



The University of York

Institutional Review
by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

February 2012

Contents

About this review	1
Key findings	2
QAA's judgements about the University of York	2
Good practice.....	2
Recommendations	2
Affirmation of action being taken	3
Public information	3
The first year student experience	3
About the University of York	4
Explanation of the findings about the University of York	5
1 Academic standards	5
Outcome.....	5
Meeting external qualifications benchmarks	5
Use of external examiners	5
Assessment and standards	6
Setting and maintaining programme standards.....	7
Subject benchmarks	7
2 Quality of learning opportunities	8
Outcome.....	8
Professional standards for teaching and learning	8
Learning resources.....	8
Student voice	9
Management information is used to improve quality and standards.....	10
Admission to the University	10
Complaints and appeals	10
Career advice and guidance.....	11
Supporting disabled students	11
Supporting international students	12
Supporting postgraduate research students	12
Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements	13
Flexible, distributed and e-learning.....	13
Work-based and placement learning	13
Student charter.....	14
3 Public information.....	14
Outcome.....	14
Findings.....	14
4 Enhancement of learning opportunities	14
Outcome.....	14
Findings.....	15
5 Theme: The first-year student experience	15
Supporting students' transition.....	15
Information for first-year students	16
Assessment and feedback.....	16
Monitoring retention and progression	16
Glossary	17

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 York. The review took place on 13-17 February 2012 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Mrs Jill Lyttle
- Professor Tim Softley
- Ms Kate Little (student reviewer)
- Dr Dave Dowland (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the University of York 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 standards¹
 - the quality of learning opportunities
 - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- identifies features of good practice
- makes recommendations
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take
- provides commentaries on public information and the theme topic.

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 5.

In reviewing the University of York the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [theme](#) for the academic year 2011-12 is the First Year Student Experience.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² Background information about the University of York is given on page 4. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for [Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland³ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

¹ For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

² www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/IRENI/pages/default.aspx

Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about the University of York.

QAA's judgements about the University of York

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the University of York (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**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **is commended**.

Good practice

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

- The *Guide to Assessment, Standards, Marking and Feedback*, in linking assessment strategies to learning outcomes, and its use in the ongoing development of the modular system (paragraph 1.3.1).
- The wide range of training and development opportunities at all levels, ranging from postgraduate research students to senior academic and support staff (paragraph 2.1.3).
- The development of the Management Information Gateway, linked to the University's 'Better Management' and 'Leadership Development' programmes, as a comprehensive resource for departmental and institutional academic planning, monitoring and enhancement (paragraph 2.4.1).
- The extensive opportunities for students to develop their employability skills through engagement with local and regional communities (paragraph 2.7.3).
- The proactive approach to the creation of a community among distance learning students, including enhancement initiatives through the Distance Learning Forum (paragraph 2.12.1).
- The successful establishment of the Mathematics Skills Centre to support students across a wide of range of disciplines (paragraph 4.3).

Recommendations

The QAA review team **recommends** the University of York to:

- establish a process to assure itself that timely and appropriate responses are sent to all external examiners' reports, starting with reports for 2011-12 assessments (paragraph 1.2.3)
- ensure the provision of coordinated, accurate and comprehensive information for students (including a university-wide framework for core information in course and departmental handbooks and web sites) and ensure that, in the absence of a student charter or equivalent document, all students receive accurate information setting out what they can expect, what is expected of them and what to do if their experience does not meet expected standards (staged implementation to be carried out between now and 2013-14) (paragraph 2.14.1)

- ensure the consistent implementation of procedures regarding the timing and conduct of Thesis Advisory Panels for postgraduate research students, by the start of the academic year 2012-13 (paragraph 2.10.2).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- Opportunities for formative assessment are being extended for all students, especially in the early stages of their studies (paragraph 1.3.4).
- Assessment policies are consistently implemented across all departments, and include: feedback within six weeks, departmental statements on assessment, supervision to ensure reflection on feedback is promoted across all departments (paragraph 1.3.3).
- The process for ensuring that departments respond to changes in subject benchmark statements is being tightened (paragraph 1.5).
- A consistent approach to student/staff discussion forums in each department, separate from the Board of Studies, is being introduced (paragraph 2.3.1).
- A university-wide induction programme for postgraduate research students is being implemented, in response to student feedback (paragraph 2.10.1).
- All formal agreements with collaborative partners are signed before the programme starts (paragraph 2.11.2).

