

University of Sunderland

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Institutional audit

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Printed copies are available from:

Linney Direct

Adamsway

Mansfield

NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450629

Email qaa@linneydirect.com

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.

Contents

Summary	1		
Introduction	1		
Outcome of the audit	1		
Features of good practice	1		
Recommendations for action	1		
Outcomes of discipline audit trails	2		
BA English; BA English Language and Literature; BA English and Drama; BA English and Film; English in the Joint Honours programme; English Language/Linguistics in the Joint Honours programme; MA English; MA English: Postmodernity and Contemporary Literature; MA English: Restoration to Romanticism; MA World Literatures; MSc Computer Based Information Systems; MSc Electronic Commerce Applications; MSc Commercial Applications; MSc Information Technology Management; MSc Intelligent Systems; MSc Internet Engineering; MSc Multimedia Systems; MSc Network Systems; MSc Software Engineering; MPharm; PgC/PgD/MSc Clinical Pharmacy; Postgraduate Diploma Pharmaceutical Sciences; MSc Medicines Management; Practice Certificate Supplementary Prescribing (Pharmacists); BSc (Hons) Psychology; Psychology in the Joint Honours programme (including specialised major in Psychological Studies); Graduate Diploma in Psychology; MSc Applied Psychological Research	2		
National reference points	2		
Main report	4		
Section 1: Introduction: the University of Sunderland	4		
The institution and its mission	4		
Background information	5		
The audit process	5		
Developments since the previous academic quality audit	6		
Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes	7		
The institution's view as expressed in the SED	7		
The institution's framework for managing quality and standards	8		
The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards	9		
Internal approval, monitoring and review processes	10		
External participation in internal review processes	13		
External examiners and their reports	13		
External reference points	14		
		Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies	15
		Student representation at operational and institutional level	15
		Feedback from students, graduates and employers	16
		Progression and completion statistics	17
		Assurance of the quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward	17
		Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development	18
		Learning support resources	19
		Academic guidance, support and supervision	19
		Personal support and guidance	20
		Collaborative provision	21
		Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline trails	22
		Discipline audit trails	22
		Section 4: The audit investigations: published information	28
		The student's experience of published information and other information available to them	28
		Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information	28
		Findings	30
		The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes	30
		The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards	31
		The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning	31
		Outcomes of discipline audit trails	33
		The use made by the institution of the Academic Infrastructure	34
		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	34
		Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards	34
		Reliability of information	34
		Features of good practice	35
		Recommendations for action	35
		Appendix	36
		The University of Sunderland's reponse to the audit report	36

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Sunderland (the University) from 29 November to 3 December 2004 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards offered by the University.

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 United Kingdom (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 academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

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

- use of school conferences to address specific themes, develop a broader understanding of issues, and as a mechanism for exchange of feedback and dissemination of good practice
- use of Teaching and Learning Fellowships that are focused on particular institutional priorities and targets, for example, retention and for building community links. They are used effectively in the development of 'reach out' activity as well as internal academic matters and are well integrated into the institution

- maintenance and enhancement of learning support resources as a key priority and the provision of high-quality technician support
- range and quality of support for students with special needs (physical or educational challenges) linked to the University's strategic view of diversity.

Recommendations for action

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

- the Academic Board ensures greater clarity in the articulation and operation of its policy, making explicit the minimum requirements for adherence across the University as a whole. In addition, that Academic Board ensures that there is central oversight and assurance in the operation of its Assessment Boards
- in the context of the University's key strategic initiatives, the University refines its definitions of quality assurance and quality enhancement and establishes more clearly its interpretation of the relationship between them. In doing so, the University is advised to secure an approach to improvement that is more systematic, timely and strategically driven
- the Academic Board introduces measures to secure a greater degree of critical analysis throughout its annual monitoring process, and more consistency in the annual monitoring reports from schools. This would increase the University's capacity for synthesis of key matters and thereby ensure that annual monitoring makes a more effective contribution to strategic decision-making and institution-wide implementation
- the recommendation made by the previous audit team's report of 2001 for more explicit institutional consideration of professional, statutory and regulatory body accreditation reports and the introduction of a standard procedure for responding to these is fully addressed to capture intelligence and good practice
- as identified by the 2001 audit team, the University ensures that the development and implementation of improved mechanisms for the collection, analysis and use of student feedback is addressed as a matter of priority
- the University prioritises the enhancement of management information and data analysis, builds staff capacity and maximises the benefits of systems to address the acknowledged problems with the quality of statistical data

- the University secures, and assures, an equivalence of student experience for students registered on the Joint Honours Scheme.

The audit team also recommends that the University should consider the desirability of:

- keeping under review personal support for students to ensure that the variety of personal tutoring arrangements continue to reflect their particular identified needs.

From 2004, the published information set will include the recommended summaries of external examiners' reports and of feedback from current students for each programme. The University is working towards meeting this expectation. The group established to steer the University's response to these requirements had reported and responsibility for implementation of plans is delegated to the Quality Support Office.

Outcomes of discipline audit trails

BA English; BA English Language and Literature; BA English and Drama; BA English and Film; English in the Joint Honours programme; English Language/Linguistics in the Joint Honours programme; MA English; MA English: Postmodernity and Contemporary Literature; MA English: Restoration to Romanticism; MA World Literatures; MSc Computer Based Information Systems; MSc Electronic Commerce Applications; MSc Commercial Applications; MSc Information Technology Management; MSc Intelligent Systems; MSc Internet Engineering; MSc Multimedia Systems; MSc Network Systems; MSc Software Engineering; MPharm; PgC/PgD/MSc Clinical Pharmacy; Postgraduate Diploma Pharmaceutical Sciences; MSc Medicines Management; Practice Certificate Supplementary Prescribing (Pharmacists); BSc (Hons) Psychology; Psychology in the Joint Honours programme (including specialised major in Psychological Studies); Graduate Diploma in Psychology; MSc Applied Psychological Research.

The standard of student achievement in the programmes is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), published by QAA. The quality of learning opportunities available to students is suitable for a programme of study leading to the award titles.

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 that the Agency has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The findings of the audit suggest that the University has responded appropriately to the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA.

Main report

Main report

1 This is a report of an institutional audit of the University of Sunderland (the University). The audit was undertaken during the week commencing 29 November 2004. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility for its awards.

2 The audit was carried out using a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and Universities UK (UUK), and has been endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills. 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). The scope of the audit encompassed all of the University's provision, other than collaborative arrangements, leading to its awards. The University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative arrangements in due course.

Section 1: Introduction: the University of Sunderland

The institution and its mission

4 The institution traces its origins back to the formation of the School of Science and Art in 1860 and the Municipal Technical College in 1901, which launched the first sandwich courses in England and Wales in 1903. Sunderland Polytechnic was formed in 1969 through the merger of the Technical College, the School of Arts and Design and Sunderland Teacher Training College. The Polytechnic gained university status in 1992. The University has full degree-awarding powers.

5 The University's estates strategy is to focus all its activities on two main sites: the City Centre Campus and the new Sir Tom Cowie Campus at St Peter's which has been developed in three phases from 1996. In its self-evaluation document (SED) the University states current student numbers as 18,000 or 12,250 full-time equivalent (FTE) students. Approximately 53 per cent of these study full-time and 47 per cent part-time, while for both modes of study approximately 80 per cent of students are undergraduates and 20 per cent postgraduates. Over one-third of postgraduates are international students. Approximately 1,800 students (full and part-time) study off-campus.

6 During 2001, the University undertook a comprehensive review of its business and financial position and its future academic direction. This resulted in revisions to the academic organisation of the University and the creation of five schools: Arts, Design Media and Culture; Business; Computing and Technology; Health, Natural and Social Sciences; and Education and Lifelong Learning which also incorporated the University's Joint Honours degree scheme. The five schools encompass 13 academic areas based on the potential to achieve critical mass and academic quality. Concurrently, an overall reduction of 100 staff took place with partial or total withdrawal from a number of academic areas notably engineering, modern foreign languages and geology.

7 The University has recently published its Corporate Plan 2004-05 to 2009-10. This incorporates a revised mission statement:

'The University's vision is to help make our region great, help make our city great and help all our learners to achieve and become great. If we succeed, we may then be recognised as one of a new generation of great civic universities - innovative, accessible, aspirational and outward looking - with international reach and with remarkable local impact'.

8 The University's vision is expressed in a number of strategic aims which are to:

- a provide an academic environment which encourages and draws together research, learning and teaching, and engagement with the social, professional and business communities, to underpin high quality academic provision
- b offer a range of academic programmes and a learning environment which is attractive to both UK and overseas students and which, where appropriate, recognises the requirements of employers

- c provide responsive academic and learner services which are supportive to students in their overall development and give them the best possible experience of higher education and opportunity to succeed
- d provide a University campus environment and range of facilities, both recreational and educational, which are attractive, accessible and stimulating within a long-term strategy of concentrating the University on the City Centre Campus and the Sir Tom Cowie Campus at St Peter's
- e be an exemplary provider to business and industry, offering high quality expertise to stimulate and support demand for innovative solutions, knowledge transfer and collaboration in support of economic development
- f engender a culture across the University which encourages and supports student participation in voluntary, community and employment-based opportunities including work placements and new business ventures
- g provide accessible learning opportunities for both on and off-campus students, with supportive study materials and flexible learning patterns
- h contribute to raising the educational aspirations of people in the region and encourage their greater participation in higher education
- i foster and build mutually advantageous strategic alliances with a number of local and regional partner colleges, and with other national and international partners, in order to offer a range of well supported, demand-led learning opportunities
- j provide an environment of mutual respect where staff are highly valued and feel motivated, where there are personal development opportunities, and where colleagues are able to understand and embrace the strategic aims and requirements of the University
- k work with staff, students and stakeholders to ensure avoidance of discrimination and the promotion of diversity and equality of opportunity
- l maintain financial stability, grow the range of non-public income sources supporting the University's activities, and operate cost-effectively
- m work with the City of Sunderland and other civic and regional agencies to raise the profile of the City and the north-east of England and, in partnership, help secure the economic, social and cultural regeneration of the City and the region.

Background information

9 The published information available for this audit included:

- the information on the University's website and its undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses
- the report of a quality audit in December 2000 of the University by QAA, published in June 2001
- the reports of the University's provision at subject level, published by QAA.

10 The University initially provided QAA with:

- an institutional SED
- discipline self-evaluation documents (DSEDs) for the provision selected for DATs.

11 During the audit visit, the audit team was given ready access to a range of the University's internal documents, a large number of which were provided electronically via the University's intranet, and to a range of documentation relating to the selected DATs. The latter included examples of student work.

The audit process

12 Following a meeting at the University in March 2004, QAA confirmed that four DATs would be conducted during the audit visit. The audit team's final selection of DATs included undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in: Computing; English; Pharmacy; and Psychology.

13 QAA received the institutional SED and supporting documentation in July 2004 and the DSEDs, accompanied by programme specifications, in October 2004. Both the SED and the DSEDs were written specifically for the audit.

14 The audit team visited the University from 20 to 22 October 2004 for the purpose of exploring, with the Vice-Chancellor, senior members of staff and student representatives, matters relating to the management of quality and standards raised by the SED. During this briefing visit, the team signaled a number of matters for the audit visit. At the close of the briefing visit, a programme of meetings for the audit visit was developed by the team and agreed with the University.

15 At the preliminary meeting for the audit in March 2004, the students of the University were invited, through their Students' Union (SU), to submit a student written submission (SWS) expressing views on the student experience at the University and identifying any matters of concern or commendation with respect to the quality of programmes and the standard of awards. They were also invited to give

their views on the level of representation afforded to them and on the extent to which their views were taken into account. In July 2004 the student body submitted a detailed document to QAA. The submission had been prepared on the basis of a wide range of activities initiated by the SU. Attendance at conferences, networking with other SUs and meetings with University staff sought to ensure that the SU was appropriately briefed about the process of audit. Student feedback was gathered via a web-based questionnaire, focus groups, meetings of student representatives and through committee meetings. The final submission was shared with the student population and with staff in the University and there were no matters within it that would require the audit team to treat it with any level of confidentiality greater than that normally applied to the audit process. The team is grateful to the students for preparing this valuable document to support the audit.

16 The audit visit took place from 29 November to 3 December 2004, and included further meetings with staff and students of the University, both at central level and in relation to the selected DATs. The audit team comprised Professor Brian Anderton, Professor Tony Cryer, Professor Chris Green, Professor John Simons, Professor Chris Turner, auditors, and Ms Alison Cork, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms A Christou, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Developments since the previous academic quality audit

17 The continuation audit carried out in December 2000 commended the University on four aspects: progress made in strengthening the monitoring of internal programmes; the strength of links with regional collaborative partners; commitment to the University's regional mission, particularly with respect to widening access; and the strategic and effective approach to the use of learning resources.

18 The continuation audit advised the University to consider:

- continuing to strengthen central oversight of collaborative provision, with particular attention to programmes offered in collaboration with partners overseas
- acting promptly to address its current agenda in relation to assessment, with particular attention to those matters affecting the consistency with which students are treated.

It was desirable that the University should consider:

- setting a timetable for reviewing the effectiveness of recent modifications to its committee structure
- considering further whether it has sufficient explicit institutional consideration of professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRBs) accreditation reports and standard procedures for responding to these
- specifying its minimum expectations in respect of the provision of personal tutoring, and strengthening its arrangements for monitoring provision in this area
- making mandatory training for postgraduate students undertaking teaching duties
- ensuring that its substantial commitment to gathering student feedback is put to good use and the findings disseminated and considered promptly.

