QAA

Institutional audit

The Queen's University of Belfast

MARCH 2009

Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (now the Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree-awarding bodies in a proper manner

- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications

- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

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 academic standards of awards

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes

- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply, unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on 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.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students

- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences

- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Handbook for institutional audit: England and Northern Ireland 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited The Queen's University of Belfast (the University) from 30 March to 3 April 2009, to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

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

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK). The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment of students.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team found that the University has made good progress in recent years in developing a more enhancement-led approach to the student experience, consistent with its objective of developing an overall strategy, which would be of assistance in determining the University's priorities, and in evaluating the progress it is able to make. Its approach also underpins the University's claim to be a reflective institution with an increasing emphasis on quality enhancement.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team found the University to have a widely and fully developed research culture appropriate for the recruitment of research students. Strategic responsibility for postgraduate research students rests with the Pro Vice-Chancellor Research and Postgraduates, who chairs the University's Research Committee. Primary responsibility for day-to-day decisions concerning postgraduate research students is devolved to schools, each of which has its own school postgraduate research committee, which reports to the central Postgraduate Office. The team found that the University's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision for postgraduate research programmes meet the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by the QAA.

Published information

The audit team found that, overall, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards, but felt that more could be done to improve the consistency and completeness of school handbooks.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following features of good practice:

- the ways in which the University makes effective use of feedback from students that is collected at institutional level

- the range and degree of staff support and development at all levels and in all areas of the University's work.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University consider further action in some areas.

The team advises the University to:

- consider whether the Annual Programme Review process provides the Education Committee and the Collaborative Provision Group with sufficient evidence of appropriate quality and reliability from schools and collaborative, partners to enable them to discharge their responsibilities on behalf of Academic Council

- address the variability in education practices at school level, to ensure equity of treatment of all students and of the student experience

- consider the means by which it might secure a direct involvement in the partnership between Stranmillis University College and Omagh College

- review the memoranda of agreement and current arrangements, including its own structures, for the management of collaborative provision in theology.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider establishing a formal reporting and accountability relationship between each school's senior academic committee or committees and the relevant committee(s) of Academic Council, and make committee minutes and papers readily accessible to staff and students

- develop an institution-wide framework for enhancing the quality of the student experience that embraces both school-level and University initiatives, in order to maximise the benefits of steps which are already being taken

- clarify further and standardise across schools both the training the University requires of those postgraduate research students who teach, demonstrate and or contribute to the assessment of undergraduate students, and the limits it imposes on the extent of such activities.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice*

- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

The audit team saw widespread evidence that the University's own codes of practice and regulations are fully informed by *The framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, the *Code of practice* and subject benchmark statements. In response to the previous QAA Institutional audit in December 2004 the University has introduced a Programme Specification Template.

Report

1   An Institutional audit of The Queen's University of Belfast (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 30 March 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2   The audit team comprised Dr Richard Latto, Professor Chris Park, Professor Colin Raban and Professor Neil Taylor, auditors, and Mrs Louise Walmsley, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr David Parry, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   The University traces its roots back to 1845 when it was founded as one of three colleges within the federal Queen's University in Ireland. It became an independent university in 1908, when it received its Charter to become the Queen's University of Belfast.

4   At the time of the audit, there were 17,092 full-time equivalent students (14,000 undergraduates, 1,916 taught postgraduates, and 1,176 research postgraduates). Of these, 4,013 were part-time students and 767 were international students. There were 3,687 staff, of which 1,134 were academic.

5   Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College are academically integrated with the University, having the status of schools. The intention is for Stranmillis to become fully merged with the University in 2009-10. The University's Briefing Paper indicated that its Charter precludes the employment of staff to teach theology, so this is carried out on its behalf by four independent colleges. There are currently 341 students taking degrees in this way, managed through the University's Institute of Theology. There is also an Institute of Professional Legal Studies that operates within the University's statutes to deliver postgraduate training on behalf of the Council of Legal Education (NI).

6   The University has an increasing number and variety of collaborative arrangements within Northern Ireland and overseas involving, in 2008-09, a total of about 1,800 students.

7   The University's mission is to:

- provide a broadly-based, research-driven university with a dynamic world-class research and education portfolio and strong international connections

- promote the widest possible access to this portfolio of excellence in an environment of equality, tolerance and mutual respect

- fully embrace its leadership role in Northern Ireland and beyond.

8   The previous QAA Institutional audit in December 2004 recommended that the University reconsiders the terms of reference for the University Learning and Teaching Committee; further develops the assessment framework; and completes the development and publication of distinct programme specifications for all awards of the University. In response, the University has drafted new Terms of Reference for the Education Committee, which replaces the Learning and Teaching Committee; established a new Assessment Policy and revised the University's Study Regulations, and introduced a programme specification template.

9   The 2004 audit also recommended that the University review its pathway approval procedures; ensure that all institutions with students registered for awards of the University were aware of the University's expectations in relation to the Academic Infrastructure, developed by QAA; complete the work and training necessary to make fuller statistical data more easily available; and enhance the quality of the students' learning experience by sharing good practice in the area of student support.

10   Actions taken by the University in response to the recommendations have included: new programme approval procedures for all programmes; new guidelines for University Coordinators for overseeing collaborative provision at programme level; a new student information system, Qsis; and the amalgamation in 2005 of many student services into a single Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs.

11   These changes go some way towards meeting the recommendations in the 2004 audit, but their implementation has been relatively slow and some of the changes are not yet complete.

12   There has also been a substantial reorganisation of the University's structure since the 2004 audit, involving the abolition of the previous faculty and school structure, and its replacement in 2005 by a two-tier structure which, following the subsequent merger of the School of Biomedical Sciences and the School of Medicine and Dentistry, now involves 20 schools and the University. Although there are no longer faculties, despite this, the term is still used on occasions, there are three groups of schools, each under a dean.

13   The central management of the University has also been changed, with the introduction of a University Management Board and a University Operating Board and a new core academic committee structure (see paragraph 16). There are also now a Directorate of Student Plus, a new Student Guidance Centre and three Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Active and Interactive Learning, Creative and Performing Arts and Interprofessional Education respectively.

14   A revised Academic Quality Assurance Framework and module and annual review procedures have been introduced and an Educational Enhancement Process has replaced the previous system of periodic review.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

15   The Senate is the governing body of the University. Responsibility for the control of internal academic affairs rests with the Academic Council, which has delegated responsibility for taught and research programmes to its education and research committees respectively. Schools, together with the institutes of Theology and Professional Legal Studies, are the key academic management units within the University's structure. Schools and institutes are grouped into three cognate areas, namely: Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Engineering and Physical Sciences; and Medicine, Health and Life Sciences, each of which is managed by a dean. Each school is itself managed by a head, who chairs the school management board, membership of which includes one or more school-based director(s) of education and the directors of research. Schools are supported by nine academic support directorates. The Academic Plan 2006-2011 emphasises that the 'atmosphere and ethos' of the University are reliant on 'ambitious academic and managerial leadership in all areas to create the ethos of 'one University' in a spirit of collaboration and collegiality'.

