

Staffordshire University

APRIL 2005

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.

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Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Staffordshire University (the University) from 4 to 8 April 2005 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

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

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

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

Outcome of the audit

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

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

Features of good practice

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

- the processes involving committee minutes and action plans which assist communication across the University and close quality loops

- the implementation of a unitary model linking all levels of the University in a common quality management structure based on and promoting a close working partnership between academic and support staff
- the fully articulated linkage of module-level and award learning outcomes and assessment strategies mapping to external reference points
- the University's determination to ensure that it has the postgraduate research students appropriate to its strengths through the management of recruitment, project approval and examination
- the operation of Welcome Week and mentoring which support the induction of new students
- student access to and support from all categories of staff
- supporting and developing staff for their changing roles in delivering the University's plans
- the commitment to and success of the development and validation of distance learning.

Recommendations for action

The team advises the University to:

- continue to rationalise the rules for award classification and the use of discretion by award boards in order to maintain the transparency and parity of the treatment of students
- make explicit the status in the periodic review process of the scrutiny of quality assurance procedures and of provision for postgraduate research students.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- review the process of monitoring the progress of postgraduate research students individually and collectively to ensure that the University has an annual overview of the progression of all research students

- review the institutional-level processing and analysis of external examiners' reports to enable the Quality Development Committee and Academic Board to gain a full understanding of the types of issue raised.

Taught programmes in Engineering and Technology; Fine Art and Design; Sports and Exercise

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 the programmes listed above to find out how well the University's systems and procedures were working at the programme level. The University provided the team with documents, including student work and, here too, the team spoke to staff and students. As well as supporting the overall confidence statement given above, the team was able to state that the standard of student achievement in the programmes was appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, published by QAA. The quality of learning opportunities available to students in each of the programmes is suitable for a programme of study leading to the named award.

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 were that the University was making effective use of the Academic Infrastructure to inform its framework for the management of quality and standards.

From 2004 the institutional audit process has included a check on the reliability of the information sets published by institutions in the format recommended in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's (HEFCE)

document, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance* (HEFCE 03/51). The University is making good progress with the development of its information sets and with meeting the requirements set out in HEFCE 03/51.

Main report

Main report

1 An institutional audit of Staffordshire University (the University) was undertaken during the week of 4 April 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility for its awards.

2 The audit was carried out using a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency (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. For institutions in England, 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 did not include the University's provision made through collaborative arrangements.

Section 1: Introduction: Staffordshire University

The University and its mission

4 The University was established out of the Staffordshire Polytechnic in September 1992 following the passage of the Further and Higher

Education Act (1992). The Polytechnic itself had been formed from the merger in 1970 of three colleges: the Staffordshire College of Technology in Stafford, the Stoke-on-Trent College of Art and the North Staffordshire College of Technology in Stoke. The original name at merger, the North Staffordshire Polytechnic, was changed to Staffordshire Polytechnic in 1988.

5 Although the great majority of the work carried out in Staffordshire University is performed at the Stoke and Stafford campuses, two developments have extended its range of activities. In 1995 the Shropshire and Staffordshire College of Nursing and Midwifery, with bases at Stafford, Shrewsbury, Telford and Oswestry was integrated with the University. Finally, a new Staffordshire University campus at Lichfield was opened in 1998.

6 In 2003, the total student population of Staffordshire University was 15,041, a reduction of 4.4 per cent compared with 2001. This student population has an approximately equal gender ratio, and a similar balance between students under 21 years at entry and over 21 at entry. The majority of students study at the Stoke and Stafford sites. Approximately 1 per cent of the students study at the Lichfield campus. The majority of students are enrolled on full-time undergraduate programmes. The number of part-time students has increased slightly over the period 2001 to 2003. In 2003, part-time students represented 5.7 per cent of the students under 21 on entry (compared with 4.5 per cent in 2001) but this rises to 53.8 per cent for those students over 21 on entry (compared with 50.8 per cent in 2001). In 2003, 5.7 per cent of the student population were from elsewhere in the European Union, and 7 per cent were overseas students.

7 In 2003, 8 per cent of the student population were postgraduates. Of these 225 (1.5 per cent of the student population) were research students and 2,467 (16.4 per cent) were enrolled on postgraduate taught courses.

8 Following an intense period of reorganisation over the past five years, the University's academic structure has changed

from eight schools to four 'academic clusters' and is now arranged in four faculties, each headed by a Pro Vice-Chancellor. The faculties are: Arts, Media and Design; Business and Law; Computing, Engineering and Technology; Health and Sciences.

9 Following the restructure some nomenclature used to describe the qualifications awarded by Staffordshire University has changed. The term 'award' is used to mean a named, validated award identified by a set of learning outcomes and specific structure. A 'programme' or 'scheme' is used to identify a set of related awards in a faculty. The term 'course' is generally used to identify a course of study leading to an 'award' or it can be used to mean a short course of study leading to 30 or 60 credit awards.

10 The faculties are supported by a separate Academic Development Institute (ADI) which has responsibility for providing a coordinated approach to the management of academic change. The ADI brings together quality assurance and enhancement, educational development and academic planning and innovation.

11 The University's self-evaluation document (SED) emphasised the significance of the long-standing regional role that the University plays in the regeneration of the Staffordshire region. However, the SED stressed that this role is not at the expense of its national and international engagements. The SED saw these national and international engagements as part of the distinctive contribution that the University can make in regenerating an area that has witnessed a decline in traditional trades and the continuation of reportedly low aspirations amongst the population. The University has a long history of outreach and provision of opportunities for all those who can benefit from higher education. This aim of widening participation is reaffirmed in the University Plan 2003-2008 which states that: 'As an accessible learning community, we value inclusion and diversity and share the Government's commitment to increasing access and widening participation. We remain committed to ensuring that people from all backgrounds have

the opportunity to study with us and we encourage a wider social mix'. Numerically, the University has met or exceeded HEFCE's access performance indicators successively during their first six years of calculation, and the University is proud of the fact that it receives large HEFCE widening participation premiums.

12 The SED described the well-established use of e-learning in many of the awards and modules at Staffordshire University. Since 1997, the staff have embraced the use of e-learning in their teaching. Initially e-learning was promoted by individual enthusiasms. A centrally-managed approach is now in operation. There is a Learning Development Innovation Unit in Information Services (IS) that takes the lead in developing and ensuring the quality of e-learning. The Unit has 43 e-learning awards and 175 e-learning modules with approximately 4500 students enrolled. Previous QAA scrutiny of the e-learning provision has recorded it as having very high quality.

13 The University's mission statement as expressed in the University Plan 2003/04-2007/08 is: 'our mission is to help you succeed'. The SED expanded on this statement to include, 'We aim to engage with our students and customers and to offer them the products, skills and opportunities they need to succeed, and as a University rooted in its communities, our economic, social and civic responsibilities are central to our activities'. The Plan states that the University will work by and be known for the following values:

- Inclusion
- Excelling in our fundamental commitment to widening participation, diversity and respect for the individual and communities
- Accessibility
- Promoting flexible, adaptable, and responsive approaches to all our activities
- Creativity
- Being known for our creativity, innovation, enterprise and agility
- Partnership

- Working in partnership through local, regional, national and international partnerships and networks
- Supportiveness
- Providing a friendly, warm, professional and positive environment for staff, students and customers
- Excellence
- Exercising quality, reliability, transparency and professionalism

Collaborative provision

14 Staffordshire University has a very large and complex collaborative provision. The SED listed over 180 courses that are current, and many that are not running at present. Because of the nature of this complex portfolio of courses in many parts of the world, the University will have a separate QAA Collaborative provision audit in 2006. Thus, the collaborative provision aspect of Staffordshire's teaching and learning is not a part of this 2005 audit.

Background information

15 The published information available for this audit included:

- the information on the University's website
- the report of QAA's quality audit of the University (Nov 2001)
- the report of QAA's Institutional Review Report of the University and the Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland (January 2000)
- the Staffordshire University and The Escuela Superior de Ciencias Empresariales Márketing y Relaciones Públicas Overseas Partnership audit report (Oct 2000)
- 25 subject review reports

16 The University provided QAA with:

- an institutional SED
- three discipline SEDs (DSEDs) for the areas selected for DATs
- the University Plan 2003-04 to 2007-08

- documentation as listed in the SED
- During the briefing and audit visits, the audit team was given access to the University's internal documents and to its intranet. The team was grateful for the unrestricted access that it was given to these sources of information.

The audit process

17 Following a preliminary meeting at the University in November 2004 between a QAA officer and representatives of the University and students, QAA confirmed the number of DATs to be conducted during the audit visit. On the basis of the SED, received November 2004, and other published information, the audit team confirmed that the DATs would focus on taught programmes in:

- Engineering and Technology
- Fine Art and Design
- Sports and Exercise.

18 The University provided QAA with DSEDs in February 2005. The DSED for Design included a course review of the Undergraduate provision in Art and Design (1997 to 2003).

19 At the preliminary meeting for the audit, the students of the University were invited, through their Students' Union (SU), to submit a separate document expressing views on the student experience at the University, and identifying any matters of concern or commendation with respect to the quality of programmes (awards) and the academic standards of awards. The students were also invited to give their views on the level of representation afforded to them, and the extent to which their views were noted and acted upon. In generating their written submission, the SU conducted a student survey, the Student Voice Survey (the ViewFinder). The SU used all its outlets to ensure wide distribution of questionnaires. The SU was also given access to the University's Student Viewfinder Survey (the Viewfinder Survey). This is a survey conducted by the University each spring and asks for student opinion on many topics including course organisation, teaching

and supervision, the learning environment, University services and students' opinions of the University. The responses to the SU survey were collated by the SU Education and Welfare Officer. The response to the Student Voice Survey was rather disappointing as only 125 students responded. However, in 2004 there were 2,934 responses to the Viewfinder Survey.

20 On the basis of these surveys, the SU generated for the audit a student written submission (SWS) which was submitted to QAA and to the University in November 2004. The audit team is grateful to the students of the University for preparing this document.

21 The audit team visited the University on 1, 2 and 3 March 2005 for the purpose of exploring with the Vice Chancellor, senior members of staff of the University and student representatives matters of the institutional-level management of quality and standards raised by the University's SED, the SWS, and the published documentation. At the end of the briefing visit, a programme of meetings was suggested and, after further communications between QAA and the University, was agreed with the University. The team did not select any area for a thematic enquiry.

22 The audit visit took place from 4 to 8 April 2005. Seven meetings were held with groups of staff and students from the University. Six meetings were also held with staff and students in the three subject areas selected for the DATs. The audit team comprised Dr J Barry, Dr S Brown, Dr R Hannam, Ms E Leyland, auditors, and Mr D Attwood, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr A Bradshaw, Assistant Director.

Developments since the previous academic quality audit

23 Since the previous QAA quality audit in May 2001, Staffordshire University has undergone significant change. In response to anticipated challenges in student recruitment and retention the University reviewed its strategic direction. The results and recommendations of this review were made available to the audit team in the documents, Strategic Futures and Strategies to

Deliver. The key elements included the need to diversify the student profile; the need to reach new markets through changes to courses offered and the modes of delivery of the awards; and the need to have a balanced annual budget to support the plan.

24 Since the last quality audit in May 2001 major changes have been implemented with regard to the management structure of the University. New Executive and University Executive Boards have been formed to steer the University towards full implementation of the recommendations in the Strategic Futures document. A five-stage strategy was described in this document to support development. The SED reported that goals have either been achieved or very good progress has been made to meet the deadline of 2005. There have been two moves away from a school-based management structure to firstly 'academic clusters' for one year followed by the introduction of four faculties in September 2003. These are the Faculties of Arts, Media and Design; Business and Law; Computing, Engineering and Technology; and Health and Sciences.

25 Each faculty is headed by a pro vice chancellor who leads and manages the faculty. The management team of each faculty includes a business manager and three faculty directors with respective responsibilities for student recruitment, learning and teaching, and research and exercise.

26 The changes have produced a unitary structure linking all levels of the University in a common quality management arrangement with a close partnership between academic and support staff. The audit team noted that during the reorganisation little disruption had been caused to the student learning experience. The University appointed key members of University staff to new committees in order to implement the plan. The team heard that staff have been well trained and supported for their management roles.

27 The quality audit report of 2001 identified nine points for consideration. The University produced an action plan based on these and on other points contained in the report. The SED

does not describe the recommendations or the action taken, but the audit team was supplied with the action plan and the audit report.

28 The 2001 audit report identified a need for quality assurance and explicit standards for on-line learning. The discussion (below) of the University's distributed learning activities describes the way in which this point has been addressed.

29 The 2001 report also suggested accelerating the review of the modular framework of the University's degree programmes. It also recommended a review of protocols for formative feedback to students in order to ensure that feedback was an effective element of the learning process. Since the audit, successfully revised undergraduate and postgraduate modular frameworks have been implemented to standardise learning outcomes and assessment loads. In discussions with students it was clear that students understood the assessment guidelines for individual modules and were not overburdened by assessment. Students reported the operation of good assessment feedback. The student work available to the audit team had clear marking annotation and contained effective feedback.

30 The University uses an electronic student information system, TheSIS. In the commentary to the last quality audit in 2001 recommendations were made to extend the use of this system to all students. Since the 2001 audit some improvements have been made. Full use of the system for all students has been delayed, but the 2005 audit team learned of plans for the implementation of a more sophisticated version of the software, TheSIS Plus. The new version will allow for the monitoring of all students, including research students, and for a more detailed analysis of information. A fuller discussion of the use of TheSIS appears in the section on Progression and completion statistics in this report.

31 The success of the new quality structures at the University is reflected in the change of two areas of recommendation for improvements in the 2001 quality audit report to become elements of good practice in this report. In the report of 2001 there was a comment

concerning the frequency of lack of clear provenance and date in the University's working documents. The present audit team found more recent production of clear records of meetings and resulting action plans. The team commends the standard of the paperwork produced.

32 The quality audit report 2001 suggested a review of the procedures for approval of research degree study. Although the audit team has found the system operated at the University to be time-consuming, the process of recruitment and mechanisms involved in project approval are commended as discussed more fully in a later section of this report. Finally, the quality audit report 2001 recommended a review of the Student Office. A review took place in 2002-03 during the University restructuring. The restructuring resulted in moving the Quality Improvement Service (QIS) from the Student Office and relocating it in the ADI. The team also learned from the University Secretary that in 2004-05 a full review of all services had taken place, including a review of those of the Student Office. That work will be completed in 2005-06.

Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes

The institution's view as expressed in the SED

33 The previous quality audit report in 2001 commended 'the University's robust framework for effective assurance of the quality of provision and the maintenance of standards and the wide ownership of that framework, at all levels'. In the SED for the present audit, the University maintained its claim that 'it has in place robust and effective policies and procedures for the both the maintenance and enhancement of the quality and standards of its educational provision'.

