



Promoting higher quality

**The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education**

Quality Audit Report

University of
Newcastle upon Tyne

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Foreword

1 This is a report of an academic quality audit of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne (the University) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA is grateful to the University for the willing cooperation provided to the audit team.

2 The audit was carried out using a revised process approved by the former Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), and endorsed by HEQC's successor body, QAA. The modified process has been introduced following completion in 1997 of the original national academic quality audit programme which began in 1991 under the auspices of the CVCP's Academic Audit Unit (AAU) and was subsequently taken over by HEQC in 1992. The principal purpose of this revised process is to offer an opinion on the extent to which individual institutions are discharging effectively their corporate responsibilities for the academic standards and quality of their awards and associated programmes of study. The process takes as its starting point the assumption that institutions have appropriate quality assurance policies and procedures in place, and also assumes that they can provide convincing evidence that these are working to good effect. The audit checks the extent to which this is the case and that the methods used are sufficiently reliable to continue to provide stakeholders with the necessary assurances for the future. The audit process focuses on four main topics: the institution's quality strategy; academic standards; the learning infrastructure; and internal and external communications.

Method and process

3 The primary source of documentary information available to the audit team about the University's quality assurance arrangements was an *Analytical Account* (the *Account*, see below, paragraph 16), prepared for the purposes of the audit. The *Account* provided examples of the evidence used by the University to satisfy itself of the effectiveness of its procedures for the management of quality and standards. The University also supplied a number of supporting documents, including its *Institutional Plan 1999-2004*, student prospectuses and handbooks, and information relating to quality assurance. Other documents available to the team were the HEQC quality audit report of 1993 and reports of the teaching quality assessments (TQAs) conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and subject reviews conducted by QAA. At a briefing meeting held to review this information, the team drew up a programme of meetings for the visit and requested a small amount of additional information.

4 The audit team visited the University from 26-30 November 2001. For the duration of the visit, the University made available to the team a base room containing the documents referred to in the *Account*, and also provided access to its web site and internal web pages. The team held a total of 13 meetings with staff and students of the University. These meetings, together with the documentary material available to the team, provided the information, examples and evidence upon which this report is based.

5 The audit team comprised Professor J Calderhead, Mr J J Horton and Dr S A Price, auditors, and Miss J Wheeler, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms S J Clark, Assistant Director, Institutional Review Directorate.

6 A brief guide, University of Newcastle upon Tyne - facts and figures 2000-01, prepared by the University, is attached as appendix 1. A list of the University's collaborative partnerships as at December 2001 is attached as appendix 2.

The context for the audit

7 The origins of the University can be traced back to 1834 when a School of Medicine was established in the city by a group of medical practitioners. In 1852 this became the Medical School (later College) of the University of Durham and in 1871 a separate College of Physical Science (later Armstrong College) was added. The two Colleges were constituted formally as the Newcastle Division of the University of Durham in 1908, merging into Kings College in 1937. The College grew substantially both in terms of student numbers and subjects offered and in 1963, when the federal university was dissolved, became the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Throughout the 1960s and subsequently, the University has continued to grow, with the notable additions of a new Dental School in 1978 and a new Medical School in 1984. Most of its current activities are conducted on a 45 acre campus near the city centre, although it also has facilities outside the city, including two farms in Northumberland and a marine biology station on the North East coast.

8 The *Institutional Plan 1999-2004* states that the University's three principal objectives are: 'to offer education which meets the most stringent tests both as to quality and standards to an increasing number and range of people, enhancing the employability of...students and contributing to regional, national and international needs for high-level skills and knowledge'; 'to sustain a substantial high quality research effort that is internationally competitive... thereby enhancing its position among the 20 large research universities in the UK'; and 'to utilise fully its

human and physical resources to contribute to economic, cultural and social development at the local, regional and international level'. The *Account* indicated that the University's distinctiveness stemmed from this combination of a very wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, a high quality research base, and a significant role in the economic development and cultural provision within the region.

9 In 2000, a total of 13,709 students were registered for degree programmes at the University. Of these, 76 per cent were undergraduates, 13 per cent postgraduates on taught programmes, and 11 per cent undertaking postgraduate research. 90 per cent of students were studying on a full-time basis and 91 per cent were either undergraduates aged under 21 or postgraduates under 25. A relatively small percentage was from overseas. A further 3,269 part-time students were enrolled on a wide range of credit-bearing courses, mainly at sub-degree level, with the University's Centre for Lifelong Learning. In 2001-02 the University was offering 229 named undergraduate degrees (including ordinary, general, single honours, joint honours, 'major-minor' and combined honours degrees), 180 taught postgraduate programmes, master's degrees by research, professional doctorates, and research doctorates (including, with effect from September 2001, a new Integrated PhD programme).

10 The University is involved in a 'limited, but expanding' amount of collaborative provision. Its current portfolio includes collaboration with a European institution in respect of a BA in International Management, a partnership with the University of Durham in undergraduate medicine, and a series of master's programmes offered through a consortia of UK universities. In September 2001 it introduced foundation degrees, offered in association with other higher and further education institutions in the North East. It also offers a small number of distance learning programmes in Dubai, Hong Kong and the United Arab Emirates, taught by its own staff with support from locally-based tutors.

Academic and management structures

11 The University's governing body is the Council, which has overall responsibility for the institution's general management, including financial and estates management. The 'supreme authority on academic matters' is Senate, which discharges many of its responsibilities through subcommittees, including the University Research Committee (URC), the University Teaching Committee (UTC), the Graduate Council, the Committee on Headships of Departments, and the Matriculation and Concessions Committee (MCC). Both UTC and the Graduate Council play significant roles within the quality management of the University's

provision, overseeing the quality assurance system for taught and research programmes respectively. Although Senate and the Council have distinct and different responsibilities, they share a total of 15 joint committees, including the University Policy and Resources Committee (UPRC), which 'has a pivotal role in bringing together academic priorities, financial considerations and estates needs'.

12 The academic head of the University is the Vice-Chancellor, assisted currently by four pro-vice-chancellors, each with a specific portfolio of responsibilities. Pro-vice-chancellors are normally appointed for three year periods, and either chair or are ex-officio members of committees relating to their respective areas. The Vice-Chancellor is also the head of the administration, supported by the Registrar, the Bursar and the Director of Estates. The pro-vice-chancellors, the Dean of Medicine, the Registrar and the Bursar are members of an informal advisory group to the Vice-Chancellor, known as the Monday Morning Meeting, which meets with the other deans of faculty on a regular basis and 'keeps the day-to-day management of the University under review'.

13 The University's educational provision is organised currently through seven faculties: Agriculture and Biological Sciences; Arts; Education; Engineering; Law, Environment, and Social Sciences; Medicine; and Science. Each faculty has a dean who is responsible to the Council, through UPRC and Senate, for the oversight and effective management of the faculty. Each also has an undergraduate sub-dean or senior tutor responsible for taught undergraduate programmes, and a postgraduate sub-dean responsible for postgraduate provision; the exception is Education which has one sub-dean covering both portfolios. These officers undertake their work with the assistance of faculty boards, supported by a committee structure mirroring that at central level. Within faculties, academic provision is organised through departments and schools, of which there are currently 75. Heads of department, in many cases advised by departmental teaching and learning and research committees, are responsible to the dean. In two faculties - Agriculture and Biological Sciences, and Medicine - postgraduate research is organised through Graduate Schools.

14 The *Account* reported that, following the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor in January 2001, the University had embarked upon a fundamental review of its organisation and structure. One of the results has been a decision to move to a three-faculty structure with effect from autumn 2002, with a consequent halving of the number of departments, and to place faculty management in the hands of three provosts. The Monday Morning Meeting will be replaced by a formal Executive Board, of which the

provosts will be members. At the time of the audit visit, a shadow Board was already in place and was working on the restructuring; the provosts-elect had also been appointed. The new structure will see the establishment of a Strategy Board to coordinate the development and implementation of University policy and an Academic Audit Committee with responsibility for auditing institutional quality systems. The way in which the University was managing the restructuring process, and the likely impact on its systems for managing quality and standards, were recurring themes in the audit team's enquiries (see below, paragraphs 29, 52-53, 61 and 67-68).

