University of Sussex

Institutional Review
by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

March 2013

Contents

About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the University of Sussex. The review took place from 18 to 23 March 2013 and was conducted by a team of five reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Alan Bilsborough
- Dr David Lamburn
- Ms Martina Rohr
- Ms Cassandra Agbehenu (student reviewer)
- Mr Rory Donnelly (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the University of Sussex and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - threshold academic standards[1]
  - the quality of learning opportunities
  - the information provided about learning opportunities
  - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the key 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 4.

In reviewing the University of Sussex, 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 2012-13 are the First Year Student Experience and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the institution is required to elect, 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.[2] Background information about the University of Sussex is given at the end of this report. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for Institutional Review of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland[3] and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

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[1] For an explanation of terms, see the glossary at the end of this report.
[2] www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx
[3] www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx

Key findings

QAA's judgements about the University of Sussex

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

- Academic standards at the University **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.
- Information about learning opportunities produced by the University **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

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

- The carefully planned and executed three-stage Portfolio Review (comprising strategic engagement, curriculum development and enhancement, and School Periodic Review) conducted across the University and involving all taught and research provision between 2010-11 and April 2012, leading to widespread curriculum redesign (paragraph 1.4.2).
- The range, variety and accessibility of academic and personal support available to students (paragraph 2.2.2).
- The process of restructuring the academic year - including careful preparation, planning, consultation and monitoring of the process leading to the redesign and implementation of the new structure for the academic year, and its associated mid-year assessment period (paragraph 4.5).

Recommendations

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

- Review, improve and, where appropriate, widen the range of mechanisms for all students to make an effective contribution to quality assurance and quality enhancement, by the commencement of the academic year 2014-15 (paragraph 2.3.3).
- Expedite the resolution of shortcomings it has identified in the management and support of postgraduate research students, by the commencement of the academic year 2013-14 (paragraph 2.10.5).
- As part of current updates to the institutional Teaching and Learning Strategy, more clearly define and promote its approach to enhancement, specifically identifying areas or activities to be addressed, with timescales, by the commencement of the academic year 2014-15 (paragraph 4.7).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following actions** that the University of Sussex is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The ongoing work by the University and the student body to develop a Student Charter, or equivalent document, with the aim of more clearly defining the mutual expectations of the institution and its students (paragraph 2.14.2).

Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

The value of student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement is strongly embedded in the University's history and culture, with a well established and substantial volume of staff-student engagement activity (including an extensive Student Representation Scheme), and an active Students' Union.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland](#).[4]

About the University of Sussex

The University was founded in 1961. In its first year, the University enrolled 52 students; in December 2012 the University had over 13,000 students (12,650 FTE). The original buildings of the estate are the work of Sir Basil Spence and are now listed buildings. The University has continued to develop its estate to improve the quality of its teaching and learning environment, student residences and social space for staff and students. Overall investment in the estate since 2008 has been in the region of £210 million, with further substantial investment planned over the next two years.

In March 2008, Senate began an institution-wide consultation concerning the University's academic structure. The consultation was deliberately aligned with the development of its 2009-2015 Strategic Plan in which it set out its intentions for a period of sustained growth in both teaching and research. The consultation concluded with the creation of a new School structure and a realignment of professional services.

In December 2010, Senate agreed to undertake a fundamental restructure of the academic year and to adopt the simplified credit structure for all taught courses for implementation in 2012-13. The rationale behind this decision was the desire (on the part of staff and students) to formalise a mid-year assessment period for all taught provision in order to ensure effective management of the process and to improve the student experience.

The University remains cautious concerning the extent of its partnership engagement at home and overseas. It is currently reconsidering its international strategy, in particular the identification of suitable international partners with whom it wishes to collaborate. To maintain its community involvement, it operates through selected local further education providers and others. In 2009-10, it entered into three partnerships and, in 2009, began the process of disengagement with one.

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[4] www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx.

The University's current Strategic Plan, *Making the Future 2009-2015*, was a plan for growth across the University. Partway through the third year of that plan, many of the goals had been achieved. In the summer of 2012, the University presented its next set of plans and goals to Council. The new Strategic Plan will cover the period 2013-18.

