential treatment of, and different perceptions of the standards required by, students. Consequently, it advised the University to further develop the assessment framework with a view to securing greater commonality of judgement and practice across the University with regard to progression rules and degree classifications. From the evidence available to the team, it appeared that the systems for maintaining standards on collaborative programmes are working effectively. However, the team concluded that it would be desirable for the University to undertake further work to ensure that the Academic Infrastructure is fully understood, and implemented in the way the University requires, by collaborative partners.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

241 Library, computing services, audiovisual services and a language centre have been brought under a single Information Services Directorate, which is proposed to provide integration of services to staff

and students. Electronic access to library journals, both on and off-campus, has been implemented and is used increasingly by staff. Students confirmed that this was viewed as a positive enhancement. It was clear to the audit team that facilities controlled by the Information Services Directorate were an effective provision for staff and students alike, although remote access for students was not always easily achieved and staff at the University Colleges do not have full access to electronic journals. The development of Queen's Online can be considered to be an important facility for both staff and students, and it was apparent in meetings with staff and students that increasing use of this resource is being made. While there is some pressure on library facilities, the approved investment of £41 million in 2009 promises to enhance services and alleviate pressures caused by expansion in student numbers.

242 Personal support for students is effected through a variety of means, most importantly via advisers of studies, but there is onus on students to approach their adviser after an initial meeting. There are also pastoral care systems available by way of a counselling service, the Students' Union and through the University chaplains. The procedures for induction and support of newly appointed staff are effective and aspects of support are commendable. The audit team heard from staff that induction includes a course on lecturing techniques. A number of other items to enhance teaching are used, namely, peer observation of teaching, appraisal, and the PGCHET, available to full- or part-time staff. Completion of the PGCHET is one requirement for promotion from Lecturer A to B. A pilot of the University's personal development planning system will involve use of Queen's Online. A University teaching awards scheme was introduced in 1998-99, with the aim of rewarding examples of good teaching activity by individuals or teams that have led to particularly worthwhile learning for students. Staff view this positively and the team considered that this scheme has made a positive contribution to the enhancement of teaching. The team found that the staff development activities, coordinated through the Staff Training and Development Unit (STDU), facilitate staff development activities across the University and within the University Colleges. The team considered that the institutional procedures for supporting learning were effective.

The outcomes of the discipline audit trails

Anatomy and physiology

243 The audit team concluded that the standard of student achievement is fully appropriate to the titles of awards for the pathways offered by the

Department of Anatomy and the Department of Physiology and that each award is correctly located within the FHEQ and that the quality of learning opportunities is suitable. The programme specifications for the awards provided clear evidence that the *Subject benchmark statement* for biosciences had been drawn upon in their construction. External examiners' reports praised the quality of student performance, in particular on level 3 laboratory projects, and commended the readiness of staff to address comments and implement changes.

Chemistry

244 The audit team concluded that the standard of student achievement is fully appropriate to the titles of awards for the pathways offered by the School of Chemistry and that each award is correctly located within the FHEQ. The quality of learning opportunities is suitable although, as the University recognises, refurbishment of the undergraduate laboratories is necessary to ensure they remain fit for purpose. Programme specifications are approaching completion but have not yet been formally approved and made generally available. The School involves its students through many formal and informal consultative processes and the students are appreciative of these efforts.

Civil engineering

245 The School of Civil Engineering has reviewed its provision of courses and developed programme specifications for all those that are aligned with the FHEQ. A postgraduate pathway that did not fit within the FHEQ has now been withdrawn. The School understands the University systems and has its own system of committees and responsible positions. It responds appropriately to external examiners' reports within the permitted timescale. The operation of one partial franchise in Brunei follows the University's procedures for the monitoring of collaborative activity. The School provides clear evidence that the University subject review process works well and is on target to address all the recommendations made in the USR report within the permitted timescale. It also carries accreditation of its courses by the professional body.

246 The School has excellent links with industry and utilises these in the teaching of modules and in the provision of work experience and sandwich placements to its students. These can lead to the supplementary award of City and Guilds Senior qualifications. Students are very supportive of the staff in the School and believe themselves to be adequately provided for in all respects.