The 1992 audit and the University's response

15 In 1992, the University participated in an academic audit conducted by HEQC. The subsequent report, published in June 1993, commended the University on a range of practices, including its development of an institutional approach to, and associated procedures for, quality assurance, and aspects of its learning infrastructure. It also invited the University to give further consideration to several matters, including the need to clarify the respective responsibilities of a range of officers involved in quality assurance; improving the feedback systems from UTC to departmental committees; ensuring greater harmonisation of marking conventions; and ensuring the proper working of staff/student liaison committees. In analysing the University's current arrangements, the *Account* incorporated references back to the previous report and also contained an appendix setting out how the matters raised had been taken forward. The audit team was satisfied that the recommendations of the previous report had been addressed systematically and that, as a result of continuing monitoring, the University had undertaken further developments in a range of areas. Further comments on specific aspects of the 1993 report are provided below (see below, paragraphs 22-23, 35 and 69).

The Analytical Account

16 The *Account* prepared for the purposes of the audit was organised into five main sections: context; the University's strategic approach to quality management; the academic standards of awards; the learning infrastructure; and communications. It contained several appendices. Each substantive section summarised the main features of the University's current arrangements, identified areas of strength, and outlined the ways in which the University would be seeking to develop and enhance its approach in the future. The construction of the *Account* was overseen by a steering group comprising representatives of the academic staff, the central administration and students. The audit team found the *Account* to be a concise,

accurate and informative document, which reflected a clear capacity for critical self-evaluation.

The strategic approach to quality management

17 The *Account* described the University's strategic approach to quality management in terms of a set of 'underpinning principles', 'structures for quality management' and 'three main systems for managing the quality of learning opportunities, namely for the approval of new programmes and of significant modifications to established ones, the biennial review of established taught programmes and the quinquennial review of subjects'.

Principles

18 According to the *Account*, the University's approach to quality management is based upon five key principles: 'firstly, that the primary responsibility for assuring the quality of provision must lie with the academic staff involved in delivering programmes with the participation, where possible and appropriate, of the students who are taking them; secondly, that this responsibility should be exercised in the light of agreed institution-wide criteria for good practice in teaching and learning... (although) because of the diversity of... provision, there may be cases where particular criteria are inappropriate and where a case may be made for variation; thirdly, that reviews against good practice should be subject to internal monitoring by academic peers from within the University and, where appropriate, external monitoring by peers from other universities; fourthly, that self-reviews and peer monitoring should form the basis for reporting downwards to providers and upwards to key University bodies...; finally, that, where areas for improvement have been identified... improvements should be effectively monitored and... good practice... effectively disseminated'. Through its scrutiny of documentation and discussions with staff and students, the audit team was able to confirm that these principles both underpinned and informed the University's quality management processes. Further comment on the ways in which the principles were realised are provided in the paragraphs that follow.

Structures

19 The *Account* stated that the University had 'structures for assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities at the programme, departmental, faculty and University levels'. At programme level, responsibility for the day-to-day management of every taught programme rests with a degree programme director and a board of studies, the

membership of which includes the relevant head of the department (or nominee), in addition to the degree programme director, teaching staff and student representatives. At departmental level, the head of department is responsible for the quality of the learning opportunities, assisted by a range of departmental committees (see above, paragraph 13); this structure is mirrored at faculty level by the dean and faculty committees. At University level, Senate is 'ultimately responsible for the quality of learning opportunities across the institution', but has devolved authority for programme approval and for quality assurance and enhancement matters to UTC and the Graduate Council. The work of these committees is supported by administrative units within the Academic Office of the Deputy Registrar, including the Teaching Office, the Quality and Standards Unit (QSU), and the Student Progress Office. In terms of liaison between the central and faculty/departmental structures, the *Account* identified faculty assistant registrars as 'the crucial link' 'both in ensuring that systems are implemented and that faculty concerns and issues are brought to the attention of the centre'.

20 Through its scrutiny of documentation and discussions with staff and students, it appeared to the audit team that these well-defined structures were operating as intended and in accordance with the University's stated principles. The team noted that it was at the levels of programme director, head of department and board of studies that the majority of programme management, development and monitoring took place; staff teaching decisions, for example, and considerations of feedback from external examiners and students, were discussed in most detail at these levels. The job descriptions for those carrying key quality management responsibilities were appropriately detailed and such staff reported that they were well-supported by both central and faculty offices. The team noted also that committees at all levels had well-defined terms of reference and clear reporting lines, set out in a *Committees and Procedures* book. In discussion with heads of department and programme directors, it was evident that there was widespread recognition of how the University's committees inter-related. The team also observed that communications between committees appeared to operate effectively, with information flowing in both directions, particularly between boards of studies, faculty teaching committees (FTCs) and UTC - a process facilitated by clear and systematically presented committee minutes that made appropriate reference to supporting papers.

Systems: programme approval and modification

21 The University's systems relating to programme approval are set out in a *Guide for the Approval of New*

Programmes and Major Revisions to Existing Programmes. The *Guide* describes a two-stage process for the approval of new programmes: the first comprises submission to the relevant FTC of an outline proposal, which includes 'comments from External persons and bodies' and a statement of the resource implications; the second, following FTC approval, involves preparation of a 'Part 2' proposal, including 'a complete programme specification', for consideration by FTC and UTC. At this stage of the process, UTC assigns an adviser to assist the programme developers who are also encouraged to seek advice from, for example, the Student Progress Office on regulatory matters and the Disability Unit on possible implications for students with disabilities. Following approval from FTC, the Part 2 proposal is submitted to UTC, 'the primary role' of which is 'to check that all of the appropriate procedures have been followed at faculty level'. If the procedures have indeed been followed, UTC 'approves the proposal and notifies Senate of its decision'. Similar procedures are followed in respect of significant changes to existing programmes.

22 The 1993 audit report had drawn attention to some informality to the programme approval system operated by the University at that time, and indicated that there was scope for improvement in communications between the various committees and officers involved in programme approval. The *Account* summarised the ways in which the system had undergone significant development since 1993 and drew attention, in particular, to modifications in 2000 to meet the expectations of the relevant section of QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic standards and quality in higher education* (QAA's *Code*). The audit team noted that the procedures, information requirements, and respective responsibilities relating to new programme approval were detailed clearly in the *Guide*. It saw examples of well-documented programme proposals which included evidence of external consultation, and supported the University's claim that programme developers were ably assisted in the construction and submission of proposals by the various central administrative offices and particularly by the faculty assistant registrars. It was also evident that proposals were subject to detailed scrutiny by the relevant FTC and UTC, with both providing feedback on their deliberations to the proposers. The team concluded that, building on the comments in the 1993 report, the University had developed a streamlined, rigorous and effective system for new programme approval.

Systems: biennial review of taught programmes

23 At the time of the 1992 audit, the University's programme monitoring and review arrangements were in their infancy; the *Account* described the ways in which they had 'developed significantly' since that

time. The University now has in place a system of reviewing all taught programmes biennially, the details of which are set out in *Guidelines for Taught Programme Review*. The system is one of 'self-review': programme directors, in consultation with their board of studies, are required to construct a taught programme quality report, based upon a self-evaluation of their programme against 'University-wide Statements of Good Practice'. The Statements, published in the *Guidelines*, cover a variety of matters, ranging from curriculum design and assessment practice to recruitment and selection, and staff and student induction. The resulting quality report indicates and provides evidence of the level of compliance with each Statement. The quality reports are considered by FTCs, with feedback provided to boards of studies, and then aggregated into a faculty quality report for consideration by UTC. UTC, in turn, notes areas of exemplary practice and areas of non-compliance, provides written feedback to faculties, and produces a University Quality Report which sets out a profile of quality across the institution as a whole and forms the basis for identifying University-wide areas for improvement.