Explanation of the findings about the University of Sussex

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.[5]

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[6] 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.[7]

1   Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards at the University of Sussex **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1   The review team found that the University approves and reviews its courses to ensure alignment to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) frameworks. The approval processes are clearly defined, with robust approval, monitoring and review procedures to ensure that learning outcomes match the qualification descriptors.

1.1.1   Credit requirements for each course ensure that a sufficient volume of study is attained for the learning outcomes to be met.

1.1.2   External examiners are required to relate comments on standards to (among other things) the FHEQ, and are supplied with the qualification descriptors.

Use of external examiners

1.2   The University's use of external examiners is strong and scrupulous and makes an effective contribution to the management of academic standards. The University's policies and procedures relating to external examiners have been mapped against the requirements of *Chapter 7: External examining* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

1.2.1   Reports from external examiners for taught courses are scrutinised by the Academic Office which can escalate concerns and evidence of good practice to the Pro Vice-Chancellor (teaching and learning). The process for consideration of reports at School and University levels and the production of responses and action plans are clearly laid out, and the review team was able to confirm that the process is adhered to.

1.2.2   The external examiners' nomination form includes safeguards against reciprocity. However, the University does not have mechanisms in place to check for or actively prevent reciprocal arrangements (for example, if an external examiner moves institution), and it may

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[5] The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However, it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.
[6] www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx
[7] See note 4.

wish to develop systems to record the University's own staff appointed to external examining roles to give further assurance that reciprocity is avoided.

1.2.3   Student representatives on the appropriate School and University Committees have the opportunity to discuss external examiners' reports and all students have access to reports and action plans on the annual monitoring website. However, it was clear to the review team that not all students were aware of this opportunity and the University should take steps to ensure that this is brought to the attention of all its taught students.

1.2.4   Collaborative courses follow identical procedures for external examining with oversight of reports through the Collaborative Provision Committee.

Assessment and standards

1.3   The University's procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of its assessment strategies are effective in allowing students the opportunity to demonstrate that they have attained the learning outcomes for their awards.

1.3.1   The University has undertaken a major review of its academic portfolio (Portfolio Review) between 2010 and 2012. The curriculum development and enhancement stage of the process provided an opportunity for all Schools to align assessment strategies and learning outcomes, reflect on assessment strategies and enhance assessment and feedback. It was evident to the review team from reading the periodic review reports and course specifications that considerable effort had been put into the design and approval of assessment strategies.

1.3.2   The University's examination and assessment regulations provide common internal reference points for all programmes to ensure consistency. These address a number of factors including progression and award criteria, compensation and condonement, and mitigating evidence.

1.3.3   The University provides clear guidance and training to staff on assessment design, as well as alignment with learning outcomes. Training is also provided for internal examiners of doctoral students.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.4   The University's procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of its programmes ensure standards are set and maintained at the appropriate level for the award. The University has clear processes for annual monitoring of its provision, although the response rate to student evaluations of modules is low. It was evident to the review team that annual monitoring made an effective contribution to the way in which the University ensures that its programme standards are set and maintained.

1.4.1   All new programmes are scrutinised by validation panels. There is a clear and well-structured approval process to ensure alignment with the FHEQ, and consideration of subject benchmarks and the requirements of the University's Academic Framework. External subject specialist assessors are required for all new programme proposals and 35 such specialists participated in the periodic reviews.

1.4.2   It was evident to the review team that the carefully planned and executed three-stage Portfolio Review (comprising strategic engagement, curriculum development, and enhancement and School Periodic Review) conducted across the University and

involving all taught and research provision between 2010-11 and April 2012, leading to widespread curriculum redesign, is a feature of **good practice**.

Subject benchmarks

1.5   Subject benchmark statements and qualification statements are used in the design, approval, delivery and review of courses to inform the standards of awards, in conjunction with the requirements of PSRBs where appropriate. The review team saw ample evidence of subject benchmarks and qualification statements being used in the design, approval and review of courses.

2   Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at the University of Sussex **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1   The University has an effective approach to the support and enhancement of professional standards for teaching and learning. For example, it is a mandatory requirement for new members of academic staff (on full or proportional contracts) with less than three years' full-time teaching experience to undertake and complete a two-year part-time Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Staff who teach on validated and franchised courses in partner institutions must be qualified at least to a level above that at which they are teaching. The University operates an annual staff appraisal system, which includes consideration of teaching and is valued by staff, although there was evidence of inconsistency between Schools, for example in the period between appraisals.