16   This strengthening of lateral and vertical relationships was accompanied by a review in 2005 of the University's committee structure. Seven core committees were disbanded and a 'Scheme of Delegation' approved, which authorised Academic Council, the Education Committee, the Courses and Regulations Group, the Collaborative Provision Group and schools to undertake certain responsibilities on its behalf.

17   Greater responsibility for academic standards has been given to the schools. Each school has discretion to manage its affairs, subject to the minimum requirement that it establishes a school management board with a prescribed constitution and appoints one or more directors of education and research, to facilitate a more focused approach to academic standards within the school. University approval is not required for the internal committee structures that a school may establish. Operations at school level are overseen by the committees of Academic Council through the receipt of information generated by the University's quality assurance procedures, supported by the Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs.

18   Both the student written submission (SWS) and the students met by the audit team commented on variability of practice between the schools of the University. Academic staff also commented that the University's new structure did not encourage interschool collaboration, although there is a general recognition that the role of the deans could provide a means of resolving inconsistencies of practice and of contributing to the realisation of the 'One University' aspiration in the Academic Plan.

19   The University's framework includes robust arrangements for securing the management accountability of heads of school and, by this means, ensuring supervision of the exercise by schools of their responsibilities for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs also makes an important contribution to monitoring and advising on activity at school level, and there are various informal arrangements by which the University is able to address variability in education practices. The team concluded, however, that it would be desirable for the University to consider whether the authority of Academic Council and its committees might be strengthened by establishing a formal reporting and accountability relationship between each school's senior academic committee or committees and the relevant committee(s) of Academic Council. The University may also wish to consider the desirability of ensuring that committee minutes and papers are readily accessible to staff and students, as one means of addressing the variability in education practices between schools, and promoting greater staff awareness of issues and developments outside their own Schools.

20   Responsibility for the approval of new modules and changes to existing modules has been delegated by the Education Committee to schools, subject to regular audits that are conducted by the Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs and reported to the Congress and Regulations Group Directorate. Programme proposals are considered by programme evaluation meeting panels which must include at least one external member and is normally attended by a representative from the Directorate who provides advice on study regulations and quality assurance requirements. A programme evaluation meeting report is submitted to the Congress and Regulations Group, together with the response of the school involved to any recommendations made by a panel. This Group either approves the new programme or returns the report to the school for further action. The Group then reports on the approval of new programmes to the Education Committee. The documentation seen by the team demonstrated the objectivity and rigour of the programme approval process.

21   Modules are regularly reviewed by schools, taking into account student evaluations of teaching and student attainment, and are detailed and thorough. The Annual Programme Review procedure requires the consideration of other evidence, such as the programme specification and external examiners' reports. The Annual Programme Review outcomes are considered at school level and school overview reports and individual Review reports are then considered by a subgroup of the Education Committee. Most school overview reports are brief, offer little evidence of critical reflection and lack specific reference to individual programmes. It appeared to the audit team that there is a progressive filtration of Annual Programme Review outcomes from programmes to schools, and from schools to the Education Committee, and that the information that is ultimately available to that Committee is limited by the nature of the questions contained in the templates for programme and school reports. The team concluded that the formal documentation submitted to the Education Committee would not itself provide the evidence that justified the formal record that 'the results of the review demonstrated…reflective practice across the University' and that 'most schools took into account student views.' The audit team, therefore, recommends that it is advisable that the University considers whether the Annual Programme Review process provides the Education Committee and the CPG with sufficient evidence of appropriate quality and reliability from schools and collaborative partners, to enable them to discharge their responsibilities on behalf of Academic Council (see also paragraph 89 in respect of collaborative provision).

22 In 2007-08, the University piloted a new form of periodic review, termed the Educational Enhancement Process. This procedure is carried out in partnership between a school and the University and is managed by the Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs. Schools are required to produce a reflective statement focusing on the enhancement of their educational provision. A panel, including student representatives and two external members, visits the school to be reviewed for one day to meet with staff and students and to review documentation. The Educational Enhancement Process report is considered by the Education Committee, and schools are now required to demonstrate how they are addressing emerging issues in the annual academic planning process. The Educational Enhancement Process is said to differ from the previous subject review process, and from the University's other quality assurance procedures, by its focus on enhancement. However, the extent to which this process is intended to provide either an assurance of the maintenance of academic standards or results in the enhancement of provision was unclear to the audit team and raised the question, therefore, whether the new process provides the Education Committee with the full range of information that it requires to fulfil its remit.

23 The University updates its comprehensive External Examiner Handbook annually, most recently in September 2008. External examiners are appointed by the Education Committee for a period of four years and are members of boards of examiners. They receive no formal training, but they do receive a copy of the External Examiner Handbook each year. They report using a well-designed template that requires them to confirm that academic standards are being maintained, and that they, and student attainment, are comparable with other higher education institutions. In all the reports seen by the audit team the external examiners were satisfied with the standards achieved by students. External examiners submit their reports to Academic Affairs which forwards them to the head of school. Academic Affairs provides a thorough annual overview for the Congress and Regulations Group, which then reports to the Education Committee. The audit team saw evidence that this system is working well and noted effective responses to University-level issues raised by external examiners. External examiner arrangements for collaborative provision programmes are the same as those for internal programmes.

24 External examiners' reports are intended to be considered in the module review and Annual Programme Review processes. However, some reviews take place before external examiners' written reports are received. In these cases, the review in question has to depend on records of oral reports and the previous year's formal report. The module review reports seen by the audit team, though generally thorough, did not normally consider comments from external examiners. The documentation the team saw from the annual programme reviews of three schools confirmed that these considered external examiners reports, but in varying detail. There was little indication in the documentation of action being taken as a result of external examiners' comments. The School Overview Report Template does not include a section confirming that responses have been made to external examiners' reports. Heads of school or their nominee are required to respond to external examiners reports within six weeks of their receipt. The responses seen by the audit team were appropriate, but were not always integrated with the annual programme reviews in either timing or content.

25 Documentation for a recent periodic review that the audit team scrutinised included reports from the previous two years and the school's responses to these reports. These were not mentioned in the subsequent periodic review report. There were, however, two comments about the practice of discounting marks from some modules in the final classification and the lack of prescriptive rules for doing this, which were followed up centrally.

26 The evidence the audit team heard indicated that most schools reported the content of external examiners' reports to students, but this did not always occur and when it did it was in a variety of ways and to varying degrees. There is no reference either to the necessity of, or to the form for, doing this in the External Examiners Handbook.

27   The audit team concluded that the University is making appropriate use of independent external examiners in assuring the standards of its awards, although it identified a number of areas where procedures could be improved, in particular those determining the way in which responses to external examiners are integrated into the University's annual programme review system.