34 The Vice Chancellor noted in the SED: 'Throughout this period we have been acutely aware of the necessity to ensure that our well regarded structures for the management of quality and standards remain robust and fit for

purpose. As with other aspects of the University's work, the ownership of the management of standards of awards and the quality of education at Staffordshire is intended to be distributed widely throughout the University. The combination of local ownership within a "central" facilitating infrastructure, we believe, provides a means of ensuring that responsibility for quality and standards is an effective collective endeavour'.

35 The SED stated that the University had been committed over the previous three years to put in place 'robust and effective policies and procedures for both the maintenance and enhancement of the quality and standards of its education provision' The University has developed a system of committees and processes which support its work in this regard.

36 The University's approach to quality and standards is founded on the belief that the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards is 'a continual process of reflection, evaluation, report and feedback'.

37 In the SED the University identified its strengths as:

- the award validation process
- the processes of reviewing and monitoring responses to external examiners' reports
- the use of a rapporteur system within annual monitoring processes to engender a degree of independent scrutiny of the process. The rapporteur is a member of staff from a different faculty. The rapporteur's role is to ensure that the process is performed according to the Quality Assurance Handbook and also to identify good practice that can be shared between faculties
- detailed analysis of student feedback
- the formation of the ADI
- working in partnership with the SU

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

38 Responsibility for management at the University is distributed through an interlocking network of bodies at faculty and university level. There is a key role in these arrangements for the group of staff who operate at both levels, namely the four pro vice chancellors, the four faculty directors of Learning and Teaching and the leading staff of the ADI. These staff operate through the formal committee structure and in management teams. Such arrangements are mirrored within each faculty by the relationships between the Faculty Quality Committee and the management teams of programme area managers. The programme area managers work with the pro vice chancellor heading that faculty, the three faculty directors (for student recruitment, learning and teaching and research and enterprise) and lead administrators for quality.

39 The pro vice chancellors all hold responsibilities for managing quality and standards. One of them chairs the Quality Development Committee and hence has lead responsibility in this area. All four sit on the University Executive Board. They each have individual areas of strategic responsibility assigned to them by the Vice Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellor. They also serve on the new Academic Leadership Group (ALG) formed 2005. This Group is chaired by the Deputy Vice Chancellor and includes the Head of the ADI. The ALG forms the 'senior group in the University with responsibility for strategic academic leadership (including academic planning, curriculum strategy and quality enhancement) ensuring cross-University coherence and integration'. The ALG implements the University Plan and its specific academic strategies. It approves and monitors annual faculty academic plans, reporting to both the University Executive Board and the Executive.

40 The Academic Board, 'as the primary Board for academic matters, takes an overarching view of quality and standards'. It receives, and debates thoroughly, the minutes of its subcommittees

and also receives information directly from the faculties. Faculty boards reflect the remit of Academic Board, receiving 'communications from both the University and the Faculty on a range of areas (including learning and teaching, quality issues, research and enterprise and health and safety)'. The SED identified some doubts concerning their 'role and remit' but notes that they offer 'an important opportunity to elicit the views of staff and student representatives for onward transmission, as appropriate, to Academic Board'.

41 The primary subcommittees of the Academic Board are Quality Development Committee (QDC) and Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee (LTEC). QDC is reported as 'responsible for annual monitoring and the associated action plans, taking an overview of external examiner reports, initiating amendments to internal policies and responding to external consultation associated with quality management and enhancement'. The SED reported agreement, following some uncertainty, that QDC should be responsible for 'audit and process issues' and LTEC for 'improvement and enhancement'. The minutes indicated to the audit team that this distinction was understood and effectively followed by both committees.

42 The four faculty directors of learning and teaching serve on both the QDC and the LTEC, the Head of the ADI sits on the former and chairs the latter. The four faculty directors also serve (since 2004) on the Senior Management Team of the ADI itself, which was established in 2003 'to provide a coordinated approach to the management of academic change by bringing together quality assurance and enhancement, educational development and academic planning/innovation within a single organisational unit'. Other members include the Director of the QIS within ADI, which provides 'a central source of information and guidance regarding quality assurance' and also 'an important means of establishing centrally what is being undertaken in the Faculties in the University's name'. Faculties all have a lead administrator responsible for quality issues and they work closely with QIS staff.

43 The faculty directors of learning and teaching are also responsible to their respective pro vice chancellors on matters of the quality of learning opportunities. Responsibilities include chairing the Faculty Quality Committees (FQC). The FQCs monitor a range of quality issues, consider both University and faculty initiatives, and submit proposals to QDC. FQCs are attended by an officer of QIS who assists 'in assuring a consistency of approach to quality and monitoring matters'. Following a newly approved plan, FQCs will also submit a bi-annual report to QDC.

44 The audit team saw evidence of the effective working of all these bodies and, in particular, the care taken to ensure their effective integration and communication. During its recent major changes the University had recognised both the need and the opportunity to develop its quality management framework. The team commends as good practice the implementation of a unitary model linking all levels of the University in a common quality management structure based upon and promoting a close working partnership between academic and support staff. This arrangement is partly ensured by interlocking personnel across and between levels of the committee structure and also by the work of the new ADI, a strength rightly identified in the SED. The team also commends as good practice the processes involving committee minutes and action plans which assist communication across the University and complete loops of recommendation, action and reporting in areas of the quality of provision.

45 The 2001 audit identified the advisability of 'accelerating the planned review of the modular course frameworks to satisfy itself that it is in line with common practice with regard to student progression and assessment; to further enhance the means for ensuring coherence of academic programmes and consistency of standards'. The University has responded by introducing new modular frameworks, first for postgraduate programmes and then, in 2003-04, an Undergraduate Modular Framework.

46 Although the SED was relatively brief on this major development, the audit team found

evidence that the process had been carried out effectively, with all undergraduate awards revalidated to align them with the revised Undergraduate Modular Framework, using the pattern of 'eight plus two', with eight generic learning outcomes for each award, plus two further outcomes specific to the award. The team considered the fully articulated linkage of module-level and award learning outcomes and assessment strategies mapping to external reference points as an example of good practice to be commended. It also welcomed the University's careful programme of training and support of staff to implement these changes and its careful evaluation strategy, in line with its stated intention to review the effectiveness of both the learning outcome statements and the revised Undergraduate Modular Framework.

47 The audit team also noted that the University had addressed issues regarding standards of awards through its revised academic award regulations, in areas such as compensation, volume of assessment and plagiarism. The remaining issue, to which the University was devoting considerable preparation, was to ensure that the award boards were able to adapt their classification procedures to the new framework. The team noted that the previous regulations had allowed award boards considerable discretion in deciding whether to award a higher degree result than that suggested by the weighted average of the student's mark at intermediate and honours levels. In the light of the new framework, a revised model had been developed, establishing whether particular mark distributions would make it 'likely', 'possible' or 'unlikely' that such discretion would be exercised in the student's favour. Award board members, and the administrative staff from QIS and faculties who supported each board, were being given extensive training in the issues raised by such cases, although it was noted that boards would retain the ability to vary practice, as some (such as Law) did on the basis of what they understood to be the national standards in their discipline. The team appreciated the complex issues raised in this area, and noted that there

was little evidence of external examiners being concerned at the application of the previous procedures. The team welcomed the development of a common University set of guidelines for the application of discretion and wished to advise the University to continue to rationalise the rules for award classification and the use of discretion by award boards in order to maintain the transparency and parity of the treatment of students.

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

48 The SED stated that the University's intention is to 'take forward the quality enhancement agenda in a systematic, coordinated manner'. At University level this has involved the establishment of the ADI. Within ADI is located the QIS that provides 'a central source of information and guidance regarding quality assurance and with other ADI colleagues, improvement initiatives'. At a meeting with QIS staff the audit team established that ADI takes an important role in ensuring that the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA, is reviewed and embedded within the University and faculty quality processes.

49 In order to ensure good communication between the ADI, the faculties and the Student Office, monthly meetings of an ADI Senior Management Team (SMT) are arranged to provide a forum for effective and rapid communication between the faculties and University. The meetings also provide for initiation, development and evaluation of new projects. The SMT first met on in February 2004 to establish terms of reference and consider current ADI priorities. The terms of reference require the group 'to consider, co-ordinate and manage strategies, policies and priorities related to quality assurance and enhancement, curriculum development and teaching and learning'. The audit team saw evidence that ADI is effective in the following areas:

- it organised a successful Learning and Teaching development day in 2004 and a

second event in April 2005. The April 2005 event was aimed at discussing widening provision and progression. The programme includes discussions in lifelong learning networks and flexible progression pathways to suit diverse learner needs

- it coordinates bids for Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning
- it organises staff nominations for the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme (NTFS)
- it organises the internal Learning and Teaching Fellowship Scheme.

Each of these activities serves to reinforce the University's claim to 'take forward the quality enhancement agenda'.

50 During the audit visit the audit team learned of two major initiatives designed to enhance the student experience at the University: a student employability policy and implementation strategy has been approved at the Academic Board. This is intended to ensure that all students enrolling from 2005 will have access to career management skills through the curriculum. Discussions are being held to ensure postgraduate students, students on franchised courses overseas and distance learners have access to employability skills. The University has produced a website with the title 'employability' to explain the emphasis being made in enhancing student employability. The University's Employability Policy (2004) states its aim of providing all students with, 'the opportunity to engage in a Personal Development Planning programme'. With this in mind the University's Personal Development Plan (PDP) steering and implementation group prepared a PDP Policy in December 2004, based upon recommendations made by UUK, Universities Scotland and the QAA. The audit team was told that the policy would be implemented in September 2005 for all Staffordshire University students.

51 The SED indicated areas for future development in quality enhancement. These include reviewing the outcomes of Internal Process Audits (IPAs) that have recently been completed for personal tutoring and research

degrees and reviewing the University assessment policy.

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

52 The University's procedures for approval and reapproval (often called 'validation' in the University's documentation), monitoring and review are fully documented in its Quality Assurance Handbook. There are close links between approval and review processes, because 'validation' of awards is often conducted at the University as part of a review of an award or subject area. Because of the changes in the Undergraduate Modular Framework, the entire undergraduate programme was (re)-validated in 2003-04; postgraduate programmes have been validated over a cycle of three years ending in 2005. The University regards the following three aspects of its processes as strengths:

- the validation process
- the use of a rapporteur system within annual monitoring to engender a degree of independent scrutiny of the process
- the critical and constructive nature of award review utilising independent peers.

53 Changes to both modules and awards, and the introduction of new awards, are initiated at programme area level. Proposals are then submitted to the FQC for approval. There are measures to ensure that changes affecting student provision across area or faculty are monitored and all parties affected given the opportunity to comment. In the case of cross-faculty awards, the responsibilities of the host faculty, the award leader and academic link tutors are carefully laid down. External examiners must be consulted for module changes at honours and master's levels, and they are informed of module changes at lower levels. Service areas are also required to comment on support issues. Module changes and award amendments are signed off at faculty level. The QIS has to receive the documentation so that it can implement any agreed changes on TheSIS Plus.

54 In the case of new awards, award proposals must be approved initially for their fit with University strategy. Until 2004-05 this was done by Academic Planning Group, and is now a function of the ALG. Subsequently, scrutiny of proposals for new awards is required at both faculty and University level. The faculty stage is designed to 'ensure that all proposals which are considered by the University are sufficiently mature to warrant full peer assessment and meet faculties' aims and objectives'. Unless a new award is based entirely upon existing provision, there is then a separate University-level validation, with standard validation support documentation supplied by the QIS. The 'key validation document is the programme specification', which follows a standard University template. Sample module handbooks are among the documents required for validation and a condition of validation is the subsequent submission to QIS for approval of a student handbook following a standard template of contents. The validation panel includes external members (see below) and each panel member has to submit a written comment before the meeting. The SED affirms that 'In line with a recommendation from the Continuation Audit in May 2001 all validation reports now contain, where appropriate, commendations as well as any conditions, requirements or recommendations'. QIS is responsible for monitoring and documenting the fulfilment of such conditions. A report on each validation is received by QDC, and an annual report is prepared for QDC on issues arising from all the validations. Through QDC these reports reach the Academic Board.

55 The University is reviewing the balance between QIS and the faculties with respect to the validation process. It is considering whether more responsibility could be devolved, with QIS taking on an audit role for the work undertaken within the faculties. The University has also taken steps to provide a speedier process for validation through the use of more standard templates. In the case of short courses (60 and 30 credit awards based on existing module provision), the Flexible Learning Approval Panel acts on behalf of QDC to approve University learning awards and free-standing graduate certificates.

56 A separate process of programme approval is applied by the University's Research Degrees Sub-Committee (RDSC) to all research degree proposals (excluding professional doctorates). Following careful pre-admission scrutiny at faculty level of the suitability of supervisory support for each research degree application, research students then have six months to detail the content, timescale and methodology of their research topic on the registration application form RDC1. The RDC1 is evaluated by two rapporteurs whose recommendations are considered by the RDSC (or the faculty subcommittee for MPhil projects only), after which the project is either registered or, if needed, returned to the supervisory team and the student for additions/amendments. The 2001 audit identified the advisability of 'investigating ways of expediting the approval process for research degrees so as to ensure that it does not hinder student progression', but the current audit team found that both students and supervisors supported this process. The registration application process is supported by the students' taking the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Methods during the period of RDC1 preparation. The RDSC minutes also record evidence of care taken with the upgrading of students from MPhil to PhD registration, and with the correct provision for their examination. The team commends as good practice the University's determination to ensure that it has the postgraduate research students appropriate to its strengths through the management of recruitment, project approval and examination.

57 The University takes other quality assurance measures that directly impact on the enhancement of the student experience. For example, staff development activities are well established in the faculties. In the Faculty of Health and Sciences a two-hour timetabled period is identified each week for an activity of interest to the staff. In discussions with staff it was reported that these timetabled opportunities were normally used two or three times each month. At the University level, QDC and LTEC are the principal vehicles for disseminating information and good practice

on quality matters. Within the faculty management structures enhancement of the student provision is overseen by such committees as the LTEC in Health and Sciences.

Annual monitoring

58 The University 'regards its procedures for the annual monitoring of the health of its academic provision as a particular strength'. Faculties are responsible for the annual monitoring of all taught programmes. The procedures build upon reports produced by leaders of modules and awards. The reports follow standard University templates. Annual module monitoring reports, which incorporate responses to student evaluations, are then considered at award level in the context of statistical data supplied centrally and any issues raised by external examiners' reports, internal or external reviews or validations. In many cases, the draft report at award level is also presented to the staff-student liaison committee (SSLC) for comment. Award reports are then considered at a special meeting of the FQC, which scrutinises each report and also identifies common issues across the faculty. This meeting is attended by two rapporteurs, from outside the faculty. Rapporteurs are trained 'to identify strengths and weaknesses and any areas of good practice'. They have access to the documentation used to produce the award reports and so can scrutinise the effectiveness of any responses made, as well as preparing their own summary for QDC of the processes and issues within each faculty, and of the issues arising that QDC should consider. The rapporteurs attend the QDC meeting where their reports are considered. At these meetings the faculty directors of Learning and Teaching are also present as QDC members. External examiners are informed of the outcomes of annual monitoring as they apply to the issues previously raised in external examiners' reports.

