



# Higher Education Review of University of Durham

March 2016

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## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the University of Durham. The review took place from 29 February to 3 March 2016 and was conducted by a team of five reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Alison Blackburn
- Professor Mary Carswell
- Mr Neil Mackenzie (student reviewer)
- Professor Andrew McRae
- Professor Peter Smith.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the University of Durham and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

In reviewing the University of Durham the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2015-16 are Student Employability and Digital Literacy,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)<sup>4</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code).

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Review themes: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859).

<sup>3</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review web pages: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review).

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about University of Durham

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the University of Durham.

- The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards **meet** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at the University of Durham.

- The comprehensive and high-quality pastoral support for students' personal development and learning provided by colleges, departments and professional services (Expectation B4).
- The systematic commitment to providing a wide range of extracurricular activities that enrich the student experience (Expectation B4).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to the University of Durham.

By September 2016:

- establish, consistently apply and monitor a University-wide policy for the timeliness of feedback on assessment (Expectation B6)
- develop and implement a consistent approach to communication with students to ensure that they are well informed about important issues relating to their learning experience (Expectations C, B5, B6 and B7).

### Theme: Student Employability

Graduate employability is a key institutional priority and a focus across all levels and departments of the University of Durham. Institution-wide activity to develop student employability is intended to encourage students to consider their development of employability skills from the beginning of their programme to maximise the opportunities available.

Student satisfaction with the University's support for the development of employability has been increasing in the light of activities adopted by the University, with the level of satisfaction felt by first-year students appearing to be higher than that of others. While students spoke positively of the University's provision of support for career development, they also expressed the view that there is a need for the University to promote a broader range of career opportunities and to offer support uniformly across all subject areas.

Employers spoke in very positive terms regarding the capabilities of students whom they had employed either for graduate positions or for placements, and expressed positive views regarding their relationships with the University.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#).

## About University of Durham

The University of Durham (the University) seeks the highest distinction in research and scholarship and is committed to excellence in all aspects of education and transmission of knowledge. Its University Strategy 2010-20 sets out its goal of achieving the highest standards in research-led education and a stimulating environment that empowers all to learn and develop to their full potential. The University is collegiate in nature, its 16 residential colleges aiming to enrich the experience of its students by providing a wide range of developmental opportunities within social and intellectual communities.

The University has in excess of 17,000 students, of whom about 13,000 are studying at undergraduate levels, the remainder being enrolled on taught postgraduate programmes or as research students. Programmes of study are delivered by the University's 23 academic departments and schools, which are organised into three faculties: Arts and Humanities, Science, and Social Sciences and Health.

The University operates across two campuses. The majority of programmes are based at the University's campus in the city of Durham. Some programmes are also delivered at the Queen's Campus in Stockton-on-Tees, which also serves as the location for one of the University's schools.

The University was subject to an Institutional Audit by QAA in 2009. During the period since the Audit, the University has continued to develop its academic strategy, one element of which is an Education Strategy for the period 2015-20. The University's collaborative provision, although remaining comparatively small relative to the sector as a whole, has grown following a commercial partnership involving the Business School and a collaboration with the Church of England and a range of Theological Education Institutes. During this period the University has also conducted an internal review of the operation of its Senate and has developed strengthened processes for periodic review of its programmes.

The report of the Institutional Audit in 2009 included four desirable recommendations and drew attention to four features of good practice. The review team considered the progress made by the University in implementing the recommendations and concluded that they have all been satisfactorily addressed. The review team also found that the areas of good practice have been continued and strengthened.

## Explanation of the findings about University of Durham

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

## **1 Judgement: The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards**

**Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:**

**a) ensure that the requirements of The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are met by:**

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

**b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics**

**c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework**

**d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

### **Findings**

1.1 The regulations for programmes define the University's awards both in terms of their level within *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and in terms of credit attainment. Awards are named in accordance with the titling conventions of the FHEQ, and the University's qualification descriptors for each award are drawn from the FHEQ qualification descriptors. Although levels are aligned, the University has retained the naming conventions of Levels 1 to 5 internally (equating to FHEQ Levels 4 to 8), making clear on the Diploma Supplement the FHEQ and European levels.

1.2 Programme learning outcomes are documented on programme specifications and module learning outcomes are documented on module descriptions, which are available online in the Faculty Handbook.

1.3 The University's procedures for programme approval and review are designed to ensure that programmes meet all the requirements of the FHEQ and take account of Subject Benchmark Statements. For new courses, external subject specialists are required to confirm that the standards set for qualifications are consistent with the FHEQ. For existing courses, external examiners are required annually to consider whether the standards of the programmes are consistent with those required by the University qualification descriptors, and thus with the FHEQ.

1.4 Exit awards are available on all programmes to those students who have fulfilled the credit requirements for that award and achieved the learning outcomes of modules at the appropriate level.

1.5 The University has clear regulations, and appropriate policies and procedures, which would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.6 The review team met staff involved with processes for the review and approval of programmes, and looked at examples of completed programme approval documentation, programme specifications and regulations; templates of and completed external examiner reports; and documentation relevant to courses provided in partnership with collaborative partners.

1.7 Programme approval documentation demonstrates that careful consideration is paid to FHEQ descriptors; external examiners' reports confirm that the standards of University awards are appropriate and take account of relevant external reference points, specifically that the aims and objectives of the programme align with Subject Benchmark Statements. The programme specifications of undergraduate programmes set out the expected learning outcomes for each level of study. For postgraduate taught qualifications, where the exit awards are at the same FHEQ level as the target award, the University's generic qualification descriptors are used to identify the learning outcomes.

1.8 The University makes appropriate use of external frames of reference. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low, as the University implements and monitors its procedures effectively.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.9 The Senate is ultimately responsible for the standards of the University's awards, and for approving the frameworks within which the standards are defined. These include the core regulations, University qualification descriptors and generic assessment criteria. The Education Committee (EC), its Quality and Standards Sub-Committee (QSSC) and Boards of Examiners have specific operational responsibilities for maintaining standards. The Senate receives regular reports from EC on the work undertaken on behalf of the Senate, as well as recommendations on those matters for which the Senate retains responsibility. Reports from EC are supplemented by an annual report directly from the QSSC.

1.10 The University has a governance framework designed to ensure that it can discharge its responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities. The Senate has delegated responsibility to Boards of Examiners to confirm the award of credit and qualifications to students. The conduct of Boards of Examiners is monitored through annual overview reports made to the QSSC, and through the appointment of a Chief External Examiner, who also reports annually to the QSSC. The Chief External Examiner's reports are in turn reported in full to the Senate.

1.11 The award of academic credit and regulations is determined by Core Regulations, which are approved by the Senate and Council on the recommendation of the EC. The regulations are supported by detailed guidance set out in the Learning and Teaching Handbook, covering, for example, the conduct of assessment and the operation of discretion.

1.12 The University uses generic assessment criteria at undergraduate and taught postgraduate levels to describe levels of achievement in relation to knowledge and skills, and these are set out in the University Calendar.

1.13 The University's regulations and its governance structure would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.14 The review team met staff and students, and scrutinised a range of minutes of meetings and reports made to committees.

1.15 Academic staff demonstrated a clear understanding of the appropriate academic levels and key external reference points for setting and maintaining academic standards. Minutes of Boards of Examiners show that external examiners were present as required and able to confirm that standards were met and regulations applied in a consistent manner.

1.16 The University has comprehensive frameworks and regulations governing the award of credit and qualifications, which are well understood and effective in securing standards. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.17 The University maintains and publishes a set of documents (programme specifications, programme regulations and module outlines) that together form the definitive record for a programme and its award. These documents are used for all programme approval, monitoring and review processes.

1.18 The University provides through its website an easily accessible archive of programme specifications for existing and former students, as well as a course database for prospective students. All current and archived module outlines, along with programme regulations, are also provided online through the Faculty Handbook (for undergraduate modules, including Level 7 modules offered within integrated master's programmes) and the Postgraduate Module Handbook for taught postgraduate modules.

1.19 The University's approach to definitive records would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.20 The review team discussed the use of definitive records with students and staff during the review visit, and was supplied with a range of information to support the University's approach. This included quality assurance procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review; programme specifications; and module descriptors and student handbooks.

1.21 Programme specifications include details of the qualification title, structure and modules, and a mapping grid showing how programme learning outcomes are delivered within the programme structure. As noted under Expectation A1, learning outcomes for exit awards are linked to the University's generic qualification descriptors.

1.22 There are robust processes for approving revisions to programmes, with new modules and changes to existing modules and programmes being scrutinised by chairs of Faculty Education Committees (FECs) on behalf of their committees. The use of templates for programme specifications and module descriptors facilitates the production and shared understanding of the information. These documents are detailed and comprehensive.

1.23 The University has appropriate and robust approaches to the provision and maintenance of definitive records. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

## **Findings**

1.24 The University demonstrates a clear commitment to setting and maintaining threshold academic standards. Its quality management framework specifies a commitment to meeting external reference points, including the FHEQ. It has additionally mapped its policy and practice against the Quality Code, Part A. The QSSC holds authority delegated from the EC for programme approval, re-validation and withdrawal.