19 The continuation audit report was received and considered by the Academic Board and the Quality Assurance Board (QAB). The University framed a response to the report in July 2002 through its routine procedure for quality assurance action planning. This was developed within a context of significant restructuring of the University's academic provision responding to a downturn in undergraduate recruitment and resulting financial impact. The University's response in respect of its collaborative provision will be considered by QAA in a separate audit in the near future. In relation to assessment, the University's annual regulatory review had addressed some of the concerns about consistency in the application of degree classification and treatment of extenuating circumstances. Academic Board approved a University Assessment Policy in 2002 and a revised policy on plagiarism in 2004. The University is currently introducing its Academic Strategy 2004-05 to 2009-10. The audit team confirmed that the University had revised its model assessment regulations for undergraduate programmes to provide for a consistent approach to the inclusion of level 2 assessment in the final honours classification. Some programmes had appropriate exemption from this aspect of the model regulations, for example to gain professional recognition by a PSRB.

20 For those aspects identified as desirable in the previous report, Academic Board's consultation on the effectiveness of the revised committee structure in 2002 resulted in limited change, notably in reinforcing the relationship between the QAB and the Learning Enhancement Board (LEB) through increased cross-membership and the establishment of School Learning and Teaching groups to link with

the LEB. Further developments have been the establishment of the Equality and Diversity Group and an Academic Portfolio Strategy Group (APSG) in 2003; the latter designed to provide appropriate strategic direction to the University's overall academic programme.

21 QAB receives a schedule of planned PSRB accreditation visits and summaries of the outcomes. A member of QAB attends visits and reports back to the Chair. The University is currently considering further proposals for greater central involvement in accreditation visits (see paragraphs 71- 73 below).

22 The University has preferred to continue with personal tutorial arrangements that reflect the nature of individual schools and academic areas and has recognised the role that the introduction of progress files may play, although the arrangements for their implementation have varied between schools. The audit team considered the action taken by the University and the matter is further discussed later in this report (see paragraphs 113-118 below).

23 The audit team confirmed arrangements, and their implementation, for all postgraduate students undertaking teaching duties to attend a University training programme that provides an introduction to teaching and learning for visiting lecturers.

24 The 2002 response related the issue of making good and prompt use of student feedback to the biennial student survey, and recognised the need for continuing work to overcome problems in the speed of analysis and communication of findings. The 2004 SED also recognised further work is needed towards an effective and integrated approach to gathering, analysing and responding to student feedback. The audit team saw evidence of the development of a new framework for student feedback, but this has yet to be finalised and implemented (see paragraphs 80-81 below).

25 Since the continuation audit, the University has experienced two subject reviews by QAA in Hospitality, Leisure, Recreation, Sport and Tourism, and in Politics. In each case the provision was approved. There have been academic review reports in History, Business and Management, and Applied Social Work. These resulted in outcomes of confidence in academic standards and commendable judgements in all aspects of the quality of learning opportunities. Two reviews of Foundation Degree provision involved regional collaborative partners.

Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes

The institution's view as expressed in the SED

26 The University stated in the SED that its structures and processes secure the standards of its awards through:

- formal procedures for taught programme design and approval
- formal procedures for the registration of postgraduate research programmes
- programme validation and five-yearly reviews of taught programmes involving stakeholder and peer scrutiny
- reviews of individual postgraduate research degree programmes on an annual basis
- rigorous assessment policies and procedures and standardised regulations
- the external examiner system.

27 The University assures the quality of its existing programmes by means of:

- its procedures and processes for programme validation, monitoring and review
- its use of staff, student, graduate, professional and other stakeholder feedback
- its processes for staff appointment, training and development
- its policies for pastoral and academic support to students.

28 The University's SED stated that extensive internal discussions during 2002-03 on quality assurance for taught academic programmes concluded that, overall, its academic quality processes were sound and stood up well to external scrutiny, but that these processes might be simplified in order to provide better focus. The SED itself identified areas in which the University considers itself to be working effectively:

- 'improving access and widening participation in higher education', and
- 'reach out activities involving mobilisation of academic expertise in engagement with business and the community to mutual advantage including economic and community benefits and contributing to regional regeneration'.

29 The SED identifies several areas that continue to pose challenges to the University, notably the requirement to ensure ongoing financial stability and the recurrent issue of student retention.

The institution's framework for managing quality and standards

30 Overall responsibility for management of quality and standards resides with the University's Academic Board. Academic Board discharges this responsibility through delegation to three subcommittees: the QAB, the LEB and the Research Committee (RC). In addition, the Reach-out Committee sits outside the reporting lines to Academic Board, and the APSG was introduced in 2003 to advise the University's Executive. The SED indicated that the current Academic Board committee structure is in need of further reconsideration based on the rationale that it was becoming increasingly apparent that the separation of quality assurance from quality enhancement was not appropriate. At the time of the audit visit, this review had not commenced.

31 QAB acts on behalf of Academic Board and has a remit that requires it to validate and approve taught programmes; identify and disseminate good practice relating to quality assurance activities; oversee the activities of School Quality Assurance Boards (SQABs), including Annual Monitoring reports; and approve nominations of external examiners for the University's taught programmes. LEB's remit requires it to approve individual school Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategies (LTAS); disseminates good practice to schools and monitors its application; and develops and implements measures to evaluate the effectiveness of innovations in teaching, learning and assessment practice. The interrelationship between QAB and LEB was commented on positively during the last continuation audit. They have a common chair and an element of overlapping membership. They both consider similar key issues relating to taught programmes (for example, change to the academic year and plagiarism policy) but from their relevant perspectives.

32 APSG was introduced to provide a university-level strategic direction to the development of the overall academic programme and has proved a constructive development. It is intended to generate, consider and develop ideas for new academic programmes; capture innovative ideas from staff; facilitate cross-University developments while preventing duplication and overlap; and take account of projected student demand. APSG is the mechanism through which new course proposals are given approval to progress towards validation, referred back, or rejected.

33 The SED stated that, apart from the introduction of the APSG in 2003 to consider new programme development proposals, quality assurance arrangements are broadly unchanged

since the continuation audit. The November 2003 report to QAB on school quality assurance processes recognised that, while the University sets the framework for quality assurance of taught programmes, schools have developed their own systems and processes for its implementation. The report identified areas of good practice and made recommendations designed to ensure better alignment between individual school policies and the University's framework. The audit team concluded that to improve consistency of quality assurance across schools, an aim made explicit in the November 2003 report, greater clarity is needed in the articulation and operation of University policy at institutional and school level about those aspects of regulation that are mandatory, and those where local flexibility is permissible. Examples where there was a lack of clarity included the monitoring of peer observation and the monitoring of attendance.

34 Individual schools are resource centres, take responsibility for academic development and for academic quality audit. SQABs are the locus for comprehensive reporting and analysis of all programme approval, monitoring and enhancement activities. They approve new modules and programme modifications; implement annual monitoring of taught programmes; and approve the nomination of external examiners for ratification by QAB. Schools are also required to have Learning Enhancement Groups that report to the University's LEB, SQAB and senior management team. The relationship between school LEBs (SLEBs) and SQABs varies between schools and, currently, the University does not prescribe any standard constitution or terms of reference for SLEBs. This will be subject to review as part of the Academic Board review of committee structures.

35 QAB plays a central role in the quality assurance process, and its Annual Reports to Academic Board were said by the SED to be 'the best indicators of how issues are identified, reported on and fed back to support the University's plans for the development of assurance and enhancement processes and activities'. The audit team carefully examined the operation of the annual monitoring process, working forward from Module Board and Programme Board Annual Reports, through consideration of these reports by SQABs and their synthesis into SQAB Annual Reports to QAB, and the further synthesis into QAB's Annual Report to Academic Board on Approval, Monitoring and Enhancement. It was evident that schools implemented annual monitoring in accordance with University policy, that associate deans played an important role in achieving this, and that the use of QAB representatives drawn from

other schools as part of each SQAB's annual monitoring process provided QAB with assurance that schools were operating appropriately. While acknowledging a sensible policy of selective reporting of quality assurance issues upwards with 'loops being closed' wherever possible at a local level, the team doubted whether the University's practices and procedures for annual monitoring gave the Academic Board a sufficient oversight of quality assurance. In particular, the team saw variability in the length, style and scope of SQAB annual monitoring reports, together with a relative absence of self-criticism, which would make a synthesis of quality assurance issues more difficult to achieve. The qualitative information available to support annual monitoring at school level varied considerably in the quality of minute taking at school boards and committees, a concern that the University has identified and is beginning to address. It was also clear that problems in the implementation of the University's new student records system (SITS), meant that the University did not have central oversight of the quantitative information used in annual monitoring and that schools currently generated their own quantitative data for monitoring purposes (see paragraphs 49-57 and 82-83 below).

36 The University made clear to the audit team its commitment to an approach that sets policy frameworks and principles but allows schools to undertake implementation in accordance with local needs. The team believed that this might result in the Academic Board providing insufficient guidance to schools on the articulation and operation of University policy, and in making explicit minimum requirements for adherence across the University. Indeed, the team saw some recognition of this by the University in the QAB Report to Academic Board on Approval, Monitoring and Enhancement 2003-04, where there was a suggestion that, as the new school quality officers gain in experience, 'they will be more proactive in advising, reminding and persuading programme teams to meet University requirements'. Another specific example of this general issue for the University is the uncertainty that relates to the identification of good practice and its dissemination, and when adoption is expected to be mandatory or advisory. The SED acknowledged the difficulty of making this distinction.

37 The University had developed and approved a University Assessment Policy in 2002. There are standard model assessment regulations for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and a variant of the former has been developed for Foundation Degrees. Provision exists for alternative

programme assessment regulations confined to situations that require variation, for example, to gain PSRB accreditation with a formal approval procedure. The audit team questioned how Academic Board assured itself that the relevant University assessment regulations were fully complied with at school level. The University identified the primary assurance as the chairs of examination boards and school officers. Chairs and officers receive annual training in the application of the regulations and external examiners oversee operations. In addition, informal networks would alert senior managers to problems should these arise. However, the November 2003 report to QAB noted considerable variation in who chairs assessment boards and recommended that schools have a consistent approach to chairing boards, particularly assessment boards. The team considered that current arrangements were insufficiently robust to allow Academic Board full oversight and assurance in the operation of the University's assessment boards.

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

38 The University identified quality assurance, quality management and quality enhancement as essential components of effective quality processes. Hitherto, the University had placed the strongest emphasis on quality assurance, but has indicated a wish to move towards increased emphasis on quality management and enhancement in the future accompanied by a 'lighter touch' in relation to quality assurance.

39 The University's Academic Strategy defines academic quality enhancement as the enhancement of the quality of academic delivery at all levels from Foundation Degrees to research degrees. It identifies three components:

- continuous, proactive improvement of the learning experience
- cost and time-effective management and academic management systems and processes
- appropriate and timely professional development for all who facilitate learning and support learners.

40 The University's agenda for quality enhancement includes:

- challenges posed by a diverse student intake
- increased engagement in collaborative provision and work-based delivery
- enthusing learners
- responding to new technologies and modes of delivery

- evaluation and development of evidence-based practice in teaching and learning, and dissemination of verified good practice
- greater focus on innovation, reflection and enhancement
- currency of the curriculum and the quality of its delivery
- more summative evaluation of the quality of learner experience through feedback from students, staff, graduates, employers and other stakeholders.

41 During the audit visit, the audit team saw examples of enhancement initiatives, for example, Teaching Fellowships linked to University priorities, and initiatives designed to disseminate good practice, such as school conferences. However, in its meetings with staff at various levels across the University, the team did not find a shared view of what quality enhancement means at the University. The team formed the view that staff saw quality enhancement in terms of specific projects and initiatives but not as part of an overarching strategy. The team noted that, although the University had developed and implemented learning and teaching strategies over a number of years, staff did not identify any linkage with the LTAS in articulating the University's approach to quality enhancement. The team would encourage the University to refine its definitions of quality assurance and enhancement and establish more clearly its interpretation of the relationship between them.

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

42 The processes and procedures for the approval, monitoring and review of taught programmes are set out in The University's Quality Assurance Procedures: An Outline. This document forms the introductory section to the University's electronic database of quality assurance processes and procedures. The University's view is that these are based on fairly traditional models and QAB oversees the activities of SQABs and receives, considers and acts on reports arising from the operation of the University procedures at school level.

Programme approval

43 The process of approval includes a series of steps. Consideration by the APSG, which examines the resource required and the relevant market information, is followed by consultation between the programme development team and a range of internal and external staff with relevant expertise to facilitate development of the programme. There is an expectation that external advisers will be drawn from

higher education, industry, commerce and the professions, as appropriate, with potential employers included and that a record of consultations be maintained. Full documentation developed subsequently is then submitted to the relevant SQAB for approval, normally through a subgroup, which may recommend revisions to secure compliance with University and school requirements.

44 Once approved by the SQAB the full documentation is presented to the Quality Support Unit (QSU) for scrutiny by an institutional panel. In consultation with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) (DVC (Academic)) the composition of the panel is determined so as to ensure an appropriate balance of internal and external members. Published guidelines for the approval of members steer this process. The procedure then requires the scrutiny panel, chaired by a senior academic from outside the sponsoring school, to meet with the programme development team for discussion, normally over the course of a day and includes a 'tour of resources'. The panel may then recommend approval to the DVC (Academic) if programme aims, objectives and standards can be achieved. Matters that require attention before the programme commences are also identified at this point and the programme team must respond, with SQAB approval, within six weeks. The approved response is submitted to the chair of the scrutiny panel and the DVC (Academic). If they approve the response it is submitted, together with the full programme documentation, to QAB which is authorised by Academic Board to approve the programme and agree a date for review and re-approval.