28   The audit team saw widespread evidence that the University's own codes of practice and regulations are fully informed by *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), the *Code of practice* and subject benchmark statements, published by QAA. Changes to the external reference points are monitored by Academic Affairs, and the Education Committee has responsibility for ensuring appropriate alignment with them.

29   The University has a strong commitment to developing its European links. It has mapped its own marking system on to the European Credit Transfer System and has used this since 1990.

30   The University's Education Strategy states that the University will ensure that students are assessed effectively, receiving proper and prompt feedback which meets their learning needs. One of the main tasks of the University Assessment Working Group, which met between November 2007 and April 2008, was to oversee the production of guidance for academic staff on the operation of assessment within the University, at both undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels, drawing on current good practice as appropriate.

31   The University introduced a new Assessment Policy during 2008-09. It addresses a recommendation in the 2004 audit report concerning the development of an assessment framework. The audit team was able to see a range of useful material relating to assessment, including policy, regulations and resources, on the Centre for Education Development's website, on the University's intranet, Queen's Online,. The team formed the view that the Policy offers clear and useful high-level guidance, but says little about implementation, in that while it offers schools broad guidelines on what they should do, it offers little on how they should do it. The Assessment Policy is underpinned by the University's Study Regulations and forms part of the University's Assessment Framework. The team found the framework to be comprehensive, accessible and clearly documented.

32   Information about assessment on particular programmes is published in course handbooks. The SWS reported that students are broadly content with the Assessment Policy, but some concerns were expressed in their submission about variability of implementation between schools, and the lack of University monitoring of the Policy. Assessment criteria for modules or programmes are set by academic staff, approved by their school, and published in course handbooks. Undergraduate and postgraduate students who met the audit team, confirmed that they knew where to find assessment and progression regulations on Queen's Online. The University has clear rules relating to student progression and qualification for awards, which are designed to ensure equity of treatment of students on different programmes and in different Schools, and are published in course handbooks. Students whom the team met confirmed that they knew where to find assessment and progression regulations on Queen's Online.

33   Marking of submitted work on all taught programmes is informed by the use of standardised grade descriptors, known as a Conceptual Equivalents Scales, to help assure equity of assessment of students' work across the schools. The audit team noted that the Scales and guidance on how they were to be used were published in the course handbooks it saw, but found no explicit evidence in a sample of board of examiners' minutes to confirm that due consideration had been given to the Scales, as required.

34   At the time of the audit visit, the University was actively discussing how changes in assessment might help to improve undergraduate student retention. Options under consideration include counting first-year performance in final-degree classification, adopting a standard weighting (10:30:60) for all three-year undergraduate programmes, and adjusting the structure of the academic year, with particular regard to the timing of semester-one examinations.

35   Approved University procedures for dealing with academic offences, particularly cheating in exams and plagiarism in coursework, are clearly described in the Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs Policy and Procedures Manual. Students whom the audit team met, confirmed that they knew where to find information on these procedures on Queen's Online. The team found variations between a sample of programme handbooks in descriptions of how cases of suspected plagiarism are handled.

36   The need for schools to provide students with appropriate and timely feedback on their work is explicitly stated in the University's Education Strategy. Each school is required to have a written statement of its policy on the provision and timing of feedback to students, and feedback must be provided to students as soon as possible after the student has completed an assessment task, in order to maximise its benefit. Students whom the audit team met confirmed that they had opportunities to discuss their work with appropriate members of staff in accordance with the Assessment Policy.

37   The University is aware that students have been unhappy with the quality and timing of the feedback they have received on submitted work, and this was echoed in the SWS. In response to this, a number of initiatives have been undertaken by the Education and Skills Development Division of the Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs, and the Education Committee acknowledged that the particular focus for 2008-09 would be in relation to assessment and feedback, and in ensuring that the University's new Assessment Policy is implemented consistently across all schools.

38   The audit team concluded that the University has made good progress in addressing the recommendation in the 2004 QAA audit report, namely, to develop further the assessment framework, with a view to securing greater commonality of judgement and practice across the University with regard to progression rules and degree classifications, although its initial response was relatively slow and the project remains a work in progress. The Assessment Policy is being rolled out during the current academic year and the Assessment Working Group will review it at the end of the year. In its submission, the Students' Union suggested that the University should complete the proposed review of the Assessment Policy, embed any best practice that emerges at an institutional level, and ensure targeted improvements in the area of assessment and feedback are conducted in academic units that perform particularly poorly. The team would support this suggestion.

39   The audit team noted a number of areas in which assessment procedures vary between schools. In light of the variability of practice in assessment, and students' concerns about the quality and timing of feedback, and given that senior managers acknowledge that assessment and feedback is an issue, the team considers it is advisable for the University to address the variability in education practices at school level, to ensure equity of treatment of all students and of the student experience (see also paragraphs 52, 56 and 112).

40   The University has invested resources in the development of a new student information system, Qsis, the roll-out of which was scheduled to start during academic year 2008-09. Major problems were encountered at the start of the roll-out relating both to timing and technical matters, as a result of which significant numbers of students experienced difficulties in registering for their course in 2008-09. The University provided real-time reports to students throughout the registration and enrolment period. However, the Students' Union expressed the view that, while the University had made some attempts to keep students informed about developments throughout the process, these had been largely ineffectual. The University had a contingency plan, but the problems had major adverse impacts on schools at the start of the academic year. A revised implementation schedule has now been agreed through to July 2010 and senior staff have been seconded to manage the project to ensure its smooth implementation.

41   The University uses student statistics (on admissions, progression, completion and student achievement) to produce management information, as part of a series of key performance indicators which are discussed at University and school levels. The audit team noted that many of the key performance indicators, are business-related and do not directly address questions of academic quality and standards as such. Deans review school performance against targets with each head of school on a monthly basis, and the Vice-Chancellor and his senior colleagues visit each school annually to review formally and discuss school performance with staff in each school, and discuss what response or remedial action is appropriate.

42   One area where the University is committed to improving performance is student retention, particularly at undergraduate level. A report on first-year examinations and degree weighting discussed by the Education Committee in March 2009 noted that 'the University has unacceptably high drop-out rates which compare unfavourably both with our benchmark and with Russell Group comparators'. The audit team was told by senior managers that student retention had absorbed much of their attention in recent years.

43   The audit team acknowledges that, through the development of Qsis and the adoption of the key performance indicator-based approach to the management of schools and monitoring of school and University progress against agreed strategy objectives, the University has made significant progress in addressing a recommendation in the 2004 QAA audit report, namely to complete the work and training necessary to make fuller statistical data more easily available to schools, faculties and relevant committees to facilitate analysis of student performance across the University. The team concluded that the University has responded appropriately to the challenges posed by the implementation of the new Qsis system, with a more realistic revised schedule and with regular progress reports to staff and students. The team also recognises the benefits of the key performance indicators-based school performance monitoring system and the potential impact of this system on academic quality and standards.