Public information

The University of York makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate and up to date. Students find the information useful, especially in helping them make an informed choice when applying to the University, and also in preparing for what they might expect when they join.

The first year student experience

The University supports students throughout their transition to higher education, with an ongoing and comprehensive induction process. Information for applicants and new students is being further developed, and the University is working to address any inconsistencies. The University encourages the provision of formative assessment and is working to ensure that all students receive such opportunities in the early stages of their studies. The University has relatively low levels of drop-out, but regularly analyses retention and progression data.

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

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/IRENI/pages/default.aspx

About the University of York

The University of York was founded in 1963. Its mission is 'to become a world leader in the creation of knowledge through fundamental and applied research, the sharing of knowledge by teaching students from varied backgrounds, and the application of knowledge for the health, prosperity and well-being of people and society.'⁵

The University is characterised by 28 'strong academic departments'⁶. Accommodation and some welfare provision for students are provided through eight colleges. Student representation is organised through the York University Students' Union and the Graduate Students' Association.

The University was last reviewed in 2007. Since then it has agreed a University Plan (2009-19) which sets out four strategic objectives: excellence, internationalisation, inclusivity and sustainability. The campus has expanded onto an adjoining site, and improvements to the physical estate have been made. A new modular scheme has been introduced for all programmes with the aim of 'achieving greater consistency and transparency for students...whilst still allowing academics the flexibility to develop programmes which meet their disciplinary needs.'⁷

The University has identified changes to funding and its impact on many aspects of higher education as a key challenge. It is also concerned to meet the national requirements for the provision of public data and is working towards this currently. The University recognises the need to consider whether or not its 'reasonably permissive policy frameworks' might need to be replaced with a 'stronger and more transparent policy framework.'⁸ The review team saw evidence of consideration of each of the key challenges at institutional level.

The University has a relatively small portfolio of collaborative partners and it does not expect this to change in the near future. It considers opportunities for collaboration if there is a strong, strategic 'fit' with the University, if there is sufficient subject expertise, and if risks to both the University's reputation and the student experience can be managed effectively.

⁵ From the self-evaluation document provided to QAA by the University in advance of the review.

⁶ See note 5.

⁷ See note 5.

⁸ See note 5.

Explanation of the findings about the University of York

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.⁹

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](#)¹⁰ 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.¹¹

1 Academic standards

Outcome

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

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 The review team found that the University has clearly defined mechanisms in its programme approval and major modification processes to ensure that programmes of study match the levels specified in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The team found many examples of evidence for this.

1.1.1 In the programme approval process, programmes are scrutinised by external reviewers to ensure that the appropriate level on the FHEQ has been met. The University Teaching Committee rejects proposals not meeting the required levels. At module level, each module is expected to match the relevant credit-level descriptors. Guidance notes are provided to clarify the relationship between module levels and the overall level of the programme. The periodic review process also requires a statement from the panel confirming conformance with the FHEQ.

1.1.2 Programme specifications are required for all programmes and must refer to the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements.

Use of external examiners

1.2 The role of the external examiner is clearly defined in documentation, in accordance with QAA guidelines. The University is currently reviewing its processes in this area in the light of the new section on external examining in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. One outcome of this review will be the need to ensure that external examiners' reports are shared with all students.

1.2.1 The appointment and induction process and the guidance provided for external examiners regarding what is expected of them ensures that their role of confirming that academic standards are appropriate is clear and effective. External examiners are provided with a pro forma by which they must confirm that standards are appropriate and comparable with other UK higher education providers, and the assessment process is sound and fairly conducted; they also comment on student performance and areas of good practice. If reports

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary

¹¹ See note 4.

are too short to comply fully with the pro forma, a letter from the Examinations Office is sent requesting a more detailed response in the next report.

