QAA

Institutional audit

University of Ulster

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Preface

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

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

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

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

- meeting their ÎÏ †Ðï ëÁ*Þ¿ Žî ®êêñ ’„H v“9 R 0

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Ulster (the University) from 8 to 12 March 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purduction

- central monitoring and review of quality assurance processes and the work of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup
- the comprehensiveness and collegial tone of the Assessment Handbook
- the considered and effective approach to providing well-thought-through learning opportunities for students
- the framework for the management and development of research degree programmes.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- ensure plagiarism cases are consistently identified and recorded
- review its systems for ensuring the accuracy, consistency and clarity of its course-level published information.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- consider ways of extending active participation of students in the quality assurance of educational provision
- continue to evaluate the extent to which its arrangements for the annual monitoring pilot allow the University and faculties to maintain oversight of the quality and standards of educational provision
- review the requirements for external examiner participation in the consideration of assessment tasks and outcomes at all higher education levels of undergraduate programmes
- review its arrangements for the management of UU (University of Ulster) Health programmes delivered overseas
- clarify the requirement for research supervisor training.

Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the University took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Report

1 An Institutional audit of the University of Ulster (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 8 March 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The University

based on a principled assessment of risk. The significant change has been in the system of annual monitoring of courses/subjects.

13 The Handbook states that external course approval panel members, who are academic subject experts, are proposed by the sponsoring faculty. They should not have been involved in the planning stages nor be closely associated with the school, for example by having recently been an external examiner or a member of staff within the last five years. The University, through its rigorous and detailed annual review of approval and revalidation events, has identified a not infrequent lack of understanding among course proposers about such requirements and has put in place careful checking procedures, such that faculty nominations are sometimes referred back for further consideration. The need to observe due process in this area (as in others identified by the annual overview report) is overseen by the Course Approval Sub-Committee and Teaching and Learning Committee and is reinforced through the annual revision of the Handbook, an annual briefing seminar on approval and revalidation and support given to course proposers by the Centre for Higher Education Practice. The audit team considered the central monitoring and review of quality assurance processes and the work of the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup to be a feature of good practice (see paragraphs 14, 19, 21, 23 and 25).

18 At the time of the audit visit, the University was operating two systems of annual monitoring of programmes and subjects: the long-standing Annual Subject Monitoring and a new programme management system piloted in three faculties in 2008-09. The Quality Management and Audit Unit provides key management information for each faculty, including statistical information. Faculties are required to report their conclusions on the monitoring documentation received from central sources and from constituent reporting units and are specifically asked to confirm that intended learning outcomes are being delivered and obtained by students and that standards are being achieved. As part of the process, the University and the faculties identify particular objectives for the reporting year, over and above the standard requirements. This mechanism allows the tracking of themes with the aim of enhancement or verification. The audit team saw evidence of how reports of Annual Subject Monitoring are considered at course level through to faculty level and then to university level, where faculty reports are considered by the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup, which itself then produces an overall report for the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee.

19 After a mature review of monitoring options, the University took a careful decision to pilot the new programme management system for one year, to conduct interim and fuller reviews and, subsequently, to extend the pilot for a further year. This phased, reflective approach to reviewing and implementing quality assurance processes has much to commend it.

20 The programme management system places specific responsibility for monitoring on the course team and relies on its capacity to monitor performance continually rather than annually. Importantly, the new system does not require monitoring units or faculties to produce reports but action plans. As yet, the details and expectations of the system remain unarticulated in

mitigation, the 2009 review of programme management system noted that all faculties had agreed arrangements for reporting issues through school boards and faculty committees. The team also heard that the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup was able to draw its own conclusions from the substantial information that it received, offering the University a vehicle for monitoring which is independent of course teams and faculty committees. Nevertheless, the audit team concurred with an important conclusion of the 2009 evaluation of the pilot scheme which recommended that consideration be given to the adequacy of central review activity given the reduced evidence emerging from course teams and faculties. The team considers it desirable that the University continue to evaluate the extent to which its arrangements for the new system of course monitoring allow the University and faculties to maintain oversight of the quality and standards of educational provision.

24 Overall, the audit team considered that the University had displayed a careful, evolutionary approach to its systems for the approval, revalidation and monitoring of its courses of study. The aim has been to allow greater flexibility and remove what were perceived to be brakes on innovation and creativity. The significant change has been in the system of annual monitoring of courses/subjects. The team recognises the fact that the new system is not yet embedded, that the University is not being hasty in the extension of the pilot scheme and that it has in place a mechanism for evaluation of the pilot. Overall, it judged that, in the area of approval, revalidation and monitoring, the management of the quality and standards of provision are effective.