44   The audit team concludes that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3   Institutional management of learning opportunities

45   The framework for managing the quality of learning opportunities includes an Education Strategy which is monitored and updated by the Education Committee on a triennial basis, to ensure that the University's provision keeps pace with the changing environment. The Education Strategy is underpinned by various policies and strategies, covering, for example, admissions, assessment and widening participation. During 2007-08, the University developed and approved a Student Employability and Skills Policy, which is intended to promote an integrated approach to skills development.

46   The University's two-stage procedure for the approval of programmes requires 'approval in principle' before a programme is developed for consideration by a programme evaluation meeting panel. To obtain first-stage approval, a school is expected to provide evidence that due consideration has been given to a programme's resource requirements. School-level documentation scrutinised by the audit team was both detailed and thorough, and there was evidence that careful consideration is given to each proposal. Following approval in principle, programme proposals are considered by a programme evaluation meeting panel.

47   Overall responsibility for ensuring that the University's policies and regulations reflect the Academic Infrastructure lies with the Education Committee (see also paragraph 28). The QAA Review of research degree programmes carried out in July 2006 confirmed that the University's procedures for postgraduate research students met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. A register of links with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) is maintained by the Academic Affairs Office. PSRB reports received by schools are copied to Academic Affairs. University-level requirements are directed to the

appropriate University committee or manager by Academic Affairs. The audit team saw evidence that this system is working well.

48   The University is committed to collecting and using student feedback and this is embedded in its Education Strategy, which states that the University will develop its student feedback systems so that student views inform the learning experience ensuring that it is truly student-centred. Student views are collected at school level mainly through module feedback, and at University level through student experience surveys. The use of National Student Survey (NSS) results, in particular, is both systematic and strategic.

49   The University is aware that its current policy on student evaluation of teaching dating from 1995 does not reflect the Code of practice and has to be updated. In 2007 it set up a working party, the Evaluation of Teaching Group, to explore the production of a centralised electronic system for student evaluation of teaching. The Group reported back to the Education Committee during 2008-09, and, at the time of the audit, was designing a set of core questions which could be supplemented by school or subject-specific ones as appropriate.

50   Heads of school are expected to ensure that there is a system in place for providing students with feedback on the action taken as a result of their comments. The audit team was informed that this usually happens through student representatives reporting back to their peers through the staff-student consultative committee process. The University will no doubt wish to explore more robust and systematic ways of ensuring that students receive timely and accurate feedback on the action taken as a result of their comments in module feedback.

51   Feedback on the academic experience of undergraduate students is collected directly through two bespoke internal surveys, covering first and second-year students respectively. Response rates on both surveys are reasonable at around 30 per cent. At the time of the audit, plans were being discussed for a survey of the views of taught postgraduate students. Student views on non-academic aspects of the student experience were collected using external consultants through the 2008 Queen's University Student Survey. Results from the survey were used to inform improvements of facilities and services. The audit team formed the view that the ways in which the University makes effective use of feedback from students, which is collected at institutional level, is a feature of good practice.

52   The audit team saw evidence that the University's approach to learning, teaching and assessment is often informed by student feedback, particularly that which is collected at University-level. There is, however, scope for adopting a more systematic way of 'closing the loop' in terms of reporting back to students on what changes were introduced as a result of their feedback, especially as, according to the University's Briefing Paper, only some school handbooks include information on responses to feedback. As part of the recommendation for the University to address the variability in education practices at school level, to ensure equity of treatment of all students and of the student experience (see paragraph 39), the team would encourage the University to take steps to ensure that the collection, analysis and use of students' views on teaching is fully and consistently embedded in all schools, and that effective ways are introduced to inform all students about responses to the feedback they have given to the University.

53   The University's commitment to including students in its quality assurance processes is contained in its Student Charter. Students' Union officers, elected from students by students, play important roles in representing the views of students on University committees and in discussions with senior staff. The setting of the Students' Union within Queen's University, as a division of the Directorate of Student Plus, is unusual, but that does not appear to inhibit Union officers working with and for the student body. The audit team was told by officers of the Students' Union that they have regular, informal meetings with the Vice-Chancellor and Registrar. They also meet fortnightly with the Director of Academic and Student Affairs and weekly with the Director of Student Plus. The Students' Union has a representative on virtually all key University committees, and is also invited to join committee subgroups and ad hoc working

groups as required. There is, however, no student representation on the University Management Board or University Operating Board.

54   Each school has a student representative on Academic Board which acts, in effect, as an institutional staff student consultative committee. Schools are required to have their own staff student consultative committees. Training for student representatives is offered by the Learning Development Service.

55   The SU advised the audit team, both through the SWS and in meetings, that not all schools met all of the University's requirements for staff-student consultative committees indicating that 'in all the areas researched in preparing for this submission the area of student representation at school level is certainly the University's weakest'. The SWS noted that there appears to be no monitoring of school staff-student consultative committees at the institutional level even though, according to its own Policy and Procedures Manual, the Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs is responsible for collating the responses from schools on membership of staff-student consultative committees on behalf of the Academic Board.

56   The audit team concluded that the University has clear, transparent and broadly effective arrangements for student representation on committees at different levels of the organisation, although there is evidence of variations in practice in terms of how staff-student consultative committees are operated in different schools. As part of the recommendation that the University addresses the variability in education practices at school level to ensure equity of treatment of all students and of the student experience (see paragraph 39), the team would encourage the University to take steps to ensure that every school meets the University's published requirements for the staff-student consultative committee system, and that an effective system is put in place, to ensure that outcomes of these committee meetings are reported back to the general student body in a timely and accessible manner.

57   The University reviewed its policy on research informed teaching in 2007 and approved a definition encompassing: students learning about others' research; students learning to do research; students learning in research mode; and staff engaging in pedagogic research. The process for achieving these goals is well embedded in the University's Education Strategy 2008 to 2011. The University has three Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (see paragraph 13), which have a strong emphasis on broad-based pedagogical research that is potentially useful across all disciplines. It has a number of media for disseminating the results of this research across schools. In its meetings with students, the audit team heard several examples of staff research informing and inspiring their teaching at all levels, and providing students with access to equipment used primarily for research. Students clearly felt that their programmes were well embedded in a research-active university.

58   The University's provision includes programmes delivered in part-time, work-based and flexible, distributed and distance-learning modes. The audit team found that the University was sensitive both to the needs of students in these categories and to a strategic need to increase its volume of work in some, and possibly all, of these areas and concluded that the University's arrangements for maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities in these modes are effective.

59   The University is considering expanding its e-learning and distributed and distance-learning provision. At present, approximately 67 per cent of undergraduate modules and 61 per cent of postgraduate modules involve some form of e-learning in conjunction with traditional media and methods, but e-learning is increasingly used on study or work placements. An e-Learning and Distance Learning Policy Group was established in December 2008, and was asked to oversee the development and implementation of an e-Learning and Distance Learning Policy, which was out for consultation with schools at the time of the audit.