1.2.2 All external examiners' reports are considered in detail through the process of annual programme review. In their annual programme review report, departments are required to comment on the main points arising in the external examiners' reports. All the reports are also read by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching, and a summary is prepared for the University Teaching Committee. Generic issues raised by external examiners in a number of subjects and associated departmental views such as on the use of the full range of marks, result in further consideration of the issues by the University.

1.2.3 Feedback to external examiners is registered in an examiners' log by each department and lodged with the Examinations Office. However, in practice the University does not verify that each department has responded to all substantive issues in the relevant report(s), nor does it monitor the nature of the responses. Some responses were minimal. **The review team recommends that** the University establish a process to assure itself that timely and appropriate responses are sent to all external examiners' reports (starting with reports for 2011-12 assessments).

1.2.4 The process for considering the reports of external examiners for postgraduate taught programmes differs slightly since the annual programme review tends to happen before the external examiners' reports are received. Departments are, nevertheless, expected to log key points and actions once the report is received. External examiners for postgraduate research programmes are briefed about their responsibilities via the examiners' website.

Assessment and standards

1.3 The University's *Guide to Assessment, Standards, Marking and Feedback* gives clear and extensive advice on how various forms of assessment can be used to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. The framework for programme design also clearly indicates the need to link assessment with learning outcomes. Programme specifications are expected to explain the link between learning outcomes and assessment.

1.3.1 The Learning Enhancement Team worked with academic staff during the introduction of the new modular scheme to consider the contribution of assessment to learning outcomes. The review team found the good advice provided by the *Guide to Assessment, Standards, Marking and Feedback*, in linking assessment strategies to learning outcomes and its use in the ongoing development of the modular system, to be a **feature of good practice**.

1.3.2 Departments are required to provide written statements of assessment which include an explanation of the links between learning outcomes and how they are assessed. However, the University will review these to clarify who they are intended for, as students do not always find them useful. As part of the move to the new modular scheme, departments were encouraged to reflect on the volume and nature of assessment, including opportunities to broaden the range of assessment methods. The new scheme also established Common Assessment Periods for invigilated examinations. As part of its evaluation of the scheme, the University recognises that the Common Assessment Periods have caused concern amongst some academic staff and students about the amount of pressure that this puts on staff and students.

1.3.3 A new 'feedback within six weeks' policy was introduced in 2009-10, with an emphasis on quality as well as timing of feedback. This is supported by a clarification of the role of supervisors in encouraging reflection on feedback. There was some evidence that

there were difficulties in keeping to the six week timescale and some inconsistency in the implementation of the new supervision arrangements. Nonetheless, the University is pressing departments to adhere to the new policies, and students reported that they have noticed overall improvements in the quality of feedback as well as its timing. The review team **affirms the action taken by the University** to continue to promote the consistent implementation of assessment policies across all departments, including feedback within six weeks, the use of departmental statements on assessment and the use of supervision to ensure reflection on feedback.

1.3.4 International students said that they did not always understand the assessment requirements and requested more formative assessment opportunities (see also paragraph 2.9.1). Formative assessment has been discussed at learning and teaching workshops, especially with regard to postgraduate taught provision. The review team **affirms the University's efforts** to extend the provision of opportunities for formative assessment for all students, especially in the early stages of their studies.

1.3.5 A mandatory tutorial on academic integrity has been introduced and has been well received by students. The University remains concerned at the disproportionate number of academic misconduct cases in areas where there is a high proportion of international students (see also paragraph 2.9.1).

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.4 The University Teaching Committee effectively fulfils its responsibilities for overseeing and approving programmes.