24 Documents available to the audit team suggested that, in broad terms, the biennial review system was working as the University intended. The team saw evidence of critical appraisal of programme reviews at faculty level, with constructive feedback offered to programme directors and heads of department. It also saw evidence that areas of difficulty were identified at University level, with steps taken to improve practice across the institution; by way of example, variability in practice regarding the information included in programme handbooks and the extent to which student progression and achievement statistics were considered by boards of studies had resulted in revisions to the University's published expectations of the business to be conducted by boards. The team noted that UTC had recently modified the review process to make it more focused and to provide more guidance on the nature of evidence required to support statements of compliance; it also noted continuing efforts to ensure that the large amount of information collected was used constructively and good practice disseminated effectively. As it takes forward this work, the University will be aware of the importance of ensuring that the process, which is central to its means of maintaining an overview of academic provision and of departmental practices in a wide range of areas, does not become overburdened with the increasing number of Statements of Good Practice. It may also wish to consider whether the current arrangements would be strengthened through the introduction of some form of periodic auditing of departmental returns.

Systems: quinquennial review of subjects

25 Biennial monitoring is accompanied by a system of quinquennial subject review, the details of which are described in *Guidelines for Internal Subject Review and Programme Re-Approval*. The process, modelled on QAA subject review, involves the preparation of a self-evaluation by the subject providers, a two-day review by a UTC-appointed team which includes at least one member external to the University, submission of a review report to the relevant FTC and UTC and, where provision is judged to be satisfactory, re-approval of the programme for a further period of five years. If re-approval is conditional, FTC is charged with monitoring progress in meeting the conditions. Training for review teams is provided by QSU.

26 The *Account* described quinquennial review as a 'rigorous and testing system' and cited positive comments on the process in QAA subject review reports. It indicated the ways in which the system had developed from its 'original incarnation, which...focused on teaching in the classroom', and pointed to recent enhancements 'to take account of the need for explicit statements of standards, external referents, and learning opportunities in relation to standards'. From the evidence available it was clear to the audit team that the process involved critical self-evaluation and was well-supported both centrally and at faculty level. Sample reports of review teams were appropriately detailed and involved thorough consideration of the evidence, with both FTCs and UTC providing feedback to the subject providers. The team concluded that the University's confidence in the quinquennial review system was justified.

Collaborative provision

27 The University's collaborative provision is 'limited, but expanding' (see above, paragraph 10). In 1996 Senate approved a *Procedure for Validation of Programmes in other Institutions* which sets out a mechanism for consideration of proposals for such programmes by a Standing Sub-Committee on Validation. Once approved, responsibility for collaborative provision rests with a University-appointed programme director, and programme management, monitoring and review systems are the same as those for internal programmes. However, the *Account* indicated the University's awareness of the 'need to review and upgrade its arrangements' in the near future, so as to 'embody explicitly' the expectations of the relevant section of QAA's *Code*. As evidence that the University was putting its intentions into effect, the audit team noted the recent development of a series of documents that provided guidance to staff on collaborative provision and associated activities; they included a *Policy and Procedures for the Quality Assurance of Collaborative*

Provision and statements on the use of agents and on the quality assurance of exchange programmes. The team also noted the detailed and systematic protocol that was employed in the recent validation visits to further education colleges in respect of the development of foundation degrees.

Proposed future developments in quality management

28 The *Account* described several instances where developments in the University's quality assurance procedures had arisen from considered responses to external demands, and also identified areas where procedures would require further modification in the near future. The audit team was informed that the University had established a system for responding to external developments, whereby information from professional and statutory bodies and from QAA, for example, was directed in the first instance to the Deputy Registrar who channelled the information to the appropriate committee or individuals concerned. In some cases, where the implications had been thought to be substantial or where the responsibilities cut across several committees, working groups had been established to take matters forward (see below, paragraph 37). The team saw evidence that, in broad terms, this procedure was working effectively.

29 The *Account* stated that the current restructuring, particularly the reduction in the number of faculties (see above, paragraph 14), would 'streamline the University's arrangements for discharging its responsibilities...for quality and standards'. It indicated, however, that this streamlining would take place 'within a similar framework of systems, policies and procedures' to that in place at the time of the audit visit. The audit team noted that the restructuring process had entailed the evaluation of a substantial amount of evidence about the University and its performance relative to a range of comparator institutions. Discussions with staff indicated that the University had developed a sound rationale for change that was well-understood across the institution; it appeared that the restructuring was taking place systematically, with appropriate consultation and good communications with staff. Although many of the quality assurance systems would remain essentially the same in the proposed new structure, the team formed the view that the development of an Executive Board with the involvement of senior academic managers, a Strategy Board providing a focus for the coordination of institutional strategies, and an Academic Audit Committee to audit aspects of the quality assurance system were well-judged innovations that would have beneficial effects on the management of academic quality. The team noted in particular that UPRC currently handled a wide range of business and had

not always been actively involved in the development of key aspects of academic strategy, a potential weakness that would be addressed by the establishment of the Strategy Board.

The academic standards of awards

30 The *Institutional Plan* states that one of the University's principal objectives is to 'offer education which meets the most stringent tests as to...standards'. The *Account* described the ways in which the University sought to meet this objective, and summarised a range of policies and practices in relation to the establishment and maintenance of output and input standards; the application of standards in terms of student assessment and the classification of awards; and assurance of the internal and external comparability of standards. It also indicated how the University evaluated its performance in relation to standards, and highlighted those areas in which developments had been achieved recently or were planned for the future.

Output standards: principles and structures

31 The *Account* identified 'five key principles' underpinning the University's approach to establishing and maintaining output standards: 'that ultimate responsibility...lies with the University as the awarding body; that, at the programme level, the tasks of establishing and maintaining output standards should be performed by the academic staff who are responsible for devising, delivering and assessing programmes of study; that the performance of these tasks should be subject to internal scrutiny...; (and also)...external scrutiny by examiners drawn from other institutions; (and) that the reports of external examiners should form the principal basis for monitoring output standards'.

32 The *Account* stated that the University had established structures for maintaining standards at the levels of the programme, department, faculty and institution. At programme level, responsibility rests with the board of studies. Heads of department are responsible for ensuring that tasks relating to standards are undertaken effectively in relation to the taught programmes offered by the department, and for nominating internal and external examiners. Scrutiny of standards in both proposed new programmes and in established programmes is the responsibility, at faculty level, of FTCs, which also have devolved responsibilities for the appointment of external examiners for taught programmes; postgraduate sub-deans nominate internal and external examiners for research programmes to Senate. At University level, UTC plays what the *Account* described as 'a pivotal role

in the management of standards', receiving all new programme proposals, internal reports on the standards of provision, reports from QAA and professional and statutory bodies (PSBs) and, since June 2001, a summary of matters raised by external examiners (see below, paragraph 37). From its scrutiny of the minutes of these various committees and discussions with their members, the audit team was satisfied that, although the operation and precise structure of boards of studies appeared to vary across departments, the University had established appropriate structures for the maintenance of standards and was achieving effective communications between the various levels.