59 The University previously identified two areas for potential improvement in annual monitoring, namely 'the length of time the process takes to complete and the use of statistics'. The first matter has been addressed satisfactorily. The 2001 audit identified the

advisability of 'prioritising the further development of TheSIS so that it provides data on the achievement and assessment of all students, including research and SURF [Staffordshire University Regional Federation] students and encouraging the fullest use of the system across the university'. The University has invested significantly in the development of TheSIS Plus and is now able to provide improved data to support annual monitoring of taught programmes. The new software allows trends over several years to be identified in both progression statistics and in cross-tabulations of a student's final award classification by entry qualifications. There is also some use of module-level data generated to support assessment boards in identifying variations in pass rates and attainment within and across awards.

60 The University RDSC coordinates the annual monitoring of research students. The RDC16 requires an evaluation by both the student and supervisor of progress made. This form is then passed to the staff member in the faculty responsible for the faculty RDC (which is attended by a member of the University RDSC from another faculty). The faculty RDSC representative prepares for the University RDSC an overview report identifying issues arising from the RDC16s, and includes a statistical summary of student progress. RDSC also approves any change of registration status of each research student. Although the audit team considered that the level of information collected about individual students was thorough and comprehensive, it was less certain that the system overall was operating in an optimum fashion. Rates of return of RDC16s were variable and in one faculty had been only 60 per cent. Consequently, conclusions drawn from partial and variable returns were likely to be problematic. In addition, it was not clear how far students would report problems in progress associated with their supervisor or the faculty on an open form. There had been only slow progress in meeting the 2001 recommendation on research student data, with TheSIS Plus still not used to record the statistical progression of research students as a body. The recent IPA of research degrees processes and their

implementation promised some action on this last point, but did not address the other issues.

61 The audit team concluded that the annual monitoring of taught programmes, including the role of the rapporteurs, was a commendable example of the aspects of good practice identified above in the implementation of a unitary model linking all levels of the University in a common quality management structure. However, the team also regards it as desirable that the University should review the process of monitoring the progress of postgraduate research students individually and collectively to ensure that the University has an annual overview of the progression of all research students.

Periodic review

62 The University conducts a process of 'Critical Review' of all areas of taught provision at least every five years. A review schedule has been agreed until 2008-09. This schedule reflects a decision in September 2004 to 'establish academic groupings to bring all the awards, at the same level, within a recognised discipline together for the purpose of critical review', sometimes now called subject review. In large subjects undergraduate and postgraduate provision might be reviewed in consecutive years. Previously, reviews often focused on a small number of awards due for revalidation; this made it difficult 'to gain a complete overview of an academic area'. As noted above, periodic review processes are often combined with revalidation of existing awards, with the same panel conducting both exercises in succession and producing a dual report. In such cases the documentation required for validation is supplied alongside that needed for periodic review.

63 The critical review process is based (since 2002) on an SED (which follows the structure of QAA's academic review method), the input of an individual or individuals external to the University, and meetings with staff and students. Students have not been invited to become members of review panels, but this is being considered. The purpose of a review is 'to critically review the health of an award, a group of awards or a subject area...to evaluate a

Faculty's success in achieving its academic objectives, and to assess its future plans in a particular area of its academic provision...to assess the effectiveness of the Faculty's quality management processes'. Although there is no official template for the report, the standard pattern in all the recent examples, based on a judgement matrix provided to the panel, is that there should be two confidence statements, one in the academic standards of the award and the second in the quality of learning opportunities. The 'quality' area is further subdivided into comments under the headings of teaching and learning, student progression and learning resources, following which (if validation or revalidation was also taking place) the report moves to validation issues. Only in one panel report seen (Design and Fine Arts, undergraduate provision, March 2004) was a section added on quality management and enhancement, leading to a confidence statement on the effectiveness of the faculty's quality management procedures. The report is submitted to QDC for approval, and the faculty has to submit two written responses to QDC, an interim one within six months and a response in detail on actions taken after one year. QIS is responsible for ensuring that summaries of the report and the faculty response are placed on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website.

64 The examples of critical review seen by the audit team showed that the SEDs and supporting material for the review process were thorough and covered all the required areas. The panel reports were relatively brief but evaluative and sometimes critical, in one case requiring major action by the subject area and faculty. However, in most cases it appeared that the panel, faced with both a review and a validation process in a two-day period at most, had not pursued in any depth the third listed purpose, namely to assess the effectiveness of the faculty's quality management processes. At least, such assessment was implicit rather than explicit, a tendency encouraged by the normal format of the review report. It was also unclear whether postgraduate research student provision was covered by the reviews, even in

cases focusing on postgraduate provision. The team was not able to establish from the University whether the cycle of reviews was intended to ensure that research student provision was reviewed. No other system of periodic review of research student provision is identified. The team advises the University to make explicit the status in the periodic review process of the scrutiny of quality assurance procedures and of provision for postgraduate research students.

65 There are no similar periodic reviews of non-academic areas of the University's provision. However, the University has now reintroduced IPA as 'a means of systematically reviewing the operation and effectiveness of key thematic areas', with personal tutoring and the research degrees process audited to date. All the members of such an audit will be University staff, with no student or external input and the reports are confidential to those audited and to the University Executive Board.

External participation in internal review processes

66 The University uses external assessors in both programme approval (validation) and in periodic (critical) review. As described above, these processes are often conducted together. In validation, external assessors are 'subject experts or practitioners in the associated field of employment' and 'are asked to comment, in particular, on the currency of the curriculum, methods of teaching and learning and assessment'. They are full members of the panel, who send in written reports in advance, attend whenever possible and approve the subsequent reports. They sometimes go on 'to become external examiners and this has proved beneficial in the development of the awards'. The SED described the externals in critical review as 'members of other HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] or industry', but the Quality Assurance Handbook states that 'they are normally senior academics with proven auditing skills. They should also have knowledge of the discipline concerned'. The externals are required to assist in identifying key

issues in advance based on the full documentation through a 500-word statement of themes and issues, to attend the review, and to agree the panel's report.

67 The SED identifies as a strength 'the critical and constructive nature of award review utilising independent peers'. The evidence seen by the audit team confirmed that the involvement of external persons in both approval and review processes was strong and scrupulous, and that those chosen had the necessary knowledge and independence to fulfil these roles.

External examiners and their reports

68 The appointment of external examiners is carried out initially through a nomination discussed and endorsed by FQC acting on behalf of Faculty Board. The University QIS arranges for consideration of the nomination by the External Examiner Approval Panel and then QDC which has delegated authority from Academic Board to approve the appointment of external examiners. The External Examiner Approval Panel, which reports to QDC, was formed in 2003-04 as a means of dealing more efficiently with appointment, extension and cessation of tenure and the SED stated that it had proved to be an effective forum in establishing consistency of approach in the consideration of proposals. The audit team considered the process of external examiner appointment to be consistent and robust.

69 External examiners receive a letter of appointment, and an outline of their responsibilities. QDC has moved away from providing examiners with paper-based information and instead refers them to the relevant sections of the University's website to ensure that they have access to the most up-to-date information. Induction for new external examiners is carried out by the faculty. The Quality Assurance Handbook recommends key points that this briefing should address, including how an examiner can access full copies of the University regulations through the website. The audit team saw evidence of successful induction processes.

70 The Quality Assurance Handbook describes the responsibilities of external examiners. They include confirmation of the standard of the undergraduate modules or postgraduate awards with which they have been involved through seeing a sample of summative work which conforms to a minimum requirement of the span of achievement of students taking the award. The audit team noted the many favourable comments of examiners including praise for the transparency and organisation of the marking system, discussions balancing care with consistency and rigour, and extremely accurate and fair marking.

71 Examiners must also be consulted about any proposed changes to the structure of assessment which directly affects students currently on the award. The audit team noted that during the 2003-04 review of the Undergraduate Modular Framework external examiners were consulted on the changes made to award structures and the shape of the curriculum. It is emphasised by the University that external examiners may not alter individual grade points for student work unless they have seen all student work in the relevant category for that module. This was confirmed in the team's meetings with staff.

72 In response to TQI requirements, the University has made alterations to procedures including establishing the role of chief external examiner. The SED states that this approach offers a number of advantages including a clear structure of external examiners' summary reports with a single summary for each area of provision at undergraduate and postgraduate level; a more holistic view of the standards of the awards in the area of provision and a reduction in the impact of award changes within the subject area and consequent changes to the membership of the external examiner team. The development of the role is also described as offering additional scrutiny of processes through the chief external examiner's approval of the QIS summary coversheet, and identification of the significance of any critical statements in the external examiner's report. The audit team considered this to be a useful

development in the context of the desirability of reviewing the institutional level processing and analysis of external examiners' reports.

73 The SED describes as a strength the robust scrutiny of external examiners' reports and the monitoring of the response to their recommendations. External examiners are required to make an annual report to the University. Reports are formally received by the Dean of Students and Academic Registrar, and processed by QIS. QIS sends copies to the relevant faculties with a coversheet that highlights issues of good practice and any recommendation for action. The Faculty Director of Learning and Teaching is required to address any critical points in advance of the subsequent procedures.

74 The alignment of University practice with the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, published by QAA, was discussed at QDC in Spring 2000. The audit team was able to scrutinise documents relating to this process and to confirm that University practice is aligned to the *Code*.

75 The audit team heard that the University had taken account of guidance under precept 13 of the *Code of practice: Section 4: External examining* and now summarises external examiners' responses to draw out key themes or recurring recommendations. This summary is presented at QDC. The summary has been produced through the introduction of a coversheet which is prepared by QIS before a report is sent to the faculty. The coversheet identifies specific comments in the report that should be addressed in the annual monitoring report (AMR), and defines them as positive, critical or recommendations. The team heard from staff that they used the coversheet primarily as a checklist, and that AMRs address all points noted, whether critical or recommended. The team found this to be the case.

76 QDC receives a summary of the statistics and issues arising from external examiners' reports. In 2004, QDC noted that the number of negative comments had declined from previous years and in 2005 noted that external examiners'

reports were in the main extremely positive. The SED stated that it has been very rare for the University to receive critical comments. The audit team formed the view that the way in which the categories of comment were defined was misleading, having found comments that the team regarded as critical that had not been recorded as such. Examples were found in 2003-04 coversheets over a wide subject range, including BSc Design Technology and BSc Sports Technology, Taught MSc Electronics, joint computing awards and Art and Design. As a consequence, the team was concerned that QDC and the University may not be gaining a proper understanding of the quality and standards of the awards. The team recognised that the University had engaged with the requirement to produce an overview report, but considers it desirable that the University reviews the current approach to the way in which it is developed at institutional level.

External reference points

77 The University has adopted *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) as the frame of reference for the design of its awards. It has developed an outcomes-based approach related to level learning outcomes and articulated the way in which this is achieved through modules, levels, programme learning outcomes and assessment. Changes have involved the revision of the Undergraduate Modular Framework and the revalidation of all undergraduate awards to align to this framework during the period 2003-04. An introductory paper 'The Specification of Learning Outcomes - Some Notes for u/g & p/g Practitioners' offers explanatory guidelines to staff and describes the model as supporting the generation of a common language for the articulation of the level of awards and outcomes related to the FHEQ, and additionally supports dissemination of good practice. At subject level, the audit team found the design and assessment of modules to be aligned with the University's level descriptors. The team was of the opinion that the linkage of module, level and programme learning outcomes fully articulated with the FHEQ was an example of good practice.

78 All postgraduate awards were re-profiled in 2002-03 to align credit ratings across courses and to review the relationship of learning outcomes to FHEQ requirements. Programme specifications were revised to express these changes and in cases where a review or revalidation was not scheduled, programme specifications were used as the means by which regulatory consistency was established. Where this was the case the School Quality Committee approved the revised programme specification documentation which was then submitted to QIS and consistency subsequently confirmed by an Approval Panel with membership drawn from QDC and the Postgraduate Education Subcommittee. An example of the latter is in Art and Design where postgraduate provision was not due for review until 2004-05.

79 Programme teams are required to demonstrate how benchmark statements have been incorporated into award structures at validation, revalidation and review. The structure of the programme specification template requires that level learning outcomes and award outcomes are directly and explicitly mapped to the relevant subject benchmark. They are also cross-referenced to the University's Undergraduate Modular Framework typology of learning outcomes which formed the basis of the FHEQ-aligned 2003-04 revalidation of all undergraduate courses. External subject specialist panel members are requested to comment specifically on this aspect of documentation.

80 There is an emphasis on the use of the programme specification as the main submission document in the recently streamlined validation procedures. The Quality Assurance Handbook describes the programme specification as the key validation document and lists standard requirements. Programme specifications scrutinised by the audit team confirmed that these documents fulfilled the requirements. The SED stated that external examiners were involved in approving programme specifications in the recent Undergraduate Modular Framework validation. The team confirmed this through scrutiny of documentation.

81 The SED described the University as having continually reviewed sections of the *Code of practice* as they have been published. The Director of QIS receives sections of the *Code* as they are produced and works with the Head of ADI to provide guidance at all levels. A pro-forma containing the precepts for any section to be reviewed is circulated to the faculty directors of Learning and Teaching and the chairs of the Academic Collaboration Sub-Committee and SURF. They are asked to comment on the precepts and the means by which the precepts are addressed, and to highlight any areas where action is needed. A report on the relationship of University practice to each section of the *Code* is subsequently received by QDC. From the documentation available, the audit team was able to confirm that this process is consistently and rigorously applied.

82 The University approach to assurance of alignment with the *Code of practice* is to embed the precepts in its institutional policies which then become the operating documents at faculty and subject level and in support services. For example, there is a revised University assessment policy that reflects the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students*, approved by the Academic Board in March 2004, and an e-learning handbook which extends the information in the Quality Assurance Handbook, and aligns with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. The audit team was able to review further sample documentation, including a code of practice for postgraduate research students recently revised through RDC in response to the September 2004 updated section and a placement handbook that had been developed in direct response to that section of the *Code*. Awareness of the *Code* and its central role in institutional policies were confirmed in the team's meetings with staff.

83 Some institutional policies are included in the Quality Assurance Handbook, whilst others are articulated through other documents and through web pages. The audit team found that institutional strategies and policies support

implementation of the *Code of practice*, and that associated information effectively encapsulates the relevant sections, facilitating their adoption at faculty and subject level, and within student support services.