2.1.1   Associate tutors (teachers who are not full members of staff) have access to an online training programme and various support pathways. However, the team saw limited evidence of the extent and consistency of induction, training and support for associate tutors in practice, despite evidence of postgraduate research students in particular being asked to take on high volumes of teaching work as associate tutors.

2.1.2   Students whom the team met were enthusiastic about the integration of research into the curriculum by academic staff. Such research-informed teaching made modules current, relevant and stimulating for students.

2.1.2   There are mentoring arrangements for staff new to teaching, but these arrangements are not required for staff with teaching experience. Instead, the University operates an open door policy to encourage staff to interact and converse with peers. However, the University does operate peer observation of teaching. The University may wish to consider a formal peer mentoring system for probationers to ensure their smooth transition and integration into the staffing structure.

Learning resources

2.2   The Vice-Chancellor chairs an annual planning meeting with each School at which resources and other strategic developments, including new courses, are discussed. The process takes into account student needs and learning outcomes. There are mechanisms for academics to engage in resource allocation discussions. The University may wish to consider a more coordinated approach to the deployment of learning resources,

especially in light of pressures arising from the planned expansion of student numbers. For example, resource allocation for postgraduate research students can be unclear and inconsistent.

2.2.1   Students reported that the Sussex Direct and Study Direct web portals are of particular use in providing access to electronic resources and gathering information about their courses. Students also praised the library facilities, with recent refurbishment being particularly appreciated.

2.2.2   Students also singled out for praise the excellent support from academic advisers and the very strong resources provided through the library. There was very positive feedback about information technology services and the Careers and Employability Centre. The Student Life Centre and Student Support Unit provide very good welfare and disability support for students. The review team agreed that the range, variety and accessibility of academic and personal support available to students is a feature of **good practice**.

Student voice

2.3   The University has a comprehensive student representation system, with student representation on a number of committees, including postgraduate research representation on Senate and Council. Students from collaborative partners are invited to sit on School-based collaborative committees.

2.3.1   Schools are required to set action plans in response to University-wide priorities, including on issues arising from student surveys such as improving assessment feedback. However, the student written submission (SWS) highlighted concerns that School action plans were not being consistently followed up or reported back more widely (paragraph 4.8). The team agreed, however, that the University could make better use of student feedback and not be over-reliant on the National Student Survey (NSS) and International Student Barometer (ISB). For example, there is no Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) or non-final-year undergraduate surveys.

2.3.2   The University is aware of a drop in student questionnaire response rates since module questionnaires were placed online. The team would encourage the University to continue its efforts to address this issue and engage more consistently with 'hard to reach' groups such as part-time and off-campus students, as it has recently demonstrated with its consultation on the structure of the academic year.

2.3.3   There is already a strong culture of student engagement in the University, but the review team agreed that mechanisms could be improved and **recommends** the University to review, improve and, where appropriate, widen the range of mechanisms for all students to make an effective contribution to quality assurance and quality enhancement, by the commencement of the academic year 2014-15.

Management information is used to improve quality and standards

2.4   The review team found that there was effective use of management information derived from a variety of sources to safeguard standards and promote the enhancement of learning opportunities. Management information is mainly gathered through annual monitoring, which is reported through the various committee layers. Data and standard reports are available through the University's Cognos software. Schools and central functions can run their own specific reports to analyse the data further. Schools also consider and reflect on comprehensive data through the annual planning round, and are

required to produce action plans. Central monitoring is overseen by the Performance Committee which reports to University Council.

2.4.1   However, the review team noted some inconsistencies in the way the University and its Schools gather, analyse and use data information to influence change - for example, data regarding the postgraduate research student lifecycle (paragraph 2.10.3).

Admission to the University

2.5   The University's admissions policy is clear and fair and is reviewed regularly by the Strategic Recruitment and Admissions Committee. There is central management of taught programme admission which is overseen by a dedicated team, using online applications to provide live data to admissions tutors. The undergraduate and postgraduate admissions processes are centralised to ensure parity. There is also an admissions template for individual courses. The University's Office for Fair Access agreement and associated policies are monitored centrally.