247 The School is addressing the finalisation of its programme specifications, taking into account the achievement of learning outcomes through

modules, and the progression of students through the early stages of the undergraduate courses. A wide variety of assessment methods is used and the standards of marking are appropriate. Overall, the audit team concluded that the standard of student achievement is fully appropriate to the titles of awards for the pathways offered by the School of Civil Engineering and that each award is correctly located within the FHEQ.

Sociology and social policy

248 From discussions with students and staff, and its study of assessed work, the audit team formed the view that the standard of student achievement was appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ. The enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning through the use of both generic review processes and specific curriculum development projects, driven by a concern for improved student learning, was evident. The team concluded that the standard of learning opportunities available to students was appropriate to the programmes of study.

Theology

249 Students have access to a wide range of learning resources in their own colleges, in other colleges and in the University. Full use is made of the three libraries and, when necessary, computing facilities in the University. Academic and pastoral support for all full-time and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students is excellent. A well-established, readily accessible and easily understood system of formal and informal support is available to, and is effectively used by, the students. The staff of the Institute, through their teaching, assessment and support, provide a stimulating and caring environment in which students learn and succeed. A very high proportion of the students who enrol on a pathway achieve their degree.

250 The Institute has developed a programme specification for each of its pathways. These specifications clearly articulate the aims and learning outcomes for the pathways and are informed by the guidance provided in the *Subject benchmark statement* for theology and religious studies. The Institute intends to revise its programme specifications in order to reflect the University's decision to differentiate between level 2 and level 3 modules. The amended specifications will be made available on the Institute's developing website. The published programme specifications will supplement the helpful pathway and module information students currently receive.

251 In addition to the extensive informal opportunities students have to feed back to staff, students complete end of module evaluations and contribute to the annual pathway review. There is formal representation on the Institute's learning and teaching and postgraduate committees. The major channel of formal communication is through the bi-annual Staff-Student Consultative Committee. The audit team considered that the outcomes of the committees' discussions could be made more widely available. However, the team concluded that students are able to make their views known at different levels and in an appropriate variety of ways and that their views are listened to and, wherever possible, acted on by the Institute staff.

252 From its reading of students' work, external examiners' reports and the programme specifications for each of the theology pathways, and from its meetings with students and staff, the audit team concluded that the standard of student achievement is fully appropriate to the titles of the awards offered by the Institute of Theology and that each award is correctly located within the FHEQ.

The institution's use of the Academic Infrastructure

253 The SED provided an informative account of the University's use of all components of the Academic Infrastructure, including identification of a number of items requiring further consideration. The audit team was able to confirm the claims made. Adherence to the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, is well established within the University itself but it was not clear how adherence is monitored in collaborating institutions. There is solid evidence of careful attention to the FHEQ by the University's central committees but the team noted limited evidence of explicit reference to the FHEQ in pathway reviews in the discipline audit trails it conducted.

254 The University has clear mechanisms in place for approving and reviewing programme specifications. Specifications are at an advanced stage of development for all the honours pathways investigated, although work remains to be done to complete the process and to make the specifications externally available via the internet. The audit team advised the University to complete the development and publication of distinct programme specifications for all its awards, including those for ordinary degree pathways.

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

255 The SED provided an accurate description of the ways in which the University manages the assurance of quality and academic standards, and of the ways in which it wishes to develop and enhance its provision. Some of the processes used are relatively new and the University's experience of their use is too limited to enable it to evaluate their effectiveness; other processes have been modified in the light of experience and demonstrate the University's capacity to reflect on its strengths and limitations. In general, the SED supported confidence in the University's capacity for self-evaluation, though the development of an explicit strategic framework for assuring and enhancing quality and academic standards would be of assistance in providing a secure basis for the judgements the University will wish to make.

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

256 The enhancement and improvement of practices contributing to quality and standards is seen by the University as an important part of its approach to, and its plans for, the development of learning and teaching. The QESC is a key mechanism for ensuring this centrality. The work of the CELT, the STDU and the Educational Technology Unit provide good evidence of this enhancement in practice. The University teaching awards scheme, additionally, provides a well disseminated and focussed source of a variety of enhancement practices. The University's plans to create a new division, with specific responsibility for the enhancement of learning and teaching within a restructured Academic Registry, was seen by the audit team as good evidence of its intentions to develop and integrate this range of enhancement approaches, and one which would benefit from the further development of an overall, University strategy for supporting the University's enhancement priorities and the evaluation of progress in these areas. In the view of the team, plans for enhancement are appropriate, consistent with the University's wider strategic aims and practical in terms of its experience and organisational framework.