84 The audit team concluded that the University had been thorough, rigorous and inclusive in its engagement with external references and in particular considered that the linkage of module, level and programme learning outcomes fully articulated with the FHEQ was an example of good practice.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

85 Since the last audit in May 2001 (published November 2001), the University had experienced QAA's academic review in three subject areas; Law, Social Work and Geography. In all cases it obtained confidence statements in its standards. In both Law and Geography all elements of the learning opportunities were judged commendable, as was the teaching and learning aspect of Social Work, where the other areas were approved. The University stated that it 'is keen to learn from the outcomes of external scrutiny' and the reports are considered by QDC, along with a response from the faculty concerned. Such reports are also considered during the annual monitoring process and in critical review.

86 Apart from providing 'a list of engagements with Professional and Statutory Bodies in the relevant areas', the SED is silent on the management of reviews by professional and statutory bodies. However, the Quality Assurance Handbook describes a thorough process whereby QIS and faculties manage such reviews, with reports considered initially by FQCs, and then (with the faculty response) by QDC. Consequent reports are also considered during the annual monitoring process. According to the Handbook, QDC should produce an annual report to the Academic Board on 'the activities associated with professional bodies': This has not occurred since 2000, but the Academic Board does receive the full minutes of QDC covering each individual report.

87 In all other respects the audit team found that these procedures were being followed and that the institution as a whole, as well as the individual subjects and faculties, were engaging in a timely fashion with all such external reviews and accreditation processes and that these procedures made a positive contribution to assurance of quality and standards.

Student representation at operational and institutional level

88 The SED stated that, 'the University has always recognised that the involvement of students plays an important role in the monitoring of the quality and standards of its awards'. There is evidence that students are represented on all appropriate University committees. The representation on the Academic Board and its subcommittees is by members of the SU. Although there is no representation on the University Executive Board, there is a University SU Liaison Committee that meets approximately three times a year to discuss current issues. It comprises the Dean of Students and Academic Registrar, two pro vice chancellors and all SU sabbatical officers and the SU General Manager.

89 The University has recently reviewed its use of student representation on committees, and decided to adopt a more formal process for monitoring and evaluating feedback. The Dean of Students, the Academic Registrar and the Education and Welfare Officer of the SU jointly produced recommendations to improve the effectiveness of the process, especially with regard to more immediate feedback in order to improve both procedures and curriculum for present students as well as future students. The reviewers put forward a series of recommendations to QDC that were subsequently approved by the Academic Board in March 2004 for implementation in September 2004. In the new procedures the Award Management Boards and equivalent faculty committees are the key forums for student representation. Action notes arising from these committees are sent to the Programme Area Manager, the Faculty Director

of Teaching and Learning, the Head of the Academic Development Institute and the SU Welfare Officer. In this way, any necessary action can be taken at the level of the programme, faculty and University without prolonged delays.

90 The SWS described how the SU played a key role in effecting these changes to the policy of student academic representation at the University. The SWS stated that it aimed to 'bring representation to the forefront and increase its profile throughout the University'.

91 The SU undertakes to train elected student representatives. A position of Representation Development Co-ordinator has been introduced to help support the new proposals set out in the student academic representation paper.

92 In addition to the above processes, international students are represented on an International Student Forum chaired by the Dean of Students and Academic Registrar. Other members include the Head of the International Office, the China Links Manager, representatives from student support services, the International Recruitment Office, the Accommodation Office, each faculty and the SU Vice President. This forum is designed to 'promote a positive experience for international students at Staffordshire University from the enquiry stage to graduation' and to 'promote awareness amongst staff and students of the cultural differences, needs and contributions of international students'. The audit team met a group of international students who explained that they were very satisfied with their experience at the University. They also stated that they especially appreciated the extended welcome week in advance of the usual welcome week arranged for other students and the special arrangements made if they had difficulty in arriving at the University on time.

93 At faculty level, the formal mechanism for student representation is via the SSLC. Undergraduates and postgraduates are represented by these committees. A benefit of these meetings is that students have an opportunity to discuss AMRs. Students reported that opening hours for the library and

information technology (IT) facilities had been extended to 03.00am as a result of their requests in these meetings. It is clear from discussions with students in the DATs, however, that strong informal mechanisms exist whereby students can discuss problems or issues with members of staff without having to wait for an SSLC meeting. Academic and support staff were praised for their willingness to help with student problems. Examples were given of students being helped to apply for jobs and prepare curriculum vitae. Students reported incidents where staff had moved teaching sessions to help when students had problems. An unanticipated consequence of the excellent informal discussions that students have with staff is the poor student attendance at the more formal committees including the SSLCs. The audit team learned that some student representatives do not attend the formal meetings because they have their problems resolved informally. In addition, staff reported the difficulty in some cases of recruiting representatives to faculty committees. The audit team noted that University staff were aware of the need to encourage more student regard for SSLCs and of the limits of informal approaches in resolving problems.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

94 Student feedback is systematically gained at University level through the annual Viewfinder Survey, distributed in paper form and on-line. The Survey covers the students' experiences of their award and the University in, for example, library services and IT, student services and diversity awareness. The Survey asks for individual comments and suggestions as well as ratings.

95 The Viewfinder Survey is managed by the Student Viewfinder Steering Group which meets termly to evaluate and plan it. It is evident from reports discussed by the Group that evaluation of the Viewfinder survey is made against performance indicators. The Group identifies cross-University action areas and examples from the 2004 Viewfinder Survey include return of coursework within specified

times, personal tutorial entitlement requirements, implementation of strategies to increase the response rate to the Viewfinder Survey. It was clear to the audit team that there is detailed evaluation of faculties and services. Student responses are broken down by gender, ethnicity, disability, level and mode. The team noted that external processing of the next survey would allow more complex interrogation of the data.

96 The outcome of evaluation of the Viewfinder Survey is an overall action plan approved by the University Executive Board, ratified by the Academic Board. Faculties and service providers develop action plans to address issues identified by students. Some of these plans note progress on the previous year's action plans and reflect on trends. Feedback to students is through the publication of action plans and responses made on the University website.

97 Students also comment on services through local helpdesks. Examples of action taken in response are University computer interfaces being adjusted to enable Japanese and Chinese students to use their own languages, and longer opening hours for the library to improve access for part-time students. Students endorsed the value of these actions. An example issue was that of students finding fares on the new intersite bus prohibitively high. The University responded by consulting widely, including with the SU with the result that costs were reduced.

98 The University does not currently gather feedback systematically from graduates other than through the First Destination Survey. The most recent available survey showed an increased number of respondents, of whom a greater number were in employment or undertaking further study than in previous years. The audit team heard that some individual award teams track graduates, and that there are local initiatives, for example, graduating students commenting on how well their course has prepared them for employment. The University has made a recent senior appointment to include a remit in graduate feedback.

99 Employer opinion is gathered and utilised in a number of ways. The University's strategy for research development is linked to companies, particularly those in health, computing and engineering. Where there are accredited courses there is employer input into curriculum and other aspects of standards and, in one case, a faculty is part-funded by the related profession. Vocationally focused courses maintain strong links with industry through project briefs set by practitioners, collaboration with companies, student placements, and staff engagement in professional practice. Whilst not all faculties have an employers' forum, the audit team heard that tutors have strong links with regional employment and professional bodies relevant to their discipline.

100 The audit team saw evidence that feedback from students, graduates and employers informs the University's provision, aids the resolution of problems, and contributes to enhancement. The University's efforts in this direction are increasing.

Progression and completion statistics

101 TheSIS provides data on progression and achievement and is used by the faculties and student support services to evaluate their provision. The SED describes a programme of development of the system and the introduction of complementary strategies for the production of reports for monitoring and internal review purposes.

102 The 2001 quality audit identified the need for further development of the then newly introduced information database TheSIS in order to provide data on the achievement and assessment of all students. Staff described to the audit team gradual improvement in the level and scope of data provided through the system and consequent assistance in annual monitoring. Such commentary was confirmed by the team's scrutiny of AMRs for undergraduate and taught postgraduate awards, which showed increasing analysis and use of data in the most recent reports.

103 Some statistical analysis of student achievement in modules is included in the reports. Centrally produced data are currently limited to reporting standard deviations, although there is evidence of more detailed local analysis. The audit team heard of an example of international students identified as achieving less well in particular modules being offered an extended bridging induction to enhance their learning in the subject identified as particularly difficult for them.

104 At University level, data are used to note and analyse trends, for example, to consider the categories of students from whom appeals and claims for extenuating circumstances are received.

105 Improvement in the provision of statistics is still to be implemented for research degrees, although the audit team heard, and noted through scrutiny of documentation, that such improvement was underway. A University overview of student progression is yet to be established. The team considered that confidence in the University's understanding of the profile, progression and completion of research students could be placed in areas where there were significant numbers of such students within a research institute. The team consider it desirable that the University move rapidly to full analysis and evaluation of the research student profile, progression and completion, particularly in view of the time that has elapsed between the 2001 quality audit report and the related point for consideration in that report and this audit.

106 There is evidence that admissions, progression and completion data have been used to inform recruitment and student support developments in the University. Data show that recruitment is largely regional. Special initiatives, including Aim Higher and the Higher Education Shop, support the admission of students from widening participation backgrounds. The audit team heard examples of mature students whose entry to higher education had been supported by the University's inclusive approach and special initiatives.

107 The SED stated that one of the main aims of the University plan was to maximise the number of students who stayed and successfully completed their courses. To fulfil this aim, developments have taken place in the use of statistical data, including the formation of a Strategy Group to improve student retention. The group monitors withdrawal figures, which are provided on a monthly basis, and takes action where necessary. An example action is that of the analysis of exit questionnaires which showed that a high proportion of withdrawals were students who had come to the University through clearing. Additional induction support for these students was put in place as a consequence. The value of the action taken was endorsed in the audit team's meetings with students in DATs.

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

108 The University's Human Resources Strategies for 2001-04 'focus upon...key processes that support the University's strategies of teaching excellence, research excellence and enterprise'. The University is committed 'to the recruitment and retention of high quality staff' to achieve its aims for excellence'. Its latest Extended Investment Plan (EIP) also identifies 'the requirement for effective leadership, good management and embracing diversity'. Personnel Services are responsible for delivering the EIP.

109 The University has well-established guidelines on the recruitment and selection of staff. A two-day training programme provides an introduction to the guidelines, the legislative background, the short-listing process and interviewing skills. Participation in the programme is compulsory for chairs of interviewing panels and it is to be extended to all staff involved in recruitment and selection. The selection process for lecturing staff involves a panel interview and usually includes a presentation by the candidate. The process assesses the candidate's suitability to lecture and, where appropriate, to conduct research,

administer and manage. Interview panels are usually chaired by a member of the faculty management team and comprise academic staff from the subject area and a senior staff member from another area. Panels for appointments to principal lecturer and above will also have an external 'expert'. The appointment of professors and readers operates under established and robust processes under the direction of the Vice Chancellor.

110 Induction takes the form of a half-day briefing on corporate matters and activities arranged by the appointee's line manager. The University's half-day briefing has recently been reduced from a full day to facilitate attendance by all new staff, a number of whom had found it difficult to attend for the whole day. Managers inducting new staff are provided with an induction template/checklist. This has over 30 elements to ensure that new staff learn of their faculty procedures and facilities and that they are introduced to individuals with key responsibilities. The induction ends with identifying further development that may be required in the first six months of appointment.

111 Induction into academic teaching is provided by a four-module Postgraduate Certificate in Higher and Professional Education (PGCHPE) initiated in 2000. It is accredited by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Staff and Educational Development Association. Attendance is a requirement for new staff without three years experience of higher education teaching and content is primarily focused on them. It is also available to those experienced staff who wish to update themselves on new forms of practice, to a wide range of other staff involved in learning and teaching supporting roles, and to postgraduate tutors.

112 The SED states that 'in general, the appointment processes work well and the procedures are consistently applied throughout'. The induction process is specified as being 'one of the University's recognised strengths' having been modified following feedback from participants in the University's ViewFinder 2001 staff survey.

113 The SED stated that 'Staff appraisal has been part of University practice since 1996. A revised appraisal and development policy...came into effect in 2001. This established different forms of appraisal for each category of staff, with the aim of making the process relevant to each person's particular role...for it to have greater alignment with a department's planning process...and for individual objectives to be linked to those of each department'. There is an appraisal form with boxes for the appraisee to complete under 13 headings in preparation for an appraisal. The appraiser then adds comments to adjacent boxes on the form during the appraisal. For all academic staff, appraisals are undertaken by the line manager who, for most academic staff, will be their group leader. The appraisal leads to identifying staff development needs to meet personal, faculty and University objectives. The appraisal process is soon to change to a performance review.

114 Staff may be rewarded by receiving accelerated increments within their grade. The procedure is stated to provide both clarity and transparency with identified criteria against which applications are judged. Additionally, the University promotes reward and recognition of achievement in teaching via the Learning and Teaching Fellowship scheme which has been operating since 1999. Six Fellowships may be awarded per year, comprising a £1,000 honorarium for two years and a further £1,000 for two years to conduct a pedagogic project. In 2004, one of the University's Fellows was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship. The University affirmed that 'The number of Learning and Teaching fellowships awarded under the current scheme is recognised as not adequately reflecting the number of excellent teachers in the institution'. The University is intending to change its academic staff assessment, promotion and rewards processes from August 2006 following a review of its remuneration strategy.

115 The audit team reviewed the appointment and interviewing guidelines, and discussed with staff the training programme and selection procedures. Staff judged these last two elements to be fit for purpose. The information

obtained from staff and the documentation seen by the team on induction and the appraisal process satisfied the team that the process is undertaken thoroughly and leads to the identification of developmental needs.

Assurance of quality of teaching through staff support and development

116 The SED stated that 'the University's commitment to the development of all its staff is demonstrated by the achievement of the Investors in People (IiP) standard across the whole institution in October 2003'. This recognises the embedding within the University of a continuous improvement culture. The IiP standard requires commitment to invest in people to achieve organisational goals; planning of how individuals and teams are to be developed to achieve these goals and taking action to develop and use necessary skills in a well defined and continuing programme directly tied to organisational objectives. IiP is thus at the heart of staff development but it has also contributed significantly in enabling the University to implement its recent structural changes. The University's latest EIP identifies 'the requirement for...support for staff through proactive approaches to training and development'.

117 The SED described how 'the Training and Development section of Personnel Services has responsibility for the development of general staff training and development policies...together with the direct provision of staff training and development activity and related specialist advisory services to meet identified training needs'. The SED went on to describe how 'The Professional Development Committee, which reports to Academic Board, takes responsibility for the coordination of training and development across the University and for the implementation of both the Professional Development Plan and the Training Development Plan. The Committee, chaired by a Pro Vice Chancellor, has representatives of the training providers and those involved in identifying staff's professional development needs'. Some of these are identified through appraisal as already described.