45 Where new programmes introduce new Joint Honours combinations, recently updated procedures (November 2004) require an early consultation process involving the Joint Honours Scheme (JHS). Credit-bearing short courses are required to undergo a University approval procedure involving the submission of documentation for consideration by SQAB.

46 A range of pro forma documentation supports approval of new taught programmes. These act as an aid to procedure and regulatory requirement. Guidance documentation seen by the audit team is helpful and explicit in making the necessary connections with the QAA Academic Infrastructure. Furthermore the duties and responsibilities of panel members specifically require panels to confirm articulation of new programmes with each of the stated elements of the Academic Infrastructure.

47 The audit team reviewed the approval documentation of a new programme and that of a

programme subject to major revision (MSc Multimedia Systems and MSc Clinical Pharmacy, respectively), which illustrated comprehensive adherence to approval requirements. There was clear evidence of external consultation and the use made of the Academic Infrastructure by proposers, and formal progression of proposals and panel outcomes through appropriate school and University-level committees. The recommendations of approval panels were clearly stated in their reports and the monitoring of responses made by subject teams to the relevant committees and executive authorities were clearly in line with the stated expectations of the process documents.

48 The audit team formed the view that programme approval, the approval of major changes to programmes, and the approval of module changes operated as defined in the University's procedures and was thorough and penetrating. The introduction of the APSG, and the record of its activities since inception, was considered by the team to represent a potentially important contribution to the systematic way in which the University considered proposals for new programmes.

Annual monitoring

49 The SED stated that 'annual reports are the best indicators of how issues are identified, reported on and fed back to support the University's plans for the development of assurance and enhancement processes and activities'. Guidelines on Monitoring Reports outlines the key features of annual monitoring and the mechanism through which consideration of student feedback and external examiner reports is incorporated. Review and reporting on modules is coordinated with the production of a Module Board annual monitoring report. The process is designed to be launched at the start of the academic session and is expected to be completed by early October with the report's submission to the relevant Programme Studies Board and SQAB. Programme studies boards each produce an annual monitoring report that, together with the Module Board Annual Monitoring Report are considered by a SQAB subgroup and reported on with recommendations to SQAB. SQAB submits a school annual monitoring report to the University QAB, which reviews and uses the outcomes to inform its own report and action plan to Academic Board.

50 Where Joint Honours programmes are concerned module studies boards report for each subject, to the Joint Honours Programme Studies Board. These reports are incorporated into the JHS Annual Report, informed by external examiner reports and agreed by the Programme Studies Board. The summative report is submitted to the

School of Education and Life Long Learning SQAB, which compiles an annual monitoring report to QAB. This forms part of the basis upon which QAB reports to Academic Board.

51 SQABs determine their own mechanisms for the scrutiny of annual monitoring reports and for identifying a means of disseminating outcomes to programme and module boards and, as appropriate, partner colleges. Guidelines require that the means of disseminating the response to students should be discussed with students. The schedule for the process shows report scrutiny by SQABs being undertaken in December. Two representatives of the University QAB attend school monitoring meetings. Each representative attends a sample of meetings and school quality officers provide them with an outline of the school's monitoring process and recommendations on how they may best be involved. QAB representatives report directly to QAB on the conduct of the monitoring exercise in schools.

52 University guidance represents comprehensive coverage of the areas annual monitoring might be expected to address at module and programme levels in relation to the Academic Infrastructure. At SQAB report level particularly, procedures are assured through presentation of an action plan, which articulates with the previous year's plan, the outcome of the annual monitoring process, and the identification of good practice. Reports all require assurance that external examiner reports have been addressed, their recommendations fully integrated into the monitoring process and responses made to the relevant examiners. In common with its views on programme approval the SED indicated the University's confidence in the efficacy of annual monitoring as a key component of the processes securing the quality and standards of its taught provision and awards.

53 The SED referred to a Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research and stated that the procedures and processes for registration, supervision, monitoring and examination of postgraduate research degree programmes are overseen by the Graduate Research School, reported to the RC for evaluation and subsequently reported annually to the Academic Board. RC reports for 2002-03 and 2003-04 include reference to regulatory changes; the issue, but not outcomes, of a Research Student Questionnaire; ongoing review of research training; and a survey of student numbers that illustrated a three year decline in numbers. The University's documentation of processes for maintaining the quality and standards of postgraduate research provision was unclear.

However, these were made clearer in the 2002-03 report in which procedural changes were included.

54 Through careful scrutiny of annual monitoring at all levels of operation, the audit team charted the progression of the process, confirmed that the scrutiny of external examiners' reports was a distinct feature and that student questionnaire outcomes were considered at module level. However, in a number of instances reporting from all modules was not achieved, late submission of component reports had occurred and, in the case of Joint Honours, there was an incomplete range of reporting from subject areas involved. Although not of great individual significance, these instances, taken together with the growing synoptic nature of the summative reports provided by SQABs to QAB, these omissions compounded the impression formed by the team that SQAB reports were sometimes lacking in self-critical analysis and, because of their variable nature, were not fully able to provide QAB and the Academic Board with a sufficiently comprehensive picture of the quality and standards of the totality of provision offered by the University. Thus, although it was clear that staff were operating the processes generally in line with the requirements, the expectation that the process would provide a systematic and comprehensive way for the University to identify and prioritise issues of institutional importance and to measure compliance with all policy and regulatory requirements seemed not to be borne out by the quality and refinement of the information being captured at University level.

55 Annual monitoring outcomes for the JHS formed an annex to the SQAB report provided to QAB by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning. It was noted the report was based on subject-based reports that did not necessarily highlight matters of particular relevance to students following Joint Honours programmes. As such, an opportunity to identify issues relevant to all Joint Honours students was being missed and the potential value of the report was not being realised.

56 The way in which progress from the module boards, through programme boards to the SQABs, was recorded was also variable. The audit team read a wide range of reports at institutional and discipline level and, in some cases, the value being accrued through debate and consideration of the outcomes as they arose was difficult to discern, and a deficiency has arisen in the effective recording of proceedings. The University has introduced appropriate training opportunities to relevant staff.

57 In addition to confirming that annual monitoring has taken place, and accepting the reports it receives, QAB feeds back to the QSU on detailed operational improvements and prepares a report on the quality assurance process in schools. Schools provide responses to QAB on mainly operational improvements associated with review and the treatment of external examiners' reports. From the proceedings of school level committees it is clear that QAB provides feedback and that this is the subject of further consideration by schools. There was also clear evidence that the action planning process associated with annual monitoring was operative and that reviews of actions took place regularly at module, programme and school levels. The team considered that it was much less clear that the requirement for feedback to students on the outcomes of the process was being addressed at school level through discussion with representatives or students in general. Indeed the recognition by students of their involvement in any quality assurance processes was, in general, low. The team encourages the University to ensure that the development and implementation of mechanisms for the collection, analysis and use of student feedback is addressed as a matter of urgency.

Periodic review

58 Programme review is conducted on a five-year cycle and is equivalent to the re-approval of programmes. QSU maintains the schedule and initiates discussion with relevant staff in advance of the due date for re-approval. Some delays have occurred in the five-year cycle because new programme approvals were prioritised, and because of a continued high volume of activity in this area. The programme team's outline proposals for review are submitted to the QSU. The review process is similar to programme approval but includes two additional elements. First, the institutional review approval panel meets students to discuss their experiences of the provision. Second, the programme team is required to evaluate the operation of the programme over the previous five years. Much of the guidance to programme teams, schools and university-level bodies in relation to programme approval, also applies to programme review including, for example, the roles and responsibilities of the scrutiny panel members.

59 The audit team scrutinised documentation relating to an exemplar review that also illustrated that the University procedures interface with those of external professional and statutory bodies to provide efficient operations for all parties. This illustrated compliance with statements in the SED and University guidance. The externality required of

the process both at the preparative stages and at the review panel stage was clearly identifiable and, in common with the process of new programme approval, the re-approval/review process was rigorous and penetrating. Recommendations of the review panel were taken seriously and response and adherence to the recommendations was a requirement for final approval by the review panel and approval from both SQAB and QAB, each of which received a full range of supporting documentation to allow confidence to be placed in their decision. The team concluded that the process of periodic review of programmes, as exemplified by the case provided by the University for detailed consideration, was contributing effectively to the quality and standards of programmes as claimed by the University in its SED.

External participation in internal review processes

60 University procedures for programme development, approval and review all require input from staff external to the University. Selection and nomination of external participants is subject to specific guidance and is undertaken formally by the DVC (Academic). The audit team found that not only were external persons appointed from appropriate quarters using the formally defined procedures, but that their involvement was demonstrable. Through approval and review documentation, and through the audit team's discussions with students and staff in the DATs, it was clear that the University gained from the externality inherent in its systems and that external involvement benefited the design and relevance of its programmes.

External examiners and their reports

61 In its SED, the University indicated the long-standing nature of its external examiner processes, improvements that have been made and the confidence it places in external examiners reports as a major platform for the assurance of the standards of its awards.

62 Nominations of external examiners for taught programmes are made subject to explicit criteria in Factors Governing the Appointment of External Examiners (2000). They are considered by SQABs in accordance with guidelines and requirements agreed by the University QAB and then forwarded to the QSU together with a record of the boards' discussion for subsequent appointment by the University QAB on behalf of Academic Board. Appointment of external examiners for postgraduate

research degrees is considered by the RC on the recommendation of supervisors who are advised by Notes of Guidance (2004) - Panels for the selection of Examiner (Research degrees). The audit team's consideration of minutes at all levels confirmed that such deliberation is given and that schools adhere to the stated requirements.

63 The SED claimed that the induction process has been enhanced to secure more consistent and comprehensive practice through information and guidance on examiners' roles for both module and programme assessment boards. The Roles and Responsibilities of External Examiners at the University of Sunderland, inter alia, informs examiners of the University's expectations for reporting, clarifies their terms of reference in relation to module and/or programme assessment boards and the requirement that new examiners attend an induction session. An induction pack provides comprehensive information, complemented by both strategic and regulatory documentation, specifically either the Review of Undergraduate External Examiner Reports for the previous year, or the Review (2000-02) relating to Postgraduate External Examiner Reports. External examiners are informed about what they may expect to receive from the relevant Assessment Board(s) and are told how the boards operate. The value placed on University-led induction sessions was evident to the audit team from a number of external examiners' reports.

64 Reports are made using a standard template which requires comprehensive responses relating directly to the assurance of standards: conduct of assessments; the determination of awards; issues of the level of challenge; students' performance; programme structure and support; and the support provided to the examiner by the University and the School. Reports provide a means whereby external examiners may comment on the implementation of the University's assessment policies. The audit team concluded that the context in which external examiners' work adheres to the precepts of the relevant section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA.

65 External examiners for taught programmes submit their reports centrally to the QSU. Reports are then forwarded to the relevant schools, but are also scrutinised by the DVC (Academic) to facilitate early identification of, and rapid response to, any urgent problems. That such a scrutiny takes place was evidenced to the audit team by annotations to reports and, in significant cases, by the letters exchanged between the DVC (Academic) and

relevant deans. Schools respond to individual external examiners concerning actions taken as part of the annual monitoring process. Central scrutiny also allows identification and collation of university-wide issues, or issues that may have university-wide implications. This central process results in a summary Review of External Examiners' Reports considered by the University QAB and Academic Board. The final report is shared with staff and external examiners. The 2002-03 report included information arising from the reports of 111 examiners, received by the University by 31 January 2004. The overview document revealed revision and refinement of the external examiner report form and that at the time of writing (post-31 January 2004) 16 examiners had failed to submit a report for the 2002-03 academic session. The overview of External Examiner Reports for Postgraduate Programmes (September 2000 - February 2002) is equivalent in structure and references aspects of the previous overview report particularly where improvements are perceived to have occurred.

66 The audit team accessed a wide range of external examiners' reports, supporting documentation relating to appointment, induction, ongoing contact, and how reports were considered at local and university level. The team confirmed that external examiners returned helpful reports, adhering to the requirements of the University. It was also clear from annual monitoring and other documentation that schools dealt appropriately with the reports and responded to them in a thoughtful manner. The records of programme assessment boards illustrated the full engagement of examiners in the assessment process both during the board meetings and throughout the session. The University made effective use of external examiners in summative assessment procedures. Input was taken seriously, acted upon conscientiously, and taken forward through the programme monitoring procedure.

External reference points

67 Reference to the QAA Academic Infrastructure is embedded in the University policy and practice. The SED stated that as external changes occur 'the challenge is to ensure that activities and actions that derive from the oversight of these systems are sufficiently reflective and responsive to preserve and enhance processes, quality and standards'. This was exemplified in three ways: through consideration by QAB of feedback on approval and review events; through receipt and consideration by QAB of 'all documentation related to external quality assurance and enhancement requirements'; and the

opportunity to 'streamline documentation requirements'. The SED noted that the minutes and reports of QAB record issues debated including the introduction of elements of the QAA *Code of practice*, and gave as examples, the introduction of requirements regarding learning outcomes; module descriptors; the use to be made of subject benchmarks; and the FHEQ. Over time these had been incorporated into guidance for subject teams. The audit team saw much evidence to support the assertion that the Academic Infrastructure is debated, discussed and reviewed within the University's deliberative structures against University structures and processes. For example, the report from the QAB to Academic Board on Approval, Monitoring and Enhancement for 2001-02 makes reference to the implications of, what were then, new processes for external review at subject and institutional level. The report recognised that minor modifications may be needed to make some aspects more explicit and better evidenced, for example, student feedback.