1.25 The framework that defines the academic standards of each type of award made by the University is aligned with the FHEQ. Qualification descriptors for undergraduate and postgraduate degrees are supported by matrices for undergraduate and postgraduate level descriptors.

1.26 The University's policy and practices would allow this Expectation to be met.

1.27 The review team considered a range of documentation, including qualification descriptors and the quality management framework, and met senior staff and teaching staff.

1.28 The University requires due regard to its qualification descriptors and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements in the course of programme approval. The criteria for new programme approval requires the proposer to demonstrate at stage two that the programme 'meets the standards of the University as defined by its qualification descriptors, level descriptors and assessment criteria' and that its intended learning outcomes are 'appropriate to the Subject Benchmark Statements'. Evidence was provided of these procedures in operation, at the level of taught programmes and also research degrees.

1.29 The University also has a clear process for the approval of new modules, and evidence was provided of departmental processes for approving alterations to modules. Evidence of the process in operation was considered.

1.30 The review team found that the principles of programme design and their application at the University have clear cross-reference to UK threshold standards. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.31 The award of academic credit and qualifications is determined by Core Regulations that are approved by the Senate and Council on the recommendation of the EC. The regulations are supported by detailed guidance and protocols in the Learning and Teaching Handbook.

1.32 The University's processes for programme approval, and programme monitoring and review, require the necessary learning outcomes, UK threshold standards and the University's own academic standards to be demonstrated through assessment before any credit or qualifications are awarded. The design of the University's policies and procedures would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.33 The review team tested the operation of these processes by reviewing a range of documentation and by meeting relevant staff and students.

1.34 The Senate is ultimately responsible for academic standards, with specific operational responsibilities for maintaining standards being delegated to the EC, QSSC and Boards of Examiners. Boards of Examiners are monitored through annual overview reports considered by FECs and the QSSC, and through annual reports to the QSSC from the Chief Examiner on the operation of these boards. The Chief Examiner's report is then reported to the Senate. The QSSC also considers reports on student progression and classification for undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research degree students. The review team reviewed a range of these reports and concluded that they were informative and appropriate.

1.35 The University defines the level of its awards by reference to its qualification descriptors, which are drawn from and align well with the FHEQ. Programme specifications appropriately describe how the programme outcomes meet the requirements of these University qualification descriptors and Subject Benchmark Statements, and show how module learning outcomes relate to programme learning outcomes. This is consistently checked through the University's programme approval and review processes. This is also commented on each year in the external examiner annual reports. Any change to module learning outcomes or assessments requires the approval of the chair of the relevant FEC, and anything other than a minor change requires the approval of the external examiner.

1.36 The University has effective processes to ensure credit and qualifications are awarded only when the necessary learning outcomes have been demonstrated through assessment, and when both UK threshold standards and its own academic standards have been satisfied. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.37 The University has in place clear review processes which contribute towards the maintenance of academic standards. These are articulated in the quality management framework.

1.38 The annual monitoring of each programme includes consideration of student achievement data, student satisfaction data, graduate destinations and external examiners' reports. Annual monitoring processes also consider any new or revised Subject Benchmark Statements, while external examiners' reports are used to provide assurance that threshold standards are being set and met on programmes.

1.39 Periodic review is conducted at departmental level on a six-yearly basis. These reviews require departments to reflect holistically on their educational provision and research activity. While the status of research in these reviews is being reconsidered, the fundamental attention to academic standards remains unaffected.

1.40 The University's policy and practices, as evidenced in the course of the review, would allow this Expectation to be met.

1.41 The review team reviewed the University's relevant policy documents and considered examples of reports arising from annual monitoring and periodic review. The team met staff who oversee the review processes, and those involved in the day-to-day management of reviews, as well as teaching staff and students.

1.42 The annual monitoring process is documented in a report form that is considered by the appropriate FEC. On the basis of a consideration of these reports, the FEC chair prepares an overview report; these reports are considered in due course by the QSSC. Actions identified in annual monitoring are pursued until closed.

1.43 Periodic reviews consider programme specifications against the University's qualification descriptors and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. The process for making changes to programmes is clearly articulated; cumulative changes to programmes may prompt the chair of a FEC to judge that a re-approval process is required. The review team saw evidence of the re-approval of an existing programme, which underwent a programme approval process following major changes, being conducted with care and rigour in the attention to programme structure and delivery. The educational aspects of cross-disciplinary programmes are subjected to monitoring and periodic review according to the same processes as those for single-discipline programmes.

1.44 The University's processes for monitoring and review are effective in ensuring that academic standards are set and maintained. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:**

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.45 External subject specialists are appointed as external assessors for programme approval and periodic review. The Learning and Teaching Handbook sets out the criteria for appointment and their role. All programmes leading to an award of the University are overseen by at least one external examiner appointed using criteria aligned with the Quality Code. The University has also appointed an independent Chief Examiner who considers the operation of assessment within the University as a whole and annually reviews the operation of the University's Boards of Examiners.

1.46 The University's policies and procedures require external and independent expertise to be used at key stages to advise on setting and maintaining standards. Their design would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.47 The review team tested the operation of these processes by reviewing documentation including policies, procedure and handbooks relating to the use of external expertise, and by meeting relevant staff and employers.

1.48 External specialists are provided with documentation that sets out the academic standards of the programme and University (including programme specifications, qualification descriptors, assessment criteria and benchmarks) and comment explicitly on the match between the proposal and the required academic standards. They also comment on any relevant professional body requirements; the appropriateness of the proposed assessment in measuring achievement of the module and programme learning outcomes; and whether the design of the curriculum will enable the aims and intended learning outcomes to be met.

1.49 The University encourages accreditation of programmes by relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) and provides guidance to departments on gaining this. Support for PSRB accreditation visits is available from the Academic Support Office (ASO) and their outcomes are monitored internally through Faculty Periodic Review and Accreditation Panels and through consideration by QSSC.

1.50 The University has clear and rigorous procedures for managing the work of external examiners in securing its academic standards. There are clear published criteria for the appointment of external examiners for taught and research degree programmes. Boards of Examiners review and approve marks to ensure that students have met the intended learning outcomes of any awards made and external examiners consistently confirm in their reports that the standards approved for the programme have been set, delivered and achieved. External examiners are consulted about changes, with particular reference to new modules. Feedback from external examiners is captured in an annual overview report considered by QSSC which confirms that external examiners agree that programmes are aligned with the Subject Benchmark Statements and that academic standards are maintained.

1.51 While the University has no explicit requirement for employer involvement in programme approval and review, there have been instances of employers helpfully contributing to new programme proposals. This involvement includes the use of Employer Fora such as the Durham Earth Sciences Advisory Board and a range of Advisory Boards in Durham Business School. This interaction with employers has strengthened the extent of the external and independent advice in these areas: the University may wish to consider building on this approach by encouraging such interaction more widely.

1.52 The University makes clear use of external and independent expertise to advise on whether UK threshold academic standards, and its own academic standards, are appropriately set and maintained. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.53 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All of the Expectations for this judgement area have been met and the associated level of risk for each Expectation is judged to be low.

1.54 The University has transparent and comprehensive frameworks to ensure that standards are set at appropriate levels within institutional frameworks and that the definitive record of each programme is used to govern the award of academic credit and qualifications.

1.55 There are no findings of good practice and no recommendations relating to this judgement area.

1.56 On the basis of the documentation provided and meetings with staff and students, the review team concludes that the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards at the University **meet** UK expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval**

#### **Findings**

2.1 The University has defined strategic aims and principles that inform the development of the taught curriculum, focusing attention on research-led education, employability and skills, and internationalisation. Programme development takes place within this context.

2.2 The University's programme approval process, overseen by QSSC, has recently been revised. The process has three stages: initial proposal (stage 0), full business case (stage 1) and full academic proposal (stage 2). There are clear regulations outlining who should be involved in decisions at each stage, and a clear stipulation that any proposed programme may be rejected at any of the stages. There are also clear expectations of a schedule for progression through the stages.

2.3 The review team considered a range of evidence of the process in practice, and met senior staff and teaching staff involved in the approval process at all levels. Evidence included an example of a programme proposal progressing through the three stages with an audit trail of its consideration by QSSC. Further, as evidence of the process's rigour, examples were provided of proposals being rejected at each stage. The available documentation provided evidence of appropriately constituted panels and detailed consideration of proposals, and was sufficient to allow the Expectation to be met.

2.4 This range of evidence demonstrated rigorous and effective consideration of programme development, including detailed consideration of curricula, learning and teaching methods, and assessment.

2.5 New programme proposals are initiated by departments; in recent years, a 'Combined Honours' department has enabled the development of cross-disciplinary programmes, for instance in Liberal Arts. The University offers strong support to those involved in programme design and approval, including the provision of helpfully annotated proposal templates and programme specification templates; additionally, training and support are available to staff planning new programmes and a guide for members of approval panels, the University's Guidance on Inclusive Curriculum Design, is intended to ensure due consideration of relevant equality and diversity issues.