Output standards: new programmes

33 The *Account* reported that, historically, the output standards of the University's programmes have 'traditionally reflected the shared implicit values of subject communities about what is appropriate for a particular award' and had not, as such, 'been formally articulated in the approvals procedure' for new programmes. It described how this matter had now been addressed through recent revisions to the programme approval system (see above, paragraph 22). Part 1 proposals must now include a statement of the typical intended learning outcomes of the programme, referenced to the national framework for higher education qualifications; Part 2 proposals incorporate a programme specification and a commentary showing how standards relate to the national benchmarks and PSB requirements. While it is too early for the University to judge fully the impact of these new arrangements, the audit team was satisfied that they represented a move to ensure that standards matters were addressed explicitly through the programme approval process. The team also noted that the recent development of an innovative PhD (Integrated) programme had involved detailed consideration, by the Graduate Council, of the relationship of the programme to the national framework for higher education qualifications and explicit definition of appropriate learning outcomes and associated assessment strategies.

Output standards: existing programmes

34 The *Account* reported that the increased emphasis on standards within the new programme approval process was being extended to established programmes: UTC had required boards of studies to produce programme specifications for all provision in 2001-02 and there was an expectation 'that all taught programmes will have explicit definitions of standards within the next couple of years'. Staff who met the audit team described this development as a 'cultural challenge', but the team saw evidence that a standards

template for undergraduate awards had been adopted already in a range of programmes and heard from students that they had found it helpful; a similar template for postgraduate programmes was to be developed in due course. In addition, the team noted that the revised quinquennial review system (see above, paragraph 26) incorporated explicit consideration of standards matters.

35 These developments notwithstanding, the *Account* was clear that 'traditionally the University has relied on the external examiner system' in making judgements about standards in established programmes. External examiners are required to review, evaluate and moderate student attainment, to evaluate the assessment process, and to report annually to the Vice-Chancellor on these matters and on the comparability of the University's awards in relation to those of other institutions. They are appointed formally by Senate, normally for three years, and receive a range of induction materials from both the centre and the department, including the University's Examination Conventions and, in respect of undergraduate awards, a *Handbook for External Examiners of Undergraduate Examinations*. As recommended in the 1993 audit report, payment of an external examiner's fee is dependent upon submission of the required report.

36 External examiners' reports are forwarded by the Examinations Office to boards of studies, which are required to consider the matters raised and give feedback to the examiner; the report and response is then forwarded to the relevant FTC for consideration. FTCs are responsible for monitoring the implementation of any actions proposed in response to the reports, with faculty assistant registrars ensuring that such monitoring appears as an item on FTC agendas. Nonetheless, the audit team saw evidence that a board of studies had delayed responding to a report for several months and had not provided feedback to the external examiner. This matter appeared not to have been discussed by the relevant FTC, although it was indicated clearly in the board's minutes. Within this context, the team noted that some procedural matters relating to the handling of external examiners' reports, and to the University's efforts to ensure that all reports were sufficiently evaluative, had received critical comment in a range of QAA subject review reports.

37 The *Account* reported that, in considering in 2000 the sections of QAA's *Code* relating to external examiners and student assessment, UTC had identified 'a number of minor matters' requiring action by the University, 'but some major ones as well', including the fact that it was not possible, under the current arrangements, 'to have a clear picture of recurring issues raised by external examiners'. As a result, a

Working Party on Standards and Assessment was established in 2001 to take forward the major issues. In terms of the section of the *Code* relating to external examiners, the Working Party recommended some changes to the constitution and procedures of examination boards and revisions to the report form and the *Handbook*. In addition, in June 2001 FTCs were required, for the first time, to present to UTC a summary of the matters raised by external examiners in the preceding year, in order to facilitate oversight at institutional level and the identification of generic matters. In fact, on that occasion summary reports from only three faculties were presented to UTC; the audit team's scrutiny of the full run of reports, available by the time of UTC's October meeting, indicated considerable variation in format and content, with some reports being only a general confirmation that the faculty had responded to external examiners, without raising specific matters. Given the emphasis it places on the external examiner system, the University may wish to establish a central means for ensuring consistency in the ways in which departments and faculties handle external examiners' reports, and to take steps to ensure that UTC is provided with sufficient information to enable it to maintain an adequate overview both of the matters raised by external examiners and, more generally, of the ways in which faculties are exercising their devolved responsibilities in this area. In so doing, it may also wish to consider the merits of allocating, to a senior member of staff, responsibility for reading all external examiners' reports in a given year, so as to ensure that a holistic overview is obtained.

38 In terms of output standards in research degree programmes, 'the University relies upon the judgements of internal and external examiners'. Research degree external examiners are provided with relevant briefing information, including a *Handbook for Examiners of Research Degrees*, developed under the aegis of the Graduate Council as part of the University's response to the section of QAA's *Code* relating to research students. Following examination, the internal and external examiners submit a joint report on the candidate's performance to the Student Progress Office. The audit team found the *Handbook* to be a comprehensive and well-written document, with sections on good practice and the criteria for evaluating student work particularly helpful in ensuring consistency in making judgements about standards. Research students who met the team confirmed that they were well-informed about the standards of performance expected of them and drew attention to the valuable advice provided in a *Handbook for Research Supervisors and Research Students* (see below, paragraph 61).

Input standards: principles

39 The *Account* identified 'three key principles' behind the University's approach to establishing and maintaining input standards: 'the first is that all candidates should normally meet the threshold standard...necessary to indicate the potential to pursue a course of study in higher education successfully; secondly,...where students do not meet the threshold...but offer alternative qualifications...any admissions selector must make a case for concession to the relevant University authorities; thirdly,...in terms of specific programmes, entry standards additional to the threshold should be set by the academic staff responsible for the programme'.

Input standards: admissions requirements and procedures

40 In common with other institutions of its age and history, the University operates a system of both General Entrance Requirements and Matriculation Regulations expressed in terms of GCE qualifications or equivalent for undergraduate entry. The details are specified in the annual *Calendar*. Where qualifications have been gained in another language, applicants are also required to present suitable evidence of proficiency in English. These requirements notwithstanding, the Matriculation Regulations make provision for the admission of those who do not meet the prescribed requirements, specifically mature candidates and those who have been in employment for over two years but have few or no formal qualifications. Such applications are considered on an individual basis by Senate's MCC, on the recommendation of the relevant department, and exemptions may be conditional upon the taking of additional courses and/or passing designated examinations. MCC reports annually to Senate on its exercise of concessions, and monitors the progress of students admitted on this basis. From the documentation available to it and its discussions with staff, the audit team concluded that MCC was operating with due regard both for the maintenance of input standards and the interests of individual applicants.

41 Postgraduate entry requirements are expressed in terms of degree qualifications. As with undergraduates, exceptions to the general requirements may be made and faculty guidelines for this purpose are provided for admissions selectors. Cases falling outside the guidelines are referred to the postgraduate sub-dean for approval, and entry may be conditional upon further study or examination. The audit team heard that, in practice, decisions in respect of alternative qualifications were made on the basis of the academic case put forward by the admissions selector.

42 Specific programme entrance requirements are expressed for undergraduate programmes in terms of required grades, although the *Account* emphasised the University's recognition that 'individual attainment can be influenced by...socio-economic background and the quality of schooling, both of which can disadvantage potential students'. As a result, and consistent with the objectives of its *Institutional Plan*, in 1999 the University introduced a Progression and Access Routes to Newcastle University (PARTNERS) programme, to encourage applications from young people from deprived areas. Students are given the opportunity to demonstrate their potential by attending an assessed summer school, which covers matters such as study and personal skills and includes a subject-specific strand delivered and assessed by the relevant academic department. Successful candidates may be offered a place at the University on the basis of grades typically six points lower than the standard offer, though the Matriculation Regulations must still be met. The audit team was informed that the programme had increased its range steadily since its inception with 37 departments now participating. The team viewed the PARTNERS initiative and the widespread involvement of departments as a commendable development that provided strong evidence of the University's genuine engagement with its regional mission.

43 The *Account* reported that the University had commenced the development of 'an overall policy' for the accreditation of prior learning and experience (AP(E)L). A first draft of the policy was considered by UTC in February 2001 and would be considered further in the light of forthcoming guidance from QAA. The audit team had access to the draft document and found that it represented a worthwhile starting point, but might require further refinement, particularly in relation to the accreditation of learning which met only some of the learning outcomes of specific modules. The team was informed that for most departments AP(E)L was not problematic, as few claims were made.