60   The audit team was given sight of a Work-based and Placement Learning University Policy, which the University drew up in December 2008. At the time of the audit, it had yet to be disseminated, but is intended to supersede the Placement Learning: University Policy and Framework for the Approval of Work-Based Learning created just after the previous audit in 2005.

61   The Briefing Paper stated that the University's strategy is continually to improve its formal teaching space and its informal learning accommodation, in line with the University's Estates Strategy and Information Services Strategy and Action Plan 2006-2009. Senate has approved a Capital Development Plan 2008-2013, including currently approved and fully funded projects circa £127 million, along with 14 additional priority developments, costing an estimated £86.45 million. External examiners on taught undergraduate programmes are asked to comment on a programme's delivery, while those on taught postgraduate programmes are asked how the provision within a programme reflects its education aims and learning outcomes. The audit team found examples of such comments by external examiners in reports that it scrutinised for the academic year 2007-08.

62   A Students' Union survey found that a clear majority of students who responded to questions about the library and information technology resources felt that these services generally meet their needs as learners. The SWS suggested that there was some dissatisfaction with library opening hours, but the students whom the audit team met were critical of neither the level nor the nature of learning resource provision.

63   The audit team was satisfied that the University's management of learning resources was coherent, strategic and effective, and that it incorporated due reflection on, and action in respect of, feedback from both internal and external stakeholders.

64   The University's Admissions Policy is aligned with the University's Marketing and Recruitment Strategic Plan and underpins the Education Strategy. Overall responsibility for the Admissions Policy rests with the Education Committee. The Admissions Policy documents clearly institutional processes, requirements and expectations, including the division of responsibilities between the University and its schools.

65   Operational responsibility for undergraduate admissions rests with the Head of Admissions who works with academic selectors in each school, who make decisions on entry conditions. At the time of the audit visit, the University was developing a postgraduate admissions policy to guide schools. Currently the postgraduate admissions process is administered via the Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs, although schools select the students who are offered places.

66   The University's Marketing and Recruitment Strategic Plan, 2007 to 2011, recognises a need to market undergraduate courses to increase the quality of the student intake and to protect key subjects with falling enrolments (particularly in the sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics. Two strategic priorities over the period 2007 to 2011 are to increase postgraduate student numbers and improve the intake quality of undergraduates, with the intention of securing an institutional average of 400 points compared with around 360 for the 2008 intake.

67   Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data shows that the University admits a lower-than-expected number of overseas students, particularly at undergraduate level, and a significantly lower-than-expected proportion of ethnic minority first-year undergraduate students (2.3 per cent vs 16.2 per cent). The University's Widening Participation Policy 2008 to 2011 emphasises the need to raise awareness and aspirations, facilitate entry, and facilitate retention and progression.

68   The audit team concluded that the University has in place appropriate and well-documented procedures for ensuring the consistent implementation of its Admissions Policy.

69   The Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs oversees a number of student-facing administrative and support services. The Head of Student Welfare is located in the Student Guidance Centre, which provides a one-stop shop for professional guidance and advice. The audit team noted that particular efforts are made to respond to the needs of part-time students.

70   A Student Support Forum, a network of staff involved in delivering direct advice, guidance and support to prospective and current students, seeks to improve both student transition into higher education and progression and attainment while studying at the University. The Supporting Student Attainment Sub-Group, a subgroup of the Education Committee, investigates areas of collaborative work to support all applicants and students, but in particular, students from non-traditional backgrounds, students with disabilities, mature students and international students.

71   The Education Strategy 2008 to 2011 includes the promotion of student-centred approaches, which it claims are at the heart of the University's Centre for Educational Development. From September 2008, there has been an increasing emphasis on the academic school as the student's immediate community. The Centre for Educational Development works with schools to implement personal development planning, which students manage through Queen's Online. The University has created an Employability and Skills Policy, 2008 to 2011, part of which encourages all schools to promote and accredit personal development planning (PDP) as a core element of every student's academic experience and link employability and skills development and integration to careers education, information and guidance activities. The audit team noted that all schools had personal development planning schemes running for level 1 students, at least in 2007-08.

72   The Students' Union Management Board is developing a three-year Strategic Plan, reflecting the Union's desire to be at the forefront of delivering the student experience, and the anticipated change in the student population over the next three years resulting from the University's internationalisation and postgraduate objectives.

73   Each month, the University's senior management reviews a set of key student-related performance indicators that help to contextualise and motivate what the audit team was informed is a continuous effort by the University to support its students in attaining their academic and life goals. An area of concern to the University is its recognition that fewer students with disabilities apply for its academic courses than it would wish. Its Policy on Disability asserts a commitment to equality of opportunity for all students, but identifies a responsibility to encourage an increase in the proportion of students with disabilities who apply and are admitted to the University, to a level that is more reflective of the proportion of people with disabilities in the community at large.

74   The audit team was informed by senior managers that the University was concerned about retention of undergraduates at all levels. The team found clear evidence of a concerted, strategic effort to address the problem through a number of initiatives.

75   The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for student support, and supervision of those arrangements, were effective and implemented consistently.

76   Each newly-appointed member of staff is allocated a mentor for three years in addition to oversight by their own school probation committee. Unless they already hold a qualification recognised as equivalent by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), all probationer staff must enrol on the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching. The Certificate is also available to existing members of staff and the audit team was told that there has been some take-up. In addition, new staff on three-year probation must complete a one-day workshop on 'Supervising Research Students'. The team met some newly appointed staff, who confirmed that they were following all these requirements. Probation for more experienced lecturers or teaching fellows is normally between six months and two years. In addition, the Queen's Gender Initiative provides mentoring for female staff throughout the University. At the time of the audit visit,

this scheme was being extended to include academic-related, clerical and technical female staff. The team noted in particular, the depth of support provided by these mentoring schemes, as well as the thoroughness of the scrutiny involved in the probation system.

77   There is an annual programme of CPD workshops for staff with teaching responsibilities, organised under the six areas of the HEA's Higher Education Professional Standards Framework. In addition, the Centre for Educational Development organises workshops for staff who are applying for HEA accreditation. The audit team noted in particular, the support provided to staff by a range of units within the University, and the way in which the support was sensitive to the evolving needs of schools and individuals within those schools.

78   The University's annual Teaching Awards scheme is open to all staff and is intended to recognise noteworthy examples of traditional methods, as well as innovative approaches. In 2008-09, 10 awards were available, each worth £1,000 for the exclusive use of the winning team or individual for personal or professional development. The audit team noted the wide range of academic and non-academic staff eligible for teaching awards.