118 The main staff educational and professional development activities are organised by Educational Development which was incorporated into and became one half of the ADI when it was established in August 2003; (the other half is QIS). A new Coordinator for Educational Development has recently been appointed, following an 18-month vacancy. The new appointment has led to a major programme of development. The second strand of staff development is provided by Learning Development and Innovation (LDI) which is part of IS. LDI provides training and support activities for staff in developing technology-supported learning. This activity primarily covers the development of e-learning teaching resources for use both by on-campus and distance learners and answers the current five-year University plan which includes a commitment to patterns of flexible delivery and accompanying staff development. A third strand of staff development is provided by faculties, as described below.

119 The SED affirmed that 'Academic staff development is...a shared responsibility between the University, the Faculty and the individual'. The training and development activities that staff undertake are grouped either under a (1) University Development Portfolio (UDP) heading or under (2) an Individual Development Portfolio heading. The UDP includes the induction half-day; the PGCHPE programme for less experienced lecturers; a three-day course, A Survivor's Guide to Teaching and Learning in higher education aimed at part-time and postgraduate students and others who assist part-time in teaching. There is also a Management Development Programme which focuses on management and leadership skills for senior managers in faculties and services. The programme was established to ensure that those appointed to leadership and managerial positions within the new University structure were adequately trained. Attendance has been mandatory for programme area managers and more senior staff.

120 The University Professional Development Policy requires staff to have Individual

Development Portfolios (IDP) of job-specific development activities to support them in the performance of their role and career development. The University affirms that 'Subject-related staff development is the responsibility of the Faculty and the individual' and faculties are allocated a budget for this. Such developmental needs may be addressed by seminars and conferences, role specific technical training, bespoke faculty or service skills workshops and lunchtime sessions. 'Faculties are proactive in running in-house staff development sessions according to need'. Once an activity has been completed, all staff should use a Learning Activity Plan proforma to record and reflect on the activity. External training bodies courses can be used by staff to improve their interpersonal skills. The University promotes membership of the HEA with financial support.

121 The current two-year Learning and Teaching Strategy identifies priority areas of educational development activities and there are also 'Professional Development of Staff action plans'. The SED stated that 'The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee (LTEC) plays an important role in monitoring the relevant action plans and progressing staff development as appropriate'.

122 Examples of educational development in support of priorities in the Learning and Teaching Strategy include events related to PDP and Student Employability; the University events were followed up by faculty-based sessions; a programme on disability awareness which has been mandatory for all staff; Learning and Teaching Conferences which have been organised for the last two years, designed 'for colleagues throughout the University to share good practice around a number of themes'. Attendance at the conferences has, however, been lower than expected by the University.

123 Improvement in teaching quality also occurs through peer observation of teaching, which was made compulsory in 2000, replacing local schemes. Staff are trained as observers and 'a more consistent approach to training the staff involved...is currently being developed'. The scheme is developmental and designed to

improve teaching quality, disseminate best practice, to identify staff development needs and to provide reflective practice for both observers and observed. It is not linked to promotion, disciplinary matters nor appraisal.

124 There has recently been a 'debate on how best to reconfigure the educational development function'. The University recognises that during the previous two years, the structure for delivering educational staff development had undergone a number of changes which have possibly created some uncertainty about where responsibility is located. It is further recognised that the separation of staff development and educational development, and their operating in a relatively independent manner, requires revision. Closer working arrangements will be developed. The publication of a Staff Development Handbook covering both aspects is seen by the University as starting this process.

125 Despite the reorganisation that has occurred with educational development, the complexity of declared responsibilities and the diversity of plans, the audit team found that staff development is well-embedded in the University for all levels of staff. This is further reflected in professional, educational and subject related development being separately considered and by the use of the lIP programme to help facilitate restructuring. Development needs are identified both by appraisal interviews and from policy decisions; some of which result in some development activities being mandatory. In addition to the University-provided activities, faculties organise regular sessions for all their staff to attend, facilitating both development and the sharing of good practice. The team concluded that the staff development strategy and facilities provided by the University make a very firm contribution to the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of the student learning experience.

Assurance of quality of teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods

126 The SED stated that the University has been 'engaged in the delivery of e-learning since

1997-98 and has established a national and international reputation in a number of areas'. The SED explained that the initial projects were 'enthusiast-led' but developments since have embedded distributed learning in the University's current Learning and Teaching Strategy. Distributed learning awards are now centrally managed within the University, coordinated by expert staff in the Learning Development Innovation Unit of IS. The University is proud of the fact that it now has 43 e-learning awards and 175 e-learning modules. The main virtual learning environment (VLE) utilised for current distributed learning activities is a leading commercial course management system and is being used at Staffordshire to replace the local VLE initially used.

127 The faculties and IS, in consultation with HEFCE and DfES, have established an e-learning policy stating the aims and objectives of its use at the University. It is among the first UK HEIs to develop such a policy. In addition, the University has produced a comprehensive handbook for e-learning that describes all aspects of the production of a new course or award including the quality assurance mechanisms that must be in place.

128 The University utilises e-learning in different ways:

- as a resource support for students where key document information regarding a module is found
- in addition to acting as a key document information source, e-learning is used to provide a certain degree of independent learning activity within a traditionally delivered module
- it is also used in postgraduate programmes as the major delivery tool. Face-to-face delivery has been replaced by independent activity. As examples, three new postgraduate master's courses were validated in June 2004: the Master of Public Health; the MSc in Physical Activity and Public Health; and the MSc in Applied Sport and Exercise Science. Each of these courses is delivered entirely by distance learning. They offer unique opportunities for students that are not available elsewhere.

129 The distributed learning programmes are validated and monitored using similar quality control mechanisms to those of traditional mode programmes. New proposals are reviewed by a QDC validation panel consisting of external panel members as well as experts from IS. The presenting team display their material and a final report is sent to the Academic Board for approval. The University has also established a Flexible Learning Approval Panel (FLAP) that is composed of staff from QDC and IS and can approve University Learning Awards on behalf of QDC. FLAP can act swiftly in response to market demand for shorter courses and is being used to introduce new distributed learning courses. For example, a recent University Learning Award, entitled 'Conversion entry route in Psychology' was approved by FLAP on 28 January 2003.

130 Each distance-learning award has a programme specification and a comprehensive student handbook that meets the requirements of the University's Quality Assurance Handbook. The audit team met some postgraduate students on a distance learning PhD programme and noted the high level of support that the students received both at the University and when abroad.

131 The audit team came to the view that University has very well developed quality management systems for its distributed learning activities.

Learning support resources

132 Many of the University's centrally provided learning resources are the responsibility of IS under the Director of IS. These include the Library and Learning Support, IT and the network infrastructure, Operations and the LDI unit. IS liaises with more specialist faculty provision in some areas. IS was established in 2002 and its responsibilities have expanded since. Its own strategic plans are linked to the overall University plan. A detailed review of informal and formal liaison mechanisms across the campus was undertaken in 2004, and identified some as being strong and others weaker. The University told the audit team that

'A liaison policy is now being embedded into the Service'.

133 The IS strategies have been allocated project capital funding by the University and an initial spend of £1.1million is supporting the 2004 to 2006 IS Network Strategy. This will upgrade the entire network and increase both bandwidth and storage capacity. The development was urgently required and will benefit staff and students. A Content Management System is also being implemented to support the creation of internal document repositories, the intranet and the overall management and redesign of the website. IS has also undertaken substantial development in support of e-learning and additionally supports staff and students once new e-awards, modules and learning support software are available for use. A new student induction programme and a key skills area of the website have been created.

134 There is an annual budget for library resource purchases. The library currently has 30,000 e-books available and access to 16,000 e-journals through a consortium supply. These facilities address both student survey responses for greater access to books as well as supporting off-campus delivery of learning. Subject and Learning Support librarians liaise with academics in faculties on the allocation and use of these resources.

135 The University's Estates Strategy recognises that improvements to the teaching facilities are required. These are being progressively addressed by an allocation of £50,000 per annum. Additionally, £2.4 million from the HEFCE Restructuring and Collaboration Funds has recently been invested in remodelling, refurbishment and extensions to engineering, technology and science laboratories and specialist facilities, and £2 million of HEFCE Project Capital funding has improved the space and facilities for postgraduate/professional programmes, media studies and performing arts and drama.

136 The particular combination of subjects taught at the University means that a significant variety of facilities and equipment is required in addition to PCs for individual study and accessing information sources. Examples of

such facilities are studios and specialist equipment for television and film work; media centres, design studios and workshops for a range of creative arts; specialist laboratories to support sport and exercise subdisciplines of physiology, psychology and biomechanics. Specialised software, often to commercial specifications, is also required.

137 The faculties, their awards and their specialist equipment are mostly based on a single campus so that students rarely need to travel between campuses to use special facilities, and, in the view of the audit team, duplication is not necessary. There are libraries and computing facilities at all sites.

138 The library and IS are two of the main areas covered by the ViewFinder Survey. In the most recent survey, students classed the range and the availability of books in the libraries as the fourth and sixth most important aspects of their University study. The analysis of responses showed that all students judged the range of books as 'satisfactory' while a question on the availability of books showed a majority opting for 'OK' with the rest being 'satisfactory'. The availability of journals/periodicals and electronic media was almost unanimously judged as satisfactory, as was the availability of library study places. On IT, students from three of the four faculties were 'very satisfied' with the number of computers, with their access to the internet and with the IT facilities provided by their faculty.

139 Students from the disciplines met by the audit team through the DATs had been significantly influenced in their choice of university by the facilities available. Before applying, some students had compared facilities across various universities. One student classed those available in his discipline at the University as outstanding. Students commented very favourably on the specialist facilities and on the learning resources generally. They were also pleased that their views had been responded to with the library now being open until 0300 hours. They were also very appreciative of the assistance received from academic and support staff.

140 The University has an estates strategy to improve progressively its learning resources. Current students are very appreciative of the physical, computing and human resources available to support their learning. The audit team has confidence that the University's resources ensure that the curriculum is delivered and that they help students to meet the standards required in their programmes.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

141 The 2001 audit commended 'the university's learning and teaching strategy which provides effective support for student learning'. Since 2001, the main structures for such support have not been altered, although there has been considerable attention to the effectiveness of personal tutoring, most recently the completion of an IPA of personal tutoring earlier this year. The SED, which addresses both academic and personal support and guidance under the same section, concluded that 'generally, students are well supported both by academic and professional support staff in the University', citing evidence from the Viewfinder Surveys and regarded 'the emphasis all staff place on a student focused and friendly learning environment which supports the wide range of students' to be a strength. However, it noted that 'further improvement' can be made in 'the personal tutor system' and its plan of action includes consideration of 'the outcomes of the IPA of personal tutoring and their implementation'. There has been a University-wide scheme in place since 2001, offering students 'a minimum entitlement to a personal tutor during each year of their studies'. Training was given to personal tutors when the scheme was first introduced, a personal tutor handbook produced and a website set up as a resource for personal tutors. However, evidence from the Viewfinder Surveys of varied implementation across faculties led to the decision to conduct a systematic evaluation of the scheme through the IPA. This evaluation concluded that 'all students have access to personal tutorial support', though in some areas less than 'required by the policy', but that 'many students

see the personal tutor as a problem-solving mechanism they use when needed'.

142 The SED concluded that 'evidence from reviews of awards and subject areas show that students feel well-supported in their studies by academic staff and that relations between staff and students are strong' and the audit team endorse that verdict on the basis of the evidence collected both in DATs and University-wide meetings. It was clear that formal personal tutor systems were only one mechanism by which students obtained academic and personal support from staff and that in this context variability in the use of personal tutors, at student discretion, was an appropriate state of affairs. Indeed, the team regarded student access to and support from all categories of staff as an area of good practice to be commended.

143 The IPA also recommends that the role of personal tutoring be reviewed in the light of developments in 'personal development planning', noting the opportunity that this offered for the closer integration of the academic and personal support functions of personal tutoring. There has been a PDP steering implementation group in place at the University for some time, which in December 2004 produced a PDP Policy. The policy proposes a flexible approach to the implementation of PDP reflecting different curriculum strategies in each field, but requiring all faculties to 'ensure that all academic programmes will incorporate opportunities for students to engage in PDP activity' and requiring academic staff 'to provide advice and guidance to students engaged in PDP processes, signposting where necessary to support services'. The audit team saw evidence of a range of pilot projects and discussions about how to implement this policy in each subject area and noted the recommendation that this be used as an opportunity to formalise the personal tutoring input in this wider context.

144 The audit team also noted the operation of several aspects of guidance and support at particular stages of the students' experience. The first was the good practice involved in the operation of Welcome Week and mentoring which support the induction of new students.

An effective partnership between the SU and the University, making excellent use of existing students to offer assistance and guidance to incoming students, was clearly ensuring that both academic and pastoral needs were being effectively addressed for students of all categories. A similar level of care was in evidence for first-year students throughout their studies, in connection with the programme of work conducted as part of the Retention Strategy, which has been implemented since September 2004 by a high-level Retention Strategy Group, 'comprising the Faculty Directors for Learning and Teaching, the Head of the Academic Development Institute, a member of staff from the Institute of Access Studies, a member of the Strategic Planning office and the Students' Union Education and Welfare Officer'. This Group not only monitors data on retention each week, but has also put into place measures to support students, notably the work of the Student Guidance Officer, who meets all students thinking of leaving the University.

145 The Student Guidance Officer also plays an important part in the appeals and complaints procedure, along with the Student Appeals and Complaints Officer. The latter deals with any appeals and complaints on behalf of the Dean of Students and Academic Registrar and the former gives advice and guidance to students on the process: this division of labour avoids any potential conflict of interest within the University procedures. Both officers, working in partnership with the SU, helped to address many cases informally, so limiting the number reaching formal consideration. The audit team found that all parties were satisfied with the operation of these procedures and was also impressed by the feedback and report mechanisms used to ensure that all parties learned from each case: it also noted the Vice Chancellor's affirmation that she monitored complaints closely, through the role of the Dean of Students and Academic Registrar, and found these a key guide to areas for potential improvement of services and support.

146 The audit team considered both the general requirements for student handbooks (both award and module) and numerous specific examples during the DATs. The formal requirements for the

handbooks were exemplary, although not all the examples seen met the exact requirements, the general standard of information provided was very high. The same was true of the information contained in programme specifications, which was often very detailed.

Personal support and guidance

147 The 2001 audit made two recommendations in the area of personal support and guidance: the desirability of 'improving the visibility of the Student Charter and evaluating the way that it is used' and the advisability of 'building on its existing review processes so that the Student Office is able to benefit from an integrated institutional-level overview'. Since 2001 the Student Charter, though still in formal existence and updated in June 2004 to reflect various service level agreements, has not been emphasised and was not discussed in the SED. However, the SED identifies one of its strengths as 'working in partnership with the Students' Union' and the team found ample evidence of this partnership and of specific guidance on services available to students in handbooks and on the website.