44 The audit team noted that the biennial review exercise of 1999-2000 had included specific consideration of the recruitment and selection of students; boards of studies had been required to self-review against Statements of Good Practice covering selection policy, the conduct of interviews, and the provision of information for admissions selectors relating to equal opportunities and the recording of admissions. The results suggested a high level of compliance with the Statements in relation to selection policies and information about equal opportunities, but a lower level in relation to the other areas. As a result, UTC had requested the introduction of a *Manual for Undergraduate Selectors*, and had instituted the provision of training for admissions selectors. The team concluded that the University was keeping an

appropriate overview of its selection and admissions procedures, and taking action where appropriate.

Student assessment and the classification of awards: principles

45 The *Account* detailed 'four key principles' underpinning the University's policies and practices in relation to student assessment and the classification of awards: 'firstly, that the criteria for marking individual assessments should be clearly related to the classification of awards; secondly, that these criteria should be transparent to students...; thirdly, that these criteria should be used by academic staff who are marking student work; (and) that the above should be subject to monitoring and reporting by external examiners'.

Student assessment and the classification of awards: policies and procedures

46 The *Account* reported that, while 'given the breadth of provision at Newcastle it would be impossible to have common descriptors of attainment covering all...subjects', the University required FTCs 'to promulgate, or approve' descriptors of the attainment associated with each classification for subjects within that faculty. *Central Guidelines for Degree Programme Handbooks* specify that the descriptors should be included in student handbooks and staff are required to mark student work in relation to the descriptors. External examiners are responsible for monitoring the marking, and verifying that award classification is appropriate to student attainment. The audit team had access to a range of student handbooks, all of which contained descriptors of attainment, in accordance with the University's requirement, although the format and terminology varied significantly. In one subject area, for example, assessment criteria were published in terms of mark ranges available for different types of work (essays, examinations, projects etc); another provided criterion-referenced statements specified by grade and performance criteria. FTC papers available to the team, and its discussions with staff, also indicated some confusion as to what was meant by assessment criteria. In the view of the team, a more consistent use of terminology across the institution might assist the University in its internal calibration of standards. This matter notwithstanding, students informed the team that they were clear as to what was required of them at assessment, both at module and programme level.

47 The *Account* reported that the Working Party on Standards and Assessment had identified two areas in which current University practice required modification in order to meet the expectations of QAA's *Code* relating to assessment. The first concerned assessment policy in relation to taught postgraduate

programmes, specifically the absence of a common marking scale. The audit team was informed that an institution-wide scale had been proposed by the Working Party and would be implemented as part of new postgraduate examination conventions when these had been developed. The second area, internal double marking, had resulted in UTC approval of revised Undergraduate Examination Conventions, to take effect from 2002-03. The new conventions include a minimum requirement for second marking of a sample sufficient to enable the moderator to form a secure judgement in relation to module marks. The team was satisfied that the University had carried out a careful review of its assessment practices in relation to the *Code*, and undertaken follow-up action where appropriate.

Internal and external comparability of standards: principles

48 The *Account* stated that the University's approach to assuring the internal and external comparability of standards was based on two principles: 'that, as far as possible, there should be internal comparability of academic standards across the University and...that the academic standards of awards...should be effectively calibrated with those in similar subjects in other higher education institutions'. It also identified a range of policies and procedures for ensuring comparability, including a common marking scale and requirements for progression and award, common conventions for the conduct of boards of examiners, the external examiner system, and monitoring the examination process.

Internal and external comparability of standards: marking scales, progression and classification

49 The University has a common marking scale for all undergraduate programmes, with the exception of general degrees in the Faculty of Medicine. The Undergraduate Progress Regulations, set out clearly in the *Calendar*, specify a requirement that standards set at each programme stage must be achieved before proceeding to the next, with provision made for compensation in accordance with clear criteria. Three hundred and sixty credits are normally required for the award of an honours degree and 300 for the award of an ordinary degree, but boards of examiners have some discretion to accept fewer credits. The Undergraduate Examination Conventions specify the constitution and procedures of boards of examiners, including rules for considering non-standard cases.

50 The audit team had access, in the *Calendar*, to a wide range of individual programme regulations, and noted that while the University's regulatory framework specified progression rules, it offered no guidance as to the volume of credit or number of modules of a given level which might be studied within any one stage or

within the programme as a whole. As a result, programme regulations differed, and in some programmes stage 1 modules could be offered as options at stage 2 and stage 2 options at stage 3. Students who met the team perceived this arrangement as a little unfair. The team also noted that the revised Undergraduate Examinations Conventions permitted the weight of stage 2 in determining honours performance to vary between 33 per cent and 100 per cent of the weight given to stage 3. In the view of the team, greater consistency of practice between programmes and faculties, in relation both to the volume of credit to be studied at each level and the contribution of each level to the overall award, would assist in the University in the internal calibration of standards. The University recognises that it is now timely for it to seek to obtain a more holistic overview of individual programme regulations.

51 The University's classification rules permit boards of examiners to 'use one of three methods' to determine honours classification: 'averaging, preponderance, or the use of both and the application of whichever yields the highest outcome'. The method to be used for each programme is determined by FTCs and set out in the degree programme regulations. Examination boards have discretion to award a higher class of honours than the outcome determined using the specified method, but must record their reasons for so doing.

52 The *Account* reported that the Working Party on Standards and Assessment had reviewed these arrangements in the light of an awareness that the use of three different methods could lead to 'different classifications for the same array of marks'. As a result, UTC approved the combined methodology as the preferred method but, to take account of the possibility that this might put individual subjects out of line with practice in the same subjects in other institutions, had invited faculties to provide a rationale if they did not wish to adopt the preferred method. At the time of the audit visit, UTC had approved the use of the averaging method by three of the current faculties; the audit team heard that rationales for deviation would again be required when the faculty restructuring had taken place. On the basis of the documentary evidence available and its discussions with staff, the team formed the view that it would be advisable for the University to revisit this matter: the reduced number of faculties could result, at least initially, in the use of several different classification methods within a single faculty, with implications for the equitable treatment of students and the effective internal calibration of standards. The University may also wish to reflect on whether an arrangement which permits deviation from its stated preferred methodology is wholly in accordance with the expectations of QAA's *Code*.

Proposed future developments in the management of standards

53 The *Account* reported that the University intended to 'improve and develop the management of standards' by retaining the committee reporting lines central to its quality management system, 'but redesigning its systems to incorporate standards'. As examples of this work in progress, it pointed to the new requirement for boards of studies to define explicit standards at programme level and the increased emphasis on standards within the programme approval process. The audit team saw evidence that the definition and communication of standards at undergraduate level was well-advanced, although developments in relation to postgraduate taught programmes were somewhat slower. The team noted that the reduction in the number of faculties resulting from the current restructuring was likely to lead to a substantial increase in the workload of the reconstituted FTCs, potentially reducing the effectiveness of their role in assuring standards. It heard that this impact would be offset by gains in consistency and by greater use of sub-groups for particular purposes. However, given the progress it has made in recent years in addressing standards matters, the University will no doubt wish to keep under close review the impact of the restructuring on its systems for managing quality and standards.

The learning infrastructure

54 The University aims 'to offer a learning infrastructure to support the provision of learning opportunities which will enable students to achieve the standards of its awards'. The *Account* set out the ways in which it sought to achieve this aim, and to both maintain and develop its provision, focusing on learning and other material resources, the provision of student support, and human resources policies. In discussing these matters with staff and students, the audit team was aware of the University's consistently positive outcomes in the 'learning resources' and 'student support and guidance' aspects of QAA subject review.