79   The University expects its staff to perform at a high level in teaching and the management of learning, and in terms of their interaction with business and the community. These expectations are reflected in the appraisal process, in the monthly review of school performance and in the promotions procedures for all levels of staff. Promotion to professor on the basis of excellence in education, including the management of learning, leadership and performance and development, is a recognised route within the University. Contribution to the community is expected to involve participation in community outreach activities registered on the web-based University Community Outreach Directory. This aspect of the promotions scheme reflects, in part, one element of the University's Mission (see paragraph 7), namely to fully embrace its leadership role in Northern Ireland. The audit team concluded that the promotions procedure is thorough, rigorous and fair, and informed by a wish to support staff and retain their commitment to the University and its mission.

80   The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for managing the quality of teaching and postgraduate research student supervision through its human resources procedures, and supervision of those arrangements, were effective and implemented consistently. In the view of the team, the range and degree of staff support and development at all levels and in all areas of the University's work, is a feature of good practice.

81   The audit team concludes that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4   Institutional approach to quality enhancement

82   In March 2008, the University adopted its own definition of quality enhancement, namely 'the successful outcome of systematic consideration of the quality of student educational experience which identifies opportunities for improvement and acts upon them'. It emphasises a deliberate decision by the University to 'move from a retrospective review of past activities to one more focussed on the future and opportunities for enhancement' and is informed by QAA's definition of enhancement. Each head of school is responsible for quality enhancement within the school, overseen by a dean.

83   The main vehicle through which this new approach is delivered is the Educational Enhancement Process, (described in more detail in Section 2 of this report). This Process which operates at school level, was piloted in 2007-08. Following subsequent modifications, the first Educational Enhancement Process took place in March 2009. It has an emphasis on the importance of 'external expertise'. It replaced the previous periodic review process, which had an emphasis on monitoring and quality assurance. The audit team was not persuaded, however, that, despite its title and the professed focus on the future, this Process differs a great deal from

the periodic review process which it replaces. The focus on opportunities for enhancement appears, in practice, to have meant a desire to identify and resolve problems, particularly in relation to issues raised in feedback from students. The Educational Enhancement Process process also appears to the team to be driven, at least in part, by the quest for efficiency gains, in terms of reducing the administrative burden and duration of review. Furthermore, each school has an Educational Enhancement Process review only once every six years, so it is not clear how it can regarded as a continuous quality enhancement process.

84   Beyond the formal Educational Enhancement Process and module and programme review processes, the University's approach to quality enhancement is informed by the various forms of feedback it collects from its students and the use of key performance indicators (considered in more detail in Section 2 of this report). The University website includes pages on supporting excellence in teaching, which describe a number of initiatives that are designed to assist in achieving the University's commitment to the continuous enhancement of teaching.

85   The audit team concluded that, through Educational Enhancement Process and the other mechanisms outlined above, the University has made good progress in recent years in developing a more enhancement-led approach to the student experience. This goes some way towards its objective of 'developing an overall strategy' which would be of assistance in determining the University's priorities, and in evaluating the progress it is able to make. Its approach also underpins the University's claim to be a reflective institution with an increasing emphasis on quality enhancement. In addition, the team recognised other, University-level, initiatives that have the potential to enhance the student experience. However, the team considers it desirable for the University to develop an institution-wide framework for enhancing the quality of the student experience that embraces both school-level and University initiatives, in order to maximise the benefits of steps which are already being taken.

Section 5:   Collaborative arrangements

86   The University's portfolio of collaborative provision has expanded in the period since the last audit. The Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs Policies and Procedures Manual identifies fives types of collaborative arrangement: Foundation Degrees, articulation, validation, franchising, and joint programmes. The majority of the provision within the portfolio comprises franchise and validation arrangements, and a significant proportion of the University's collaborative provision is delivered within its region. Indeed, the University's collaborative arrangements make a significant contribution to its engagement with the region.

87   The Briefing Paper stated that the University exercises full responsibility for the academic standards of all awards granted in its name, including those awarded under collaborative arrangements, and that the Collaborative Provision Group discharges this responsibility on behalf of the University. The Briefing Paper also indicated that the 'standard procedures' for quality assurance are applied, with some variations, in the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision. Staff from partner organisations who teach on a University programme must apply to the Collaborative Provision Group for appointment as 'recognised teachers' and the evidence seen by the audit team demonstrated that this Group is diligent in the execution of this responsibility.

88   The University's procedures require the appointment of 'University Coordinators' for each collaborative arrangement or programme. They provide a focus on the development, monitoring and enhancement of the collaborative arrangement at programme level. Although the Guidelines for University Coordinators (contained within the Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs Policies and Procedures Manual) emphasise their importance in maintaining standards and ensuring ongoing dialogue with the collaborative organisation, their accountability and reporting obligations are not specified in this document. The Manual requires University coordinators to produce an annual report to the Collaborative Provision Group and on further investigation it became apparent that this requirement is fulfilled by the completion by coordinators of the annual programme

reports for the partnerships for which they are responsible. The audit team considered whether this was appropriate or whether assigning responsibility for the production of the Annual Programme Review to its partner organisations, with the University Coordinators producing a separate and independent report to the Collaborative Provision Group, might afford appropriate evidence from collaborative partners to enable this Group to discharge its responsibilities on behalf of Academic Council.

89   The scrutiny of Annual Programme Review reports is undertaken by a subgroup of the Collaborative Provision Group. The team noted that the minutes of this Group do not provide a record of issues identified through this process. The summary report is short, focused on process rather than substantive issues, and does not provide details relating to individual partnerships. The team also noted that in February 2008 the this Group had considered and approved 'a proposal to streamline the annual reporting of annual review of programmes including collaborative provision' with the effect that a single form would be used for all programmes. Whilst, in discussions with staff, it was explained that the proforma would be enhanced to ensure the inclusion of additional information, the team recommends that it is advisable that the University considers whether the Annual Programme Review process provides the Collaborative Provision Group and the Education Committee with sufficient evidence of appropriate quality and reliability from schools and collaborative partners, to enable them to discharge their responsibilities on behalf of Academic Council (see also paragraph 21).

90   A recent meeting of Collaborative Provision Group noted that the University's Regional Collaborative Provision Group had considered a paper, which outlined the findings of an audit of the approaches to collaborative provision adopted by 12 Russell Group Universities. This report had identified examples of good practice for possible adoption by the University, including a risk-assessment tool to determine the level of scrutiny required when considering a collaborative proposal. The University is at an early stage in considering changes to its procedures, and its current plan is to provide guidance on the general questions that should be considered in the development rather than the approval of new partnerships. The audit team considered that the University is exercising appropriate caution in introducing a procedure that could have significant implications for the level of scrutiny applied to the approval of new provision.

91   The University's portfolio includes several articulation arrangements. At the time of the audit, the University Operating Board was considering a proposal which would remove the requirement that there should be a 'validation stage' in the approval of proposed articulation arrangements. Although staff confirmed that the Board paper clarified the extant procedure, the University will no doubt wish to ensure that its procedure for the approval of articulation arrangements retains appropriate measures to ensure the academic compatibility of a partner's provision, and the University programme to which students will progress.