Complaints and appeals

2.6   The University's appeals procedures are effective. The Teaching and Learning Committee receives an annual report on appeals but there is no such report for complaints. Although the number of complaints during 2011-12 was low (10 - all dealt with without recourse to the formal complaints procedure), the University may wish to keep a formal record in order to monitor trends.

2.6.1   While the procedures for complaints and appeals are clear, they are not well publicised. Although present in student handbooks, students and staff met by the review team were unclear what the procedures are and where to find them.

Career advice and guidance

2.7   The University has a strategic approach to career and employability advice, and has highlighted this as an area of focus arising from NSS scores. The Careers and Employability Centre (CEC) regularly facilitates careers days within Schools, runs a strong programme of central activities and also encourages students to take advantage of CEC resources. This is very positively rated by students.

Supporting disabled students

2.8   The team found that the learning opportunities and entitlements of disabled students were generally well managed to help them achieve intended learning outcomes. The University is aware of some lack of clarity regarding access and availability of central services, facilities in the library and staff training as highlighted in the SWS. The University has strategic overview of planning, monitoring and evaluation of services through the committee system. The Equality and Diversity Committee's role is to recommend and monitor the implementation of the University's policies, schemes and practices for the promotion of equality and diversity. The review team is able to confirm that all policies, strategies, guidelines and codes are clearly and comprehensively available on the internal website with links to all services.

2.8.1   The physical environment is generally good, and relevant support as documented on the web is available to undergraduate and postgraduate taught students. However, at present, services have a strong focus on undergraduate and postgraduate taught students while postgraduate research students reported difficulties in accessing the services.

2.8.2   The review team encourages the University to ensure equal access to services for all students and, in particular, to enhance the services specific to the needs of postgraduate research students and to continue to monitor the adequacy of resourcing.

Supporting international students

2.9   The University effectively manages its policies, structures and procedures to ensure the quality of learning opportunities for international students. International students have access to a variety of support mechanisms such as those provided by the International Office, the English language and study skills support services, the CEC, and the information on the Sussex Direct and Sussex Study Skills websites.

2.9.1   Annual monitoring reports and external examiner reports generally reflect positively on the standard of language and on the achievement of international students. Two annual monitoring reports commented on international students not contributing to classes and on their language skills, and that this was being addressed by increasing the International English Language Test System threshold and staff development workshops run by the Teaching and Learning Development Unit on topics such as feedback and teaching international students.

2.9.2   The University continues to review its induction procedures and central activities for students, and provides staff development workshops for staff at School level to support the integration of international students into the University community and increase their familiarity with the UK academic culture. The Students' Union takes an active interest in the international student experience by reporting to and advising the University. The review team encourages the University to work together with the Students' Union to continuously monitor and enhance international students' experience.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.10   The Handbook for Doctoral Researchers and the Code of Practice for Research provide comprehensive guidance on research degree regulations, protocols and procedures governing the arrangements and quality assurance mechanisms for postgraduate research students.

2.10.1   The SWS reported on inconsistent experiences of postgraduate research students across Schools and departments pointing to varied support from services, restricted disability support, lack of consistency in training, incomplete supervisory teams, varied supervisor contact and feedback, insufficient space allocation in some instances, and lack of appropriate levels of resourcing for some self-funded students. Different models are used across Schools and add to confusion and discontent. Critical comments were further substantiated by students whom the review team met. A number of postgraduate research students with teaching responsibilities reported heavy workloads, and inconsistencies in training and remuneration. The University acknowledged that at present there were no effective mechanisms in place to monitor postgraduate research students' teaching allocation.

2.10.2   The SWS also reported instances of problematic relationships with supervisors and inconsistency of supervision, in particular when supervisors leave the University, as well as differences in provision across Schools. Students at the Students' Union focus groups reported that they did not know how to complain about their supervisors and their anxiety in doing so. This inconsistency of supervisor support and supervision evidence was also noted by various Periodic Review Panels; for example, one report confirmed that 'student meetings with their supervisors did not always happen'. The Review Panel also remarked that 'an

accurate electronic record of the discussion to record targets set and progress made towards the target' was needed.