68 The 2002-03 report to Academic Board records that all programme teams use the FHEQ and relevant subject benchmark statements when developing programmes. Difficulty in implementing change is acknowledged, for example, 'staff have sometimes been unwilling to produce these (programme) specifications because of perceived duplication'. The 2002-03 report to Academic Board records that all programme teams 'now use the QAA Framework for Qualifications in HE and relevant subject benchmarks when developing programme documentation'. The difficulties experienced by some multidisciplinary programmes where a number of subject benchmarks are used is also referenced in the report 2003-04, although, in general, programme teams were reported as '...now well versed in the use of QAA FHEQ and subject benchmark statements to review and develop their programmes'.

69 The QAB Annual Report for 2001-02 stated that those sections of the *Code of practice* related to Recruitment and Admissions, and Career Education Information and Guidance (CEIG) were considered by QAB, and while it believed that the University's practice in respect to the former met the intended effects of the *Code*, it reported that 'some further action was needed on the requirement for a formal procedure for interviewing applicants and the need to publish the complaints procedure relating to applications'. The LEB formally considered the latter, and the response and guidelines noted by QAB. The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Action Plan 2002-03 noted the production of a policy on the CEIG section of the *Code*; an implementation

strategy developed and 'a programme of staff development to support future curriculum developments in careers education, information and guidance designed'.

70 The audit team found that the University is making appropriate use of the QAA Academic Infrastructure including the *Code of practice*, FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and other external reference points including the requirements of PSRBs.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

71 The SED commented on the reports of the seven most recent QAA reviews, all of which concluded that the quality of provision and academic standards were approved. The SED also referred to the outcomes of its Ofsted inspections 'making the institution the best provider of Initial Teacher Education in the region, and one of the better providers nationally'.

72 The previous audit team urged the University to give further consideration to PSRB accreditation. In the 2002 response, the University described the QAB's reporting arrangements to Academic Board. QAB acts on behalf of the Academic Board to undertake five functions. One of these is to 'validate and approve taught programmes of study and agree arrangements for the monitoring and review of such programmes within approved policies, procedures and programmes, in consultation with, and acting with, as appropriate, external approving and accrediting agencies'. This function is illustrated in annual reports to Academic Board where, inter alia, QAB 'addresses the processes and outcomes of assessment and review by external and accrediting bodies'. The most recent annual report gives examples of where representation from PSRBs on the University review panel has enabled the approval or review process to meet the requirements of the relevant PSRB.

73 Through the DAT investigations, the audit team noted that Computing, Pharmacy and Psychology made reference to accrediting PSRBs in their programme specifications and made clear how the programmes articulated with the requirements of the PSRB. The team noted the actions that had been taken as a result of PSRB requirements. The University's Procedure for Accreditation by Professional and Statutory Bodies, August 2004 indicated that the QAB is currently considering further proposals for greater central involvement in accreditation visits. However, the audit team could find no evidence that reports from PSRBs are

received by QAB and also, in noting the institution's recognition that the quality of minutes is variable, advises that a more systematic digest of data is needed, and that the recommendation made by the previous team in its report of 2001 for greater institutional consideration of PSRB accreditation reports, and responses to them, is fully addressed to capture intelligence and good practice.

Student representation at operational and institutional level

74 The SED acknowledged that the University was continuing to seek ways to achieve comprehensive student representation and involvement at all levels in accordance with a framework that makes provision for student representation on all of its central committees (with the exception of the Reach-out Committee), on all SQABs and on programme and module studies boards. Student representatives on central committees are nominated by the SU and are generally members of the SU Executive. Student representation on the RC is achieved by the election of research students nominated by research degree students. There are regular meetings between the University and the SU Executives, and SU Executive attendance at University senior staff meetings and conferences to discuss major strategic issues.

75 At school level, there is student membership of the SQAB and SLEB, although the SED stated that review of this was needed in the light of particular difficulties in securing representation. Student representatives on these boards automatically qualify for membership of the SU organised Students' Council. Students are elected to module and programme boards, where membership of at least two students on each can be increased at the discretion of individual schools.

76 The SED stated that the University has always taken the view that major initiatives, which affect students, should be considered with the direct involvement and participation of student representatives. Examples given included the University's Student Charter and the development of campus-based learner support. Meetings with students and SU representatives confirmed that students had been consulted on proposals to change the structure of the academic year through committee representation.

77 The SED gave examples where student representation and participation at institutional and school level had been reviewed to ensure it was optimised including close consultation between the SU and the University and the designation of a SU

Student Representative Coordinator to actively promote student representation. The Union's Student Volunteer Scheme is certificated jointly by the SU and University. At school level, closer working between the SU, programme leaders and School Administrator has focused on a number of steps to increase participation including wider promotion of student representation and associated training opportunities. The SED also made reference to the less formal opportunities that exist for raising concerns, and the role played by students in the annual monitoring process and periodic review of taught programmes.

78 While acknowledging the difficulties inherent in securing comprehensive student representation, the SED identified two related challenges. First, securing cohort views on programmes and modules (other than those which are collected via module/programme questionnaire) and, second, feeding back to students the outcomes of feedback questionnaires and student representatives' contributions to meetings. The SWS reported on evidence from focus group respondents who did not know who their student representative was. Despite this, student representatives who participated in the audit visit through DATs gave the audit team examples of where module or programme teams had responded to their comments. The team noted that it was difficult to ascertain the pattern of student attendance at meetings because the status of those present was not always recorded, and this was particularly evident at the Joint Honours Programme Board of Studies. The team encourages the University to secure more comprehensive participation in representative structures to facilitate more effective feedback to students.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

79 The SED stated that if the University 'is to meet the key objectives defined in the University's Academic Strategy it needs to maximise its use of performance measures in order to assess its progress on a continuing basis'. The SED acknowledged that the University has some way to go before a complete and regularised set of systems could be said to be in place. It further identified what is required in the form of a coordinating framework based on a number of principles and levels. It locates the level where feedback is obtained, and identifies the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that the framework is implemented effectively, and appropriate action is taken on student feedback, with the DVC (Academic), aided by the QAB, RC and Executive Board.

80 The University collects information from students on taught programmes through a biennial university-wide questionnaire, most recently in 2002-03. Data are used for institutional-level analyses to provide comparisons between programmes, academic areas and support services. A separate questionnaire is delivered periodically to students on postgraduate research degree programmes. The SED referred to survey outcomes in 2002-03 that identified strengths and areas for improvement and stated 'more critical comments were reserved for issues which have been identified as central to the achievement of the University's strategic objectives'. It identified as examples five areas for further action including: opportunities for students to give feedback; the need for more feedback to students on action taken; quality of feedback on assessed work, including written examinations; opportunities to influence curriculum delivery and learning opportunities; and availability and accessibility of personal tutors and administrative staff support. The audit team concluded that some of these issues are still live and these were reiterated in the Framework for Student Feedback (2004) that is being 'progressively implemented'. The document confirms that there are 'significant amounts of feedback gathered from students' collected through a variety of means at module, programme and university level as well as for some central services. It states 'notwithstanding this comprehensive assessment of student opinion, institutional student questionnaires have shown that there is concern by students over student feedback mechanisms'. Four particular concerns are identified including: no robust methods to inform students of action taken; insufficient detailed analysis of the data generated, particularly at the level of academic area and school; analysis that is not fed upwards through University lines of accountability and through the academic committee system; and a lack of evaluation of the effectiveness of action taken in response to student feedback.

81 The SED acknowledged the need for 'effective, coordinated frameworks which facilitate the capture of information and enhance the ability of the University to act upon it with confidence', and 'appropriate mechanisms whereby graduates, employers and other professional stakeholders are provided with a University response'. However, noting that the framework has yet to be implemented, there has been little tangible progress regarding student feedback since the previous audit team's report of 2001. The audit team advises the University to secure the development and implementation of improved mechanisms for the collection, analysis, use of student feedback and communication of outcomes to students.

Progression and completion statistics

82 At local level, information is presented in raw and complex forms and local annual monitoring reports seen by the audit team were characterised by an absence of detailed analysis of statistical data and, therefore, must be seen as less effective than they might otherwise be, in informing the University about the specificity and location of progression and completion challenges and, therefore, about what action might be taken across the institution to draw together local initiatives. At the programme level there was obvious evidence of a desire to investigate specific phenomena (for example, the comparative achievement, progression and completion of part and full-time students) but these were frustrated by the intractability of the information provided centrally.

83 Local groups attempted to put together usable data manually. However, the relatively informal nature of these processes and initiatives made them significantly less effective than if they were informed by more solid information from central sources. For example, the view that some progression figures might be depressed by the widening participation agenda (in that students were admitted with relatively low qualifications) is not possible to confirm or deny, based on the information available locally. The result of these uncertainties is that annual monitoring reports do not always reflect critically on implications drawn from statistical data and this reduces their effectiveness as tools by which the University is assured that its standards are being appropriately monitored at the local level.

84 Discussions by the audit team with staff revealed that although systems were in place for attendance monitoring, and the University saw attendance as an important factor in progression and completion, there was inconsistency in monitoring practices. Additionally, a more consistent approach to tracking student movement from group to group is needed. Omission of Joint Honours and part-time students from module lists aggravated difficulties in tracking and recording progression.

85 The University acknowledges that it has a serious problem with progression and completion and that this is having an impact on several different areas of the University's academic portfolio. The information that would assist the University in understanding, locating and addressing this problem is not available in easily usable forms, especially at the programme level where, arguably, the most effective steps could be taken in response to identified problems.

86 At least three groups have met to look at the issue and the University has developed both a sophisticated grasp of the root causes of the retention problem and policy and plans to address them. However, a lack of easily accessible and usable data means that it has proved difficult to develop either a set of actions linked to institutional-level policy or sufficient local initiatives to empower programme teams to address retention where this is perceived as having a specific effect on a programme.

87 There is obvious evidence of deep and wide consultation in which staff at different levels confirmed their involvement. Steps are also being taken by the University to enhance staff resources and to acquire new reporting tools. However, the University's procurement and implementation of new management information systems has not been able to achieve the desired level of progress. The University is advised to secure comprehensive oversight of its statistical data in the context of monitoring completion and progression statistics, both globally and programme by programme, to further assure itself of its ability to act on indications that standards might be at risk.

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

88 In its SED, the University emphasised 'the need for academic staff appointment and promotion procedures to be based explicitly on the aim of enhancing quality across the whole range of academic activity in the member of staff's specialism'. Examination by the audit team of the University's Fair Recruitment and Selection Policy and discussions with academic staff during the DATs concluded that this ambition is largely being met.

89 The University's appointment procedure includes provision for representation on interview panels from outside the appointing school, as well as the use of subject specialists and external reference points. The University has instituted the Fair Recruitment and Selection procedure alongside a related training programme for staff on interview panels. The University's induction and probation scheme has been recently reviewed and newly appointed staff met by the team were able to reflect positively on the process.

90 In its SED, the University described its Developmental Appraisal Scheme for Academic Staff which focuses on the construction of personal development plans for each of the three areas of academic activity: teaching, research and reach-out. The University intends to develop this approach by

exploring ways in which reach-out plans and strategies can be better recorded, monitored and reviewed. Formal documentation for the scheme makes clear that this process addresses all three strands and discussions with staff in DAT meetings confirms that the process is well understood and implemented.

91 The University reflected in its SED that the incentivisation of pay structures is a high priority but recognised that no progress has been made. It stated that the role of Programme Leader 'can be undervalued and often ambiguous'. The University will be giving attention to this matter in its future planning, and it intends to review and further develop its Human Resources Strategy during the 2005-06 academic year. The audit team saw evidence that some progress is being made in this area and that the role is becoming better understood and valued.

92 New criteria for the appointment of professors and principal lecturers specifically identify criteria in both pedagogic practice and business and community engagement. The audit team found that these are well disseminated and have clearly made a positive difference to staff perceptions of the promotion process.

93 The audit team found that appointment, probation, induction, and promotion systems were well known and supported and there was recognition that many new processes were working effectively.

Assurance of quality of teaching through staff support and development

94 The University has Investor in People (IiP) accreditation and has adopted the continuous IiP assessment methodology. Its Rewarding and Developing Staff in Higher Education submission to the HEFCE resulted in some £4.4 million investment in strategies including recruitment and retention; future strategic change; equal opportunities; reviews of staffing needs; performance reviews; and addressing poor performance. This funding has been used for specific activities such as on-line learning material production, developments in the postgraduate programme in teaching and learning, as well as specific staff appointments in the area of staff development activities. Documentation made available to the audit team indicated that, by May 2004, 160 staff had registered for on-line learning.

95 The SED explained that planning and production of its staff development programme are informed by the outcome of annual academic appraisal and by institutional-level planning processes. The annual Staff Development Programme Handbook contains a collection of some

137 separate training programmes accessed via an email booking system that can be searched on the University intranet. Academic staff made good use of the courses in the programme.

96 Teaching Fellowships have been awarded since 1995 using criteria similar to those of the National Fellowship Scheme. Teaching fellows are seconded into the Learning and Development Services for up to two days a week to support projects that realise objectives identified in the University's LTAS. The audit team learnt that these Fellowships have had a positive impact on various parts of the University in areas such as e-learning, student wastage, international student support and progress files, and were provided with various examples of Teaching, Reach-Out and Community Fellowships in discussions with staff.

97 The SED stated that the University has paid the processing fee for staff joining the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHe) and continues this support through funding of the Higher Education Academy. Staff confirmed that the University had hosted two regional workshops for the ILTHE and had hosted Learning and Teaching Support Network subject centre workshops. Staff development is also supported at local level through school conferences. The University had also been a successful lead or partner in the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning bids with other universities in media and biological sciences.