92   The University maintains a partnership with Stranmillis University College and St Mary's University College. These were described to the audit team as being autonomous, but academically integrated with the University, and the Briefing Paper states that they are 'regarded as having the status of Schools'. The Memoranda of Agreement for these two partnerships are comprehensive and detailed, indicating that the University exercises appropriate oversight of the colleges' provision.

93   The audit team observed, however, that Stranmillis University College (SUC) itself maintains a number of partnerships which lead to University awards. The Memorandum of Agreement for the University College's partnership with Omagh College describes SUC as acting 'under delegated authority from the Academic Council of Queen's University'. The University is not a signatory to the Memorandum and there is no provision for its involvement in arbitration. There are, however, references to University involvement in the appointment of recognised teachers, programme modifications, student registration, the appointment of external examiners, and the approval of publicity. The team was informed that the University monitors the partnership through the receipt of the Annual Programme Review for SUC, and through its

periodic review procedure. It was confirmed that there is no University Coordinator for this provision, and that the only direct evidence that is regularly available to the University is that provided by its external examiner reports. In the absence of a formal accreditation agreement with SUC, the team concluded that, pending the planned merger of the University College with the University, it would be advisable for the University to consider the means by which it might secure a direct involvement in the partnership between SUC and Omagh College.

94   As already noted, the University's Briefing Paper indicated that the Charter of the University precludes it from employing staff to teach theology. The undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in this discipline that have been validated by the University, and which are delivered by four independent theological colleges, are managed by the University's Institute of Theology. Although the Institute has the status of, and is subject to the same procedural requirements as, a University school, it employs only two staff. The Chair and the majority of the membership of its Education Committee are drawn from the Colleges, and the Head of the Institute acts as the University Coordinator for all four partnerships.

95   In the light of this information, the audit team concluded that the Institute was unlikely to possess the capacity to manage the University's partnerships in theology. The team also considered whether the Institute's Education Committee has the capacity to oversee the provision on behalf of the University and concluded that the Committee was insufficiently independent of the partner colleges to provide objective assurances of the quality and academic standards of the provision for which it is responsible. Finally, the team sought to establish whether the manner in which the University's quality assurance procedures are applied to its provision in theology provided it with sufficient information for the purposes of discharging its responsibilities. The team noted, in particular, that the limitations which it was advised are imposed by the University's Charter, the nature of the partnerships in this area, and the form of the current Memoranda of Agreement meant that the University would be unable to discharge its residual obligations to enable students to complete their studies, in the event of the termination of one or more of the collaborative arrangements. The team considered that it is advisable for the University to review the memoranda of agreement and current arrangements, including its own structures, for the management of collaborative provision in theology.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

96   The audit team found the University to have a widely and fully developed research culture appropriate for the recruitment of research students. Its schools are 'research-led' and each has one or more of the University's 84 research clusters, each led by a director of research. At the time of the audit visit, the University interpreted the results of its 2008 Research Assessment Exercise submission as demonstrating that it was 'in the top 20 universities in the UK'.

97   Strategic responsibility for postgraduate research students rests with the Pro Vice-Chancellor Research and Postgraduates, who chairs the University's Research Committee. The Committee appoints external examiners, and is responsible for overseeing the University's arrangements for assuring the quality and standards of research degree programmes and all aspects of University policy, regulations and training for postgraduate research students. Primary responsibility for day-to-day decisions concerning postgraduate research students is devolved to schools, each of which has its own school postgraduate research committee that reports to the central Postgraduate Office.

98   The Postgraduate Office liaises closely with the Admissions Office, which administers the admissions process for postgraduate research students. The audit team noted that, in September 2006, the UK GRAD Programme had rated the University's 'Grad School' the best in the UK.

99   All applications for research degree registration are considered by at least two members of the relevant school's staff. Once recruited, new students are invited to induction events organised by groups of cognate schools. A Personal Development Planning Handbook is issued to students

explaining what personal development planning involves, and their supervisors are expected to assist students in its use. The audit team noted that none of the postgraduate research students it met had used personal development planning, but the Postgraduate Office is reporting to the Research Committee in 2009-10 on ways in which engagement with this planning can be strengthened.

100   Every student has a principal supervisor, a second supervisor is normally appointed, and a third supervisor may, exceptionally, be appointed where a student's research is interdisciplinary. A supervisor may not normally be the principal supervisor for more than six full-time research students (or equivalent) at any one time. The principal supervisor normally meets a full-time student at least six times a year, and the second supervisor twice a year. The audit team met a number of postgraduate research students, all of whom had two supervisors, whom they met regularly, on a weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis.

101   All new members of academic staff on a three-year probationary period must complete a one-day supervisors' training course before qualifying to be a principal supervisor. The audit team noted that the University had employed an external consultant to offer a two-day refresher programme to existing supervisors in February 2009. Members of the University's Postgraduate Advisory Body had been invited to attend and to report their opinions on the appropriateness of this training as a model for regular support training for staff in the future.

102   The Postgraduate Skills Training Programme aims to support research students in developing a range of professional skills in order to complete their PhD and increase their employability. It consists of formal training courses in transferable skills coordinated centrally by the Postgraduate Office; subject-specific training coordinated by schools, and developmental opportunities. Employability-related skills training is the responsibility of a senior careers adviser, while a senior counsellor offers personal-effectiveness skills training. The students whom the audit team met, confirmed that they had completed, or were in the process of completing, the stipulated training requirements, and two students had taken advantage of careers advice. The effectiveness of the Postgraduate Skills Training Programme is monitored through a continuous process of evaluation, using feedback forms and focus groups with students, supervisors and employers. In the view of the audit team, the University is particularly aware of the need to decide how best to provide for its part-time postgraduate research students.

103   Students who undertake teaching or demonstrating are required to undergo training before beginning such work. According to the Notes of Guidance for Supervisors, schools normally set a limit on the amount of teaching and demonstrating that a student may do, in order not to hinder the progress of their research. However, the audit team concluded that there is currently a range of different practices across the schools. In the interests, not only of postgraduate research students but also of the undergraduate student body, the team recommends that it is desirable that the University clarifies further, and standardises across schools, both the training the University requires of those postgraduate research students who teach, demonstrate and/or contribute to the assessment of undergraduate students, and the limits it imposes on the extent of such activities.

104   All students must agree a research plan with their supervisors at the outset of their research and attend courses and undertake research as specified in the plan. Progress thereafter is monitored through regular supervisions, initial review and subsequent annual progress monitoring. A supervisor who has concerns about a student's progress must bring this to the immediate attention of both the student and the relevant head of school. All research students are included in the University-wide annual progress monitoring exercise. Students cannot re-register for a new academic year unless their progress has been deemed satisfactory. MPhil/PhD students are initially 'undifferentiated' but at 'differentiation' normally within nine months of initial registration, if they are full-time students can be upgraded to PhD. Students can only make two (or, exceptionally, three) attempts at differentiation.