2.10.3   Completion rates have been identified as a further key area of concern in Periodic Reviews of the Doctoral School and through other channels. Issues include both low or slow completion, and concerns about data quality for monitoring this. Various measures have been deliberated over an extended period, and a timeline has recently been set by Senate for this to be better addressed.

2.10.4   The Doctoral School Committee (particularly at recent meetings in December 2012 and March 2013) has considered and agreed a set of actions to address a range of the issues identified, including with regard to quality assurance and support mechanisms across Schools and departments.

2.10.5   The review team noted that a number of these matters had been raised regularly but without resolution for some time, and **recommends** that by the commencement of the academic year 2013-14, the University expedites the resolution of shortcomings it has identified in the management and support of postgraduate research students.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.11   The University manages and supports its collaborative partnerships effectively and maintains good oversight of the arrangements with these partner institutions. The University has a strong UK-based partnership portfolio, a small number of articulation agreements with overseas partner institutions, and an extensive register of partnerships with European and other overseas institutions facilitating student exchanges. These partnerships are served by the Partnership Office and the International Office. UK partners are mostly further education colleges offering validated or franchised programmes and some private colleges. All have undergone Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review or Review of Educational Oversight by QAA. All partnership activities are reported to the Collaborative Provision Committee, and onwards by summary reporting to the Teaching and Learning Committee and to Senate where necessary.

2.11.1   Policies and procedures for managing collaborative provision are clearly set out in the Partner Handbook, including procedures for validation and revalidation, annual monitoring, external examining, a calendar of events with deadlines, partner support mechanisms, regulatory frameworks, and a procedure for examination boards. Contracts clearly stipulate arrangements for quality assurance, responsibilities of either side and student entitlements. Templates for annual operational agreements (service-level agreements) are well articulated and reviewed annually.

2.11.2   The review team concluded that the University has good oversight of its arrangements with partner institutions. However, the SWS did not report on engagement with collaborative partners and the review team would encourage the University, working with the Students' Union, to strengthen its oversight of student voice and student evaluation at collaborative partner institutions.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.12   The quality of learning opportunities delivered through flexible arrangements, including e-learning, is managed effectively. The *Strategic Plan for Technology Enhanced Learning for the University of Sussex 2010-2015* clearly sets the parameters for the development and enhancement of facilities, teaching and learning opportunities for the future.

2.12.1   Apart from the Professional Doctorate in Education, there are no courses taught through flexible or distributed arrangements. The taught component of this programme is delivered by University academic staff through an annual summer school.

2.12.2   The University makes good use of virtual learning environments through its Sussex Direct and Study Direct portals. These are supported by qualified staff who deliver training for learners and staff; they appear to be well maintained sites, and staff and students engage actively with this learning and communication environment.

Work-based and placement learning

2.13   Employability and placement learning is a new area of strategic development. At the time of the review, a restricted pilot scheme was being operated. The review team was provided with a Status Update Report evaluating the delivery of the pilot and monitoring student uptake of this initiative.

2.13.1   The scheme is too recent for the review team to evaluate or identify good practice, but the team acknowledges the current information on placements on the web and endorses the initiatives arising from the pilot scheme.

Student charter

2.14   The University currently does not have a student charter. Sussex was identified in the national BIS (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) student charter report of January 2011 as one of six English higher education institutions 'currently developing a charter' (data collected summer 2010), but the review team noted that progress has not been made. The University and Students' Union confirmed that joint work to develop a student charter was anticipated later in the academic year, with the timescale having been extended by mutual consent.

2.14.1   At present, mutual expectations of the institution and its students are set out in the University of Sussex Student Handbook, available via the website. This is the main document governing the relationship between students and the University, and students confirmed that this provides adequate information about their rights and responsibilities.

2.14.2   The review team **affirms** the ongoing work by the University and the student body to develop a student charter, or equivalent document, with the aim of more clearly defining the mutual expectations of the institution and its students.