98 The University Peer Review of Teaching scheme's primary aim is 'to enhance the student's learning experience by encouraging staff to reflect on their teaching'. Guidelines require that peer review should be used by all teaching staff to encourage reflection rather than as a judgemental process to inform appraisal. It is not yet possible for the University to clearly monitor the numbers of staff who have made use of the scheme to measure its performance against its ambition; some schools were clearly monitoring the process at a generic level, others were leaving it to individual academic areas that seemed not to be undertaking any monitoring. Similarly, the process of peer observation varied between schools and subjects, with some innovative practice taking place in some schools. Discussions with staff in the University suggested that there was variety between and within schools on this matter, with the vocabulary of reporting forms using both Observation and Review as legitimate terms.

99 The audit team found that the University's claim of progress in making peer review of teaching a more widespread and regular practice than once had been

the case is supported to a limited extent. However, the University's ambition that all lecturers will have their teaching observed by peers at least once a year by October 2004 is not evidenced. The scheme has been supported by staff development activity, and discussions with staff in DAT meetings confirmed that peer review is indeed taking place in some areas and is proving effective in improving and supporting learning and teaching. However, the team found that the application of peer review is patchy and that, in some cases, it has not yet been fully implemented within even an entire academic area.

100 The School of Education and Lifelong Learning, in conjunction with Learning Development Services, leads and supports the new Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (PgCTLHE), to be submitted for accreditation by the Higher Education Academy in May 2005. Its predecessor, the CertEd HE was accredited by ILTHE. An Introduction to Teaching and Learning programme for visiting lecturers is provided. These are made available through the University Staff Development Programme. A short Academic Orientation programme for new academic staff is mandatory, and the audit team was able to verify that newly appointed staff were taking part in the Programme. The one year part-time PgCTLHE is now mandatory for newly appointed academic staff with no previous experience of teaching in higher education. Newly appointed staff with whom the team met confirmed this.

Learning support resources

101 The SED identified the key strategic objectives for academic guidance and student learning support as those emerging from the LTAS. Evaluation of the contribution of strategic planning to the achievement of objectives was made against the key objectives in the Academic Strategy to provide a high-quality experience for all members of the academic learning community; and provide high-quality learner support. Two further objectives deriving both from the LTAS and from the Information Systems/Information Technology Strategy were identified as essential to building a high quality learning and support environment, that is, campus-based learner support and the e-environment. The main focus of the University's strategy is the provision of a more integrated and seamless learning support environment that encourages students to take more responsibility for their learning.

102 The University has recently made a major investment in learning resources at the Sir Tom Cowie Campus. Staff met by the audit team were broadly

positive about the quality of the provision that demonstrates commitment to learner support. At the same time, the University acknowledges that there are some issues still to be resolved in embedding the two-campus strategy and is taking action. Students met by the audit team offered a slightly more mixed view but this tended to reflect the issues that the University had itself identified and is seeking to address. Students acknowledged the high quality of the new resources. They further pointed to the value and quality of the virtual learning environment (VLE) support and delivery systems that are an important feature of the University's strategy of moving towards enhanced learner support.

103 Postgraduate research students were extremely positive about the resources available and it was clear that they feel exceptionally well supported. Undergraduate students met by the audit team pointed to some difficulties created by the split site, for example, the transfer of journal holdings to the Chester Road Library resulting in interruption of research and preparation for course work, lack of availability of a photocopying card top-up facility in the Hutton Library that meant journeys between sites could be wasted. Joint Honours students claimed that a lack of coordination in timetabling between their subjects could mean that they had, on occasion, an impossible task in attending classes where these were located on different sites in adjacent slots. This was acknowledged to the team by staff who indicated that there was increasing consultation between subjects to resolve this issue. Nonetheless this appeared to be a significant barrier for Joint Honours students who were uniformly vociferous in identifying it as an area for urgent attention.

104 It is clear that the University has developed a strong suite of learning support resources and these have been regularly commended in external review at the subject level. A genuine attempt to respond to user feedback and to seek to make improvements where these were possible was evidenced. Currently, improvements include an extension of opening hours, the development of more flexible access to specific clusters of ICT hardware, and an intention to invest in more on-line resources and e-journals. Another area of strength was the high quality and proactive support provided by technical staff in areas requiring practical or laboratory sessions.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

105 The main driver in the University's approach to academic guidance is its Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy reflected at school level through local strategies. The University sees this aspect of its

provision as a priority and has been recognised by the funding council as exhibiting good practice in two areas, the LTAS and establishment of LEB. In addition, evidence from QAA review between 1997 and 2001 shows a record of maximum scores or commendations in the relevant aspects.

106 On the basis of the review of student work, the audit team concluded that at the programme level staff were conscientious and committed in the support of students in modules. Students acknowledged this. There was, however, a major difficulty where Joint Honours students were concerned. This did not affect their individual interactions with staff but their status as Joint Honours students meant that, in their view, they were excluded from full access to academic guidance. For example, it appeared that Joint Honours students did not automatically receive induction materials, they were not always invited to briefing events about future module choice and, because they did not automatically appear on lists, they were not always assigned to module groups. Part-time Joint Honours students described some poor levels of communication. These issues were communicated very strongly in the institutional student questionnaire where students in the Joint Honours cohort reflected these concerns offering a picture of a group that exhibits significant uncertainty about what level of support is available.

107 One particular issue that will affect Joint Honours students in the future is the differential adoption of the move from a semester-based modular structure to a structure based on terms. The decision to permit differences between schools and programmes may well exacerbate rather than alleviate the issues that this group raises. The University is advised to secure and assure an equivalence of experience for students registered on the JHS.

108 The University offers a full suite of centrally based learning support facilities. These include support for study skills, numeracy, WebCT (delivered through a central Learning Development Services and also subject to considerable enhancement-oriented consideration at school level), financial guidance, help with disability and specific learning difficulties (recognised as a strength by students), careers, health and welfare, counselling and chaplaincy services. Current plans are ongoing to offer a higher degree of integration in these support services through a one-stop shop in the Edinburgh building while retaining, as part of the two-campus strategy, access to these services elsewhere and web-based frequently asked questions (FAQ), self-referral and appointment facilities. Students praised these central services both

in terms of the help and support they provided and in terms of their accessibility. Plans to develop the one-stop shop should further enhance the good work done in these areas.

109 Documentation and materials provided the audit team with evidence of improving practice in, for example, the induction to library and learning resources and the development of study skills support, although here it appeared that there was not yet a fully developed system to share good practice across schools and programmes. The staged introduction and development of personal progress files provided a new mechanism to bind students into the academic support and guidance available through their programme staff.

110 Procedures for the identification of students with special needs, either physical challenges or specific learning difficulties, and the subsequent development of support for those students drew very positive comment from both staff and students. There was evidence that central services are well integrated with schools and programmes to ensure that the academic experience of students in these groups is supported and is to the fore of the University's effort to ensure that it manages the diversity of its intake in the most appropriate ways.

111 Overseas students are offered specific support and the University had used its teaching fellowship scheme to explore the particular issues affecting this group to design and implement mechanisms for supporting them. This supplements the work of the Centre for International Education, which is a central location for a wide range of support for this cohort. An overseas prospectus is published in both English and Chinese.

112 Although the arrangements for the academic guidance of students did appear to reflect the claims made in the SED, there was also evidence of variation of practice between schools and programmes and this had a particular impact on the large cohort of Joint Honours students. The University does exercise oversight of the entire process of academic guidance through the structure of the LEBs but the apparent local variation might require further scrutiny to ensure that an equivalence of experience is not compromised by what in themselves might be perfectly appropriate local approaches.

Personal support and guidance

113 The University does not specify a minimum entitlement for personal tutorial support beyond committing itself to provide each student with a personal tutor. There is no specific statement of minimum entitlement in the Student Charter and

the Research Student Handbook which are, in themselves, helpful documents. At local level, programmes have developed their own entitlement models but the evidence available to the audit team is that, as in many institutions, students tend to conflate academic and personal guidance and use their academic tutors for the full range of personal support. Generally, each undergraduate has a personal tutor at levels 1 and 2, and a level tutor at level 3 while, for taught postgraduates, programme leaders perform the personal tutorial role for the whole, usually relatively small, cohort.

114 Students on the Joint Honours programme have a different arrangement and the Joint Honours programme team provides personal tutorial support. This creates a number of difficulties. The first is that on current numbers the programme team has to act as personal tutors for an average of between 170 and 180 students each. The second is that the dissociation of the Joint Honours support system from the schools and programmes in which the modules are based means that some Joint Honours students met by the audit team were unaware that personal tutorial support was available to them. The third is that where the Joint Honours students did know that such support was available, the dispersal of the support function through a team created a perceived lack of continuity in support and a depersonalisation of the tutorial function. In July 2004, the Joint Honours team carried out a review of the arrangements for the revised personal tutoring of Joint Honours students implemented in 2003-04, but at the time of the visit this was unavailable.

115 Some of the small number of Joint Honours students who responded to the Joint Honours programme questionnaire cited personal tutorial arrangements as an issue, and Joint Honours students do seem to have significantly less chance of getting a First class award and significantly more chance of getting an Unclassified degree than their colleagues on other programmes. In 2002-03, for example, the University recorded 8.9 per cent First class candidates (2 per cent in the JH cohort) and 2.9 per cent Unclassified candidates (7.3 per cent in the JH cohort). The University does acknowledge an historic problem with achievement patterns on Joint Honours degrees but it might consider if this apparent lack of equivalence of achievement between different cohorts on equivalent awards might result in part from the personal support arrangements offered to Joint Honours students and their experience of these arrangements. It is also acknowledged by staff that where different grading

cultures exist students may be at a disadvantage and this might especially affect Joint Honours students.

116 The new developments around personal progress files are designed to enhance the personal tutorial function by providing a structured approach to meetings between students and personal tutors. The evidence was that this was being taken up variably and that variations in the implementation of the personal progress files between programmes and schools could mean that the effect of the scheme would be different from one academic area to another although there are clear implementation requirements.

117 Students are well supported in careers advice where they have a clear statement of entitlement supported by policy that is integrated into the institutional LTAS and the relevant section of the *Code of practice*.

118 With the exception of the evidence relating to Joint Honours programmes the arrangements for personal support seemed to work well even in the absence of a minimum entitlement, although students did not take full advantage of the opportunities offered by a personal tutor. The increasing use of progress files to develop a more formal relationship between the personal tutor and the student's programme may work gradually to improve this situation. It would be desirable for the University to ensure that it keeps under review personal support for students to ensure that the variety of personal tutoring arrangements continue to reflect their particular identified needs.

Collaborative provision

119 The University has collaborative arrangements with organisations in 30 countries and with 56 UK institutions. Specific guidelines, given as part of the web document database, are provided for monitoring of programmes delivered in collaboration with UK and overseas partners. These guidelines are presented according to the five models of collaboration recognised by the University, with monitoring reports for local franchised provision being submitted directly to schools for consideration by relevant programme boards and SQAB. The University is scheduled to have a separate collaborative audit in the near future in which the range and scope of teaching delivered through collaborative and distributed methods and the management of academic standards and quality of these awards will be considered.

Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline trails

Discipline audit trails

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

English

BA English; BA English Language and Literature; BA English and Drama; BA English and Film; English in the Joint Honours programme; English Language/Linguistics in the Joint Honours programme; MA English; MA English: Postmodernity and Contemporary Literature; MA English: Restoration to Romanticism; MA World Literatures.

121 The DSED for this DAT had been produced specifically for the purpose of the audit. The audit team was shown a full range of well-constructed programme specifications that showed evidence of engagement with the Academic Infrastructure, especially in regard to the FHEQ and the relevant subject benchmark statement. They demonstrated that the programme team had engaged critically and productively with these documents in the development of appropriate levels of achievement related to learning outcomes. In terms of curriculum development the range of topics offered reflected the advice given in the benchmark statement, while growing out of the specific strength of the programme teams and the specific needs of the Sunderland students.

122 Progression and completion data, although available, was not a strong point of the document and reflected the more general institutional problem in providing programme teams with usable management information. The audit team saw a significant pack of data provided to staff to inform annual monitoring but it was difficult to see how the programme team might have used this to inform themselves about underlying trends that might or might not be affecting student progress. Indeed, it was observed in the meeting with the team that better information on, for example, the comparative performance of students with different statuses would have been welcome and would have been used to help staff understand how best they might enhance the student experience in certain areas.

123 The audit team saw evidence of programme review and followed validation processes through from initial planning to final approval. Systems were robust and well founded and staff had, through these systems, the capacity to keep a firm hold on the standards of their awards. External examiners' reports were followed up through formal responses. One report did allude to some problems but the evidence available to the team showed that not only had these been addressed, but, that the English staff had enacted the procedures to guard against ambiguities in the future.

124 The audit team explored the CEIG section of the QAA *Code of practice* with staff and saw evidence that the newly developed progress files are being used, and will be further developed, to help students frame initial career trajectories. In addition, use is made of programme notice boards and student handbooks to develop student engagement with careers. This local work is underpinned by central institutional careers support and guidance, which was praised by students, and by regional initiatives that offer tailored support to students at the University.

125 Assessment strategies and policies were clearly related to the relevant institutional policies. The audit team saw a wide range of assessed student work that incorporated modules from various programmes and from all levels, including dissertations from taught postgraduate programmes. Student work is scrupulously marked in accordance with clear expectations regarding attainment levels, and written feedback is helpful and tailored both to the level required and to the specified learning outcomes for the particular assessment task.

126 In addition to the assessed work, the audit team saw a related range of programme and module handbooks. These were never less than appropriate and, in some cases, demonstrated innovative and imaginative approaches to this aspect of student support. Consistent attention was paid to ensuring handbooks were useful to students and that they could, in themselves, be used as adjuncts or supplements to guide learning on individual modules. Learning outcomes and assessment criteria (both generic and specific to individual tasks and modules) were clearly expressed and students were unanimous in their view that they understood clearly what was required of them. They saw these requirements reflected both in the design of particular assessments and in the feedback offered.