148 Many of these services fall within the Student Office, which comprises Employability and Student Support; Student Recruitment; Student Administration; and the International Office. The SED offered ample evidence of the work of the first of these sections, in areas such as careers guidance and counselling. The post of Head of Careers and Employability reflects the University's efforts to link its teaching strategy on employability with its careers advisory service. The evidence seen by the audit team, including the Viewfinder Survey evidence, confirmed that these individual services worked well and were responsive to customer feedback. However, the team was less sure that the Student Office had addressed the 2001 audit advice regarding 'an integrated institution-level overview'. A substantial number of support services did not fall under the Student Office, and it was not clear that there was a regular cycle of service reports and plans, or of university-led reviews of their provision. The team noted that many reviews of specific service issues, initiated by the

University Secretary were now under way, to be completed 2004-05.

149 The SED identified only one set of support issues specific to a particular student group, namely disability. Here it reported on the work of the Disability Forum, which is clearly effective, in the view of the audit team, in ensuring that the needs of this group are properly addressed at all levels, although the SED identified the need to 'review the Faculty and Service Disability Plans'. However, the team noted that many other organisations and activities are provided by the University to meet the needs of other types of student. For example, international students were considered by an International Strategy Group, which in turn established in summer 2004, an International Student Forum. The papers of this Forum, together with discussions with students, confirmed that a number of issues for international students had been effectively aired and addressed. These various forums now fell under the responsibility of the Diversity Steering Group or, in the case of the International Student Forum, the International Strategy Group, with its brief to ensure that the University's plans to develop an increasingly diverse student population (with growth proposed in international, postgraduate and distance learning students) were properly reflected in support provision as well as in the teaching and skills of staff.

150 The audit team also considered the challenges faced by the University in delivering its support services across campuses. It concluded that every reasonable effort was made to supply the same level of support at both the Stoke and Stafford campuses, and to work with the local partners in order to provide adequate support for students on other campuses and by distance learning.

Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trails

Discipline audit trails

151 In each of the selected DATs, members of the audit team met staff and students to discuss

the programmes, studied a sample of assessed student work, saw examples of learning resource materials, and studied annual module and programme reports and periodic school reviews relating to the programmes. Their findings in respect of the academic standards of awards are as follows:

Engineering and Technology

152 The DAT was based on three engineering and technology undergraduate programme areas and three postgraduate taught awards offered by the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Technology.

Undergraduate programme areas:

- Engineering MEng/BEng/BSc
- Design and Sports Technology BSc
- Media, Entertainment and Communication Technology BSc.

Postgraduate awards (MSc):

- Advanced Technology
- Electronics
- Computer Games Design.

153 The DAT SED was written for the audit, and programme specifications were appended for these programmes and others. The undergraduate engineering programme comprises eight separate awards, spanning electronic, electrical, mechanical, systems and forensic engineering. Similarly, the other two undergraduate programme headings consist of a number of more specialised subjects under the generic title given. Awards are offered both full and part-time, with the majority of part-time students being on programmes in engineering or on the MSc in Advanced Technology. The BSc Design and Sports Technology programme awards aim to satisfy the academic requirements for registration as an incorporated engineer. The engineering awards additionally include preparation for becoming a chartered engineer.

154 The programme specifications are comprehensive documents, setting out the aims and appropriate learning outcomes. 'All awards have been developed following the University's

'eight plus two' interpretation of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ)' as previously described. The teaching and learning for each award and the assessment methods are mapped against the FHEQ and against the *Subject benchmark statement* for engineering where this applies. The programme specifications also describe the curriculum, the basis of assessment, and give the award structures in terms of the modules studied.

155 A selection of progression and completion data was appended to the DSED. This was derived from the TheSIS database and illustrated that students' progression within and between awards and through the University could be classified under 30 different headings. Staff can select cohort data refined in further student categories to view progress and achievement characteristics. These analyses are then used in annual monitoring. The audit team was advised that, through the current enhancements to TheSIS, more detailed trend analyses would soon be possible.

156 The University states that 'Quality management within the Faculty is the responsibility of the Faculty Director for Learning and Teaching, and is managed through a Faculty Quality Development Team (FQDT). A member of the University's Quality Improvement Service (QIS) is a member of the team to provide advice and to ensure that the Faculty is operating to the policies and guidelines of the University'. Annual internal monitoring starts with individual module reviews. These include student input obtained through questionnaires. 'Award tutors then prepare an award monitoring document based on the individual module documents.' These then progress to the programme area and then a Faculty monitoring meeting at which staff discuss and evaluate each monitoring report and identify actions needed. The Faculty then creates an action plan to ensure that quality is maintained and that good practice is disseminated throughout the Faculty. University-appointed rapporteurs examine and comment on the monitoring process. Reviews/revalidations take place less frequently but all awards have been revalidated recently as a part of the move

from a 10 to a 15-credit system. The review documentation seen showed that a standard University pro forma was used and that this prompted relevant issues to be addressed.

157 There are procedures for addressing comments made by external examiners in their reports, for reporting on these comments and for checking that actions have been taken. However, examples were found where external examiners were repeating the same comments with some degree of frustration the year following their first expression. In discussion of this point, one staff member seen by the audit team advised that staff might have treated the comments as developmental and thus the comments might be addressed only over the years rather than actioned immediately. For the external examiner comments seen, (for example, a comment on the setting of examinations) the team judged delays in response to be unhelpful. A contributory factor to the delay in response may be the University's external examiner report form. The form asks the external examiners to summarise their recommendations at the end of their reports, without also asking for any required actions to be specified.

158 The University has spent some time developing its assessment strategy as part of its recent programme structure changes. The approaches are reflected within the engineering and technology programmes viewed. From the sample of assessed student work the audit team saw, it was apparent that there was a match to the programme specifications and that the standards of student achievement were appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ.

159 Student handbooks are given to each student at the start of studies. The handbooks are produced to a high standard of presentation and detail of content. Detail includes guidance on how to study, the award curriculum and assessment information as well as disciplinary requirements, appeals procedures and a glossary of University terminology. There is a separate handbook for students who study on placement.

160 The DSED stated that the Faculty has a policy of updating facilities and resources, partially reflecting student numbers taking particular awards. In recent years there has been significant investment in studio facilities for the entertainment-related awards, in order to give students access to industry-standard hardware, software and technology. A new design studio has also been made available to students. In the view of the Faculty, the usability laboratory is a key facility for the MSc in Computer Games Design. As resources change, staff develop their skills to the level necessary to deliver the curriculum using the new facilities. There are e-learning packages which have been developed in the VLE to help students with their learning and these are positively regarded by students. The Faculty views its facilities as excellent. Students report that academic and other staff make a significant contribution to their learning through their availability and accessibility.

161 Students provide feedback on individual modules through questionnaires and also by contributing to the Student Viewfinder Survey at University level. The Student Viewfinder survey results are analysed by faculty under headings which include seven aspects of course organisation, five aspects of staff teaching and supervision, nine academic and transferable skills and seven aspects of the learning environment. Three issues were recently identified through the Student Viewfinder survey related to the Faculty and an action plan was developed in response. Progress on this is monitored by the Faculty Learning Development Team.

162 There is no award or programme questionnaire. Rather, student representatives sit on SSLCs and sometimes on course committees, both undergraduate and postgraduate. Here, students make comment and receive information on issues raised. The minutes seen of such committees did not show the students typically raising many issues. However, students did show some concerns about the later delivery of certain modules which the students had expected to have started. Students reported that issues which arise may often be referred to staff directly and

dealt with and thus not appear on committee agendas. It was reported by staff that it can be difficult to engage students in committee work and aspects of quality management.

163 The audit team found the programmes covered within the DAT to be operating effectively within the Faculty quality management framework. The review and monitoring procedures lead to both evaluation of programmes and action plans to address issues. Students' feedback is used at module level and student evaluations of a wide range of issues occur through the University Student Viewfinder Survey. The team formed the view that the information that students receive on their awards is clear and comprehensive, the facilities available to support their learning are of a high quality and staff are very supportive. The team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities was suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards reviewed in the DAT.

Fine Art and Design

164 Awards selected for the DAT were within the Arts, Culture and Design Programme Area. They included BA awards in Ceramics, Crafts, Design Management, Glass, Product Design, Product Design Technology and Surface Pattern Design and MA awards in Ceramics, History of Ceramics and Design Management and Enterprise. Postgraduate research degrees were also included.

165 The DSED was initially written for the 2004 Internal Subject Review of undergraduate provision. The Programme Area Manager provided a factual and evaluative update in an additional section. There was little reference to postgraduate provision although the supplementary section of the DSED offered some evaluation of statistical data on postgraduates.

166 All undergraduate provision underwent revalidation in 2003-04. The development of the Undergraduate Modular Framework involved new programme specifications and the articulation and integration of learning outcomes by module, level and award in relation to the University's learning outcomes, the subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ.

167 The undergraduate courses are covered by three programme specifications and postgraduate courses by a single specification. Programme specifications scrutinised by the audit team provided a complete outline of the course and explicitly mapped the learning outcomes to the relevant subject benchmarks. The chief external examiner was involved in approval of the new undergraduate programme specifications. Postgraduate programme specifications are less comprehensive pending the review of the Faculty's postgraduate provision when award-specific specifications will be developed. In their current largely generic form they provide an adequate outline of the provision and confirm the University's commitment to the use of external references.

168 The audit team heard that staff had used a learning outcomes approach to curriculum design and assessment for some time, and that the development of the Undergraduate Modular Framework had enhanced and supported this. The team review of a sample of assessed work confirmed clear progression in the learning outcomes in relation to the FHEQ and the subject benchmark. Learning outcomes for postgraduate awards were also developed in the context of external guidelines, and evidenced through the work sample.

169 Staff understood that the sections of the *Code of practice* were embedded in University policies. Staff were involved in mapping current practice to sections and feeding back to QDC. The MA Ceramics placement handbook, which explicitly cites and integrates the placement learning section, is an example of the Faculty's implementation of the *Code*.

170 The DSED included an evaluative commentary on statistical data. The audit team was told by staff that data provided by the University was improving and enabling them to evaluate their provision increasingly effectively. Moreover, some more recent AMRs included reflection on gender, ethnicity and disability and awards statistics. An example of action taken in response to analysis of recruitment and retention data was the development of a four-day 'Bridging the Bridge' induction for mature

students, the value of which was endorsed by students in their meeting with the team.

171 The Faculty Quality Handbook gives an outline of validation and review processes including module and award amendment, module monitoring and annual award monitoring. In alignment with handbook guidelines, the Faculty provided a detailed response to the recent internal review and provided an action plan to address points raised in the review report. The audit team noted that effective action had been taken on for example, the effective administrative support for SSLCs. The review report and Faculty response were considered by the Faculty Quality Group and submitted to QDC as described in the DSED. Staff thought the process beneficial and the team found it effective.

172 External examiners' reports are received at programme level through QIS. Awards develop their AMR and identify key issues raised by external examiners. The audit team noted some variation in explicit engagement with examiners' comments. In line with the Quality Assurance Handbook there are examples of examiners' module-specific comments including level 2 modules. A chief external examiner for undergraduate provision takes an overview of the examination process, attending all award assessment boards to ensure parity in the treatment of students. The chief examiner's 2003-04 report described examination board processes to be balanced, fair and rigorous.

173 Undergraduate students met by the audit team described learning outcomes as clear. Module feedback forms record achievement against learning outcomes and students confirmed that feedback enhanced understanding of their achievement. Postgraduate students told the team that assessment was well described. The extenuating circumstances process was clear, and students were confident that, should they need to use the appeals or complaints procedures, they would be able to find the required information and advice. Through review of the student work sample, the team was able to confirm that assessment practice is aligned with the revised

University assessment policy and learning outcomes with external references.

174 At the start of their course students receive a handbook that includes a student guide with information about wider University support. A standard format module descriptor covers module content, learning and assessment strategies and requirements, learning outcomes and information about accessing resources including detailed timetables. Additional contextual material also supports the students' learning experience. In conjunction with the related programme specification, handbooks fulfill the requirements described in the University's Quality Assurance Handbook.

175 Students praised the subject specialist resources available to them. There is a clear annual process for considering bids for resources. Students have input to this through SSLCs, Workshop Users Groups and the University's Student Viewfinder Survey. Students remarked on the extended Library opening hours which were particularly valued by part-time students. Whilst there are examples of identified resource needs that remain unfulfilled, it was evident that resources were managed to support the quality of the student experience as far as was possible within budget constraints.

176 The audit team heard that students feel well supported academically. They were particularly positive about the academic standards of their courses. Tutors operate an effective 'open door' policy, as well as a personal tutorial system which offers twice-yearly timetabled progress reviews. Students also valued the level and quality of support from technical staff. The team heard that research student supervision is well organised and of a good quality and that there is effective liaison between supervisors.

177 In taught awards a student's pastoral support request is noted on the academic tutorial record. Students described support for disabled students as excellent, and the support offered by the International Office to overseas students as good. Students expressed satisfaction with the University Welcome Week

which they felt reflected the friendly and supportive ethos that they found in the University and their courses.

178 Student representatives receive training from the SU. They attend staff/student liaison groups which are held for each award and which meet once each semester. Students are included in all aspects of meetings, for example, contributing to the scrutiny and agreement of module monitoring reports and, annually, the award AMR. There is also student representation on the annual Workshop Users Group which informs the annual review of learning resources. Representatives feed back to fellow students as described in the Faculty Quality Handbook. The audit team found minutes to be consistently clear across the groups, and that the administration of the meetings and feedback effectively completed action required by the Internal Review.

Sports and Exercise

179 The scope of the DAT included eight awards grouped into two schemes. The Sport and Exercise scheme comprised four different awards leading to the qualifications of BSc (Hons) in Sports Studies; Sport and Exercise Science; Exercise and Health and Sport and Exercise Nutrition. The latter is accredited by the Nutrition Society. The Sport and Society Scheme covered BA Honours degrees in Sports Studies; Sports Development and Coaching; Sport and Leisure Management (accredited by the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management) and Sport Culture and the Media.

180 To support the DAT a DSED was specially written by members of staff from the Sport and Exercise Programme Area in the Faculty of Health and Sciences. All staff and students had had an opportunity to comment on the initial draft.

181 The introduction to the DSED explains the position of sport and exercise in the Faculty of Health and Sciences and the developments that have taken place since the 1970s with regard to new degree awards. The most recent development has been the production of two schemes, consisting of eight individual awards which were validated in 2003. In line with

University policy outlined in the Strategic Futures document, the aim was to reduce the assessment load, increase credit for individual modules and match subject development. In addition, the two schemes were designed to offer students increased opportunities to gain employment-related skills and experiences.

182 In addition to the DSED, two programme specifications were included in the information sent to the audit team. Each programme specification covered a scheme of four different degree programmes. Both documents were written in similar concise style. They included the major aims for the programmes but no learning outcomes. The reader was referred to the student handbook for details. The team noted that these were added as an appendix to the programme specification documents following the validation by QDC. It was made clear that the learning outcomes were informed by the FHEQ and the *Subject benchmark statement* for hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism. Although the aims did not refer to specific degrees, there was a section entitled, Distinctiveness of each Award, that helpfully explained the differences.