3   Information about learning opportunities

Summary

The information about learning opportunities produced by the University of Sussex **meets UK expectations**. The intended audience finds that the information about the learning opportunities offered is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The University appears to meet its publication obligations to the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

3.1   Accuracy on information about learning opportunities is managed through the Communications Division and Student Recruitment Service working with Schools. The Partnership Office works with partners to ensure accuracy of information on partnership and validated provision information. The Communications Division has overall responsibility for

the University's web presence, guided by its Code of Practice for Publishing Information on Electronic Networks. The Governance Office retains a web directory of all current policies.

3.2   School websites provide online course handbooks with programme specification information, module content, level, teaching method, learning resources and assessment. The information is sourced from the Course Management System to ensure accuracy. School websites link to the University Student Handbook which highlights recent changes in, for example, assessment, deadlines and the mitigating evidence process. There is some variation between School websites and course handbooks, and the University is reviewing a format to provide a common standard for information.

3.3   Current students expressed some dissatisfaction with the communication of abrupt changes of policy without prior widespread consultation - for example, on fees, the academic year, mitigating evidence and late submission penalties. Additionally, there was late information regarding examination dates.

4   Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at the University of Sussex **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1   Since 2008, the main driver for enhancement of student learning opportunities at institutional level has been the Teaching and Learning Strategy and the Operational Plan. There is no separate enhancement strategy, although there is a strategy on quality assurance and enhancement published on the Academic Office website and dating from 2008, with annual updating in light of internal and external developments. It is predominantly concerned with quality assurance; its final section emphasises that the University's approach to quality enhancement is via the overarching Teaching and Learning Strategy, not a distinct quality enhancement strategy.

4.2   The Teaching and Learning Committee has overall responsibility for developing the academic aims, educational objectives and academic policies of the University including developing and monitoring the Teaching and Learning Strategy. The Teaching and Learning Committee is advised by two subcommittees regarding enhancement:

- the Teaching and Learning Committee Enhancement Board, to advise on revisions to the Teaching and Learning Strategy to meet strategic objectives
- the Quality Enhancement Sub-committee which considers curriculum changes, keeps the academic framework under review, receives reports on programme validations and PSRB reviews, reviews portfolio development and annual monitoring and review outcomes to inform curriculum enhancement, and oversees the Quality Code. Much of its business is concerned with quality assurance rather than quality enhancement.

4.3   There is significant institution-led strategic enhancement. This is perhaps most obvious in the run-up to the restructuring of the academic year and the subsequent simplification of credit and degree structures. This involved consultations, with questionnaires and focus groups representing special interest cohorts, as well as meetings and web-based communication, and several interim reports inviting responses which led to subsequent modification (including the timescale for implementation) of the original proposals.

4.4   There is evidence of careful preparation, planning, consultation and monitoring of the process leading to the redesign and implementation of the new structure for the academic year, and its associated mid-year assessment period. Associated with the latter are the opportunities taken during the redesign of credit and modular structures to innovate in curriculum design and assessment, allowing for University-wide student elective modules, greater emphasis within the curriculum on transferable skills, placement opportunities, study abroad, and credit-bearing volunteering activities. The culmination of this process was Portfolio Review involving the phases of Strategic Engagement, Curriculum Development and Enhancement, and School Periodic Review to approve the standards and quality of newly designed programmes within the new credit and module framework.

4.5   The review team agreed that the process of restructuring of the academic year, including careful preparation, planning, consultation and monitoring of the process leading to the redesign and implementation of the new structure for the academic year, and its associated mid-year assessment period, is a feature of **good practice**.

4.6   Notwithstanding the success of individual enhancement activities at institutional level and below, it would be appropriate for the University to explicate more prominently an enhancement strategy within its overarching Teaching and Learning Strategy. This would have the benefits of promoting continuity, facilitating interconnections, coordination and integration between enhancement activities, and raising the profile of enhancement generally among staff and students, feeding in turn into student expectations of quality, and staff readiness to experiment and innovate in curriculum design, delivery and assessment.

4.7   The review team **recommends** that the University, as part of current updates to the institutional Teaching and Learning Strategy, more clearly defines and promotes its approach to enhancement, specifically identifying areas or activities to be addressed, with timescales, by the commencement of the academic year 2014-15.