105   The oral examination of a thesis is chaired by an independent member of academic staff, who is in attendance only for the purpose of monitoring the conduct of the examination and who completes and submits a standard report to the Student Administrative Services and Systems. One of the student's supervisors attends the oral, but the student has the right to request that the supervisor not be present. Examiners are expected to take cognisance of the guidance provided in the FHEQ, and if they cannot reach agreement, the University appoints an additional external examiner, whose decision is final. The audit team was satisfied that oral examinations are managed with an appropriate degree of rigour and that the University responsibly considers an annual summary of the salient issues raised in examiners' reports.

106   A student who is dissatisfied with the outcome of the progress monitoring exercise, differentiation or examination may appeal to the University Postgraduate Appeals Committee. The appeals procedure is set out in full in the core regulations for the degrees of PhD and MPhil, which are published on the University's website. A recent research student appeal that went to the University's Board of Visitors for consideration resulted in the Board commenting to the University that it was 'regrettable that there was no written schedule of supervision'. The Research Committee has consequently decided that all of the component parts of the University's Institutional Code of Practice become a requirement, rather than simply a guide to best practice, and that a record of all meetings, at which the student was able to raise issues with the supervisor to discuss progress, should be kept.

107   One mechanism by which the University monitors and reflects on its postgraduate research student provision and the performance of its students is through the Postgraduate Office's annual review of research degree programmes. The audit team scrutinised the review for the academic year 2006-07, as it had been reported to the University Research Committee in May 2008. The report noted that many schools had developed and delivered their own training programmes, which added significantly to students' formal training hours, and enhanced the overall postgraduate student experience. Schools arrange student representation on school committees and the University conducts surveys of student views. The team saw evidence that the University is responsive to students' views. The postgraduate research students whom the audit team met, expressed satisfaction, both with the work of the recently established Postgraduate Students' Association and with the extent of postgraduate research student representation on committees.

108 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision for postgraduate research programmes meet the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, that it made use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points, and that it is committed to improving its provision wherever possible.

Section 7:   Published information

109   The University publishes a wide range of information in hard copy and electronic format. Schools also produce a wide variety of promotional material for prospective students and handbooks and other literature for current students in both hard copy and on the web. Programme specifications produced by schools and approved by the Courses and Regulations Group are available to staff and students on Queens Online. The audit team found that the completeness of these varied between programmes but the University is aware of this and they are currently being audited by the Courses and Regulations Group to be discussed by the Education Committee later in the year. A new template has been developed for use on Qsis, which will have an interface to allow public access to programme specifications in 2009-10.

110   The Publications and Website Unit in the Directorate of Marketing, Recruitment and Communications conducts research to ensure that students' needs are being met, and provides schools with some core material for including in handbooks and other school literature. The Directorate of Academic and Student Affairs is responsible for the accuracy and completeness of the General Regulations published in the University Calendar after they have been approved by the

Courses and Regulations Group and the Education Committee. The audit team found these to be clearly written. The team noted that here, as elsewhere, the current document still refers to faculties.

111   The University Website Board oversees the University's website, with the Website Manager in the Directorate of Information Services having overall responsibility for the website. The accuracy of information on the Unistats website is monitored by the Planning Office and the Centre for Educational Development. The audit team found that the information about the University that was publicly available, complied with the requirements specified by HEFCE in Annexe F of HEFCE 06/45, *Review of the Quality assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes*.

112   Schools are responsible for the accuracy and completeness of their own promotional and recruitment literature and for programme and module handbooks. There are no University prescribed procedures for the structure of these handbooks and practice varies, but in some cases school directors of education sign-off documents. There is no central overview of internal publications of this kind. Schools are also responsible for their own web pages. The audit team scrutinised six handbooks and found considerable variability in their coverage. Schools are also responsible for producing programme specifications. The University is aware that there is some inconsistency in the way these are completed and is taking steps to address this. The recommendation for the University to address the variability in education practices at school level, to ensure equity of treatment of all students, and of the student experience (see paragraph 39) is relevant to this aspect of University provision.

113   The memoranda of agreement with collaborative partners require them to obtain approval for all their published information that refers to the University, but there is no formal central overview of material produced by collaborating institutions.

114   In meetings with the audit team, students confirmed the view in the SWS that the core publicity material and prospectuses, both printed and on the University's website, are an accurate account of the University and reflected their subsequent experience as students. All categories of students the team met, also reported that the material they received at induction was helpful and informative.

115   Overall, the audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the university publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards, but felt that more could be done to improve the consistency and completeness of school handbooks.

Section 8   Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

116   The audit team identified the following features of good practice:

- the ways in which the University makes effective use of feedback from students, which is collected at institutional level (paragraph 51)

- the range and degree of staff support and development at all levels and in all areas of the University's work (paragraph 80).

Recommendations for action

117   The audit team makes the following recommendations.

It is advisable for the University to:

- consider whether the Annual Programme Review process provides the Education Committee and the Collaborative Provision Group with sufficient evidence of appropriate quality and reliability from schools and collaborative partners to enable them to discharge their responsibilities on behalf of Academic Council (paragraphs 21, 89)

- address the variability in education practices at school level to ensure equity of treatment of all students and of the student experience (paragraphs 39, 52, 56 and 112)

- consider the means by which it might secure a direct involvement in the partnership between Stranmillis University College and Omagh College (paragraph 93)

- review the memoranda of agreement and current arrangements, including its own structures, for the management of collaborative provision in theology (paragraph 95).

118   It is desirable for the University to:

- consider establishing a formal reporting and accountability relationship between each school's senior academic committee or committees and the relevant committee(s) of Academic Council and make committee minutes and papers readily accessible to staff and students (paragraph 19)

- develop an institution-wide framework for enhancing the quality of the student experience that embraces both school-level and University initiatives, in order to maximise the benefits of steps which are already being taken (paragraph 85)

- clarify further and standardise across schools both the training the University requires of those postgraduate research students who teach, demonstrate and or contribute to the assessment of undergraduate students, and the limits it imposes on the extent of such activities (paragraph 103).

Appendix

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

The University welcomes the outcome of the Institutional audit and the Quality Assurance Agency's judgement that confidence can be reasonably placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of the learning opportunities available to its students.

Students are, of course, the University's top priority and the University is gratified to note that its use of feedback from students has been identified as a feature of good practice. The University is pleased that the importance of staff support and development has also been recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency as a feature of good practice.

The report contains a number of recommendations, all of which will be considered and acted upon in the most appropriate manner. Some of the recommendations build on work in progress, for example, a current review of committee terms of reference and membership, a review of support, training and guidance for student representatives, and the introduction of a Student Transition Project which will draw together institution-wide initiatives to enhance the quality of the student experience.

The final report will now be considered in detail by the University's Education Committee and the University Management Board. The report recommendations, together with any other suggestions for improvement which the University decides to implement, will be included in an action plan which will be implemented and monitored through the University's academic committee structure.