Learning resources

55 The University Library operates on three sites, the main library being complemented by separate site libraries for the Medical School and the Law School. The combined stock totals over 1 million items, including more than 8,000 journals, some 40 per cent of which are available electronically. The *Account* reported that the Library sought to ensure that provision continued to meet institutional needs through a variety of means: by way of example, subject (liaison) librarians have access to the papers of FTCs and may attend meetings, through which they are alerted to new

academic developments and can discuss consequent matters relating to resourcing and servicing; at departmental level, there is provision for library staff attendance at staff-student committees at which day-to-day matters are raised (see below, paragraph 69). The appropriateness of library resources is monitored by regular user surveys and questionnaires, and through quinquennial subject review (see above, paragraphs 25-26). Through its scrutiny of the documentation available and its meetings with staff and students, the audit team learnt of widespread satisfaction with library services. It appeared that the only substantive concern was the harmonisation of opening hours between the three site libraries; with the increase in the availability of self-service facilities, it may be that the Library will be able to resource such extension of access. Students were also appreciative of the arrangements allowing them to access other university libraries in the region. Within this context, the team noted the reasons given by the Library for the University's current difficulty in signing up to the UK Libraries Plus scheme, which would afford a mutual level of access to other academic libraries nationally.

56 The central provision of IT facilities for the learning infrastructure is the responsibility of the University Computing Service. Monitoring arrangements are similar to those relating to the Library and, as with the Library, designated members of staff work closely with faculty IT committees and individual departments to ensure that IT provision is appropriate to their needs. In its meetings with students, the audit team found an unusually high level of satisfaction with IT provision and in particular with the ease of access to networked workstations. The students expressed some minor concerns that the provision of software on publicly available PCs was inconsistent, but were also aware of the University's intention to adopt a common desktop. The *Account* indicated that this would be available initially for staff and in place within three to five years; in the light of students' expressed needs, the University may feel under some pressure to bring forward the date for implementation and full-campus availability.

57 The Library, Computing Service and the Audio-Visual Centre are accountable for financial and planning matters to the Academic Services Spending Authority, which reports to UPRC. There are also dedicated central committees responsible for the policy and steering of each of the three services, reporting to both Senate and the Council. It was apparent to the audit team that, while the University had no plans for a structural convergence of the services, it had taken steps to ensure that potential areas of overlap were coordinated appropriately. The team was satisfied from the evidence available that the University had established systems for assuring itself that the services,

both individually and collaboratively, were making a full contribution to maintaining the quality of the student experience, and were sufficiently robust and flexible to meet the demands likely to be placed upon them by the increase in student-centred learning.

Student support and guidance

58 The *Account* defined the University's provision of support and guidance to its students under the headings of general academic and welfare matters, specialised pastoral guidance and support, support for career planning and management, and research supervision. Student support and welfare policy is overseen by a Student Welfare Services Policy Committee, a joint committee of Senate and Council chaired by a pro-vice-chancellor.

59 University policy requires all students to have a personal tutor (normally the supervisor in the case of research students), responsible for advising them on academic and non-academic matters and for generally monitoring their progress. Advice for tutors is provided in a *Tutors' Handbook* and an evolving on-line database offers a confidential means of recording, monitoring and communicating the progress of each student. More specialised guidance is provided by a range of services, including the Student Counselling Service and a Student Advice Centre, the latter operating independently from its location within the students' Union Society. The audit team was informed of several other recent initiatives, including the appointment of a Mature Student Support Officer, coupled with the introduction of a mentoring scheme through which new mature students would be mentored by their second-year counterparts; and the creation of a Disability Unit to cover the needs of students with disability or impairment (including dyslexia). The team learnt that there was a high degree of cooperation between the head of this unit and the Students with Disabilities Officer of the Union Society. Students from overseas have full access to the general and specialist services, and to additional facilities dedicated to their particular needs, including a Language Centre. The team noted that information on these various services was readily available to students through a user-friendly web site, universally distributed handbooks, and other publicity. The students it met were aware of what was available to them and where they should go if they needed help, and were appreciative of the personal tutoring system. It was also evident that the concept and practice of student support was embedded fully in University procedures.

60 The *Account* described the ways in which the Careers Service sought 'to provide facilities and opportunities for students to improve their career planning and management skills' working 'closely with

faculties and departments'. As an example of the way in which the Service's work was integrated with that of the University more generally, the audit team noted in particular the Service's liaison with the Student Recruitment Office in respect of the Students into Schools Programme, through which 'undergraduates work in the region's schools and gain academic credit as well as providing role models to younger pupils'. More generally, the team noted that the University was alert to the need to monitor the suitability of the student placements - in schools, hospitals, industry and institutions abroad - that featured in a wide range of its programmes. Placements are the subject of Statements of Good Practice in new programme approval and biennial review, and the team learnt of a recent case in which the University had suspended a medical placement location that failed to meet its expectations in relation to quality assurance. As a further example of the coordination of student support provision, the team noted that the monitoring of placements included specific consideration of the needs of disabled students.

61 In the context of the University's extensive portfolio of postgraduate programmes and research activity, the *Account* gave details of the additional support arrangements made for research students. It reported that, historically, the University had provided 'an overall framework of requirements for research supervision' and guidelines on the respective responsibilities of students and supervisors. It also indicated the ways in which the Graduate Council had sought to enhance provision in response to QAA's *Code* relating to research programmes: new arrangements included the requirement for formal training and mentoring of staff new to research provision; the publication of the *Handbook for Research Supervisors and Research Students*; the separation of the annual monitoring of student performance from students' own evaluation of the quality of their learning experience; and plans to introduce a system of Research Programme Review similar to that already in operation for taught programmes. The research students who met the audit team were content with these arrangements, although anecdotal evidence suggested that there may be a need for the University to monitor more closely the satisfaction of international students, whose expectations of levels of supervision may vary and who may be more reluctant to raise areas of concern. The team also heard from members of the Graduate Council that the current academic restructuring would allow for the creation of a graduate school in each faculty, and provide opportunities for coordination between the three, and thus the creation of a stronger feeling of 'graduate community' within the University.

Staffing procedures and staff development

62 The *Account* outlined a range of University policies and procedures relating to the recruitment, induction, development, and promotion of academic staff. Responsibility for the recruitment and appointment process, including the appropriateness of advertisements and further particulars, rests with the Human Resources Section of the Registrar's Office. Chairs of selection panels are required to undertake training for their role, and such training is also available to other panel members. After appointment, the induction of new staff takes place at institutional, department and programme level. The provision of local induction was audited by the University in 1999-2000 through the biennial review process and potential areas for improvements identified; the *Account* reported that progress would be monitored during the next round. New staff who met the audit team, some of whom were part-time, confirmed that they had received induction at the three levels.

63 Newly-appointed staff are subject to a probationary period of up to three years, with mentoring arrangements in place during the specified period. Until recently, all probationers were expected, though not required, to complete a programme of training in teaching and learning methods, the Certificate in Teaching and Learning, delivered by QSU and accredited by the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. In July 2001 Senate decided to make successful completion of a professional development programme compulsory for all new staff, unless exempted on the basis of experience or qualifications obtained elsewhere, and a longer Certificate in Academic Practice, which includes both generic and subject-specific-training, has now been introduced. The new requirement is included in revised probation procedures and in a recently-issued Staff Training and Development Policy. Newly-appointed staff who met the audit team confirmed that the principles and practice of the policy had taken effect. The team noted that the importance attached to staff development as part of the University's overall approach to quality enhancement was illustrated also by the decision to assign to QSU a remit that combined staff development with quality and standards matters. Within this context, the team found the *Guide to Academic Practice*, a web- and paper-based directory of University policies compiled by the Teaching Office with input from QSU, to be a particularly useful information source for staff (see below, paragraph 67).