4.8   The review team saw a number of examples of quality assurance processes identifying areas for improvement or enhancement, but with the benefits arising being limited by patchy recording, reporting, tracking or follow-through on actions (particularly through committees). Linked points were mentioned earlier in this report in relation to postgraduate research students (paragraphs 2.10.1 to 2.10.4); use of the student voice (paragraphs 2.3.1 to 2.3.3 and 5.3); professional standards for teaching (paragraphs 2.1.1 and 2.1.3); learning resources (paragraph 2.2); management information (paragraph 2.4.1); student complaints (paragraph 2.6); and development of a student charter (paragraph 2.14). More generally, as part of updating the institutional Teaching and Learning Strategy (paragraph 4.7), the University considers introducing an appropriate institution-wide mechanism to ensure that actions agreed through its quality assurance and enhancement processes are tracked, addressed and reported back in a rigorous and timely fashion.

5   Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Each academic year, a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's Institutional Review teams. For this review, the theme selected was Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The value of student opinion is strongly embedded in the University's culture, primarily being enacted through an active, informed and campaigning Students' Union, and an extensive Student Representation Scheme. There are open communication channels between management staff, the Students' Union and student representatives. Students and staff

whom the review team met indicated their support for the principles of student engagement.

Innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

5.1   There are substantive opportunities for students to help shape teaching and learning provision by considering innovative practices, and student engagement in the periodic review and validation of courses. The latter was an important element of the pan-institutional periodic Portfolio Review conducted in 2011-12, identified earlier in this report as a feature of good practice (paragraph 1.4.2), and welcomed by students who gave positive feedback about the process. Around 100 students were involved in Periodic Review processes, with outputs showing thoughtful and wide-ranging consideration of issues such as postgraduate research study.

5.1.2   Other notable aspects of student engagement in quality at the University include a Student Representation Scheme, operated jointly by the Students' Union and University, which manages elections and draws in student representatives (approximately 600 in total) to a large number of committees across all levels and areas of the University. This was broadly agreed to work well, particularly within Schools as it facilitates regular direct contact between senior management and Union Officers. The explicit inclusion of a postgraduate student representative on the Council, in addition to the President of the Students' Union, is innovative.

Staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality

5.2   The review team heard that there are very strong links between staff and students at course, department and School level - including through School Teaching and Learning Committees, Boards of Study for individual courses, and other structures that may be more informal or variable across Schools. Training support is provided for student representatives. However, student involvement in quality was generally seen as something connected to student membership on committees. Students' Union representatives are unclear about what 'engagement in management of quality and standards' meant, and the SWS noted that representatives did not feel suitably well informed about quality or enhancement as evaluated through QAA Institutional Review.

5.2.1   In general, despite inclusion in committee memberships, there was limited evidence of students being systematically engaged with quality assurance mechanisms other than validation and review, although student engagement in Periodic Review contributed to good practice (paragraph 1.4.2). Students, including representatives on relevant committees and from the Students' Union, were not widely aware of the existence of external examiner reports or their ability to access them via annual monitoring web pages. The SWS withheld comment on external examining and related monitoring processes. Student representatives on committees indicated that they had limited involvement in annual monitoring processes.

Acting on student contributions and 'closing the feedback loop'

5.3   Communication to students about actions taken in response to their feedback was seen to be variable across the institution. Staff indicated that the primary mechanism for 'closing the loop' is through committees which include student representatives and are minuted; but students indicated that this was not always sufficient, and the review team noted that timescales or responsibilities for follow-up were not being consistently identified. Related to this, the team agreed there was an opportunity for the University to do more to consistently track actions taken in response to matters arising through its formal committee structures, including reporting back on actions agreed as a result of student feedback (paragraph 4.8).

5.3.1   Nonetheless, the review team saw evidence of the University being responsive to student feedback. For example, views regarding assessment were considered in the recent Portfolio Review and incorporated in the restructuring of academic year, which in turn was carefully communicated back to students. Student input and feedback being gathered and acted on was particularly evident regarding library and information technology resources, for which specific initiatives had been undertaken. The University and Students' Union have developed an action plan arising from the SWS, to be jointly signed off.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of: threshold academic standards; learning opportunities; enhancement; and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms, please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:
www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx.

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Code of practice *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

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.

enhancement Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

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*.

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned

programmes of study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

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

operational definition A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study) An approved course of study which 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 being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

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.

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

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