127 Students met by the audit team spoke positively about the learning resources available and about the support offered by English staff and by central

services. Single honours students were clear about personal tutorial arrangements and confirmed these were functioning well and that the new progress files were working to encourage first-year students to make more use of their tutors. Staff acknowledged that there was still work to be done here to increase engagement. The split site did create some problems for Joint Honours students who were also less confident in the arrangements for personal tutorial support.

128 There was general agreement among students that they knew who their representatives were, although the arrangements for electing representatives were ad hoc and reflected difficulties in engendering student participation in representative roles. There were several systems used to enable representatives to communicate with their constituencies, and students confirmed that they were content that issues raised were dealt with. The audit team saw examples of the feedback collected for each module and students confirmed that they were aware that feedback is acted upon.

129 The audit team confirmed that the quality of learning opportunities was suitable for the range of programmes of study leading to the named awards and that these were appropriately located within the FHEQ. The strength of the research underpinning for the curriculum and the evidence of engagement with, and critical self-reflection on, institutional issues such as the development of progress files, assessment regulations and peer observation of teaching shown by the English team were particularly worthy of comment.

Computing

MSc Computer Based Information Systems; MSc Electronic Commerce Applications; MSc Commercial Applications; MSc Information Technology Management; MSc Intelligent Systems; MSc Internet Engineering; MSc Multimedia Systems; MSc Network Systems; MSc Software Engineering.

130 The suite of programmes selected for the DAT reflected a range of stages within the cycle of approval and review. Three were longstanding provision, four had been developed more recently and two were approved in 2004. Four programmes were approaching institutional periodic review in 2004-05. As such, the range of programmes within the scope of the DAT provided appropriate opportunities to explore the University's quality assurance mechanisms. The DSED was written specially for the audit but was supported by existing Definitive Course Documents for each of the nine programmes, all of which contained programme specifications.

131 Despite a useful set of Guidelines to the Preparation of Programme Specifications, only some of the more recent programme specifications made reference to the FHEQ; the *Subject benchmark statement* for computing was referenced in some Definitive Course Documents and the DSED. However, the process for new programme approval at school level specifically identified elements of the Academic Infrastructure as items for discussion.

132 Annual monitoring reports from the programmes made no coherent use of progression and completion data, although a separate spreadsheet was available as supporting documentation for the audit team; the University's management information requirements for monitoring is an area identified by the University for further development and improvement and this is evident throughout the DAT. There was thus in both the DSED and in annual monitoring reports a paucity of progression and completion data; it was less than easy to see the use of data to monitor standards and quality.

133 Individual module and programme annual monitoring reports contained sufficient detail to secure confidence that annual monitoring was taking place according to expectations. Student feedback was very evident through the use of questionnaires, and there was clearly external examiner and student input into both module and programme boards of study. It was less clear, however, that the SQAB annual monitoring report contained sufficient detail on its own to allow the University QAB to rigorously monitor progress in the computing discipline area.

134 External examiners' reports were scrutinised at programme level and contribute to annual monitoring. The School of Computing and Technology QAB addressed issues raised and communicated formally with external examiners regarding both process and outcomes. It was evident from minutes of programme boards that apposite responses were made to external examiners. External examiners' reports are in the main complimentary about the master's programmes and it is evident that standards are being met. Indeed, it is apparent that the University regulations for the Award of Distinctions are being exceeded in the School by requiring a greater number of modules with the appropriate mark to be achieved than is the norm across the University. The audit team saw assessed work and it is clear that the quality and quantity of work is apt for master's courses in the area.

135 The University LTAS was cited in the DSED and in specific Definitive Course Documents. A range of differing assessment strategies was used and there

was some innovative practice. External examiners commented that some students clearly struggle with some of the assessments and the teaching team was exploring alternative strategies in appropriate elements of the provision. Students understand the assessment process and procedures that apply to them and feel that they are transparent; they had confidence in their objectivity and knew and understood what was expected of them in terms of their performance. Feedback to students on their assessed work was generally good and appropriate and they were fully aware of the processes for obtaining an extension if applicable.

136 Students met by the audit team commented that the information they were given on their programme is satisfactory and fit for purpose. Some local students made exclusive use of the University web pages to decide on their programme of study. Students particularly commented positively on handbooks at the module level and the School practice of approving programme handbooks as part of the annual monitoring process is to be applauded.

137 Learning resources and support were reported by students as good; access to workstations was satisfactory and students were very supportive of the library. Some specific software packages were only available on certain workstations and this caused some queuing problems for a small number of students in some of the more specialised master's programmes, but they were content with these constraints against a background of good levels of provision.

138 In the past, personal tutorial arrangements for the master's courses were not entirely clear to some students; it was now clear to all current students that the Programme Leader was also their Personal Tutor. Students commented that there seemed to be a higher than expected drop-out rate in their programmes. Their view was that this related to a mismatch between the legitimate rigour of master's programmes and the unrealistic expectations of some students. The staff view of the matter was that it related to the skills base of some students and they had developed competency testing packages to be used early in some programmes to allow students to transfer to other master's programmes where suitable.

139 The student voice is heard through both formal and informal channels. Recent examples of student feedback were made available which had been analysed in the relevant annual monitoring reports of the module, programme and School. It was evident that student feedback, while patchy in places was effective in most areas and those informal processes that were in place ensured that any gaps were filled. A Staff-Student Liaison

Committee is established for each of the master's programmes, and students input into each of the appropriate board of studies.

140 The relationship between Computing and its professional computing community of practice takes place through accreditation by the British Computer Society and also through the extensive work experience of masters' students in local companies. Students were enthusiastic about the role of the British Computer Society in their studies and their future careers.

141 The quality of learning opportunities is suitable for the range of programmes of study leading to the named awards and these are appropriately located within the FHEQ.

Pharmacy

MPharm; PgC/PgD/MSc Clinical Pharmacy; Postgraduate Diploma Pharmaceutical Sciences; MSc Medicines Management; Practice Certificate Supplementary Prescribing (Pharmacists).

142 The DSED was prepared specifically for the audit and programme specifications, or a Definitive Course Document containing a programme specification equivalent, were provided in each case. The scope of the DAT comprised provision in the School of Health, Natural and Social Sciences. The provision is delivered by the Pharmacy, Chemistry and Biomedical Sciences academic area (known externally as the Sunderland Pharmacy School).

143 The MPharm programme specification, like those presented for other programmes, contained an appropriate level of detail. In addition, it also demonstrated its confluence with EU Directive 85/432/EEC, as applied by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB), which enables graduates of the programme to apply for registration as pharmacists in the EU, after completing pre-registration training and assessment by the RPSGB. The MPharm specification, although not explicitly referenced, was aligned with the FHEQ. Links to the appropriate external benchmarks including the *Subject benchmark statement* for pharmacy and National Health Service (NHS) statements such as *Pharmacy in the future: implementing the NHS Plan* were discernible with key skills being mapped to individual modules across the four years of the programme. The programme specification for the Postgraduate Diploma in Pharmaceutical Sciences incorporated similar and appropriate linkages and provided evidence of the direct professional relevance of the programme. The definitive documents describing the remainder of the provision fulfilled the expectations of programme specification statements effectively and comprehensively.

144 Progression and completion data for annual monitoring, periodic review and professional accreditation purposes comes substantially from School sources, with data held at module level deriving from programme assessment boards. The progression data available to the audit team in the DSED and module information showed that progression rates in the MPharm programme were good. In all cases the sophistication of the analysis provided was only sufficient for broadly based academic decisions to be reached. Although certain data was provided to the School by the University, the School remained in discussion with the providers about how such data may best serve the School's information needs and lead to a situation where reliance may be placed on a single agreed data-set.

145 Documentation provided to the audit team showed that the School adhered to the general requirements placed on it in relation to the University's processes for annual monitoring. Annual monitoring reports for the three most recent review years showed some variability in scale and style, but were in line with the University's stated expectations, being reflective of the strategic priorities signalled by the institution. The annual monitoring reports from the School, incorporating the input from the Pharmacy programme and module levels have become more synoptic over the last three sessions with fewer detailed appendices being included. Although a recognisable general feature of the annual monitoring process, it was not possible for the audit team to trace whether progress on actions identified in the appended action plans had been monitored through the committee structures in all cases. In terms of the periodic review of programmes, postgraduate provision in Pharmacy was last reviewed in 2001, giving rise to a University Review Panel Report, June 2001. The MPharm provision was also reviewed for accreditation purposes by the RPSGB in the same year. The RPSGB Accreditation Panel report was addressed by the School through the approved University procedure. It was clear to the team from discussions with staff, that they were not only fully engaged with both internal and external programme monitoring and review processes but that external inputs into the preparation for, and the events associated with review were demonstrable and in line with University expectations. The records of the SQAB and the recorded operations of its Annual Monitoring Sub-group also supported this.

146 The audit team had access to recent external examiners' reports. All adhered fully to the University template. Reports varied from the brief to the

extensive, but variation related more to style of response rather than differences in the levels of confidence shown by examiners in the quality of provision or the standards of the awards. The level of support for the standards of student achievement was good. Reservations had been expressed concerning the University's system for the determining final degree classification for when equal weighting was prescribed for performance in years three and four. Since 2004, greater weight has been accorded to year four, although at the time of the audit visit comments from external examiners on the implementation of this change had not yet been received. Full evaluation of external examiners' reports was undertaken and reported through annual monitoring, responses to reports were generated which were both appropriate in their rigour and formal approval. It was evident to the team that institution-level issues had been identified, although it was difficult through consultation with the available documentation, including university-level committee meeting papers, that explicit responses to such issues had been forthcoming. Overall, the team was able to confirm that responses to external examiners' reports were generally timely, balanced and indicated a willingness by the School to take action in a wholly appropriate manner in line with the University's defined procedures.

147 From its examination of the assessment criteria, marking schemes, progression criteria and assessment guidance available to staff and students, the audit team concluded that assessment was conducted in line with the guiding principles of the University strategy and that such assessments were varied in nature, appropriately selected and fairly applied. Both the university and school-level approaches to assessment are informed by and adhere to the principles established in the relevant section of the *Code of practice*. The programme and module assessment boards produced detailed records of their decision-making and actions, although these were not subject to any overview from outside the School.

148 Assessed student work from across all programmes was accompanied by information on the assessment task, assessment criteria used and, in many cases the feedback provided to students on their performance. The audit team was able to appreciate the range of assessment instruments employed and to confirm that student performance was being determined in line with the stated learning outcomes, due care being demonstrated with respect to moderation (in line with the SQAB Statement on Moderation) and second-marking of work. In most

cases helpful and relevant feedback to students was provided using a pro forma designed for the purpose.

149 Programme and module handbooks, laboratory guides, workbooks, WebCT materials, practical guides, logs and Project handbooks provide students with highly relevant and helpful additional information that clarified the details of the teaching, learning and assessment experience they might expect, and, the expectations of their performance in the context of the award for which they were studying. Students met by the audit team confirmed the utility of the documentation and of its equivalents available electronically via the University's VLE. They felt confident in their knowledge of the learning expected of them in order to achieve their qualification goal and of how that learning would be assessed. The team formed the view that the handbooks and associated programme support materials formed a significant and highly worthwhile contribution to the academic support of students across the full range of Pharmacy programmes.

150 Based on the University's City Centre Campus, Pharmacy students have convenient access to lecture rooms, seminar rooms, well appointed scientific laboratories, dispensing laboratories and 'mock up' Community Pharmacy facilities, which include video and viewing facilities. These resources are complemented by an advanced clinical teaching suite and, in addition to two local IT suites, students have ready access to the City Centre Campus Learning Resource Centre and the co-located Murray Library. The Library, in common with other facilities, has received additional resources in the recent past to enhance its holdings, including those related to Pharmacy. The environment for Pharmacy study is much appreciated by students, who recognised the value and relevance of the Library, IT, laboratory and other practically-oriented facilities and services available to them and the commitment given by the School and the University to their continued enhancement. Students also endorsed enthusiastically the high level of academic and personal support they received from an accessible, enthusiastic and well-qualified staff that made the needs of students a primary focus. Staff also emphasised their commitment to their own development through a range of activities including a recently re-formalised system of peer review of teaching.

151 Students value the opportunities for feedback available to them through module-based questionnaires and membership of the relevant student/staff panels. Although feedback to students on actions taken was not always fully formalised, students were confident that they benefited from such actions.

While students were enthusiastic about the School's willingness to act on their views, either formally or informally, they had a less clear view, of their actual or potential involvement in programme management, development and the assurance of their learning experience via membership of the School's academic committees. Student membership of the Programme Studies Board for Pharmacy could only be verified by the team as being a feature of its most recent meeting, November 2004. Notwithstanding this, the audit team formed the view that an effective learning culture was a feature of the Pharmacy provision.

152 Overall, the audit team was satisfied that the standard of student achievement in the programmes covered by the DAT is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ, and the quality of the learning opportunities is suitable for the programmes of study in Pharmacy leading to the named awards.

Psychology

BSc (Hons) Psychology; Psychology in the Joint Honours programme (including specialised major in Psychological Studies); Graduate Diploma in Psychology; MSc Applied Psychological Research.

153 Psychology is located in the Sunderland Business School. The DSED was prepared specially for the audit visit and drew on a range of evidence including minutes from undergraduate and postgraduate module and programme boards, annual monitoring reports, period review reports, external examiner reports, and a recent mid-term review by the British Psychological Society (BPS). Programme specifications for all programmes were included and were informed by the relevant subject benchmark. Specifications contained explicit reference to the FHEQ.