64 The *Account* stated that 'as in many other universities, appraisal has enjoyed limited success at Newcastle' and pointed to some scepticism about 'its value and relevance within a profession which is naturally inclined to self-development'. The audit team

noted that a review of appraisal had been instigated in 2000 and that the Appraisal Review Working Group, in liaison with the Staff Committee and campus unions, was drawing up guidelines for a revised Performance and Development Review Scheme, conducted on a line management basis. At the time of the audit visit, a pilot project was underway in several areas of the University. It appeared to the team that the proposed scheme, the detail of which had been communicated to staff via the fortnightly bulletin *Update*, had been well-received.

65 It was evident to the audit team that the University made significant use of postgraduate students for teaching and demonstrating duties. The *Account* stated that the University had 'recognised a need for enhancement' in the availability of training and development opportunities for such students: current provision by QSU was 'not universal' across departments and faculties, and funds had been sought from HEFCE to work with faculty-appointed staff development liaison officers in securing improvements. The team saw no evidence that the University's use of postgraduate students for teaching was unsatisfactory (or driven by resource rather than developmental needs). However, its discussions with staff and students indicated that there was considerable variance not only in the training provided, but also in the levels of contractual documentation supplied to students and in the monitoring of their performance. Given that considerable numbers of undergraduates will receive instruction from postgraduates during their studies, the University may wish to consider the desirability of seeking ways to ensure greater and more demonstrable consistency in its arrangements for contracting, training and monitoring those it employs. In so doing, it may also wish to consider whether the helpful section on teaching and assessment in its *Undergraduate Prospectus* should include mention (constructive rather than cautionary) of the use of postgraduate students for such purposes.

Internal and external communications

66 The *Account* set out and attempted to evaluate the effectiveness of the University's arrangements for communicating its aims, objectives, policies and procedures to 'key internal and external stakeholders and audiences', including its regional partners and regional employers. Although possessing a relatively compact campus for an institution of its size, the University recognises that the extensive range of its academic portfolio and associated activity poses a challenge to the efficiency of its communications systems. An initial *Communications Strategy* was developed in 1999, under the aegis of the Communications and Information Strategy Committee (CISC), a joint committee of Council and Senate.

Specific aspects of the University's approach to securing good communications are considered in the paragraphs that follow. In general the staff and students who met the audit team were well-informed about their institution, and knowledgeable about matters that were not necessarily parts of their immediate remit.

Communications with staff

67 The *Account* described various mechanisms for communicating with staff, ranging from the formal structures provided by the committee system and line management arrangements, to written communications such as *Update* and the *Guide to Academic Practice*, and the increasing use of the internal web site both to provide information and to obtain feedback on internal developments. In considering staff communications, the audit team focused in particular on the way in which the University was handling the process of academic restructuring. It appeared to the team that, while the outcome of the restructuring was likely to improve channels of communication, the process itself, and the associated upheaval after a relatively long period of stability, would test the University's ability to communicate effectively with its own community.

68 The theme of restructuring arose naturally in almost all of the audit team's meetings. The contributions from staff (and students) on those occasions were presented in an environment of fact rather than rumour, which led the team to believe that the community was being kept informed and updated, in part through dedicated and well-maintained web pages, and had been provided with ample opportunity to contribute to discussions. In addition, it was evident that the University had gathered information from other institutions to inform its own deliberations, and had taken care to explain to staff the rationale behind its decisions. It also appeared that the University was fully aware of the potential impact of restructuring upon the student body and of the need to deal systematically with matters such as 'departmental belonging' for students in the middle of their degree programmes. In the context of securing good communications, the University is to be commended for the care with which it has approached the restructuring process and its concern to minimise the impact upon the student experience.

Communications with students

69 The *Account* outlined the University's approach to student representation and indicated a range of developments in this area since the 1992 audit. Students are represented at all levels of committee, from Council and Senate to faculty committees and boards of studies. All departments are required to have

staff-student committees to 'consider matters relating to the quality of the student experience and offer a forum for consultation' about programme changes; there is also a University Staff-Student Committee, a joint committee of Senate and Council chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, to consider more generic matters. The audit team had access to the minutes of several departmental staff-student committees and noted the range and relevance of the issues raised. Union Society officers who met the team reported that they had very good relations with the central authorities and indicated no major outstanding matters or frustrations. The team concluded that the University had done much since the previous audit to enhance its arrangements for student representation and to ensure the proper working of staff-student committees.

70 In terms of communications more generally, students reported no conflict between their expectations as raised by the University's prospectuses or other promotional materials and their subsequent experiences. They were satisfied with the arrangements made for their induction into the University and their departments, and with the quality of the information provided in degree programme handbooks. They were also aware of the routes available to them in the event that they wished to make a complaint or an academic appeal, as detailed in the *Student Handbook*. The audit team noted that the procedures for both complaints and appeals had been reviewed and revised in 2000-01 in the light of QAA's *Code*.

Electronic and external communications

71 Overall responsibility for the University's central external web site rests with CISC; responsibility for monitoring the site and ensuring its accuracy rests with a Publications and Website Development Office within the Registrar's Office. The audit team made much use of the site during its visit and found it to be relevant, well-maintained and updated regularly. Management of the internal web site rests with the Registrar, but faculties, departments and administrative offices are responsible for the maintenance of their own pages in accordance with central guidelines. The team noted some variability in the upkeep of these pages, but students commented favourably on the level of information provided.

72 The *Account* reported that the University had established a Learning and Teaching Support Unit (LTSU) in 2000. Its remit is to facilitate the delivery of the Learning and Teaching Strategy by supporting staff in programme delivery, including the delivery of distance learning programmes. The audit team noted that LTSU was well-staffed and had as its major focus the development of an appropriate virtual learning environment, including the rolling-out of the e-learning

software platform Blackboard, accompanied by structured training. The team had sight of a recently-issued *Essential handbook for distance learning* - a detailed document that appeared to be a model of good practice for any department considering an extension of its activity into this field. The team's discussions with both academic and learning support staff suggested that there was a high level of consultation and coordination of matters relating to the demands of distance learning in the widest sense. The University is to be commended for the proactive way in which it is responding to developments in the virtual learning environment, and the associated training provided for staff.

Communicating good practice

73 During the course of its visit, the audit team encountered many examples of good practice across a wide range of the University's activities. It was evident from its discussions with staff that there were several mechanisms for collating and disseminating such examples: through the work of QSU, for instance, as well as via the formal committee structure and staff bulletins. It was clear, however, that the matter of how best to manage the wide range of information emanating from departments, and to ensure that examples of good practice were shared, remained a concern for UTC. The University will no doubt continue to reflect on the ways in which it might achieve greater consistency of dissemination of its many examples of good practice. In so doing, it may wish to consider the merits of developing a comprehensive and continuously updated information base of departmental practices, perhaps making use of the internal web site as appropriate.

Conclusions

74 The University of Newcastle upon Tyne's principal objectives for the period 1999-2004 are 'to offer education which meets the most stringent tests both as to quality and standards to an increasing number and range of people...; to sustain a substantial high-quality research effort that is internationally competitive...; and to utilise fully...human and physical resources to contribute to economic, cultural and social development at the local, regional and national level'. In seeking to meet these objectives, the University is committed to the core values of intellectual excellence, integrity, respect for diversity, equality of opportunity and responsibility to society. It sees its distinctiveness as stemming from a combination of offering a very wide range of academic programmes, having a high quality research base, and playing a significant role in the economic development and cultural provision of the North East.

75 The University's strategy for managing academic quality and standards is simple, clearly articulated, and well-understood within the institution. Essentially, it comprises three systems - for new programme approval, the biennial review of existing programmes, and quinquennial review at subject level - supplemented by project work to address specific areas, such as the expectations of QAA's *Code* and national developments in defining standards. At all levels, good use is made of external referents. The strategy is characterised and implemented by a proactive University Teaching Committee and its officers, and by working groups established by that committee. Since the 1992 audit and under UTC's leadership, the University has made considerable progress in taking forward an appropriate quality agenda, set partly in response to external developments, and in establishing effective lines of communication between the centre and faculty teaching committees, to which significant quality management responsibilities are devolved.