1.4.1 Some validation proposals have been rejected on the grounds of standards (see paragraph 1.1.1). The standards of new and reviewed programmes are endorsed through external scrutiny as part of programme approval and periodic review, as well as through external examining. However, the review team was concerned by the potential effect of a cumulative succession of major modifications to modules on the overall standards of a programme over a period of time. The University responded that the new modular scheme is still bedding in, and gave assurance that the periodic review process would monitor the effects of cumulative change as the new modular system becomes established. The review team would encourage the University to make this specific in periodic review documentation.

1.4.2 The periodic review process results in action plans for those areas where quality and standards are deemed to be at risk. The annual programme review process benefits from the presence of students in the departmental meetings, along with a member of the Academic Support Office, which helps to ensure that matters of importance to students are discussed. However for some combined honours programmes there is no coordination between the relevant departments in the annual programme review process, despite recent changes to supervision regulations for combined honours students. The University is aware of a certain amount of dissatisfaction with regard to management arrangements for combined programmes. The review team would encourage it to continue to find ways of resolving these issues.

Subject benchmarks

1.5 Subject benchmark statements and qualification statements are used in the design, approval and review of programmes, in conjunction with the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, where appropriate. However, the University acknowledges that it needs to close the loop between noting changes to subject benchmark statements and ensuring that appropriate action is taken by departments. The review team **affirms the**

University's aim of tightening the process for ensuring that departments respond to changes in subject benchmark statements.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

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

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy refers to a 'consistent culture of quality', with staff support identified as one of its key elements.

2.1.1 The recently introduced 'Peer Support for Teaching' engages staff in active discussion of learning and teaching and has the potential to support change and enhancement (see also paragraph 4.2). Teaching quality is an important factor in staff promotion.

2.1.2 New academic staff with less than three years' teaching experience are required to complete the University's accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. Students and staff confirmed that postgraduate students who teach are well trained, supported and mentored.

2.1.3 A wide range of training and development opportunities is available at all levels, ranging from postgraduate research students to senior academic and support staff. These opportunities are also available to staff at partner institutions. This is a **feature of good practice**.

Learning resources

2.2 'Managing the Learning and Teaching Environment and Infrastructure' is a key element in the Learning and Teaching Strategy. Key groups such as the Better Management Sub-Group (BMSG) use management information to allocate resources.

2.2.1 The BMSG places a clear emphasis on improving buildings and facilities to increase and enhance provision. An extensive programme of both new build and refurbishment of older buildings is under way, with some consequent temporary disruption - for example, to library facilities during extension and refurbishment.

2.2.2 Departmental Library representatives sit on the University Library Committee. The University is aware that surveys indicate some inadequacy in library stock, and additional resources have been allocated. Students were positive about the new library facilities, including online support.

2.2.3 The University's virtual learning environment is called Yorkshare. Its usage, which is evaluated annually, is variable between departments, some of which prefer to use their own electronic resources. Effective online support for distance learners is provided. Support for users is provided by professional staff and also through user networks. The student written submission stated that students were generally satisfied with this resource. This was confirmed by the students who met the team.

2.2.4 Library and information technology support is provided at central and departmental level to staff and students by professional support staff. Regular surveys are carried out, and responses to user feedback are given via the website. The student written submission cited several examples of University responses to student feedback, including on the issue of 24-hour library opening. Students who met the team commented on the helpfulness of library staff.

2.2.5 Students benefit from a supportive network of supervisors in academic departments, central support services, further personal support through staff, and welfare tutors in colleges, as well as from York University Students' Union and the Graduate Students' Association.

2.2.6 The college system plays a significant role in the student experience at York and complements personal academic support provided through departmental supervisors. The review team heard from staff at all levels of the sense of community that this campus university engenders, and heard from students that they felt part of a welcoming academic community.

Student voice

2.3 Students make a significant contribution to quality assurance and quality enhancement at the University. Opportunities for them to give their opinion are provided at all levels.

2.3.1 Students are represented on the main University committees and relevant working groups, on the departmental boards of studies, and on annual programme monitoring and periodic review panels. However, there is variability in practice as to how departments facilitate student discussion outside these formal meetings. A policy for student representation in learning and teaching activities is also under discussion, with a view to establishing more consistency across departments. The review team **affirms the work the University is doing** to introduce a more consistent approach to student/staff discussion forums in each department separate from the Board of Studies.