2.6 The University has robust processes for the development and approval of programmes. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education**

**Findings**

2.7 The University's approach to recruitment, selection and admission is outlined in the University's Strategy. This is further articulated through the Education Strategy and the Postgraduate Strategy. Policies and procedures are clearly and publicly available through the University's external website

2.8 Key policies are reviewed annually both at institutional and departmental levels. Strategic reviews have also taken place periodically in light of regulatory or other significant changes. This included a significant review in 2013 and a review in light of the regulatory changes in 2015. The review of 2013 benchmarked the University's processes against comparator institutions and led to greater standardisation of the admissions process across the institution while retaining decision-making within departments.

2.9 The University provides clear policies and templates to inform applicants' decision-making, including clear timescales with supporting information provided through the University's website, with departmental 'frequently asked questions'. Entry requirements are published on the University's website and in key printed materials. The University's approach to the use of contextual information in admissions is also publicly available to students.

2.10 The University's processes and procedures would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.11 The team met senior staff, departmental and service managers, teaching staff, students and professional support staff. They also examined documentary evidence including the Education Strategy, the Postgraduate Strategy, admissions policies and the minutes of key University committees.

2.12 Recruitment, selection and admissions activities are led by academic departments, with support from the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office. While there are University policies for admission to undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, some departments operate their own admissions policies subject to approval by the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office. Training for members of staff involved in decision-making is intended to ensure full understanding of policies, procedures and University priorities.

2.13 The University's proactive position in relation to widening access has led it to an explicit use of contextual data to increase the number of offers made to under-represented groups. In particular, this has targeted applicants from low-participation neighbourhoods, including through the Supported Progression Programme. Staff training for those involved in admissions and the admissions fora has ensured awareness of these arrangements.

2.14 There is a very good understanding of the policies and processes relating to recruitment, selection and admissions across all staff involved in the process. There are clear policies around who can make decisions and the roles played by the central admissions service and departments.

2.15 Students said that their admissions process from prospective applicant to enrolment was smooth and that they were well informed throughout. The University provides clear and standardised information to all applicants, including feedback to unsuccessful applicants.

2.16 A number of students felt that the student experience would be enriched by a greater degree of diversity in the composition of the student body, particularly in relation to the social background of UK students, and that they wished to see the University taking further steps to address this. The University recognises the need to ensure diversity within the student body, particularly in relation to male students from lower socio-economic groups and students from minority ethnic groups. It has a range of measures in place to address this, including its Supported Progression Programme and support for teachers and potential applicants from schools in areas of significant disadvantage.

2.17 The University has clear and readily available policies in relation to recruitment, selection and admissions, which are well understood and consistently applied by staff. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

#### **Findings**

2.18 The approach to learning and teaching for undergraduate and postgraduate students is embodied in the Education Strategy and Postgraduate Strategy. A revised Strategy for undergraduate and postgraduate provision is under development but is not yet approved by Senate.

2.19 Both existing and draft strategies emphasise the importance of research-led teaching, underpinned by a belief in viewing students at all levels and staff engaged in delivering and supporting learning, teaching and research supervision as members of the same community of academic practice. This is engendered through the focus on research-led teaching, which is widely recognised by staff and students.

2.20 The Education Strategy is underpinned by sets of principles covering a range of aspects of the student experience. The principles for the development of the taught curriculum were approved by Senate in March 2011 and set out the characteristics expected in programme curricula. A key advance in relation to research-led education was the incorporation of a major research component in undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes.

2.21 The Education and Postgraduate Strategies and the University's associated policies and practices offer a framework which would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.22 The review team considered the effectiveness of the learning and teaching provision through the scrutiny of strategy documents, policies, procedures and relevant committee paperwork, and by meeting senior staff, teaching staff and students.

2.23 The principles have been implemented through action plans at departmental level, reported through annual review of taught programmes and monitored through reports to the EC. The ASO provides specific training sessions for academic staff on applying the principles to their own work.

2.24 The programme approval process requires departments to consider the needs of particular groups of students that might require specific support during their programme. Training on equality and diversity is provided for all new staff, and further online training is available for all staff.

2.25 Lecture capture is strongly supported by the Students' Union and has been discussed in the EC, which has proposed that lecture capture be introduced widely within the University following an initial pilot within one department. In addition, EC asked the Inclusive Teaching Task and Finish Group to revise the University policy on the Recording of Lectures and Other Teaching Sessions to permit audio recording by students within lectures as a matter of principle. There is growing awareness on the part of staff of the potential benefits from this for inclusive learning in particular.

2.26 The Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) is compulsory for all newly appointed probationary teaching staff, providing the opportunity for reflection on teaching practice and an introduction to the principles of the Education Strategy. Successful completion of the two compulsory modules qualifies staff for Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Teaching staff who had undertaken the PGCAP expressed the view that it provided valuable opportunities for reflection on and supportive evaluation of practice in teaching and assessment.

2.27 The HEA-accredited Durham Research-led Education Accreditation Model (DREAM) scheme enables staff to engage with the UK Professional Standards Framework. The University has engaged actively with the HEA: approximately 50 per cent of staff are HEA Fellows and there are eight National Teaching Fellows at the University. Academic staff confirmed that the University encourages them to apply for fellowship and that the DREAM scheme offers effective support.

2.28 Research students who wish to teach are required to complete a training programme, run partly centrally and partly within home departments; the Centre for Academic, Researcher and Organisational Development (CAROD) is responsible for collating feedback from PGRs annually. A thorough thematic review of the policies in place was undertaken in 2010 and its implementation was the subject of a report to QSSC in December 2015, noting that the policy was being implemented appropriately by departments. Research students confirmed that they had received training for teaching and assessment.

2.29 Students have access to programme specification summaries and a Faculty Handbook is readily available through the University website. There are also Welcome Guides for UG and PG students. Information on English language support, the Academic Skills Programme and disability support is also readily available. CAROD has led on a project on Transitions into Higher Education designed to encourage students to adopt independent approaches to learning from the start of their studies.

2.30 All taught students are provided with an Academic Adviser in their academic departments to provide academic support and feedback, supplementing the pastoral and welfare support available in the colleges. Students reported some unevenness in their knowledge and use of the Academic Adviser system, but confirmed that they would know where to find advice and guidance on academic matters.

2.31 The Statement of Responsibilities of University Membership sets out the concept of the University academic community, and the role of undergraduate and postgraduate students within it.

2.32 The Education Strategy provides a framework that forms the basis for effective learning and teaching. This is reinforced in the draft Education Strategy currently under discussion. The Strategy encourages students to view themselves as part of an academic community of practice with a research-rich learning environment.

2.33 The University's approach to learning and teaching is well understood and effective. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.34 Student development and achievement is monitored through QSSC via periodic and annual reviews, accreditation panels, annual reports on progression and external examiner reports. The Student Experience Sub-Committee (SESC) oversees the policy for non-academic elements of the student experience, student support services and employability, enterprise and skills issues.

2.35 The University offers a coordinated approach to enabling student development and achievement, with Academic Advisers in departments providing academic guidance to students and colleges offering pastoral and welfare support. Central services offer professional support in key areas; Academic Advisers and colleges refer students for such support as needed. Students told the review panel that they were well able to find the support they need, mainly through colleges for pastoral and welfare support.

2.36 The principles of student support require departments to provide documents setting out the role of the Academic Adviser. Newly appointed academic staff receive guidance on their role as Academic Adviser and arrange meetings with their advisees, although some students prefer to use alternative sources of advice.

2.37 College provision is monitored through the College Review Process. Reports are received by SESC. The Colleges' Oversight of Student Support Advisory Group facilitates partnership working between college staff and colleagues across the institution.

2.38 Management of the University's approach to equality and diversity is the responsibility of a team led by the Dean of Equality and Diversity. Training for staff regarding equality and diversity is offered by the University's Equality and Diversity Officer to ensure compliance with the Equality Act (2010).

2.39 The University's strategy, policies and procedures are designed to facilitate students in developing their academic, personal and professional development, in particular through the coordinated approach to student support. Its approach to enabling student achievement is clearly expressed in policies and procedures which would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.40 The review team evaluated the University's approach by considering documentation including the Education Strategy, descriptions of relevant procedures and roles, and in discussion with students, academic staff and staff from professional services.

2.41 The University has mechanisms to encourage progression and retention, including the academic progress procedure designed to identify students failing to engage in their studies at an early stage. This process well illustrates the way in which support for students is coordinated across academic departments and colleges, as students seen not to be engaging with their studies are issued with a warning notice that then triggers college intervention. The University regards the implementation of this procedure as significant in contributing to its high retention rate.

2.42 Colleges act as the first point of contact for welfare services and as a referral point to specialist student support services. Students identify closely with their colleges, and value highly the support and social interaction that is provided.

2.43 The comprehensive and high-quality pastoral support for students' personal development and learning provided by colleges, departments and professional services is **good practice**.