Reliability of information

257 The University is pursuing all of HEFCE's requirements carefully and thoroughly with the Teaching Quality Information Project Group (TQIPG), chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students and Learning) and reporting to the LTC, having a central overview of the whole process of publication of the necessary datasets. The LTC held a series of workshops in early 2004 to brief all schools, faculties and other departments to ensure that staff were informed about the development and implications of the Funding Council's requirements. The formal work of the TQIPG and the LTC, together with the developmental workshops, appears to be an effective means of embedding the requirements into the University's quality culture.

258 The University devolves responsibility for the accuracy of the information published by, and about, a school to the appropriate head of school. The audit team concluded that this system works effectively. It found that the information available to prospective, new and continuing students was accurate, produced to meet the specific needs of the target groups and positively received by the students. Although local needs determine the contents and structure of handbooks, similar essential material is present in all the handbooks. The SWS commented on dated course handbooks, however, the evidence presented to the team in the DATs did not enable it to confirm the claim.

259 Extensive and appropriate use is made of the University's website to inform students, staff and other interested groups about a wide range of matters. The site is thoughtfully designed to facilitate access by all types of users. The pages viewed by the audit team, like the printed materials the team read, provided reliable, up-to-date information.

Features of good practice

260 The following features of good practice were noted:

- teaching awards, which serve as an enhancement tool to promote and disseminate good practice across the University (paragraph 40)

- the rigour of the University subject review process and associated follow-up activity (paragraphs 55 to 58, 62)

- the responsiveness of the University to its students, manifest in the various means by which it ensures that the student voice is heard and in its orientation programme for international students (paragraphs 86 and 87, 115, 121)

- the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching which it makes available to all staff of the University, including part-time staff, and its potential for enhancement (paragraphs 99, 102).

Recommendations for action

261 The University is advised to:

- reconsider the terms of reference for the University Learning and Teaching Committee to make explicit the Committee's responsibility for maintaining an overview of academic standards (paragraph 26)

- further develop the assessment framework with a view to securing greater commonality of judgement and practice across the University with regard to progression rules and degree classifications (paragraphs 32 to 34, 37)

- complete the development and publication of distinct programme specifications for all awards of the University (paragraphs 79 and 80, 182).

262 It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider whether the pathway approval procedures, as currently articulated, enable it to be satisfied that sufficient use is always made of suitably qualified independent subject and/or professional experts external to the University to advise on the appropriateness of the quality and standards of its provision (paragraphs 48, 58)

- incorporate, within its process of annual pathway review, a means to ensure that all institutions with students registered for awards of the University are aware of the University's expectations in relation to the Academic Infrastructure (paragraphs 75, 138)

- complete the work and training necessary to make fuller statistical data more easily available to schools, faculties and relevant committees to facilitate analysis of student performance across the University (paragraphs 95 to 97, 160, 170)

- enhance the quality of the students' learning experience by sharing good practice in the area of student support (paragraphs 118, 126).

Appendix

The Queen's University Belfast's response to the audit report

The University welcomes the positive report of the institutional audit carried out in December 2004 and the team's conclusion that 'broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards'.

We are particularly gratified at the identification of good practice within the University. Our teaching award scheme, which has been expanded, has proved to be of great benefit to staff in identifying and sharing good practice. Our Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching (PGCHET) has provided both new, and more experienced, staff with an opportunity for development and this has had a clear impact on the quality of learning and teaching across the University. Our University subject review process has given subject areas an opportunity for self evaluation and the chance to obtain an external insight into their quality and standards. Indeed, many of our PGCHET qualified staff now act as internal reviewers.

Students are, of course, our prime concern and we are pleased to note that our responsiveness to students and our particular welcome to international students were recognised by the team.

The team made a number of recommendations, all of which will be considered carefully and acted upon. Some of the recommendations build on ongoing work and developments, such as, the development and publication of programme specifications, and the availability of fuller statistical data to facilitate analysis of student performance across the University.

In all we found the audit to be a very useful experience, giving us an opportunity to reflect on our own policies and procedures, and providing us with an informed and detailed insight and guidance for the future.