2.3.2 Student feedback is sought at module, programme and institutional level. Students were able to give examples of matters where they had given feedback and had seen evidence of changes made as a result.

2.3.3 Support and guidance for student representatives is available from the University, Chairs of Boards of Studies, individual departments, and through training provided by York University Students' Union (YUSU) and the Graduate Students' Association (GSA). YUSU and the GSA also publish clear, comprehensive handbooks.

2.3.4 Results of various national surveys, such as the National Student Survey, are carefully considered. The President of YUSU and the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching may visit departments with less favourable scores to discuss how learning opportunities might be enhanced. The GSA is similarly involved with the results of the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. The two student representative organisations are often asked to find students from less well represented groups to take part in central focus groups. The University prides itself on working in partnership with its students; both staff and students who met the team emphasised that, in addition to formal engagement, there is much informal contact and discussion between staff and students at departmental level and at institutional level with student representatives.

Management information is used to improve quality and standards

2.4 The University makes effective use of management information and key performance indicators to support the assurance of quality and standards and the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

2.4.1 The development of a Management Information Gateway, linked to the University's 'Better Management' and 'Leadership Development' programmes, as a comprehensive resource for departmental and institutional academic planning, monitoring and enhancement **is a feature of good practice**. The layout of information is detailed and user-friendly, and facilitates better coordination and communication across the University. Several changes, such as increased staff in departments where the staff-student ratio was out of line with others in the University, have taken place as a result of its implementation.

Admission to the University

2.5 The University's policies and procedures for admissions are inclusive and clearly worded. They are available on the University's website and are reviewed annually. An undergraduate Applicant Portal, You@York, was launched in 2011 with the aim of providing a more streamlined and seamless transition and induction experience for applicants and new students. The review team viewed You@York as a positive development.

2.5.1 Prospectuses are available electronically and in hard copy. However, the student written submission noted that the information they contain is not always up to date and that information supplied to students before arrival is not always consistent. Students confirmed the latter point, although generally they found the information they received to be helpful. **The review team recommends** that the University should ensure it provides coordinated, accurate and helpful information for students, including a university-wide framework for core information, and that information in course and departmental handbooks and websites is consistent (see also paragraph 2.14.1).

Complaints and appeals

2.6 Formal complaints and appeals procedures are published on the University's website. There is clear online guidance for students about each process. YUSU and the GSA also provide information for students on the processes, as well as advice and support.

2.6.1 The Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching receives an annual report on complaints and appeals, and any issues raised are followed up directly with the departments concerned or, in the case of more widespread issues, through the development and publication of guidance.

2.6.2 Students were not all aware of the difference between complaints and appeals, but all were confident that they would be able to find information and guidance should they need it. A recent review of procedures will enable student representatives to raise matters informally at an intermediate level with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching in order to resolve issues in a more timely manner than was previously possible. The review team saw this as a positive development and would also encourage the University to ensure that all course handbooks and departmental websites make procedures for complaints and appeals clear (see also paragraph 2.14.1).

Career advice and guidance

2.7 The Careers Service offers students a varied range of information and guidance as well as additional opportunities, such as an 'Insights' employer mentoring scheme for students with disabilities. It offers online support and provides dedicated advice for mature students, international students and alumni. Postgraduate research students are also supported by the Researcher Development Team.

2.7.1 Students thought that the service was helpful and worked hard at reaching students, though a weakness was its reliance on email communication. The Careers Service carries out regular usage reviews and has a regular 'feedback fortnight' during which students can make suggestions.

2.7.2 Careers staff are professionally qualified and enjoy internal peer support and relevant development activities. They work with staff in other areas, such as Disability Services, the Researcher Development Team and departmental careers links, to provide an integrated service for all students.