2.44 Access to student support services has been enhanced by the development of the Palatine Building, a student services building that opened in 2012. This provides a one-stop shop for all student services, including the Disability Support Service, which has seen a significant rise in the number of students registering. The largest group comprises students with dyslexia and/or other specific learning difficulties, but 2014-15 also saw an appreciable increase in the number for students with mental health conditions. The University website signals the availability of disability support to students.

2.45 The Careers, Employability and Enterprise Centre (CEEC) offers a skills audit to allow students to assess their skills needs, accessible through the University website, and taken by students before their arrival at Durham. Student engagement with this among incoming students has been high, compared with direct engagement with Personal Development Planning, which had been low for a number of years. The introduction of the skills audit arose from a review of the induction process, designed to smooth the transition to university study. A report on the Academic Skills Programme was discussed by the SESC and by the EC which noted the strong engagement of students with the programme, and suggested ways of further enhancing the programme.

2.46 The University's principles for student induction apply to undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, and set out the respective responsibilities of academic departments, colleges, specialist student services and DSU. The Induction Steering Group oversees the practical elements of the enhanced induction week. Students confirmed that they valued the broadening of the scope of induction week to include greater input from departments and an enhanced academic content.

2.47 The University claims a high reputation with employers resulting from a 'rich interplay of scholarly community and extracurricular opportunities'. Employers confirmed this view, drawing attention to their involvement with the University in aspects of curriculum development and in the provision of placement opportunities.

2.48 The Principles for the Development of the Taught Curriculum establish the expectation that employability skills will be embedded in the curriculum. This is reinforced by the skills audit and the academic skills programme and is intended to nurture the 'graduate qualities' needed for students to succeed after graduation.

2.49 The Durham Award was developed in consultation with employers offering recognition for final-year undergraduate and postgraduate students to showcase their personal development through involvement with colleges, sports teams and societies and cultural activities, and through community engagement, work experience and skills acquisition beyond the curriculum. While resource constraints restrict the number of places available on the Durham Award, no student has been refused a place on it.

2.50 Internationalisation in the curriculum has been encouraged as part of the Education strategy by promoting the study of optional language modules and the take-up of exchange programmes; the take-up of these opportunities has been strong. Registrations on elective credit-bearing language modules increased by 235 per cent between 2011 and 2014; the number of students in disciplines other than modern languages going abroad under the ERASMUS scheme also increased over the same period.

2.51 A review of student support during 2014-15 proposed an Academic and Professional Development scheme, under which students would be encouraged to record and reflect upon the skills they develop within their academic programmes. The scheme,

intended to develop aspects of graduate qualities, would be recognised by a Durham Academic Skills Certificate and a Durham Professional Development Certificate, and would be a prerequisite for entering the Durham Award. Having been agreed by the EC in June 2015, the University anticipates that the scheme will be piloted in 2017-18.

2.52 University sport, staff and student volunteering and outreach, student theatre and music are coordinated by Experience Durham which provides opportunities for students to become engaged with in excess of 380 sports teams, about 100 music groups and some theatre groups.

2.53 In a number of colleges, students have taken the initiative in organising internal and external cross-disciplinary seminars, enriching the student experience beyond the curriculum. The social interactions encouraged through college sports and arts activities contribute to the high regard of students for their membership of a college.

2.54 The systematic commitment to providing a wide range of extracurricular activities that enrich the student experience is **good practice**.

2.55 A series of awards provide encouragement for innovation. These are the Enhancing the Student Learning Experience awards, the Excellence in Learning and Teaching Awards and the University Awards for Excellence in Doctoral Supervision. Results are disseminated through Faculty Education Fora.

2.56 Opportunities for professional development of academic staff are provided by CAROD. The development of its programme of events is informed by the University Strategy, annual staff review, periodic reviews and in response to external developments.

2.57 The Learning and Teaching Handbook sets out the principles for managing the availability of learning resources: the Learning Resources Management Group (LRMG), reporting to the Education Committee, is responsible for their implementation. Minimum standards for the content of module pages on DUO, the University's virtual learning environment, are being implemented for the 2015-16 academic year: the University will monitor adherence to these standards as part of the 2015-16 annual review.

2.58 The University has effective processes for enabling student development and achievement, which are well understood by both staff and students. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

- 2.59 The institution defines its approach to student engagement through the Education Strategy, the Statement of Responsibilities of University Membership and the Principles of Student Engagement. These documents have been developed in partnership with the Students' Union and student representatives.
- 2.60 The University, in partnership with the Students' Union, has undertaken significant work in relation to student representation in recent years to ensure clarity around the roles of the Union, colleges, Common Room committees, student representatives and departments.
- 2.61 Representation in relation to academic issues is delivered through a system of course and faculty representatives. In addition, the elected Union officers work with Junior Common Room Presidents from the colleges to provide institutional-level representation. Students are involved in all quality management processes and are members of all academic committees.
- 2.62 Elected course representatives are provided with support by the Students' Union through a training programme and additional specific support as required. The Students' Union also supports representatives on key University committees.
- 2.63 The University monitors student engagement in academic departments through the annual review process, within which each department describes its processes for student engagement, as well as how students have been involved in the development of self-assessment documentation.
- 2.64 The University also considers student feedback provided through surveys and questionnaires as a key part of quality management processes.
- 2.65 The University's approach to student engagement would meet the Expectation.
- 2.66 The review team met undergraduate and postgraduate students, senior staff, academic staff and professional support staff. It also considered documentary evidence provided by the University and by the Students' Union, including key policies and principles in relation to student representation, minutes of staff-student committees and training provided to student representatives.
- 2.67 There is a clear understanding by staff across the University in relation to its approach to student engagement. This understanding is generally shared by students. Although students are not formally engaged in the approval of programmes prior to consideration by QSSC, students are active in participating in quality management systems at all levels, including periodic reviews, University committees and departmental structures, and are consulted on proposals for new programmes and on proposed changes to existing programmes.
- 2.68 Students demonstrated a good understanding of the mechanisms for student engagement in place at the University and were able to cite examples of student feedback leading to significant changes both to learning and teaching and the wider learning experience. Communication to students about responses to their feedback is generally effective.

2.69 Led by the Students' Union, recent changes to the system of course representation have led to the election of representatives in each department and appear to have been implemented effectively, with the majority of courses having trained representatives in place. Where there are gaps in representation, both the University and Union are aware of the issue and have put in place timely actions to resolve it.

2.70 The training of student representatives by the Students' Union is effective in enabling them to carry out their role. Students reported that they are aware of the identities of their representatives and of the mechanisms open to them to provide feedback to the University.

2.71 Both documentary evidence and the testimony of students in meetings described the open sharing of information between the University, the Students' Union and student representatives. This allows meaningful conversations to take place between staff and students from a position of shared understanding.

2.72 However, there is significant inconsistency in relation to the sharing of information regarding the work of departmental staff-student committees that act as the key medium between staff and students. While some departments make minutes available to all students regularly through DUO, this is not the case in all departments, and students are not uniformly clear as to where they could find this information. This lack of clarity contributes to the recommendation in Expectation C regarding a consistent approach to communication with students.

2.73 The University has a commitment to meaningful student engagement and a range of opportunities for students to engage with and provide feedback on their learning experience. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning**

**Findings**

2.74 The same policies and processes are applied across all the University's programmes, and are operationalised through the Examination and Assessment section of the Learning and Teaching Handbook which includes the University's Principles of Assessment. These principles, which state that assessment must be valid, equitable and reliable, are supported by a range of assessment policies, procedures and practices. The Principles are supported by broader institutional Principles including those that encourage the use of a diverse range of modes of assessment appropriate to the discipline, subject matter and learning outcomes. The University has institution-wide qualification and level descriptors and generic assessment criteria. The rules governing the award of credit, progression between levels and the conferment of awards are set out in the University's core regulations.

2.75 The University's policies and procedures are designed to achieve equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment and would therefore allow the Expectation to be met.

2.76 The review team tested the operation of these procedures by reviewing a range of documentation detailing the University's principles and policies, and by meeting relevant senior staff, teaching staff, professional support staff, students and employers.

2.77 The institution-wide qualification and level descriptors are supported by more specific criteria contained within programme specifications, which are approved as part of the programme approval process and are monitored and reconsidered via annual and periodic review and by external examiners. Any necessary variations from the core regulations, for example to meet the requirements of a PSRB, are considered as part of programme approval and are detailed within the programme regulations.

2.78 Assessment design is considered as part of the programme approval process, then monitored through external examiners' reports and through annual and periodic review processes which often include recommendations for change. Changes to programme regulations are subject to approval by the Chair of the relevant FEC.

2.79 Guidelines on accreditation of prior learning (APL) clearly explain the principles, time limits, and minimum and maximum accreditation permitted. APL takes place mainly on professionally oriented programmes at postgraduate level and within the Common Award programmes. Clear guidance to applicants is available, outlining the need to provide evidence against the learning outcomes of the module(s) for which exemption is sought. Outcomes of applications for APL are subject to ratification by the relevant Board of Examiners.