25 External examiners are appointed to cover every module that leads to an award. The University also appoints chief external examiners who are concerned with ensuring fairness and impartiality in the application of award regulations and procedures in the context of combined undergraduate honours degrees.

26 Faculties nominate external examiners and the Teaching and Learning Committee has responsibility for appointing them. This committee receives each year a report on the nomination process. Recurrent concerns relate to the late nomination and appointment of externals and the number of departures from the University's Code of Practice for External Examining of Taught Programmes of Study. Such departures have led to the refusal or withdrawal of a significant number of nominations, bearing witness both to imperfect understanding of the Code within faculties and to the rigour of the central monitoring.

27 The Code of Practice describes how external examiners are required to approve in advance all examination papers and coursework assessment schemes and to have access to all examination scripts and coursework. The exception relates to those 'modules at levels 3 and 4 in undergraduate degrees where they do not contribute to the final classification of an award'. In other documentation, this exception is held to relate to level 3 and 4 modules which 'do not contribute to a final award'. In a credit framework where eligibility for an honours award depends on successful completion of modules at levels 3 and 4, the audit team was of the view that all such modules arguably contribute to the final award. In a classification system that depends entirely on performance at level 6 (with level 5 marks, as level 4 marks, not contributing), clarity about the extent and rationale of external examiners' involvement at levels 4 and 5 is, in the view of the team, even more vital. Yet the wording of the Handbook on involvement in meetings of boards of examiners suggests that their presence is not an expectation 'where the performance of candidates in assessment does not contribute to the final result'. Despite an implication that would appear to exclude external examiners from consideration of level 5 outcomes, the team was assured, and presented with evidence to show, that external examiners were fully involved at level 5. For the sake of clarity, the team concluded it is desirable that the University review the requirements for external examiner participation in the consideration of assessment tasks and outcomes at all higher education levels of undergraduate programmes.

28 Each course committee is required to draft a response to the relevant external examiner's report and communicate it directly to the examiner. The reports are also considered at course committees as part of the annual monitoring process and, importantly, at the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup as part of its general monitoring function. The team found sufficient evidence that external examiner reports are being considered by staff-student consultative committees in line with *HEFCE 06/45*.

29 The Pro Vice-Chancellor, Teaching and Learning, prepares an annual overview report of external examiner reports which, as well as highlighting the positive comments received, outlines areas for development. Some of these observations have led to a themed audit initiated by Academic Development and Enhancement Committee, for example the use of group work in assessment schemes. The audit team considered this a clear example of enhancement prompted through the use of external examiners. Partly on the basis of a reading of a number of external examiner reports and a trailing of how the University dealt with the issues raised, and partly on the evidence of the robustness of procedures, the audit team judged that overall the University's external examining process was effective in assuring the academic standards of awards and reflected the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA.

30 Since the last audit the Teaching and Learning Committee has reviewed the University's regulatory framework in light of revisions to the FHEQ and the *Code of practice*. Subsequently,

modules or where a faculty can make a convincing case to the Teaching and Learning Committee. The latter has been granted to the BSc (Hons) Accounting in a pilot to test the contention that a level 5 contribution to classification would improve student motivation in the second year. The audit team considers that the whole cycle of consultation, review and debate around these two decisions exemplifies the University's capacity to engage in reflective and collegial decision-making.

35 The Assessment Handbook explains the rationale behind assessment criteria, their relationship to learning outcomes and the need for students to know them in advance. While it gives detailed generic assessment criteria by level and distinguishes between quantitative and qualitative work, it also accepts that 'differentiated assessment criteria cannot be dictated centrally since they will vary with subject and style of assessment'. Students met by the team were clear that they knew where to find relevant assessment criteria. However, the evidence

campus-based undergraduates but encourages the flexibility it affords to part-time students. The final year of the part-time Business Studies programme, for instance, offers six modules completely online. CampusOne provides for both fully online and web-dependent learners and conducts annual satisfaction surveys showing a high level of satisfaction with course materials, support from teaching staff and interaction with other learners. The library supports e-learning through access to e-journals, books and databases and has a fund for digitisation. A themed audit in 2008-09 revealed that students found online learning was challenging but worthwhile and an analysis of their performance found it comparable with that of face-to-face study. The audit team, in its reading of evidence and meeting with students, found that, although this was not a universal experience, e-learning was largely an embedded and valued feature of study at the University.