183 The audit team was provided with the AMRs for Sport and Exercise, 2001-02, 2002-03 and 2003-04. The reports draw together a range of evidence on quality and standards based upon information from external examiners reports, module leader feedback in their module monitoring reports, student feedback via personal tutor meetings, Staff Student Liaison Meetings and the results of the Viewfinder Survey, and the previous year's AMR. The AMRs are written in sections covering: Action taken in response to the previous years report; Quality Management and Enhancement and Standards; Curriculum Design, Content and Organisation; Teaching, Learning and Assessment, including related Staff Development; Student Support and Guidance; Learning Resources, including materials, buildings and equipment use; Student Progression and Achievement; Awards also delivered off campus; and Identification of an action plan for the course management team.

184 The audit team found the process of producing the AMRs and the subsequent discussion of them at the Faculty Quality subcommittee and the University Quality Development Committee was a rigorous process. Reports were also sent to external examiners and to the SSLC for discussion. Action plans resulting from the process were well documented and provided clear evidence of quality enhancement. In addition to the AMRs, the team was provided with the specific response made by the Faculty to the Viewfinder Survey 2004 and the Faculty Business Plan. Common themes arising from the scrutiny of all of these documents are well written responses and well defined action plans; both of which contribute to the overall theme in the Faculty of not only quality management but quality enhancement.

185 A sample of recent external examiners reports was provided by the Faculty to support the DAT. The reports showed that the external examiners were generally satisfied with the development of the awards and the academic standards being achieved. The audit team found that the reports were scrutinised by Faculty members and action taken on comments made by external examiners.

186 The audit team reviewed examples of students' assessed work from levels Certificate, Intermediate and Honours modules. The team found that the information provided in the student handbook, and in module handbooks that accompany the modules, was extremely useful. The learning outcomes clearly reflected the level of each module in the FHEQ. In addition to aims and learning outcomes, care was taken to explain how the module would be assessed and how and when the assessments should be completed. Clear timetables were included. Comprehensive information about learning resources that support the modules was also provided. It was clear from the examination of the samples of student work provided that the University's double-marking policy was in operation in the Faculty and the standard of achievement was appropriate at each level.

187 Students who met the audit team commented that they found the handbooks

useful and understood the assessment regulations. They were clear about coursework deadlines and accepted the policy of awarding zero marks for a late submission.

188 Students spoke highly of the support that they received from staff in sport and exercise. They explained that they had personal tutors and used the SSLC to present their views. The aspect that they most commended was the more informal discussions possible with individual staff members. Students were extremely positive about the individual help that they were given. They cited examples with regard to careers advice and to the flexibility afforded to them if in difficulty with timetabling. Students also commented on the high standard of equipment available to them, both at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

189 The high level of student support described above is reflected in the very low percentage of students who fail to progress each year. In the sport and exercise provision only 1.2 per cent of students fail to progress from year one to year two and 1.3 per cent of year two students fail to progress from year two to year three. Some students stated that they had chosen the University to study sport and exercise-related awards because of the high standard of equipment available to them compared with other institutions that they had considered.

190 There is a strong emphasis on the use of flexible distributed learning in the awards offered by sport and exercise. Indeed, The Faculty of Health and Sciences has recently offered distance-learning courses in three areas; these courses are the first to be offered by a University. The DSED explains that developments in the use of distributed and distance learning, 'have been presented at university, national and international conferences'. Discussion with the staff indicated that they have clearly considered the potential problems associated with assessment of such courses and have arrived at useful solutions.

191 In the student meeting it was made clear that students were content with the number of computers available to support their e-learning activities.

192 Several students commented that they would recommend or have recommended the University to friends because of their positive experiences. Overall, the team found the quality of learning opportunities to be suitable for the programmes of study offered by the programme area of sport and exercise.

Section 4: The audit investigations: published information

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

193 It was mentioned under Learning Resources that during 2004 to 2006 the University is implementing a Content Management System (CMS) to support the creation of internal document repositories; appropriate control of content at a local level; access to documents through the University intranet; and an overall means of managing and redesigning the website. This software is being exploited in creating a 'dynamic prospectus', which can be constantly updated with authorised information on the undergraduate awards available at the University, with a workflow and checking process embedded into the system. All information for full-time undergraduate awards is now processed through the content management system and is accessible through the internet. Prospectus information not related to awards is revised each year by the corresponding service function and it is then checked and signed off by the Dean of Students and the Academic Registrar prior to the prospectus being updated. Eventually, it is proposed to use the dynamic prospectus to produce the printed prospectus and other smaller information leaflets. Part-time and postgraduate prospectuses are not yet handled through the CMS.

194 Guidance is given to faculties on the content of Student Handbooks and Module Handbooks. Handbooks for newly-validated awards are sent to QIS for checking before they are issued. Students receive handbooks which

apply to their particular award or to a small group of related awards. Thus the information is pertinent to the student. Handbooks provide the main information that students need to know about their award, on how to progress through the award, how to study effectively and matters such as complaints and appeals procedures. The award curriculum may be cross-referenced to the intranet. Module descriptors are also available on the intranet. Handbooks are also produced for students who take placements with outside organisations.

195 The major review of the Undergraduate Modular Framework during 2003-04 resulted in changes to awards for all students. Students were sent a copy of the new regulations and the interim regulations which applied to them. However, some students taking cross-faculty awards had concerns about the apparent delays in their receiving the information that they needed on changes in their awards.

196 General Student Regulations and Academic Award Regulations are available on the University's website and are not commonly published in hardcopy to students. Summaries of key regulations are published by the SU Advice Centres, the content being checked by the Student Office in advance.

197 The SWS reported high student satisfaction with the prospectus information, although 9 per cent of the responses complained about changes having taken place between publication and their arrival, or about inaccuracies. Students met by the audit team had not experienced the CMS-based prospectus but had been satisfied with the information received on applying to the University. On award handbooks, the SWS reported almost all student respondents as being satisfied with their accuracy and clarity. The Student Viewfinder Survey found a large majority satisfied with their usefulness. The students met by the team and the quality of the handbooks and similar printed and web-based information seen by the team led to the conclusion that the information available to students is both clear and accurate. The use of the CMS to hold a single master copy of a wide range of information will enhance current practices.

Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information

198 The University has been responding to the requirements for TQI and related information. The QIS is coordinating the activity and has established a new post of Quality Systems Administrator. The postholder, with colleagues, is responsible for collating the qualitative data required and for maintaining the associated databases. Addressing some issues has required altering some procedures. This has been beneficial in that more robust mechanisms for monitoring responses to validations and reviews have been put in place together with the proposals for changes to procedures related to external examiners' reports. Additionally, 'Information Services (IS) has been supporting the implementation of TheSIS Plus, a student information system package due for complete implementation in the academic year 2004-05'. The package already provides a major enhancement to the availability of student information.

199 The University currently has data relating to the entry qualifications of its undergraduate and postgraduate students available on the TQI website. It also has its Teaching and Learning Strategy and a document explaining how it measures and responds to the needs of employers. It is preparing for publishing summaries of its external examiners' reports. To address this need, the QIS has proposed the appointment of chief external examiners who would have oversight of a subject area. A single summary report would be published for each area of provision at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The summary would be collated by the QIS from summaries of the individual external examiners reports that would also be produced by the QIS. The summaries and the overall summary would be sent to the chief externals who would be responsible for considering all the reports and agreeing or producing the final summary for publication. Some chief external examiners have already been appointed for some disciplines.

200 For internal reviews, QIS is responsible for producing summaries of the review reports which are then approved by the Chair of the Panel and the Faculty concerned. The faculty also produces a response to the report. The Director of QIS approves the final version which is then uploaded to the TQI website.

201 The University is satisfied that the TQI relating to entries, continuation, achievements and destinations of graduates is accurate. The audit team has seen examples of the data analysis currently available to the University through TheSIS Plus and is aware of the enhancements planned. The University is meeting all current requirements and it is addressing the issue of publishing summaries of external examiners' reports. The team is confident that the data and document sources available to the University should enable it to achieve the necessary accuracy of published information and judges that reliance can be placed on the integrity, completeness and frankness of the information published.

Findings

Findings

202 An institutional audit of Staffordshire University (the University) was undertaken during the week 4 to 8 April 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility as a UK degree-awarding body. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and Universities UK (UUK), three 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

203 The University has established within its Academic Development Institute (ADI) the Quality Improvement Service (QIS) that provides 'a central source of information and guidance regarding quality assurance and with other ADI colleagues, improvement initiatives'

204 The University's procedures for approval and reapproval, monitoring and review are fully documented in its Quality Assurance Handbook. The entire undergraduate programme was approved/reapproved in 2003-04; postgraduate programmes have been validated over a cycle of three years ending in 2005. The University regards the following three aspects of its processes as strengths:

- the validation process
- the use of a rapporteur system within annual monitoring to engender a degree of independent scrutiny of the process
- the critical and constructive nature of award review utilising independent peers.

205 In the case of new awards, award proposals must be approved initially for their fit

with University strategy. The key validation document is the programme specification, which follows a standard University template. Sample module handbooks are among the documents required for validation, and a condition of validation is the subsequent submission to QIS for approval of a student handbook following a standard template of contents. The validation panel includes external members. QIS is responsible for monitoring and documenting the fulfilment of conditions necessary for validation to be granted.

206 The University is reviewing the balance between QIS and the faculties with respect to the validation process. The University has also taken steps to provide a speedier process for validation through the use of more standard templates. In addition, for service areas, the University has now reintroduced Internal Process Audit.

207 A process of programme approval is applied by the University's Research Degrees Sub-Committee (RDSC) to all research degree proposals (excluding professional doctorates). Following careful pre-admission scrutiny at faculty level of the suitability of supervisory support for each research degree application, research students then have six months to detail the content, timescale and methodology of their research topic. The RDSC minutes record evidence of care taken with the upgrading of students from MPhil to PhD registration, and with the correct provision for their examination.

208 The University regards its procedures for the annual monitoring of the health of its academic provision as a particular strength. The University uses a system of 'rapporteurs' from other faculties in the process of scrutiny. The University previously identified two areas for potential improvement in annual monitoring, namely 'the length of time the process takes to complete and the use of statistics'. The first matter has been addressed satisfactorily. The 2001 audit identified the advisability of 'prioritising the further development of TheSIS [the Students Information System] so that it provides data on the achievement and assessment of all students, including research and SURF [Staffordshire University Regional

Federation] students and encouraging the fullest use of the system across the university'. The University has invested significantly in the development of TheSIS Plus and is now able to provide improved data to support annual monitoring of taught programmes.

209 The University RDSC coordinates the annual monitoring of research students. Form RDC16 requires an evaluation by both the student and supervisor of progress made. Rates of return of RDC16s were variable and in one faculty had been only 60 per cent. Consequently, in the view of the audit team conclusions drawn from partial and variable returns were likely to be problematic. In addition, it was noted by the team that it was not clear how far students would report on an open form problems in their progress associated with their supervisor or the faculty. There had been only slow progress in meeting the 2001 recommendation on research student data, with TheSIS Plus still not used to record the statistical progression of research students as a body.

210 The University conducts a process of 'Critical Review' of all areas of taught provision at least every five years. The critical review process is based (since 2002) on a self-evaluation document (SED). The examples of critical review seen by the audit team showed that the SEDs and supporting material for the review process were thorough and covered all the required areas. The panel reports were relatively brief but evaluative and sometimes critical, in one case requiring major action by the subject area and faculty. However, in most cases it appeared that the panel, faced with both a review and a validation process in a two-day period at most, had not pursued in any depth a further required purpose, namely to assess the effectiveness of the faculty's quality management processes. At least, such assessment was implicit rather than explicit, a tendency encouraged by the normal format of the review report. It was also unclear whether postgraduate research student provision was covered by the reviews, even in cases focussing on postgraduate provision. The team was not able to establish from the University whether

the cycle of reviews was intended to ensure that research student provision was reviewed. No other system of periodic review of research student provision is identified. The team advises the University to make explicit the status in the periodic review process of the scrutiny of quality assurance procedures and of provision for postgraduate research students.

211 The University and the Students' Union have been keen to enhance and embed student representation on key University committees. Their joint aim has been not only to establish a system that reacts to problems but also to stimulate immediate feedback on action taken. The net result has been the production and approval of the document 'The Student Academic Representation Paper' in March 2004. The Union undertakes to train student representatives to ensure their better participation.

212 In addition to such formal means of student representation on key University committees, the audit team learned of informal processes whereby students feel able to discuss problems with module leaders and personal tutors. As a result of these discussions, action is usually taken to solve the problem in a relatively short time. In meetings with students the team learned that these processes were clearly appreciated by the students. An unintended consequence of this informal system is the rather poor attendance by student representatives at formal committees such as the staff student liaison committees. The team also heard that it can be difficult for staff to recruit student representatives.

213 Student feedback on their experience is gained in a number of ways. It is systematically gained at University level through an annual Viewfinder Survey. The audit team found the University's management of the Viewfinder Survey to be robust and evaluative, leading also to improvements to the scope and analysis of the survey. Students also comment on services through local helpdesks.

214 The University does not currently systematically gather feedback from graduates other than through the First Destination Survey,

although there are a number of informal initiatives at award level. The University has made a recent senior appointment within whose remit graduate feedback has been included. Overall, the audit team formed the view that the University has effective arrangements for students to contribute to the management and enhancement of the quality of their education. Feedback from employers is gathered in a number of ways. Staff engagement in professional practice and research underpinned strong links with employers and the industries relating to much of the University's provision. Overall, the team considered that the development of awards and the curriculum were informed by an understanding of employers' needs and the employability of students.

215 The University has a website describing the varied and plentiful opportunities for distance learning at the University. The delivery of the courses or programmes, the learning support available and the assessments associated with each programme, meet the requirements for flexible distributed learning set out in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by the QAA. The audit team found that individual courses are validated and approved in a rigorous manner and that the valuable student support provided for these courses has been well considered. All aspects of delivery and assessment are stipulated in a policy document and there is a useful handbook, together with expert academic and support staff, to help their colleagues with new proposals. The quality processes utilised to set up and manage the courses and programmes are a feature of good practice.

216 The University has identified strengths in the way in which assures the quality of its programmes and is also working to enhance areas where procedures are less strong. The findings of the audit confirm that broad confidence can be placed in the effectiveness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

217 TheSIS provides data on progression and achievement and is used by the faculties and student support services to evaluate their provision. The SED describes a programme of incremental development of the system. The audit team heard from staff that gradual improvement in the level and scope of data had supported their monitoring and evaluation of the student experience and achievement. The team noted an increasing use of statistical data as an evaluative tool in annual monitoring reports and module reports, although they considered that analytical reference to the diverse range of students could be more evident.