2.80 Examination timetables are released 10 weeks in advance of the examination period with personalised timetables made available to students through DUO. Where a student has declared a disability, the University has clear processes for making reasonable adjustments. Proposals to strengthen consideration of equality and diversity issues in

curriculum design and review are being considered through an Inclusive Teaching Task and Finish Group.

2.81 Students at induction are introduced to the academic standards that are expected of them and to how assessment feedback is used to support their learning. Although students reported variability in how thoroughly they were initially prepared for assessment, recent changes to induction processes are intended to ensure consistency in this respect. Each module outline contains clear learning outcomes and shows how the methods of assessment relate to those outcomes.

2.82 University-level guidance for teaching staff on moderation, use of marks pro formas and anonymous marking is supported by departmental assessment policies which contextualise the process within the discipline, and are included in course handbooks.

2.83 Departmental assessment policies are presented in a variety of formats and vary in their clarity for students. A review of these departmental assessment policies in 2015 found variability in the extent to which they provided clear guidance on double-marking and moderation: a further review is addressing this issue. The variability reported by students in their understanding of assessment issues including a lack of clarity on timings for return of work and the value of feedback contributes to the recommendation in Expectation C concerning a consistency of approach to communication with students.

2.84 The University sets out minimum requirements for feedback on assessed work and recognises that feedback should help develop students' understanding of the subject. While students may meet their Academic Adviser to discuss progress and feedback, they reported wide variability in the use and value of the Academic Adviser system. Departments are required to provide students with specific timescales for when they can expect to receive feedback but students reported variability in the availability of such information and some failure to adhere to schedules when provided. There is significant variation in how the information was provided to students in the promised return times which varied from three to six weeks, and in the monitoring of these return times. Some students drew attention to some sustained or improved performance in scores for assessment and feedback, and also reported continuing difficulties with the consistency, timeliness and perceived fairness of undergraduate assessments.

2.85 The draft Education Strategy remains subject to approval by Senate but includes the objective of ensuring that feedback on assessed work is both consistent and timely. The EC has accepted that a recommendation from students regarding increasing the transparency of assessment including timeliness and consistency of feedback should inform the forthcoming review of assessment. The review team **recommends** that the University establish, consistently apply and monitor a University-wide policy for the timeliness of feedback on assessment.

2.86 All examinations are marked anonymously but the lack of a University-wide approach to anonymous marking of coursework was raised as a concern by undergraduate students. Each department is required to agree and publish its policy and approximately half of the University's departments operate anonymous marking for coursework. The University may wish to consider sharing good practice in anonymous marking, including the provision of feedback, to achieve greater equity across the student body.

2.87 The University provides a range of development and support for academic staff in relation to assessment. New academic staff must complete the first two modules of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice and are supported in working towards HEA Fellowship. Postgraduate students who undertake teaching duties receive induction training at institutional and faculty level and are normally permitted to assess only first-year undergraduate work which must additionally be moderated by academic staff. Chairs and

secretaries to Boards of Examiners are required to complete initial training and attend annual update training.

2.88 The University has a range of appropriate processes and procedures in place to ensure that assessment is carried out securely and relevant processes for identifying, investigating and responding to unacceptable academic practice. A proposal from the Senate Discipline Committee to review policies and procedures for assessment irregularities to address emerging academic misconduct issues including contract cheating has not yet been progressed. The University may wish to consider following this proposal to ensure that its policies and procedures remain up to date and effective.

2.89 Regulations and policies on Boards of Examiners clearly set out their membership, procedures, powers and accountability. Following meetings of boards, at which only the Chair and Secretary have access to student names, results including progression decisions are published to students online in DUO.

2.90 The University's regulations allow some discretion to Boards of Examiners in determining degree classifications. Discretion takes place within defined boundaries and using a range of clearly published criteria. The policy was reviewed by the EC in 2014-15 and was reaffirmed but with some additional guidance. The Chief Examiner has confirmed that the system is equitable and appropriate when used as intended but did highlight instances where Boards of Examiners expressed some disagreements with its principles. However, the Chief Examiner has now confirmed that the revised process is operating appropriately.

2.91 Overall, the University effectively operates equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met. There are, however, shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which procedures related to timeliness of feedback and the provision of information to students are applied. Therefore, the level of associated risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

## **Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

#### **Findings**

2.92 The University has a range of relevant policies and procedures concerning external examining/moderation and the operation of Boards of Examiners. These require all programmes leading to an award of the University to be overseen by at least one external examiner, and set out the purpose, role and appointment process for external examiners. Additionally, the University has appointed a Chief Examiner who considers the operation of assessment within the University as a whole and annually reviews the operation of the University's Boards of Examiners.

2.93 The University's procedures are designed to achieve thorough and appropriate use of external examiners and therefore would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.94 The review team tested the operation of these procedures by reviewing a range of documentation including policies, procedures and reports, and by meeting senior staff, teaching staff and students.

2.95 External examiners oversee all modules at Level 5 and above and are approved using criteria aligned with the Quality Code. On appointment, examiners receive a comprehensive pack of information from the ASO covering the expectations for their role and relevant University policies. The ASO maintains a helpful 'Frequently Asked Questions' site for examiners and also provides the relevant regulations, external examiners' report form, and the previous year's Overview of External Examiner reports.

2.96 Departments are responsible for providing the programme details including assessment criteria. There is no formal training for new external examiners but chairs of Boards of Examiners are expected to brief new external examiners and to identify an experienced external to act as mentor for those without previous external examining experience. The University does not record whether external examiners have received such a briefing and external examiners are not asked to confirm this in their reports. The introduction of a record of such briefings would help to ensure that all external examiners are clear about their duties.

2.97 External examiners review draft examination papers at final honours undergraduate and postgraduate levels and can ask to be consulted in the setting of summative coursework. They review an appropriate sample of assessments from examinations and summative coursework but have the right to see all assessed work. They attend Boards of Examiners and sign off awards and progression decisions. For combined and joint honours programmes, modules are confirmed by the external examiner at subject level and an external moderator oversees the award process.

2.98 External examiners submit annual reports using a standard template which provides opportunities for comment and recommendations on the maintenance and comparability of standards, appropriateness of assessment and application of the University's policies and regulations. For collaborative provision they also comment, where appropriate, on comparisons with students on University-delivered programmes. Templates are used appropriately and provide useful comments and recommendations on good practice and innovation, and on enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities. External examiners are also asked to comment on changes to modules and on new module proposals.

2.99 Reports are submitted to the ASO and are then scrutinised by the chair and secretary of the relevant FEC. Departments are required to respond to any issues raised and to ensure that the Staff-Student Consultative Committee has an opportunity to discuss such issues. Although the review team saw evidence that reports were discussed at meetings, some minutes lacked detail and did not confirm whether responses to external examiners' reports were also considered.

2.100 A link in the Student Welcome Guide gives students access to a web page with all external examiners' reports and responses to them. Additionally, departments are required to provide students with links to external examiners' reports and their responses through a DUO site and/or in the relevant programme handbook. However, the review team observed variability in departmental practice and a lack of clear signposting for students. In addition, students expressed a lack of awareness of how to access external examiners' reports and a number were unaware of the external examiner system. While the availability of external examiners' reports and responses to them are potentially very helpful to students, the lack of consistent and effective communication contributes to the recommendation in Expectation C concerning a consistent approach to communication with students.

2.101 Responses to external examiners' reports are signed off by the chair of the relevant FEC and are generally thorough in addressing issues raised. Nearly all external examiners confirm within their annual reports that issues raised previously have been addressed. Key issues and responses are summarised in FEC Overview Reports and are reported to and considered appropriately by QSSC.

2.102 The University makes clear to external examiners that they may raise a serious concern directly with the Vice-Chancellor if needed but there are no recent examples of this opportunity being used.

2.103 The ASO prepares an annual overview of all external examiners' reports which is subsequently considered by QSSC alongside faculty overviews and the Chief External Examiner's report. The latter provides a helpful independent assessment of the conduct and consistency of Boards of Examiners based on a thorough scrutiny of their minutes. QSSC then reports to the EC and to Senate as part of the wider annual review processes. The overview report is sent to all external examiners to alert them to generic issues raised and actions taken in response.

2.104 The University makes consistent and effective use of external examiners to maintain academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities. Related policy and procedures operate effectively. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

**Findings**

2.105 Programme monitoring takes place through the University's annual review process. Annual review is considered as a phased process, across the year, driven in part by the schedule for the release of appropriate data; however, departments are given a recommended schedule and are required to demonstrate how they are adhering to the underlying commitment.

2.106 The University's procedures are designed to achieve rigorous and systematic monitoring and review of programmes and departments, and therefore would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.107 The review team tested the operation of the University's procedures by reviewing a range of documentation including policies, procedures and reports, and by meeting senior staff, teaching staff and students.

2.108 The policy governing programme monitoring is clearly articulated. Templates provide helpful guidance to those charged with completing forms. Programme monitoring is conducted through Boards of Studies, and led in practice by Directors of Undergraduate and Postgraduate Studies and Heads of Department.