2.7.3 The careers website includes a section for employers where job and placement vacancies are advertised and students can find out about careers events and skills training sessions. The Community and Volunteering Unit within the Careers Service provides volunteering opportunities in the local community and beyond; these may be subject-specific, in conjunction with departments, or of more general interest. The Centre for Student Enterprise (also part of Careers Service provision) enables students to gain experience in developing business or social enterprise ideas. The extensive opportunities for students to develop their employability skills through engagement with local and regional communities was viewed by the review team as a **feature of good practice**.

2.7.4 The Employability Coordination Group oversees implementation of the University's Employability Strategy. This Strategy has a two-pronged approach: at individual level, to ensure that all students have a personal employability plan by the end of their first year; and at departmental level, that each academic department completes an employability plan, in conjunction with careers staff, to guide and support their students. An online employability tutorial has been developed to guide students from their first year in developing their personal employability plan for discussion with their supervisor.

2.7.5 The recent introduction of the modular system afforded the opportunity for explicit consideration of how employability skills could be developed within the curriculum. The subsequent development of the Employability Strategy in 2010-11 built on this (see paragraph 2.7.4) with the introduction of employability plans. At the time of the review, not all departments had fully engaged with the development of employability plans; no doubt the University will wish to encourage them to do so, given the importance it places on employability.

Supporting disabled students

2.8 The University has policies, structures and procedures in place to support the quality of learning of all students. A range of policies for the support of disabled students is driven and overseen by committees at the highest level of the University. Provision for disabled students, including the physical environment, is monitored and is actively being enhanced.

2.8.1 Disability needs of potential students are assessed following the academic consideration of their application. The information provided to disabled applicants and

students is clear and comprehensive. Admissions tutors are trained to manage applications from students with disabilities, and continuing professional development in this area is provided for all staff.

2.8.2 Disabled students have access to the full range of student support services. Additional specialist support is provided by Disability Services. The Open Door team combines therapeutic and mental health professionals from a range of disciplines to provide access to suitable interventions and psychological support. The University Careers Service also provides a bespoke information service for disabled students.

Supporting international students

2.9 A range of support is specifically available for international students, including pre-arrival, online skills tutorials; transition websites; ongoing support after arrival; and the York Ambassadors scheme, which provides peer mentoring to international students.

2.9.1 Students confirmed the range of support available and highlighted the college system as being of particular help in aiding their transition to the UK and to the York community. However, they emphasised their need for assistance in becoming familiar with the UK assessment system and suggested that increased formative assessment would be helpful (see also paragraph 1.3.4). The University provides an introduction to the Academic Integrity tutorial in Mandarin Chinese to assist the transition of Chinese students to the UK higher education system.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.10 The University has a Code of Practice for the management of its postgraduate research programmes, which is supplemented by further guidance notes as necessary. Strategic oversight of postgraduate research provision lies with the University Teaching Committee. The University is reviewing its oversight of postgraduate research provision.

2.10.1 The University has recently undertaken a process review of the postgraduate admissions process and has a clear and accessible postgraduate admissions policy. Students indicated that they were very satisfied with departmental inductions, but felt that it would also be useful to have a standard University induction to provide a more general context. **The review team affirms** that a university-wide induction programme for postgraduate research students is being implemented in response to this feedback.

2.10.2 Students are clear about what is expected of them as set out in the University's Code of Practice, although some are less content with the progress and review arrangements it contains, which are managed through Thesis Advisory Panels. There is substantial variability in the timing and conduct of the panels across the University, which impedes their effectiveness as both a mechanism for student feedback and a tool for monitoring progress. Therefore **the review team recommends** that the University ensure the consistent implementation of its procedures regarding the timing and conduct of the Thesis Advisory Panels for postgraduate research students by the start of the next academic year.