52 Placements are considered an important component both in vocational courses and in enhancing students' employability in non-professional courses. Learning through work is seen as an important tool for widening participation and addressing regional and government agendas

written submission recommended that this should be made more explicit to students. New techniques such as online chat and podcasts were particularly highly rated and the student written submission reported that students wanted their use extended. Communication with students through their mobile phones has been used by one faculty to aid retention. The University is well aware and is responding to the potential and challenge of student engagement and the demand for personalised approaches to learning through portable technology through the Emerging Technologies Working Group and work undertaken with the Northern Ireland Assembly and UK Government on policies around media literacy and digital inclusion.

56 The student written submission contained some criticism of social spaces on certain campuses, but the University has recently made investments, such as the integrated Learning Resource Centres, bringing together library and IT facilities with full wireless capability on each campus and was confident that these improvements would shortly come through in student satisfaction. Considerable estate development and investment will take place over the next few years on the Belfast campus as part of the Greater Belfast Development Strategy and students are fully involved in the planning process.

57 Taken as a whole, the audit team found the oversight, review and quality of learning resources at the University to be fit for purpose. It considered that the particular contribution of technology to learning resources aligns with the measures employed by the University to

events over the first few weeks and learned that there were advantages and disadvantages with both approaches. The means of allocating students to advisers of studies was not entirely consistent but most of the student handbooks seen by the team directed students to the advisers and described their role.

61 The University recognises the value of Personal Development Planning but also the challenges of implementing a process consistently. The students met by the audit team did not always recognise the process by name but acknowledged the systematic support they were receiving with personal skills and career development, sometimes in discrete modules or in relation to placement preparation and feedback. The University has developed an online system for recording this process and is also a member of the pilot group for the Higher Education Academic Achievement Record. These initiatives contribute to the enhancement of student employability.

62 The Teaching and Learning Strategy aims to provide 'a supportive environment, in which teaching is recognised, valued and rewarded for all those who teach and support learning in the University'. In this regard, the audit team noted that the revised staff induction programme includes corporate, academic and local elements, supported by guidelines and a checklist. The approach to appraisal is reflected in the name of the scheme adopted in 2007, the Developmental Appraisal Review Scheme. This includes a Developmental Review meeting conducted with all staff by their line managers at least once every two years, using a pro forma, and team appraisals are an option. The team learnt that members of the Centre for Higher Education Practice also worked with faculty teaching and learning co-ordinators to help roll out the Teaching and Learning Strategy, advise on Centre projects and discuss staff training needs in line with annual institutional priorities and local needs. The University's Peer Supported Review arose from a review of peer observation, in line with the University's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund objectives for Supporting Professional Standards, and extends the scope of traditional teaching observation to cover a wide range of teaching and learning-related activities which impact on students.

63 The University rewards its staff on the basis of performance through the Annual Review Process, providing for bonuses and, in the case of academic staff, promotion to a higher grade. Outcomes of the process are analysed and reported annually to Council. Three pathways for promotion to Professor, Reader and Senior Lecturer have been established in Teaching and Learning, Research and Development and Academic Enterprise, with minimum criteria established at university level, which faculties may supplement. Leadership in teaching and support for learning is also recognised by individual and team awards. The University has had four national teaching fellowship awards in the period 2000…2009.

64 The Staff Development Unit website advertises a wide range of events, schemes, courses and conferences for staff. The Unit works in conjunction with the two University Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning and the Centre for Higher Education Practice. Good practice is disseminated through conferences, symposia, seminars, workshops and discussion forums. There is an annual Staff Conference and E-learning Conference, which include presentations from both University and external contributors and are well attended. The University describes the Centre as providing 'leadership, support, opportunity and challenge'. The audit team heard that it represented a 'dynamic community of practitioners' and on the basis of its reading and discussion with staff would support that analysis. The team found that support for staff was both well provided through central staff development bodies and embedded in local practices. It also found that staff development made a significant contribution to the University's aim to provide an environment in which teaching is recognised, valued and rewarded and underpins the considered and effective approach to providing well-thought-through learning opportunities for students.

65 The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students, including those on collaborative provision courses.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

66 Academic Development and Enhancement Committee has a specific remit for enhancement, assisted by the Quality Management and Audit Unit. Annual monitoring internal and external course formats have specific headings to encourage reporting of course innovations, enhancements to facilities and examples of good practice. The Faculty Heads of Collaborative Courses are responsible for monitoring collaborative courses and identifying issues, enhancements and good practice. These are discussed and shared in the Faculty Heads of Collaborative Courses Forum and disseminated through its Annual Report of Good Practice, as well as being part of Faculty Head of Collaborative Course reports to the Academic Development and Enhancement Committee subgroup.