2.109 Documentation of the process is notably thorough. Faculty overview reports are produced via faculty education committees, according to a template. In addition, there is evidence of strong faculty oversight of the monitoring and subsequent action-planning processes, ensuring completion of agreed actions. In turn, the QSSC considers overview reports and a University-wide overview identifies 'strengths and opportunities', as well as 'weaknesses and threats' across the institution.

2.110 Periodic review takes the form of departmental review, conducted once every six years and considering both research and education. The process is led by the relevant faculty Pro Vice-Chancellor, and supported by the ASO, which provides training for review panellists and guidance for departments under review. Reports to the relevant Faculty Periodic Review and Accreditation Committee, and subsequently to QSSC and the Education Committee, enable issues raised in reviews to be followed up at various levels.

2.111 A commitment to enhancement is embedded in the University's processes. Annual monitoring at faculty level, for example, attends in part to 'opportunities for the development and improvement of the faculty's provision'. The impact of reviews was evidenced in meetings with departmental staff, who provided examples of reviews leading to reforms in (among other areas) curriculum and assessment structures.

2.112 The University involves students in both annual monitoring and periodic review, and requires each department to specify the nature of student involvement in annual monitoring. Periodic review panels include a student member and consider students' views about the programmes under review.

2.113 In accordance with the University's collegiate structure, each college is reviewed on a six-year cycle, focusing in part on the relation between college activities and the University's education strategy.

2.114 There is also evidence of the University evaluating and improving its processes. It explicitly maps its processes against the Quality Code. The QSSC conducted a review of the annual monitoring process in 2011-12: its outcomes largely maintained the central structures and inputs, but moved towards a reporting template containing an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The departmental review process was approved in 2010, was reviewed after a full year of operation, and is currently under review again after the completion of a full cycle of reviews.

2.115 The University's processes are regular, systematic and carefully followed, and work effectively in practice. The supporting documentation for review processes is comprehensive. The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

**Findings**

2.116 The University has clear and separate regulations governing Student Appeals and Student Complaints, accessible through the University Calendar and the ASO's webpages. The regulations embody statements that students can invoke the procedures without fear of recrimination.

2.117 The University implemented a revised Complaints Procedure for Students in 2015-16 with amendments particularly to the timeframes for the complaints process in the light of the framework of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

2.118 The University encourages early resolution of concerns through informal procedures, which must be completed before a formal process can be invoked; a Mediation Service procedure was introduced in September 2014 to supplement these informal procedures but has mainly been invoked in cases involving inter-personal conflict, rather than in relation to appeals.

2.119 Guidance and support for students involved in an appeal or complaint are offered through the ASO's webpages and are also available through College Support Offices or through the Student Union's Advice and Help Service. Advice on the process itself is provided by dedicated staff in the ASO who also provide training for staff involved in complaints and appeals.

2.120 The University has policies and procedures which would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.121 The review team considered the effectiveness of the procedures for academic appeals and student complaints by scrutinising strategy documents, policies, procedures and relevant committee paperwork, and in discussion with staff and students.

2.122 The regulations are drawn to the attention of students through induction materials, through departmental student handbooks and on the University website. Although students were not familiar with the existence of these procedures, they were confident that they would learn about them if necessary through advice from colleges, departmental offices, the Students' Union or academic advisers.

2.123 In 2013-14, the University received 22 complaints. Of these, eight were upheld or partially upheld, the remainder being dismissed or resolved informally. The University is of the view that the number of complaints it receives is low relative to other universities that it regards as similar.

2.124 The University seeks to learn from the complaints submitted by students with a view to enhancing future practice. The outcomes of complaints and appeals are monitored and considered through the Committee structure, via SESC, QSSC, EC, Senate and Council. Recent examples of action in response to a complaint include clarification of the necessity for a repeat viva when a PhD has to be resubmitted and the establishment of an independent peer-led audit of the University's provision for disabled students.

2.125 The University's processes for receiving, responding to and acting upon complaints and appeals are effective. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others**

**Findings**

2.126 The University will consider only collaborations which support its strategic aims and objectives, and which otherwise meet the core criteria set out in the Learning and Teaching Handbook. The types of collaborative partnership the University is prepared to enter into are accreditation, articulation, distance programmes, multiple and joint awards, and validation. The University publishes a register of its collaborative provision.

2.127 The University's approach to managing higher education with others is risk-based and proportionate. Senate retains responsibility for any educational collaboration which is deemed to be high or medium risk, with responsibility for the approval of low-risk education collaborations being delegated to Education Committee. The criteria for judging risk include the status of the partner institution, its experience in working collaboratively, the academic level of the programme concerned and the language of instruction.

2.128 An initial review of the strategic case for a new partnership is undertaken against specific criteria by the Dean of Internationalisation or the PVC Education, for overseas or UK-based partnerships respectively. A visit may be required and if so a report on the visit forms part of the documentation considered by the Partnership Approval Panel. The documentation also includes a collaboration proposal form, a draft memorandum of agreement and a business case. Following consideration by the Panel a successful proposal will be considered by QSSC and, if supported, recommended for approval to the EC and Senate.

2.129 Consideration of partnership approval is taken separately from programme approval and is subject to due diligence processes, including scrutiny of the financial and legal status of partners. The business case for collaborative taught programmes is established separately from and prior to the academic approval.

2.130 Taught collaborative courses are considered through the same programme approval process as other programmes and once approved are subject to the same external examining arrangements and to annual and periodic review. Research degree students studying on collaborative programmes are subject to the core regulations and examining processes of the University.

2.131 Standard templates for Memoranda of Agreement include the arrangements and responsibility for complaints and appeals in respect of collaborative programmes, provision for suspending and withdrawing from partnerships and residual obligations to support students in such circumstances. All partnership agreements are for a fixed period (typically six years) and all are subject to periodic renewal before the point of expiry.

2.132 The University's policies and procedures relating to the management of higher education provision with others would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.133 The review team assessed the operation and effectiveness of the approach through meetings with staff, partners involved in supporting the delivery of learning opportunities,

and students. The team also considered a range of evidence relating to approval, review and management, committee oversight and legal documentation.

2.134 The University's most substantial partnership is with the Church of England, for which the University validates ministerial training for about 2,000 students taking place in 17 Theological Education Institutes (TEIs). The suite of awards is known as the 'Common Awards' and the arrangement is described by the University as a 'validation plus model' as it provides more than just quality assurance of provision: the review team heard that TEIs are also able to access the University's theological expertise; tutor development and support through Durham conferences; annual summer schools as an option for students; web resources; a genuine partnership in curriculum development; and a network of people to support research-led ministerial education.

2.135 The Common Awards partnership was approved through the University's usual process for considering potential collaborative partners, although with some enhancement through additional external subject specialists in recognition of its scope. From viewing the documentation the review team was able to confirm a thorough approval process which adhered to the University's procedures and criteria.

2.136 The Common Awards scheme is overseen by a Management Board (CAMB) with operational responsibility for maintenance of the academic quality and standards of the programmes. Scrutiny of the minutes showed detailed and thorough consideration of the operation of the awards at the TEIs.

2.137 Each TEI is required to convene a Management Committee, which includes student representatives, to oversee its delivery and report to the CAMB. The review team was able to confirm from meeting staff and from reviewing documentation that there is active management of the relationships and careful consideration of issues.

2.138 University Liaison Officers (ULOs) are appointed within the Common Awards programme, acting as representatives of the University to ensure that the TEI's policies and procedures are equivalent to those of the University and the Common Awards scheme. The appointment of each ULO to a minimum of two TEIs facilitates the monitoring of comparability and consistency and the sharing of good practice.

2.139 The design of the Common Awards curricula is intended to accommodate the existing strengths and specialisms of the TEIs while maintaining the level of commonality required by the Church and the University. This has been achieved through a common set of programme documentation which has common learning outcomes while allowing TEIs flexibility in how they are delivered and met.

2.140 Programme changes require approval by both the University and the Ministry Division, with all TEIs being consulted on any proposed change. An annual review process has been designed to meet the requirements of both parties, and the University is currently working with the Ministry Division to create a joint periodic review process for 2016-17.

2.141 Each TEI's admissions policy, including how they manage APL requests in line with the University's principles for the award of APL, is approved by the CAMB. Following a review, enhanced APL guidance has recently been produced.

2.142 Assessment policies for Common Awards are in line with those of the University. Comparability of standards is assured through the appointment of each external examiner to two TEIs with the requirement to submit an annual report on each.