2.10.3 Skills training is provided for postgraduate students at both University and departmental level. Students praised the training provided by departments and, although the uptake of central training varied, students appreciated the fact it was available. Students are aware of their representatives at departmental level (a requirement on boards of studies). The GSA fulfils this function at University level.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.11 The University's collaborative arrangements are not elaborate and are managed in accordance with its stated policies and procedures. As well as formal links with York College, there are strong informal local links with, for example, its membership of the Higher York network (which promotes inter-institutional collaboration as well as boosting the local economy) and, slightly further afield, with the other White Rose universities (for example, doctoral training links with the Universities of Sheffield and Leeds).

2.11.1 Partner providers are selected carefully, with consideration for the fit with the University's own aims and objectives. Students enrolling at these organisations receive clear information about programme content and requirements, and about their awarding body (the University). The University regularly checks the publicity and marketing information distributed by its partners. Quality is assured through the established University processes, with the addition of a named subject contact for each programme. The Hull-York Medical School partnership is managed by a Joint Teaching and Learning Committee. The students' unions of both universities are represented on this committee, although there is no formal link between this and the School's staff-student liaison committee.

2.11.2 A register of collaborative provision forms part of the University's publicly available information. Agreements with partners are in writing, although there was acknowledgement that sign-off was subject to delay in some cases. **The review team affirms** the action being taken by the University to ensure that all formal agreements with collaborative partners are signed before the programme starts.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.12 The University runs a small number of distance learning programmes, with strong quality assurance mechanisms in place to ensure any new programmes fit with the institution's strategic objectives.

2.12.1 The University recognises the potentially higher risk of these programmes and reviews them every three years. There is a strong emphasis on support from tutors. Students commented on the feeling of community engendered. A Distance Learning Forum oversees strategic matters in this area and shares good practice, as well as developing support materials for all distance learning providers. The proactive approach to the creation of a community among distance learning students, including enhancement initiatives through the Distance Learning Forum, is a **feature of good practice**.

2.12.2 E-learning through the virtual learning environment is delivered as part of a 'blended learning' approach to most of York's campus-based programmes. As noted in the Learning Resources section (page 8), rollout of the virtual learning environment is still ongoing, but students are generally satisfied with the online resources it provides.

Work-based and placement learning

2.13 The University's Policy on Placement Learning and Study Abroad fully corresponds with QAA's *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*. Departmental Placement Coordinators are responsible for implementing it, and the quality of the experience is monitored throughout the placement and in periodic reviews.

Student charter

2.14 The University does not have a student charter, preferring to disseminate such information through the departments. Students are content with this and are broadly aware of what is expected of them and of what they can expect. However, some of the information provided through the departments is incomplete, and disparities were noted between hard copies and online versions of the same documents.

2.14.1 **The review team recommends** that the University ensure the provision of coordinated, accurate and comprehensive information for students, including a university-wide framework for core information in course and departmental handbooks and web sites; and ensure that, in the absence of a student charter or equivalent document, all students receive accurate information setting out what they can expect, what is expected of them and what to do if their experience does not meet expected standards (staged implementation to be carried out between now and 2013-14) (see also paragraph 2.5.1).

3 Public information

Outcome

The University of York **makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available** via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate and up to date. Students find the information useful in helping them make an informed choice when applying to the University of York, and in preparing for what they might expect when they join. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

Findings

3.1 The University complies with the requirements of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for publication of, and access to, information on standards and quality. A new facility within the management information portal has been introduced to support the production of the Key Information Set in the future. A Key Information Set steering group, reporting to the University Teaching Committee, has been set up and preparations are well advanced.

3.2 Much of the responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of information lies with the individual departments. However, there is a formal sign-off process for the undergraduate prospectus. Final responsibility for information lies with the Academic Registrar and the Registrar and Secretary.

3.3 A new Applicant Portal has been developed to provide tailored information for, and communication with, students who have been offered a place at the University. This is effective and has further development potential.

3.4 Students told the review team that there was some inconsistency between hard copy and electronic versions of information. The team encourages the University to continue to find ways to overcome this (see also paragraph 2.14.1).

4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at the University of York **is commended**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Findings

4.1 The University has a clear strategy for improving the quality of student learning opportunities. One of the themes of the Learning and Teaching Strategy is to institutionalise quality improvement. It aims to ensure that all staff and departments engage in quality enhancement activities.