218 The University has been particularly active in the development of retention strategies and the monitoring of retention statistics. The audit team heard of a number of examples where action had been taken to support particular categories of students who were at risk. For example, a group of international students, identified through trend analysis as less successful in particular modules, were given additional bridging support to enable them to progress.

219 Overall, the audit team formed the view that improvements to TheSIS were leading to enhancement in the evaluative use of statistical data. Whilst these improvements were still not fully effective, for example, with regard to research students, the team was confident that the University would carry through its data services enhancement programme.

220 External examiners are briefed on their role in ensuring parity and fairness, and given information including that about the curriculum of the award and the University regulations. The audit team noted the development of the role of chief external examiner and the principle of a designated individual providing the University with an overview of examination processes relating to a cluster of awards. The SED describes an additional feature of the role as that of identifying the significance of any negative statements in the external examiners' reports on the provision.

221 Faculties receive external examiners' reports through QIS which notes examiners' comments as positive, critical or recommended. QIS prepares an overview report for the Quality Development Committee (QDC) with analysis of external examiners' reports based on this categorisation of comments. Through scrutiny of documentation, the audit team was of the opinion that in reports at University level, the examiners' comments were not always appropriately calibrated, and that the current approach to analysis of the reports could be misleading. Nevertheless, at lower levels within the University the audit team was confident that the use of and response to external examiners' reports by award leaders and faculties were appropriate and sufficient.

222 The findings of the audit confirm that broad confidence can be placed in the effectiveness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes.

The use made by the institution of the Academic Infrastructure

223 The University has adopted *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) principles as a frame of reference and recently re-profiled all of its undergraduate provision accordingly. At subject level, the audit team found the design and assessment of modules to be aligned with the University's level descriptors and that staff and students were clear about the model that the University has adopted. Alignment of postgraduate provision has also taken place. Programme specifications scrutinised by the team confirmed that these documents fulfilled the described requirements.

224 The University's approach to assurance of alignment with the *Code of practice* is to embed the precepts in its institutional policies which become the operating documents at faculty and subject level and in support services. The audit team found that institutional strategies and policies support implementation of the *Code*, and that associated information effectively encapsulates the relevant sections. Awareness of the *Code* and its central role in

institutional policies was confirmed in the team's meetings with staff. QIS manages a process of review of current provision against each section of the *Code* as it is published. Faculties are asked to comment on the precepts and the means by which they are addressed and to highlight any areas where action is needed. A report on the relationship of University practice to each section of the *Code* is subsequently received by QDC. The team was able to confirm that this approach and process is effective in securing alignment with sections of the *Code*.

225 The audit team concluded that the University had been thorough, rigorous and inclusive in its engagement with external reference points and that its practice was effective.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

226 The University has strategies and plans for supporting student learning in the provision of learning resources, the recruitment and development of the teaching and support staff, and the academic and personal support provided to students. The Information Services (IS) strategy includes information technology (IT) and library provision and is linked to the overall University Plan. Implementation of the IS strategy has led to recent enhancements in IT facilities including increasing the bandwidth and storage capacity of the University network and the implementation of document management and storage software for the intranet which additionally supports the overall management and redesign of the website. The strategy includes the library pursuing a policy of e-resource purchases such that the library now has large numbers of e-books and e-journals which support on-campus and off-campus delivery of learning. This provision also supports the University strategy of steadily increasing the number of students studying part-time. Part of IS also provides training and support activities for staff in developing e-learning teaching resources for use both by on-campus and distance learners. This matches to the current five-year University Plan which includes a commitment to

patterns of flexible delivery with appropriate staff development to achieve this goal.

227 The Estates Strategy is similarly seeking to enhance learning and teaching facilities and recognises a number of necessary developments. The strategy has led to £2.4 million recently being spent on remodelling and extending engineering and technology laboratories and a new media centre. Students told the audit team that the facilities had had a significant influence on their choosing the University.

228 The University has effective systems for the appointment, induction and appraisal of staff, with appointment/interviewing guidelines, a checklist to help managers induct new staff and a template to assist self-evaluation as part of the appraisal process. Appraisal helps to identify staff development needs.

229 The University has a commitment to staff development, which covers educational, technical/professional and managerial development. It has recently focused upon a development programme to help staff through the structural and cultural changes which have taken place at the University, but this has been in addition to University and faculty-organised activities. The University has a Training Development Plan. Development needs are identified through appraisal and they are specified by management in seeking to realise an aim or implement a policy through its staff. The audit team saw evidence to show that staff development is embedded within the University's operating practices.

230 The established personal tutor scheme within the University has been subject to an internal process audit which started in November 2005. The audit was to ascertain how the scheme was currently working and if there were varying practices across faculties. The internal audit was not prompted by student concern because evidence available to the University and confirmed by the audit team is that students feel well-supported in their studies by staff at all levels. Students are satisfied with the information that they receive about their programmes and with their handbooks, including those relating to work placements.

231 The University uses the ViewFinder Survey to determine the effectiveness of its educational provision under a number of headings. Faculties and services are required to address the University Action Plan resulting from the survey results. A recent example of a response has been the extension of library opening until 0300 hours, a change much appreciated by part-time students.

232 The audit team found that many aspects of the support for learning were well regarded by the students. These include learning facilities in the library, laboratories and design studios as well as e-learning packages to assist students with their individual learning. A further key learning support is the willingness of staff at all levels to respond to students requiring help. The team found that strategies and plans for the development of the facilities are in place and being implemented. The University also has in place an effective means of determining student views on the provision of facilities. The team concluded that the University has effective procedures for supporting student learning.

The outcomes of the discipline audit trails

Engineering and Technology

233 The audit team found the engineering and technology programmes within the Computing, Engineering and Technology Faculty follow the University management and quality processes. The University has interpreted parts of the FHEQ, adding further headings and these are used in the articulation of the learning outcomes in programme specifications. The *Subject benchmark statement* for engineering has been used to inform the undergraduate engineering programmes. Annual monitoring is generally thorough, starting at the module level and ending with a Faculty report with the use of independent rapporteurs. The documentation and actions plans which result from reviews and from meetings of committees at most levels are well managed. Procedures exist to check on progress with action plan implementation. The team found that staff development was a part of the Faculty's activities and personal development

plans partly derived from annual appraisals. Part of the current staff development was focused on enhancing the capability for further development of e-learning teaching materials.

234 The audit team reviewed the curricula, the programme handbooks, web-based information, and examples of assessed work. It noted the general satisfaction of the external examiners and it held discussions with staff and students. The students were very satisfied with their learning experience, being complimentary about the staff support for their learning and their learning resources. From this evidence, the team formed the view that the standard of student achievement was appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location in the FHEQ. On the basis of the evidence available to them, the team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities within engineering and technology was appropriate for the programmes of study examined within the discipline audit trail.

Fine Art and Design

235 From its study of assessed work, and from discussions with students and staff, the audit team formed the view that the standard of student achievement in awards associated with the arts, culture and design programme area was appropriate to the title of the awards and their location within the FHEQ.

236 Audit team discussions with students indicated that students were satisfied with their chosen programme of study and positive about the friendly and supportive ethos that they found in the University as well as in their courses. They were particularly positive about the academic standards of their courses and the academic and technical staff and learning resources available to support their learning.

237 The audit team concluded that the quality of the learning opportunities for students was appropriate for the programme of study.

Sports and Exercise

238 The students were very positive about the standards of teaching and the learning opportunities available to them, especially with

regard to the sports equipment available for their courses in the sports and exercise programme area of the Faculty of Health and Sciences. They were also highly appreciative of the one-to-one support that they receive from academic and technical staff. The audit team found this level of support was also evident in the quality of the student and module handbooks. These elements of support are reflected in the standard of student achievement and high progression rates of the students through their award programmes. The team found the quality of learning opportunities to be suitable for all the awards in the two programme areas investigated. This is especially evident in the quality of the distributed learning opportunities at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. From the student work available and the positive comments in external examiners' reports, the team found that student achievement is appropriate for the titles and levels of awards and their location within the FHEQ.

239 Student and staff evaluation of the two schemes in sports and exercise occurs through staff-student liaison meetings and AMRs. The audit team found the latter especially effective. The team learned that, despite the opportunity for student participation on higher-level management committees, students do not routinely take the opportunities on offer. This is partly in response to the excellent informal relationship students have with staff and the response that they receive when problems are raised.

240 The faculty structure and the award schemes have undergone an intense series of changes in the past four years. New module credit ratings and assessment strategies have been introduced. The audit team found that the quality of student provision has been maintained during this transition period and the University and Faculty have avoided causing disruption to the students. The standard of the resulting management structure and the enthusiasm of staff involved were noted by the team. On the basis of the evidence available to them, the team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities within sports and

exercise was appropriate for the programmes of study examined.

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

241 The SED explained, in detail, the rationale for the changes that have taken place to the committee structures within the University over the past four years. It explained that some of the changes have not been made for a sufficient length of time for a full analysis of their effectiveness to be made. During the audit, the audit team heard that the role of the faculty, and the faculty board, was in practice more important than affirmed in the SED.

242 Several areas of the University's provision were stated to be strengths in the SED. These included distributed learning activities, annual monitoring procedures and student support emphasising employability. The audit team would agree with these affirmations, and it also found other aspects of student provision worth more favourable comment than given in the SED. Areas where the team would have welcomed more discussion included the effective support provided for International Students, a more detailed description of the action taken since the last quality audit in 2001, and the use that the University makes of accreditation reports from external agencies. The team noted that these reports are effectively monitored by the QDC and information is then fed back to faculties. In addition, the team noted that the description of the new management structures was clear at University level but lacked detail of the structures that exist below faculty level.

243 Overall, the processes described in the SED demonstrate the University's ability to identify its major strengths and limitations and give broad confidence that any future changes made will be well managed and will maintain the quality of the student experience.

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

244 The SED described the policies and procedures that have been or are being introduced to enhance the quality and standards of the student provision. It is clear that the staff at the University have introduced a management structure that is able to respond to changes that will enhance the quality of the awards on offer. At all levels of this structure the word enhancement appears in the titles and terms of reference of key committees.

245 The University has also introduced internal audit processes to review the operation of all aspects of its provision. To date, audits of personal tutoring and research degrees have been completed and the audit team heard that an audit of student services is about to be completed.

246 The audit team found evidence on the likelihood that the structure will be effective in introducing new policies to enhance student experience, including the new employability policy and the forthcoming personal development plans. Each of these activities serves to reinforce the University's claim to 'take forward the quality enhancement agenda'.

Reliability of information

247 The University has progressively implemented TheSIS with final enhancements about to be made. The system provides an effective means of both holding student data and analysing it. Its implementation will soon extend to postgraduate and part-time students. The University is also implementing a Content Management System (CMS), a document management system for the web. This enables the creation of internal document repositories for storing and cataloguing documents, a means of controlling content at a local level, access to the documents through the University intranet and an overall means of managing documents accessible through its intranet and website. The CMS is already being used for holding the master documents of prospectus

information and procedures exist to ensure its accuracy and currency from year to year. A further example of its use is in holding one version of programme summaries which appear both in programme handbooks and in prospectuses. The University website is an extensive resource that informs current and prospective students as well as holding information for staff and students.

248 Students met by the audit team agreed that the information received on application to the University had been an accurate description of the awards that they had chosen to study. On entry, students receive a copy of the Student Handbook relevant to their award and examples of these seen were considered to be comprehensive and well presented. Programme Specifications are also comprehensive. Students confirmed that they had been well informed about what was expected of them and of the way in which their individual programmes were organised and their final award calculated.

249 The audit team reviewed the preparedness of the University to publish the information as recommended in HEFCE 03/51. The University currently has data relating the entry qualifications of its undergraduate and postgraduate students available on the TQI website together with its Teaching and Learning Strategy and a document explaining how it measures and responds to the needs of employers. It has a method and staff appointed in order that it can publish summaries of its external examiners' reports.

250 The audit team concluded from its review that the University is meeting all current requirements for both the reliability of its internal and its published information including that published through the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website. The team is confident that the data and document sources available to the University should enable it to achieve the necessary accuracy of published information and judges that reliance can be placed on the integrity, completeness and frankness of the information published.

Features of good practice

251 Of the features of good practice noted in the course of the audit, the audit team noted the following in particular:

- i the processes involving committee minutes and action plans which assist communication across the University and close quality loops (paragraphs 31; 44)
- ii the implementation of a unitary model linking all levels of the University in a common quality management structure based on and promoting a close working partnership between academic and support staff (paragraphs 44, 61)
- iii the fully articulated linkage of module-level and award learning outcomes and assessment strategies mapping to external reference points (paragraphs 46, 77, 84)
- iv the University's determination to ensure that it has the postgraduate research students appropriate to its strengths through the management of recruitment, project approval and examination (paragraph 56)
- v the operation of Welcome Week and mentoring which support the induction of new students (paragraphs 92, 144, 177)
- vi student access to and support from all categories of staff (paragraphs 97, 130, 142, 188)
- vii supporting and developing staff for their changing roles in delivering the University's plans (paragraph 125)
- viii the commitment to and success of the development and validation of distance learning (paragraphs 127, 131).

Recommendations for action

252 The University is advised to:

- i continue to rationalise the rules for award classification and the use of discretion by award boards in order to maintain the transparency and parity of the treatment of students (paragraph 47)

- ii make explicit the status in the periodic review process of the scrutiny of quality assurance procedures and of provision for postgraduate research students (paragraph 64).

In addition, the University may wish to consider the desirability of enhancing its quality arrangements by:

- i reviewing the process of monitoring the progress of postgraduate research students individually and collectively to ensure that the University has an annual overview of the progression of all research students (paragraphs 61, 105)
- ii reviewing the institutional-level processing and analysis of external examiners' reports to enable the Quality Development Committee and Academic Board to gain a full understanding of the types of issue raised (paragraph 76).

Appendix

Staffordshire University's response to the audit report

The University welcomes the report of the institutional audit carried out in April 2005 and the judgement that broad confidence can be placed in our present and future management of the quality of our programmes and the academic standards of our awards. It was pleasing to note that the audit team had confidence in the accuracy of our published information.

The University also welcomes the positive findings of the three discipline audit trails, confirming the quality of the learning opportunities available to our students, and endorsing the effectiveness of our quality assurance procedures at the programme level.

The University would like to acknowledge the important and very positive role played by our students during the audit.

It is particularly gratifying to note the eight features of good practice which were identified and commended. The University is very pleased to note that the audit team commended our support for our students both on joining us and throughout their studies at Staffordshire. We will ensure that we maintain all the strengths identified and build upon them.

The University will give careful consideration to the four recommendations contained within the report.

We have already taken action to address the issue of the analysis of external examiners' reports by amending the guidance given to them and altering the report sheet.

We have established a Working Party to review all aspects of our administration of postgraduate research students.

We will monitor our new rules for award classification as case law becomes established.