76 As it continues to build upon this progress and to further enhance its arrangements, there are aspects of the University's management of academic standards which warrant particular attention. While external examiners are the cornerstone of the University's approach to assuring itself that the standards set for, and achieved by, its students are appropriate, some parts of its processes for considering their reports are operationalised imperfectly. New procedures for overseeing the way in which departments are responding to those reports have yet to take full effect and may require further enhancement, and the absence of central, senior locus of responsibility for reading all reports remains a significant weakness in the current arrangements. The University is aware that it also has further work to do in addressing the difficult matter of internal calibration of standards. Even within centrally defined parameters, current variations in departmental and faculty approaches to matters such as credit, progression and classification make it harder for the University to assure itself of the consistency of the basis upon which its awards are classified and made.

77 The University is notable for its success in establishing a comprehensive, well-integrated learning infrastructure. The care it takes to assure the appropriateness of its learning resources and the support and guidance it offers to students suggests that its strategic commitment to research is coupled with an equally high emphasis on the quality of teaching and the student experience. It is also mindful of its responsibilities towards its staff in relation to their support, development and career progression. There is evidence of widespread staff commitment to the institutional mission, and of student satisfaction with the experience of studying at the University.

78 Following the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor in 2001, the University has reviewed its position within UK higher education. The result has been the decision to embark upon major revisions to its academic structure, to take full effect in 2002-03. These changes, following as they do a relatively long period of stability, are not expected to have a major impact on current quality assurance procedures but will, inevitably, affect the way in which quality and standards are managed at central, faculty and departmental levels. While the discipline scope of faculties will increase significantly, the potential for variability of practice between faculties will be much reduced and should prove easier to monitor. In managing the restructuring process, the University has been able to draw upon effective internal structures for communicating with its staff and students, and is taking care to ensure that the impact upon the student experience has been minimised. As the new structures take full effect, it will no doubt be alert to the need to monitor their impact upon quality assurance arrangements, so as to ensure that adjustments are made as appropriate and the gains made in recent years are preserved.

79 The findings of this audit support broad confidence in the University's capacity to discharge its responsibilities for assuring the quality of its provision and the academic standards of its awards.

Points for commendation

80 The audit team wishes, in particular, to commend the University for:

- (i) the support it provides for staff with significant responsibilities relating to quality and standards (paragraphs 20, 22 and 63);
- (ii) the care with which it is approaching the current restructuring, in particular its communications with staff, its use of external comparators, and its concern to minimise the impact on the student experience (paragraphs 29, and 67-68);
- (iii) the PARTNERS programme initiative, including the widespread involvement of academic departments, as evidence of the University's genuine engagement with its regional mission (paragraph 42);
- (iv) the proactive way in which it is responding to developments in the virtual learning environment, and the associated training provided for staff (paragraph 72).

Points for further consideration

81 As it continues to develop its systems and arrangements for assuring the quality of the educational provision and the standards of its awards, the University may wish to consider the advisability of:

- (i) establishing a central means for ensuring consistency in the manner and format in which departments and faculties consider and respond to external examiners' reports, and securing an appropriate central overview of the matters raised in such reports (paragraphs 36-37);
- (ii) continuing to give active consideration to the internal calibration of academic standards and, in so doing, ensuring that the associated terminology is used consistently (paragraphs 46, 50 and 52);

and the desirability of:

- (iii) ensuring consistency in the arrangements for contracting, training, and monitoring the work of the significant number of postgraduate students involved in teaching and demonstrating (paragraph 65);
- (iv) continuing to reflect on the ways in which it might achieve wider dissemination of its many collated examples of good practice (paragraph 73).

Appendix 1*

The University of Newcastle upon Tyne - facts and figures 2000-01

History

The origins of the University can be traced back to 1834 when a School of Medicine was established in the city by a group of medical practitioners. In 1852 this became the Medical School (later College) of the University of Durham and in 1871 a separate College of Physical Science (later Armstrong College) was added. The two Colleges were constituted formally as the Newcastle Division of the University of Durham in 1908, merging into Kings College in 1937. The College grew substantially both in terms of student numbers and subjects offered and in 1963, when the federal university was dissolved, became the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. Throughout the 1960s and subsequently, the University has continued to grow, with the notable additions of a new Dental School in 1978 and a new Medical School in 1984. Most of its current activities are conducted on a 45 acre campus near the city centre, although it also has facilities outside the city, including two farms in Northumberland and a marine biology station on the North East coast.

Mission

'To offer education which meets the most stringent tests as to quality and standards to an increasing number and range of people, enhancing the employability of our students and contributing to regional, national and international needs for high level skills and knowledge.'

'To sustain a substantial high quality research effort that is internationally competitive, maintaining a vibrant and successful research culture in a very high proportion of its departments and research centres and thereby enhancing its position among the top twenty or so large research universities in the UK.'

'To utilise fully its human and physical resources to contribute to economic, cultural and social development at the local, regional, and international levels.'

Faculties

Agriculture and Biological Sciences
Arts
Education
Engineering
Law, Environment, and Social Sciences
Medicine
Science

Number of students 2001-02

(1 December 2001 HESA return)

Listed by faculty

	Undergraduate		Postgraduate taught		Postgraduate research		TOTAL
	FT	PT	FT	PT	FT	PT	
Agriculture and Biological Sciences	985	7	60	5	137	29	1,223
Arts	2,418	43	159	81	70	96	2,867
Education*	166	127	436	554	25	109	1,417
Engineering	1,001	12	257	27	200	33	1,530
Law, Environment, and Social Sciences	3,208	17	247	126	152	128	3,878
Medicine	2,192	12	11	154	299	113	2,781
Science	1,250	11	99	5	182	27	1,574
Total	11,220	229	1,269	952	1,065	535	15,270

* A further 2,151 (336.83 FTE) students registered on mainly sub-degree programmes in the Centre for Lifelong Learning.

*As supplied by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Student characteristics (total population)

Gender	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Male	6,707	744	7,451
Female	6,847	972	7,819
Total	13,554	1,716	15,270

Mature students

Proportion of full-time undergraduate population aged 21 or over on entry - 8 per cent
 Proportion of part-time undergraduate population aged 21 or over on entry - 1 per cent

Domicile

	UK	Other EU	Overseas	Total
Undergraduate	10,461	476	512	11,449
Postgraduate (taught)	1,528	184	538	2,250
Postgraduate (research)	1,004	133	434	1,571
Total	12,993	793	1,484	15,270

Institutional staff 2001-02

	Full-time	Part-time
Academic	978	120
Administrative	495	64
Research	684	118
Technical	344	42
Clerical	597	284
Ancillary	286	458
Total	3,384	1,086

Appendix 2*

List of the University's collaborative partnerships as at December 2001

External institution	Programme title
Partnership University of Durham	MBBS (Stages 1 and 2)
Joint award ESC Montpellier	BA (Honours) International Management
Validated programme Further Education Colleges at Newcastle, Gateshead, South Tyneside, City of Sunderland and Tynemouth	Foundation Degree in Computing and Information Systems
Other collaborative programmes Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Heriot-Watt, Liverpool, Southampton, Surry, University of Wales, Cardiff and Swansea , UMIST	MSc in Advanced Silicon Processing and Manufacturing Technologies
University of Birmingham and Sheffield	MSc in Hydroinformatics and Management Systems
Universities of Glasgow, Heriot-Watt, Southampton, Strathclyde and University College London	MSc in Marine Technology
University of Strathclyde	MSc in Process Analytics and Quality Technology

*As supplied by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne

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