4.2 The University views enhancement as being best achieved by creating a culture of quality and ownership in departments, and provides encouragement, support and reward for this. Initiatives to enhance quality include the 'Peer Support for Teaching' initiative introduced in 2011, which encourages all academic staff to engage with quality enhancement within departments. It has resulted in discussion groups and projects tailored to the needs of individual departments. Some departments have been slower to participate than others, but the University is monitoring progress, and staff see the initiative as a means of generating formal discussion about how to enhance learning and teaching.

4.3 The Mathematics Skills Centre provides drop-in help with mathematics for students on any course. Following a call for more mathematics support by various departments, it was first piloted, then extended, and continues to be supported through review and funding. It is clearly highly valued by students. The review team viewed the successful establishment of the Mathematics Skills Centre to support students across a wide range of disciplines as a **feature of good practice**.

4.4 The introduction of the new management information system at institutional level enables the departments to make more strategic decisions about quality enhancement.

4.5 The work of the Learning Enhancement Team is driven by ideas from departments and staff. It holds workshops and forums, for example, one was set up to support the work on improving student feedback and the development of the supervision policy.

4.6 Good practice is shared through various means, including the termly *Forum* magazine and a specific website for that purpose. There is an annual teaching and learning conference, which has been attended by more than 150 people in recent years and discusses many aspects of enhancement and good practice. The University has dedicated significant central funds in 2010-11 to departmental initiatives that may have broader applicability across the institution.

5 Theme: First Year Student Experience

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. In 2011-12 the theme is the **First Year Student Experience**.

The review team explored the First Year Student Experience at the University of York. First-year students are well supported, as are students entering postgraduate education for the first time or experiencing UK education for the first time. Various support mechanisms are used, as explained below.

Supporting students' transition

5.1 Coordinated support for students is provided through the college system. The University promotes interaction between new and continuing students as part of the induction process. Second and third-year students are involved in welcoming and mentoring new students, and there is a buddy scheme for international students. The programme of

induction begins before students arrive and continues after the first week of term. It includes online pre-arrival support, welcome sessions and ongoing support during the first weeks. There is an international orientation programme which covers cross-cultural awareness and English language skills. There are strong links between support services and interaction between formal and informal methods of support.

Information for first-year students

5.2 The University is developing information for applicants and new students through the Applicant Portal (see paragraph 2.5) as well as through other online resources. The portal and other facilities allow self-service and interactive access to a wide range of information for applicants and their parents/advisers, including, for example, an introduction to the colleges and other aspects of York life, and help in understanding fees and funding. There is individually tailored direction to relevant resources, such as English language support, and links to departments. Many academic departments have transitional sites, offering online induction to new students. The University is aiming to strengthen the coordination of information and address inconsistencies. There is a package of online and personal support for international students.

Assessment and feedback

5.3 The University's *Guide to Assessment, Standards, Marking and Feedback* encourages staff to provide formative assessment for students. Efforts are being made to extend this (see also paragraphs 1.3.4 and 2.9.1). The Examinations Office runs a session to introduce new overseas students to UK assessment. The University is discussing with the GSA whether mock examinations might be introduced. All students are required to take online training on academic integrity, the completion of which is rigorously monitored.

Monitoring retention and progression

5.4 The University has relatively low levels of drop-out, but there is periodic analysis of retention and progression data (see [glossary](#)). An exercise was being carried out at the time of the Institutional Review visit to explore the reasons for year one drop outs. The University has also been monitoring student retention in relation to the effects of the changes in the modular system.

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**, **subject benchmark statements**, **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.

blended learning Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning.

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

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

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.

progression data Statistics showing how many students successfully complete a given stage of their studies and move on to the next stage.

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.

retention data Statistics showing how many students **do not** drop out of their programmes of study.

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**.

White Rose universities A consortium of the universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York.

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

RG 853 05/12

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2012

ISBN 978 1 84979 493 0

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk.

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786