154 The undergraduate and Graduate Diploma programmes were revalidated in 2002, while the MSc Applied Psychological Research was validated in 2001 with its first intake in 2003. The BPS re-accredited the undergraduate programmes in Psychology and Graduate Diploma in Psychology as conferring eligibility for Graduate Membership of the Society and eligibility for the Graduate Basis for Registration as a Chartered Psychologist and Graduate Diploma in 2001 for a five-year period. The audit team saw documentation arising from the Mid-year Resource Review that identified areas where clarification was required, and the response made by the University leading to confirmation that the conditions were fulfilled.

155 Levels of retention, progression and achievement are monitored annually at the module and programme levels by the respective boards.

However, annual monitoring reports did not contain any data. Classification data were referred to in reports from external examiners and subsequent discussion in a Programme Studies Board. The University's stated process of providing an oversight of identified issues was evidenced in a response to the concern of the external examiner from the Psychology team and from the DVC (Academic).

156 The audit team noted the overall concern that the University has about student retention and, specifically, noted that 'the Psychology Boards are attempting to gain a better understanding of the issues underlying our undergraduate student retention, progression and achievement', although no data was offered to illustrate this. Discussion with discipline-based staff confirmed that the information provided centrally was insufficient for their needs in analysing the issue of retention. The team believed that the widening participation agenda depressed achievement but, at the same time, pointed to the educational distance travelled by students as significant.

157 Student representatives variously reported to the audit team on their selection and induction, including training organised by the SU. They explained how cohorts and individuals identified issues with extensive use made of WebCT. Postgraduate representatives were more likely to discuss issues with their cohort because of its smaller size. Students gave examples of issues that had been raised and were generally satisfied with the feedback they received. They also showed understanding of the sensitivities and limits to action by discipline-based staff or the University.

158 The audit team discussed the quality of feedback from the University to the discipline-based team. They confirmed that they had been involved with a number of University-wide debates including implementation of SITS and the changing shape of the academic year, recognising the issues this might pose for Joint Honours students. They also reported that attempts were being made to alleviate timetabling issues for Joint Honours students through consultation with staff in other disciplines.

159 External examiners were consulted about assessment standards and asked to comment on curriculum developments. A range of assessed work by level and course was seen by the audit team which confirmed that the standard of achievement was appropriate to the title of the awards and their location within the FHEQ. The use of the Academic Infrastructure was evidenced, for example, in the work undertaken through Development Group discussions in preparation for the BPS Mid-Year Review.

160 Undergraduate students reported on a tutorial entitlement of one hour per week, but observed that arrangements were flexible so that no member of staff ever refused to see an individual student. Frequent use was made of support from module leaders. The use of Progress Files was currently being implemented so that staff specialised in personal development planning (PDP) act as personal tutors at level 1, and PDP is embedded in one module, while at level 2, each member of staff is assigned four students with the PDP focus on careers.

161 Graduate Diploma and MSc students also have assigned tutors, while Joint Honours students do not have a personal tutor, but refer to the Joint Honours team. They claimed this led to a sense of being treated differently from other students and may result in students dealing with a different tutor on different occasions.

162 Students who met the audit team reported that they found the course information including course handbooks informative and accurate. They were clear about the learning outcomes from the induction, handbooks and additional material supplied by staff, and considered that assessment criteria were clearly explained. They were highly complimentary of provision to support students with special needs. They considered that specialist careers advice was minimal at the subject level and there was a mixed response to centrally provided support, although individual members of staff were considered helpful.

163 The audit team noted the appointment of a dedicated professional librarian supporting the Psychology team, and discussion with staff and students confirmed that while the resourcing of texts and journals was good, the operation of a split-site library had led to problems of access, especially for part-time students. Access to IT facilities was generally sufficient, and the students experienced a high level of technical support especially for those engaged in project preparation.

164 Staff development within the Psychology team was supported through staff appraisal with a variety of activities including peer observation. Postgraduate students appointed as visiting lecturers were prepared through the University scheme. Staff met by the audit team recognised the three aspects of the University's policy related to academic activity and, while active in two of these areas, the staff team recognised that reach-out and professional practice 'are less well established'. The staff team was considering how it could respond to reach-out activity including the Community Fellowship Scheme and changes in the profile of staff recruitment to the discipline.

165 The audit team was satisfied that the standard of student achievement in the programmes in Psychology is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ, and that the quality of the learning opportunities is suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Section 4: The audit investigations: published information

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

166 The SED recognised that the University is currently addressing a number of issues concerning the planning, management and control of published information. To this end it has established a website group with 10 subgroups to address perceived deficiencies in its approach. These concerns were not evidenced in the audit team's discussion with the students, who seemed very content with the information available to them on the web. Indeed, the University web presence was wide-ranging and appropriate for both staff and students. Information was available to students through the web portal on matters ranging from managing finances, student support and guidance generally, University policies and regulations relevant to students. This is augmented at school level in both printed and web presences on matters relating to assessment, quality assurance, and other learner support. Students were very content with this level of information and were particularly appreciative of the role that the module handbook played in their learning and assessment.

167 Students were very content with the information made available to them in the University prospectus with one exception. A few students on recently approved master's programmes considered that the Prospectus was insufficiently detailed or current, but these students were also aware of the difficulties in keeping printed material current and were content with the University's web presence. On the whole students found the published information full, accurate, frank and reliable, consistent, appropriate and fit for purpose.

168 University guidelines deal with the five main handbooks: Freshers' Handbook; Student Handbook; School Handbook; Programme Handbook; and International Student Handbook. These handbooks are the responsibility of individual schools, but it is evident that there is some central cross-University control to ensure sensible cross-referencing. Much use is made of the University and School web pages.

169 Overall, the audit team supported the students' view that a good range of information is available through the internet, the University internal web pages, and in a range of printed formats. The evidence from the students' experience confirmed that information was accurate, reliable and consistent.

Reliability, accuracy, and completeness of published information

170 The University states that it has in place mechanisms to ensure that the externally published information is assured for accuracy, by way of approval from the appropriate managers and the University Executive. The DVC (Academic) approves the final University prospectus.

171 On the matter of the Teaching Quality Information (TQI), the University explained in its SED that it had established a subgroup to deal with QAA matters and responsibility had been assigned to the Quality Support Unit to prepare and respond to the demands of HEFCE's documents, *Information on quality and standards in higher education*, 02/15, and *Final guidance*, 03/51. QSU staff recognised that it will find the task taxing in terms of time and expertise. The extent to which the University will be able to respond positively and effectively to the requirements of TQI in the time required is, in part, dependent on enhancement of its management information and data analysis, and its ability to maximise the benefits of systems to address the acknowledged problems with the quality of statistical data.

Findings

Findings

172 An institutional audit of the University of Sunderland (the University) was undertaken during the week 29 November to 3 December 2004. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility as a UK degree-awarding body. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals and Universities UK, four discipline audit trails (DATs) were selected for scrutiny. 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

173 Since the previous audit in December 2000, the University has introduced an Academic Portfolio Strategy Group (APSG) that provides scrutiny of new course development proposals before they are allowed to proceed. The programme approval process is based on peer review and involves both external and internal participants. Panels may recommend approval, subject where necessary to the fulfilment of specified conditions, and the University Quality Assurance Board (QAB) acts on behalf of Academic Board to approve new courses. Subsequent annual monitoring is conducted at both the module level by the Module Studies Board and at programme level by the Programme Studies Board. Both the Module Studies Board annual reports and the Programme Studies Board reports are received by the School Quality Assurance Boards (SQABs). SQABs submit a school annual monitoring report to the University QAB, and this in turn uses the outcomes reported in these to inform its own report to Academic Board. Annual monitoring requires consideration of student evaluation and external examiners' reports.

174 Programme review is, in effect, programme re-approval and entails the same process as new course approval, without consideration by APSG but with the provision to the panel of an evaluation by the course team of the operation of the programme over the preceding five years, the normal duration of a course approval in the University. The panel meets with students on the programme to enable the latter's experience of the provision to be taken into account. The University is also able to access student feedback on the quality of its programmes

through the student representational system and through mechanisms for the collection of more general feedback. The latter involves a biennial institution-level student questionnaire, and feedback collected through the range of mechanisms at programme and module level.

175 The self-evaluation document (SED) indicated that the University had undertaken extensive internal discussions of the quality assurance of its taught programmes and these had concluded that its quality assurance processes were sound and stood up well to external scrutiny. The SED also claimed a close and productive working relationship with the Students' Union, but acknowledged the problems involved in securing adequate engagement of student representatives at school level. It also acknowledged problems concerning insufficiently detailed analysis of data generated through student feedback mechanisms, particularly at school and programme levels, and in informing students of action taken in response to feedback. In recognition of the need for an effective and integrated coordinating framework for gathering student feedback, the University is implementing a new 'Framework for Student Feedback' in 2004 designed to address not only student feedback but also feedback from graduates, employers and other stakeholders. This is being introduced in 2005.

176 The audit team formed the view that course approval and review processes were conducted in compliance with the University's regulations, were rigorous and penetrating, and contributed effectively to the quality and standards of programmes as claimed in the SED. The team was satisfied that annual monitoring was operating generally in accordance with University requirements. However, the team concluded that with the variability in the nature and self critical analysis of the SQAB annual monitoring reports, Academic Board was not provided with a sufficient oversight of the quality and standards of the University's programmes. In addition, the approach adopted to monitor the Joint Honours Scheme (JHS) did not necessarily highlight issues of particular relevance to students on the JHS. The audit team advises the University to increase its capacity for synthesis of key matters for a more effective contribution to strategic decision-making and institution-wide implementation.

177 In relation to student feedback and feedback from graduates and employers, the audit team considered that there had been less substantial progress since the last quality audit by QAA. The University is advised to prioritise the development

and implementation of improved mechanisms for the collection, analysis and use of feedback, particularly given the prominence which the University accords to such feedback in assuring the quality of its programmes.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

178 Key features of the institution's approach to securing the standards of its awards include the use of statistical data, the management of assessment processes, and the role of external examiners.

179 Overall responsibility for the management of standards in the University resides with the Academic Board, which discharges this responsibility through delegation to three subcommittees: QAB, the Learning Enhancement Board and the Research Committee. The SED recognised the need for a further review of its Academic Board committee structure although, at the time of the audit visit, this had not commenced. The SED argued that the University's structures and processes secure the standard of its awards through formal procedures for programme design, programme validation and review procedures involving stakeholder and peer scrutiny, rigorous assessment policies and procedures with standardised assessment regulations, and the external examiner system.

180 The University has developed model assessment regulations to govern its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Variations to these model regulations may be approved, for example, in order to gain exemptions from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The University expresses confidence in its external examiner system in securing the standards of its awards. Explicit criteria govern the appointment of external examiners, and they receive guidance from the University on their role both through documentation provided and through attendance at an induction session. The University requires external examiners to report using a standard template and these reports are considered at both Directorate and school levels. Schools are responsible for responding to external examiner comments. In addition, the University produces a Review of External Examiners' Reports to collate common issues across the provision within the University and this is shared with staff and external examiners.

181 The new student records system (SITS), introduced in 2002-03 is designed to provide a solution to 'issues of reporting capability up to that time'. The SED recognised that progress with the

implementation of SITS has been much slower than the University had hoped, and it commissioned a business systems audit in 2004 to make recommendations for overcoming resourcing constraints, while a SITS Strategic Development Group has been set up to enhance University performance in this area.

182 The audit team's review of the University's procedures for course approval and review, and its assessment policies, concluded that these operated in a way that supported the maintenance of standards in the University. The last quality audit by QAA expressed concerns about the University's assessment regulations in relation to the consistency with which the undergraduate degree classification regulations were being implemented. The University had successfully dealt with this issue that arose in connection with the inclusion of level 2 credit into the final classification for honours. The evidence reviewed by the team confirmed that the University was receiving helpful reports from its external examiners, and that schools dealt appropriately with these reports responding to them in a thoughtful and responsive manner. The team was satisfied that the University was making effective use of external examiners in assuring the standards of its awards.

183 The audit team formed the view that information to enable the University to understand and address issues such as perceived problems of student progression and completion was not available in easily usable forms at school and programme level. Annual monitoring reports at this level were characterised by an absence of detailed analysis of statistical data and, in the absence of solid information from central sources, reliance was placed on locally produced data. The result was that annual monitoring reports did not always reflect critically on the implications of information that might be drawn from statistical data, and this reduced their effectiveness as tools by which the University is assured that the standards of its awards are being appropriately monitored at a local level.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

184 The provision of a high quality learning environment is a stated objective of the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategies, the main focus of which is stated to be the provision of a more integrated and seamless learning support environment that encourages students to take more responsibility for their own learning. The University operates on two main campuses and it faces the challenge of providing an equivalence of learner

support for students on both campuses. Resource constraints prevent duplication of learner support services and the SED recognised that, with its two-campus strategy, the number and geographical separateness of its support services is inconsistent with its aspirations for an accessible and high quality learner support service. The Learner Support Management Group, with responsibilities for oversight of campus-based learner support, had reviewed the potential for providing customer-focused learner support on a campus basis, and building on approaches already adopted in respect of consolidated library and learning resources provision. The University had also initiated a support services review in 2004 and new structures will be in place for 2005-06.

185 Student guidance and support is managed through tutorial arrangements that are organised to reflect the particular nature of the schools and academic areas. The Centre for International Education supports international students. This provides pre-entry advice to international students together with personal support once students arrive at the University. Student and Academic Services provide a range of central services including counselling, financial advice, careers and disability support. Learning Development Services support students through provision of programmes covering maths, English and study skills, and they also have involvement in the implementation of Progress Files within the University.