- 2.143 Publicity materials produced by TEIs are subject to review by the University and from its scrutiny of documentation the review team was able to confirm that this is actively done.
- 2.144 Common Awards students are given guidance on what they can expect from the University as students at a TEI, including access to appeals and complaints processes. Student handbooks seen for both Common Awards and other collaborative arrangements were clear and comprehensive in articulating the relationship with the University and setting out expectations of students.
- 2.145 A further innovative collaboration for the University is its four-year BSc programme with KPMG which provides a distinctive route to an accounting degree while gaining practical experience. Six modules are delivered by the University and six through BPP Professional Education as KPMG's approved external teaching provider. The approval, review and operational processes for the programme are rigorous and allow the University to maintain appropriate oversight.
- 2.146 A detailed mapping is undertaken for articulation arrangements. The final classification of the award is based on credit undertaken at and assessed by the University. Scrutiny of documentation showed thorough consideration of such arrangements by the programme approval panel.
- 2.147 Programmes leading to taught joint/dual awards and articulation agreements are governed through a Management Committee drawn from staff from the University and the partner institution. Reports are made to QSSC. The review team found that these reports were thorough and evidenced good oversight by the University.
- 2.148 The process for partnership renewal includes submission by the Department/school of a renewal form, a proposed new MoA and a proposed new business case. Scrutiny of an example of a partnership going through this renewal process showed it to be thorough and rigorous.
- 2.149 All publicity materials for collaborative activity require the approval of the University, normally through the relevant Management Committee.
- 2.150 Proposals for international student exchanges are considered via the Partnership Appraisal form (PAF) and submitted to QSSC for approval. Where marks are given for work assessed by the exchange institution, these are translated based on a mapping to the University's assessment criteria, in a process overseen by the University's Board of Examiners.
- 2.151 Placement guidance is provided at both University and departmental levels. Placement providers expressed satisfaction with the arrangements made and the support given to them.
- 2.152 The University's process for the consideration of professional body accreditation reports requires reports from accrediting bodies to be submitted to QSSC in the first instance, to identify areas of good practice or concern, or issues relating to University policy. Faculty Periodic Review and Accreditation Panels (PRAPs) are charged with ensuring that effective follow-up to accreditation reports takes place, and an annual report is made to QSSC.
- 2.153 Certificates and transcripts for all single and dual awards are managed and issued by the University. Certificates for all awards make reference to the transcript. For joint/dual awards, and for those where credit for modules is awarded by a partner (for example,

through an articulation agreement), the name and location of partner organisations are identified on the transcript.

2.154 The University states on its Diploma Supplement that its 'programmes are all taught and examined in the English language, except where the subject of the degree is such that it is obvious that all or part of the teaching assessment must be in another language (for example BA in Modern Languages such as French, German etc.). By exception, the thesis for a postgraduate research award may occasionally be submitted in a language other than English'. In instances where assessment is in a language other than English the University ensures the continuing availability of internal and external examiners who are able to work easily in all the languages concerned.

2.155 The University has a large number of accreditation arrangements and its approach to overseeing PSRB reviews mirrors aspects of its internal periodic review process. University guidance requires departments to consult the ASO for support and guidance before submitting documentation to a PSRB and, following review visits, PSRB reports are in the first instance considered by QSSC to highlight any institutional issues or actions and any specific items of good practice. Subsequently, PRAPs consider each report with a view to monitoring departmental follow-up processes. QSSC receives an annual report which outlines projected PSRB activity, reflects on reviews undertaken in the previous cycle, and flags any key risks associated with accreditation activity.

2.156 The University has in place effective procedures and appropriate operational arrangements to secure its academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities delivered with others. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees***

#### **Findings**

2.157 The EC has responsibility for institutional oversight of research degree provision while FECs exercise oversight within each faculty. Pending the revised Education Strategy, the Postgraduate Strategy provides the framework for postgraduate provision. The EC is considering whether to establish a Postgraduate Coordination Group to consider and promote the visibility of postgraduate issues within the University. Core business processes relating to research students are managed by central services, particularly the ASO, with oversight at faculty and/or University level.

2.158 Postgraduate Faculty Education Committees are responsible for the quality assurance and development of postgraduate provision in each Faculty. The responsibility for ensuring support for research students in each department and for overseeing the monitoring of their progress lies with Departmental Directors of Postgraduate Research, who are their departments' representatives on Postgraduate Faculty Education Committees.

2.159 The Graduate School is a structure to provide support for postgraduate students, supervisors, examiners and Directors of Postgraduate Research. Although the School has a virtual, rather than a physical, presence, all postgraduate students are members of it, and as part of the Postgraduate Strategy are also members of a college.

2.160 Regulations for research degrees are accessible via the University Calendar. The regulations are supported by a Code of Practice on Research Degrees accessed through the Learning and Teaching Handbook. Being available on the University's website, they are accessible to external as well as internal examiners. The Code of Practice is reviewed by the EC annually and has been mapped against Chapter B11 of the Quality Code.

2.161 Research degree provision is monitored through departmental annual review, the reports of which are considered by each FEC and by QSSC.

2.162 The QSSC annually considers qualitative and quantitative data on student enrolment, progress and completion, enabling it to benchmark provision against the sector and Faculty targets. The University has since 2013 participated in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey whose outcomes, following consideration by the Education Committee and QSSC, are referred to Postgraduate Faculty Education Committees for discussion and action.

2.163 The University's policies, procedures and guidance are sufficient, if implemented, to allow the Expectation to be met.

2.164 The review team considered the effectiveness of the arrangements for postgraduate research students through the scrutiny of strategy documents, policies, procedures and relevant committee paperwork and in discussion with students, academic staff and staff of professional support services.

2.165 The University's website offers clear information about the opportunities for postgraduate research. Guidance on the content of departmental handbooks includes provision of key information for new students. Induction events are organised at faculty level by CAROD to communicate the responsibilities and entitlements of research students, including opportunities for representation; they take place at the beginning of both Michaelmas and Epiphany terms to cater for students who commence their research at those times of the year. Students not resident in Durham are normally expected to attend induction events, or are provided with comparable induction information.

2.166 The Code of Practice specifies clear criteria and procedures for selection and admission of research students, and includes reference to the key elements of a thriving research environment. In each department there are two members of academic staff who are designated as postgraduate admissions selectors, and who are required to attend training provided by the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office.

2.167 The Code of Practice is clearly written, wide-ranging and easily navigable to all staff and students. Key information for research students is also made available through the Graduate School webpages and is supported by Departmental Handbooks.

2.168 As part of the induction process, each student completes a Training Needs Analysis to plan and record their professional and career development needs. The analysis is repeated at the start of each academic year. Training needs are designed in line with external benchmarks such as Vitae. Students were positive about the availability of training relevant to their needs.

2.169 The Code of Practice makes clear the composition of supervisory teams and the knowledge and skills expected of supervisors. Staff new to supervision must complete training provided by CAROD. Responsibility for the management of supervision is devolved to departments, as set out in the Learning and Teaching Handbook. The Handbook includes provision for setting the maximum number of research students that a supervisor may supervise at any given time with a view to ensuring that individual supervisors have sufficient time to carry out their duties effectively, and also sets out expectations concerning the frequency of supervisory meetings. The University Awards for Excellence in Doctoral Supervision Scheme recognises excellence in supervision.

2.170 The Code of Practice specifies that the progress of all research students is reviewed and recorded annually using a system based on DUO. Annual reports are reviewed by the Director of Postgraduate Research in the relevant department and reported to the Faculty Education Committee (PG).

2.171 The University provides a comprehensive range of skills training for research students through CAROD. Further training is also provided through centres for doctoral training, such as the North East Doctoral Training Centre, and through departments, for instance by attending taught modules. Some funds are available for conference attendance, although availability may vary between disciplines.

2.172 Students spoke in positive terms about their research environment and the quality of supervision, and expressed satisfaction with the resources provided for them to conduct their research, as well as dissatisfaction with the availability of study space. The University does not have a policy on provision of space for research students, and provision varies between departments.

2.173 The Core Regulations set out the assessment criteria for research degrees which are broadly consistent with the Doctoral Degree Characteristics, but do not make specific reference to it. Students have access to further guidance on assessment criteria and arrangements from the Learning and Teaching Handbook and the Graduate School website.

2.174 The University's policies and processes for managing the quality and standards of research degree provision are effective and well understood. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.175 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All of the relevant Expectations for this judgement area have been met. The associated level of risk is judged to be low except for Expectation B6 for which the level of risk is judged to be moderate.

2.176 There are two features of good practice in this judgement area, relating to the comprehensive and high-quality pastoral support provided by colleges, departments and professional services and to the systematic commitment to providing a wide range of extracurricular activities.

2.177 The review team makes one recommendation in this judgement area, in respect of establishing, consistently applying and monitoring a University-wide policy for the timeliness of feedback on assessment.

2.178 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

### 3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.**

#### Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

##### Findings

3.1 The University has an institutional position of transparency, leading it to make all key strategic documents available through its public website, including mission, vision and values, institutional strategy and key statistical data.

3.2 Generic information for prospective students is available through centrally managed webpages containing a core set of information for students wishing to study at any level. The courses database constitutes a single source of programme information and is subject to checking by relevant departments and professional services.

3.3 The University provides information to current students under the 'Principles for Student Induction'. Welcome pages are provided on the University's website, developed under the guidance of the Student Induction Working Group. This includes information on the Statement of Responsibilities of University Membership, developed in partnership with students, and containing clear guidance on what students can expect from the University and what is expected of them.

3.4 The welcome guide, tailored to undergraduate or to postgraduate provision, contains guidance on key University policies, procedures and structures. All students also receive handbooks from their departments and have access to all relevant documents, policies and procedures through the 'Student Gateway'. The Graduate School webpages provide further tailored information for research students.