186 The University has achieved Investor in People accreditation, and produces an annual handbook of staff development opportunities. The SED described the University's Developmental Appraisal Scheme for Academic Staff which focuses on the construction of personal development plans for each of the three areas of academic activity: teaching, research and reach-out. Newly appointed staff undertake the University's new Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, which will be submitted for accreditation by the Higher Education Academy in May 2005, and the University supports membership of the Higher Education Academy. Training is also provided for visiting teachers and postgraduate students undertaking teaching duties.

187 The University has a Peer Review of Teaching Scheme that focuses on enhancement of the student learning experience by encouraging staff to reflect on their teaching. The SED reported that the University has awarded Teaching Fellowships since 1995, and that fellows are seconded into Learning and Development Services for up to two days a week to work on projects related to University policy priorities. The SED claimed that important progress had been made with regard to the dissemination of peer review

of teaching across the institution, with a target that all lecturers (including visiting lecturers) will have had their annual teaching observation by October 2004.

188 The audit team were made aware of the substantial investment in learning resources, particularly in recent times on the Sir Tom Cowie Campus, and there was evidence of a broadly positive evaluation of the quality of learning resources on the part of both staff and students. This included the value and quality of the virtual learning environment support and delivery systems. Students identified some difficulties in relation to the split sites on which the University operates. Students on the JHS appeared to be particularly adversely affected by difficulties relating to the split sites, since they needed to attend classes on both campuses and timetabling did not always take account of this.

189 Academic support at programme level was provided by a conscientious and committed staff team and students acknowledged this. However, students on the JHS appeared to be an exception. This did not relate to their interaction with individual module tutors, but rather that their status meant they were sometimes excluded from sources of academic guidance, for example, induction materials, and had separate briefing sessions concerning future option choices. Part-time students on the JHS appeared to be the most significantly disadvantaged group with respect to access to academic guidance.

190 Students were very positive about centrally provided academic support services, identifying both their helpfulness and their accessibility. Students were particularly positive in their evaluation of support services for students with special needs.

191 The University does not have a statement of minimum entitlement for students to personal tutor support. However, the audit team was satisfied that all students had personal tutor support, albeit in some cases this was provided by programme leaders or project tutors, and support arrangements appeared to operate satisfactorily. An exception was the JHS students. Members of the Joint Honours programme team provide their personal tutorial support. Notwithstanding the reduced teaching commitments, the ratio of students to staff members in the Joint Honours programme team made the audit team doubt the efficacy of such an arrangement. This was supported by a variety of sources of feedback that suggested JHS students were sometimes unaware of personal tutorial support arrangements, and those who were identified personal tutorial support as an issue of concern. The audit team was told that the Joint

Honours programme team had carried out a review of revised personal tutoring arrangements but, at the time of the audit visit, this was not available.

192 The audit team found that the University's Developmental Appraisal Scheme was understood by staff and well implemented. With respect to the implementation of peer review of teaching, the audit team found that documentation had been disseminated across the institution and that the process has been supported by staff development activity. However, the team formed the view that application of peer review was patchy and that it had yet to be fully implemented.

Outcomes of discipline audit trails

193 In each of the selected discipline audit trails, appropriate members of the audit team met staff and students to discuss the programmes, studied a sample of assessed student work, saw examples of learning resource materials, and studied annual module and programme reports and periodic school reviews relating to the programmes.

English

BA English; BA English Language and Literature; BA English and Drama; BA English and Film; English in the Joint Honours programme; English Language/Linguistics in the Joint Honours programme; MA English; MA English: Postmodernity and Contemporary Literature; MA English: Restoration to Romanticism; MA World Literatures.

194 The audit team confirmed that student achievement on the programmes was appropriate to award titles and to the location of those awards in the *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Assessment processes are satisfactorily managed and the quality of learning opportunities suitable. Programme specifications evidence well-designed courses that engaged appropriately with subject benchmarks statements. There was evidence of high student satisfaction with the learning experience, the support offered by staff, module and programme handbooks offering high quality information, the strength of research underpinning for curriculum design and progress on a range of institutional issues.

Computing

MSc Computer Based Information Systems; MSc Electronic Commerce Applications; MSc Commercial Applications; MSc Information Technology Management; MSc Intelligent Systems; MSc Internet Engineering; MSc Multimedia Systems; MSc Network Systems; MSc Software Engineering.

195 The quality of learning opportunities is suitable for the range of programmes of study leading to the named awards and their location in the FHEQ. External examiners' reports contributed to annual monitoring and apposite responses were made. Annual review processes met the University's expectations although there was a lack of progression and completion data. A range of assessment strategies was utilised with some innovative practice. Students understood assessment process and procedures, and what was expected of them in terms of their performance. Feedback on assessed work was generally good and personal tutorial arrangements are clear to current students. Learning support resources were reported by students as good.

Pharmacy

MPharm; PgC/PgD/MSc Clinical Pharmacy; Postgraduate Diploma Pharmaceutical Sciences; MSc Medicines Management; Practice Certificate Supplementary Prescribing (Pharmacists).

196 Programme design makes appropriate reference to academic and professional requirements. External examiners reported the standard of student achievement as good, reports were rigorously analysed and responses generated. Assessments varied in nature, were appropriately selected and fairly applied. Annual monitoring adhered to University requirements but showed some variability and a lack of sophistication in data analysis. Handbooks and support materials formed a significant and highly worthwhile contribution to the academic support of students, and students endorsed the learning environment for Pharmacy and the high level of academic and personal support received from staff, although they were not entirely clear about their role in quality assurance. Student achievement is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ, and the quality of the learning opportunities is suitable.

Psychology

BSc (Hons) Psychology; Psychology in the Joint Honours programme (including specialised major in the Psychological Studies); Graduate Diploma in Psychology; MSc Applied Psychological Research.

197 Programme specifications were informed by professional requirements, the subject benchmark statement and FHEQ and were linked to approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Retention, progression and achievement were monitored annually but information provided centrally was insufficient to support effective analysis. Students were satisfied with their input to quality assurance of provision and the feedback received. They reported

that course information was useful and accurate and were highly complimentary of provision to support students with special needs, although the support provided to Joint Honours students was considered less favourably. Access to IT facilities and learning support resources are good and students experienced a high level of technical support especially in project preparation. The standard of student achievement is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ, and the quality of the learning opportunities is suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

The use made by the institution of the Academic Infrastructure

198 The SED stated that the University QAB's annual report to Academic Board on Approval, Monitoring and Enhancement exemplifies the University's approach to the consideration of the individual elements of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA. It also affirmed that reference to subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ are embedded in the University's processes and practice. The audit team saw much evidence to support the assertion that the Academic Infrastructure has been discussed and debated within the University, and reviewed against its structures and processes. The team formed the view that the University was making appropriate use of the Academic Infrastructure, including the *Code of practice*, FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and programme specifications.

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

199 The SED was accurate in its representation of the University, and it showed some evidence of critical self-evaluation, although much of the content was discursive. In relation to its comprehensiveness and coverage, the audit team found the SED was limited in supporting the quality audit process by its reluctance to focus more precisely and systematically on evaluation against the key strategic objectives of the University.

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

200 The SED signalled the University's intention to shift the balance of its quality agenda towards quality enhancement, with the implication of a lighter touch towards quality assurance than in the

past. It defined quality enhancement in terms of enhancement of the quality of delivery of programmes. Three components of academic quality enhancement were identified: continuous and proactive improvement of the learning experience; cost and time-effective academic management processes and systems; and appropriate and timely professional development for all staff who facilitate learning and support learners.

201 During the audit visit, the team saw good examples of enhancement initiatives, for example, Teaching Fellowships linked to areas of priority for the University, and also initiatives designed to disseminate good practice, for example, the school conferences. However, in its meetings with staff at all levels of the University, the team was unable to discern a shared view of what quality enhancement means in the University. The team formed the view that staff saw quality enhancement in terms of specific projects and initiatives, but not as part of an overarching policy of quality enhancement, and would advise the University to refine its definitions and secure an approach to improvement that is more systematic, timely and strategically driven.

Reliability of information

202 The SED indicated that the University QAB had considered the approach to be taken in relation to TQI requirements, in particular the design and content of external examiner summaries. A subgroup had been established to deal with QAA matters and responsibility had been assigned to the Quality Support Unit to prepare for, and respond to, the requirements of HEFCE's documents, 02/15: *Information on quality and standards in higher education*, and 03/51: *Final guidance*. The University has in place mechanisms to ensure externally published information is assured for accuracy, and this involves approval by appropriate managers and by the University Executive.

203 The audit team heard that the University was currently addressing a number of issues relating to the planning, management and control of published information. A website group (with 10 subgroups) had been established to oversee the University's web presence. The University also provided guidelines to schools for the production of various student handbooks.

204 Evidence, obtained from students whom the audit team met, confirmed that information provided to students, both prior to joining the University and subsequently, was accurate, reliable and consistent. The audit team supported this view.

205 The extent to which the University will be able to respond positively and effectively to the requirements of TQI in the time required is, in part, dependent on enhancement of its management information and data analysis and its ability to maximise the benefits of systems to address the acknowledged problems with the quality of statistical data.

Features of good practice

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

- i use of school conferences to address specific themes, develop a broader understanding of issues, and as a mechanism for exchange of feedback and dissemination of good practice (paragraphs 41; 97)
- ii use of Teaching and Learning Fellowships that are focused on particular institutional priorities and targets, for example, retention and for building community links. They are used effectively in the development of 'reach out' activity as well as internal academic matters and are well integrated into the institution (paragraph 96)
- iii maintenance and enhancement of learning support resources as a key priority and the provision of high-quality technician support (paragraphs 101-104)
- iv range and quality of support for students with special needs (physical or educational challenges) linked to the University's strategic view of diversity (paragraphs 110; 162).

Recommendations for action

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

- i the Academic Board ensures greater clarity in the articulation and operation of its policy, making explicit the minimum requirements for adherence across the University as a whole. In addition, that Academic Board ensures that there is central oversight and assurance in the operation of its assessment boards (paragraph 37)
- ii in the context of the University's key strategic initiatives, the University refines its definitions of quality assurance and quality enhancement and establishes more clearly its interpretation of the relationship between them. In doing so, the University is advised to secure an approach to improvement that is more systematic, timely and strategically driven (paragraph 41)

- iii the Academic Board introduces measures to secure a greater degree of critical analysis throughout its annual monitoring process, and more consistency in the annual monitoring reports from schools. This would increase the University's capacity for synthesis of key matters and thereby ensure that annual monitoring makes a more effective contribution to strategic decision-making and institution-wide implementation (paragraphs 54-57)
- iv the recommendation made by the previous audit team's report of 2001 for more explicit institutional consideration of PSRB accreditation reports and the introduction of a standard procedure for responding to these is fully addressed to capture intelligence and good practice (paragraph 73)
- v as identified by the 2001 audit team, the University ensures that the development and implementation of improved mechanisms for the collection, analysis and use of student feedback is addressed as a matter of priority (paragraphs 57; 80-81)
- vi the University prioritises the enhancement of management information and data analysis, builds staff capacity and maximises the benefits of systems to address the acknowledged problems with the quality of statistical data (paragraphs 82-83; 122; 132; 144; 155)
- vii the University secures, and assures, an equivalence of student experience for students registered on the JHS (paragraphs 84; 103; 106-107; 112; 114-115; 127).

208 The audit team also recommends that the University should consider the desirability of:

- i keeping under review personal support for students to ensure that the variety of personal tutoring arrangements continue to reflect their particular identified needs (paragraphs 113-118).

Appendix

The University of Sunderland's response to audit report

The University is pleased that the auditors have broad confidence in the University's management of quality and standards and the academic standards of its awards. The University welcomes the audit team's recognition of the areas of good practice both in the summary of the outcomes of the audit and in the main body of the report. We are particularly pleased that the auditors highlighted the following examples of good practice associated with the development of a high quality learning and teaching environment:

- the use of school conferences to disseminate good practice
- the use of Teaching Fellowships focusing on institutional priorities which are well integrated into the institution
- the maintenance and enhancement of learning support resources as a key priority
- technician support for students
- the range and quality of student support for students with special needs

The University was pleased to note that the auditors also commended the establishment of the Academic Portfolio Strategy Group to enhance programme planning, the relationship the university has with its external examiners, external participation in review events and the programme approval process.

The University is also pleased that in the subjects of English, Computing (postgraduate programmes), Psychology and Pharmacy the standard of student achievement and the quality of learning opportunities available to students is judged to be appropriate. Commendations included 'critical self-reflection on institutional issues', 'strength of research underpinning the curriculum', 'learning resources and support were reported by students as good', 'in most cases helpful and relevant feedback to students was provided', 'handbooks and associated programme support materials formed a significant and highly worthwhile contribution', 'students also endorsed enthusiastically the high level of academic and personal support they received from an accessible, enthusiastic and well qualified staff'.

The University wishes to make the following comments relating to recommendations made by the auditors:

- the University had already developed a student feedback framework to enhance mechanisms for collection, analysis and feedback of actions to students which was available to the auditors and which is being implemented from September 2005. It is anticipated that this comprehensive and detailed framework which includes feedback collected from students on programmes and in services across the institution, at a variety of levels, will address the issues raised by the auditors
- the University has acquired a new student record system, to address the deficiencies in production of data identified both in the SED and by the auditors. Staff are being trained in the operation of the system and, with the evidence to date of its impact on the quality of data, the University is confident that the new system will address the issues identified and provide more accurate data
- the University would have welcomed an opportunity for further discussion on some of the recommendations, which it felt were based on misunderstanding. Although the policy of making most of the documentation available electronically seemed eminently sensible, the auditors appear to have had some difficulty in finding some of the information.