3.5 The provisions in place to manage information for the public, students and staff would enable the Expectation to be met.

3.6 The review team met senior staff, academic staff, professional support staff and students from across the University, and considered documentary evidence including extracts from the University's website, policies in relation to the publication of information and a selection of student handbooks.

3.7 There are clear processes for the production and approval of public information in relation to prospective students which are well understood by staff. This information is generated by academic departments and is subject to approval through faculty structures and the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office. Students expressed the view that information received prior to application accurately describes the student experience at the University.

3.8 Recent developments in the provision of pre-enrolment material to students, including the use of a skills audit and academic skills development, are intended to support induction and to ease the transition to higher education, and have been welcomed by students. Student induction itself has been developed in recent years, both in terms of the immediate 'welcome week' and the wider transition to higher education. Students described induction as a positive process and felt well informed of the support and opportunities available at the University.

3.9 Students expressed a sense of confusion regarding awareness of certain key elements of the learning experience. In particular, students were unclear as to where they could access information in relation to the timing, marking and return of assessments. This uncertainty adversely affected their ability to develop and learn from their assessments. While there are principles in place regarding the provision of information at a module level through DUO, there is inconsistency at a programme level. Students also drew attention to inconsistencies in relation to sharing information regarding the work of departmental staff-student committees, as detailed in Expectation B5. The review team **recommends** that the University develop and implement a consistent approach to communication with students to ensure that they are well informed about important issues relating to their learning experience.

3.10 The Learning and Teaching Handbook, maintained by the ASO, is a source of detailed and helpful information for academic and support staff in relation to the University's arrangements for managing academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement. It includes guidance for teaching staff on information they should provide to students including specific guidance on the contents of programme handbooks and module pages within DUO, as well as a list of the University's collaborative arrangements and a register of accredited provision.

3.11 The University has sound policies and procedures in place regarding public information. The review team concludes therefore that the Expectation is met. However, shortcomings in the rigour with which procedures are applied means that the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

## The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.12 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The single Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

3.13 There are no features of good practice in this judgement area. The review team makes one recommendation in this judgement area, in respect of the development and implementation of a consistent approach to communication with students.

3.14 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 The University sets out a framework for quality enhancement as part of its overall quality management framework. Enhancement was also a focus of the creation of an integrated Education Strategy in 2010 and is a key aspect of the current review of that strategy. The Education Strategy is then a substrategy of the 2010-20 University Strategy which includes a wide range of objectives and key targets, a number of which relate to enhancement of the learning experience.

4.2 The University makes a commitment to using its quality assurance processes to identify opportunities for improving the students' learning experience and sets out a wide range of opportunities for enhancement in its framework. The design of its processes would therefore allow the Expectation to be met.

4.3 The review team tested this by reviewing a range of documentation and by meeting relevant staff, students and employers.

4.4 The Education Strategy has four related themes of research-led education; the student experience; employability and skills; and internationalisation. Each theme has a set of objectives with associated annual plans. The proposed Education Strategy 2015-20, which has not yet been approved by Senate, continues to develop the same themes and to address enhancement but these are now reflected in two overarching themes of transitions and community.

4.5 The EC monitors the implementation of the Education Strategy through evidence such as outcomes of the NSS and the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey. Its annual action plan includes elements intended to enhance the learning experience such as, in 2014, the development of support for academic skills. Departments develop action plans from their annual reviews which align with the key themes in the Education Strategy and include proposals for enhancing the student learning experience.

4.6 The annual review process for both taught and research degrees draws upon a wide range of evidence to identify strengths and weaknesses, disseminate good practice, and establish priorities for development. It explicitly prompts consideration of enhancement opportunities. Chairs of FECs review their annual review reports and each prepares a faculty overview which summarises key issues and actions. ASO prepares a University overview of these reports, which is considered alongside the faculty overviews by QSSC.

4.7 Although University overviews identify very few University-wide issues, enhancement opportunities are more clearly identified in the Faculty Overview Reports. The review team heard of a number of examples of enhancement at a departmental or faculty level which could be applied at a University level. Examples included a comprehensive review in Physics to reduce over-assessment, the use of employers to comment directly to PGCE students on the relevance of education research in practice, a department-wide engagement with NSS outcomes in Anthropology, and the introduction of a teaching and learning newsletter in Social Sciences & Health. The University may wish to consider whether further benefits can be achieved by increasing the focus on potential University-wide initiatives. QSSC also considers annual faculty and University overviews of external examiners' reports, all of which identify enhancement opportunities.

4.8 The University's commitment to research-led education identifies staff and students as co-members of an academic community. Students are able to contribute to quality enhancement through committee structures from departmental staff-student consultative committees to Senate. However, due to the inconsistency identified in Expectation B5 in relation to sharing information about the work of staff-student consultative committees, there is scope for improvement in communication with students which could lead to the identification of further opportunities for enhancement. Students may additionally contribute to enhancement through providing feedback via a wide range of internal and external questionnaires and by contributing to the monitoring and review of programmes.

4.9 Staff are encouraged to reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching through the Annual Staff Review process and peer observation. A range of support is provided which draws on the Education Strategy and helps staff in enhancing the quality of provision. These include encouraging academic staff to gain HEA recognition which has led to a significant increase at the higher membership levels.

4.10 There are annual schemes to recognise Excellence in Learning & Teaching and in Doctoral Supervision and in Enhancing the Student Learning Experience. Award winners' good practice is shared in staff development events including a University-wide learning and teaching conference scheduled for September 2016. The use of evidence of success in learning and teaching to inform applications for progression and promotion provides academic staff with further encouragement to pursue enhancement opportunities.

4.11 The University takes a range of deliberate steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.12 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The single Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low.

4.13 There are no features of good practice and no recommendations.

4.14 The University takes a range of deliberate steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 Graduate employability is a key institutional priority and a focus across all levels and departments of the institution. This is operationalised through the Employability and Enterprise Skills Strategy and is supported by extensive student support arrangements across departments, colleges, central services and the Students' Union.

5.2 The strategic focus on employability is reflected in range and ambition of success indicators adopted by the institution in this area, based on comparison with peer institutions. All departments aim to be in the top five or top 5 per cent in 'graduate prospects' for their subject area.

5.3 The ASO includes a detailed breakdown of information in relation to graduate employability through the Department Destination Sheets which are considered through the Annual Review Process and are then compiled into summary reports considered at faculty and institutional levels. Departments regarded as underperforming relative to the University's target receive support from the CEEC.

5.4 Institution-wide activity to develop student employability is led by the CEEC whose focus is on encouraging students to consider their development of employability skills from the beginning of their programme to maximise the opportunities available. One of its services, the provision of one-to-one careers advice, is described by students as being well used and valued. Students have the option to complete a skills audit prior to enrolment that allows them to track their progress throughout their studies against the University's 'graduate qualities'. The University intends to achieve more widespread use of the skills audit in the future: while not all students were aware of it, those who had engaged with it found it a positive process.

5.5 Student satisfaction with the University's support for the development of employability has been increasing in the light of the programmes adopted by the University, with the level of satisfaction of first-year students appearing to be higher than that of others. While students spoke positively of the University's provision of support for career development, they also expressed the view that there is a need for the University to promote a broader range of career opportunities and to offer support uniformly across all subject areas: a significant minority expressed some dissatisfaction with the level of careers and employability support in relation to non-vocational subjects and for students wishing to pursue careers outside large private-sector graduate recruiters.

5.6 The University's Durham Award scheme offers a means of recording and recognising student achievements beyond their academic studies, including recognition for acting as a course representative, serving on a Junior Common Room committee, holding office within a Students' Union society or representing a University sports club. The scheme was designed in partnership with employers and maps to the 'graduate qualities' to provide opportunities for awareness and development of employability skills. The extensive Experience Durham programme demonstrates a further commitment to supporting the personal, social and professional development of students.

5.7 Employability initiatives in academic departments are led by the nominated 'employability champion' who works with careers advisers within CEEC and through employability fora to further embed the development of employability skills within programmes. Departmental Employers Forums established in some departments engage directly with employers in developing employability skills provision.

5.8 There is evidence, particularly in non-vocational subject areas, of only limited employer engagement in curriculum development and review: the University may wish to consider the benefits of more uniformly embedding the development of employability skills within the learning experience of its students. Nevertheless, employers spoke in very positive terms regarding the capabilities of students whom they had employed either for graduate positions or for placements, and expressed positive views regarding their relationships with and the work of the CEEC.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 30-33 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx).

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

### Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

### Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

### Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

### Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

### Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'.

See also **blended learning**.

### Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

### **Enhancement**

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations.

See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

### **Learning outcomes**

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

### **Programme specifications**

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

### **Public information**

Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

### **Quality Code**

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** that all providers are required to meet.

### **Reference points**

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

### **Subject Benchmark Statement**

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

### **Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

### **Threshold academic standard**

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

### **Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

### **Widening participation**

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

## **QAA1613 - R4636 - May 16**

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