67 The first strategic aim of the Teaching and Learning Strategy is 'to enhance the quality of the student learning experience' and this is reflected in the action plans for 2009-10 at central and faculty level. This clear and systematic approach to defining the institution's strategy and then translating it into specific, measurable and relevant action plans is the core of the University's approach to sustainable quality enhancement

68 The audit team saw evidence that much of the drive for enhancement comes from internal audits, course monitoring and staff and student feedback. The University also makes use of external examiner comments, Institutional Audit reports and QAA and Higher Education Agency publications. The National Student Survey is a key source of information on student views which is carefully considered at university and faculty level.

69 Cross-cutting enhancement initiatives often develop through the Centre for Higher Education Practice Centre for Higher Education Practice. As noted above (Section 3), an area that has received some recent attention from Centre for Higher Education Practice is the linkage between research and teaching, but the team found limited evidence of linkage of research to teaching, although there were some specific good examples.

70 The University recognises the wealth of experience, ideas and good practice that resides in individual staff and has made this more widely accessible by constructing a searchable database of these staff under the themes of assessment, e-learning, teaching first-year students, teaching large groups, reflective practice and plagiarism.

71 The audit team concluded that the institutional approach to quality enhancement was effective and supported through the creation of an environment in which teaching is developed and rewarded and good practice is routinely captured and disseminated.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

72 Currently, there are around 5,800 full-time equivalent students designated as being on collaborative provision. Approximately 4,600 students are at other institutions on University-validated courses. The current Collaborative Provision Strategy was developed in 2005-06 and

programme implementation progresses and the level of direct involvement by University staff changes. However, the team concluded that it would be desirable for the University to review its arrangements for the management of UU Health courses delivered overseas.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

80 The Research Degrees Committee is responsible for approving programmes of study and for analysing performance and support for research students. It reports to the Research and Innovation Committee, a committee of Senate, and has published a comprehensive Research Studies Handbook that lays out policies and procedures relating to postgraduate research. The Handbook is reviewed annually with the aim of sharing best practice and in accordance with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

81 The Research Office, reporting to the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation, provides central administrative support for research. Following consultation in 2005-06, some responsibility for the administration of postgraduate research study was devolved to faculty-based research graduate schools. Biennially the Research Degrees Committee carries out a review of the management of research students within each Research Graduate School. The reviews are evidence-based, reflective and generate clear action points. Data on a range of performance indicators is analysed, including supervisor loads.

82 The admission process is clearly set out in the Research Studies Handbook. Applications are strongly encouraged in relation to specific topics in which the relevant faculty has demonstrable supervisory experience and appropriate resource. Admission decisions are normally made by the Faculty Board or, in exceptional cases, by Research Degrees Committee on the recommendation of the Faculty Board. Induction is normally undertaken during the first week following registration and the programme comprises both central and faculty-specific components. Postgraduate students whom the audit team met confirmed the induction process to be well designed and effectively implemented.

83 The respective roles and responsibilities of supervisor and student are articulated in the Research Studies Handbook and reiterated in a Research Student Charter. While there is good provision for supervisor training and updating and for each Research Graduate School to assess the composite strengths of a proposed team, it was not clear to the audit team if initial training is compulsory and needs to be undertaken by staff before being allocated to their first supervisory team. The team considers it desirable that the University clarify the requirement for research supervisor training.

84 Student progress is monitored by the supervisory team and the relevant Research Graduate School, and centrally by the Research Office. Following discussion of the outcomes of the 2006 Review of research degree programmes, all faculties have formalised assessment of students at the end of their second year (for full-time students) to ensure continuing progress. Also, in response to the Review, Senate has determined new arrangements governing supervisors' presence at oral examinations that are consistent with the expectations of the *Code of practice*.

85 The primary mechanism for eliciting research student feedback is the Annual Report system. Independent completion of the report is a requirement of both supervisor and student and the responses are considered by the Research Office and the relevant Research Graduate School in relation to key performance indicators outlined in the Research Student Charter.

86 The criteria against which students' submissions are assessed are incorporated into a Handbook for Examiners of Research Degrees and distributed to the Board of Examiners alongside a copy of the student's thesis. The Handbook sets out the requirements for all aspects of the examination process.

87 In summary, the audit team considered that the balance between postgraduate research students being associated with Research Institutes and the way that their administration is located

Recommendations for action

93 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

ensure plagiarism cases are consistently identified and recorded (paragraph 39)

review its systems for ensuring the accuracy, consistency and clarity of its course level published information (paragraph 90).

94 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

consider ways of extending active participation of students in the quality assurance of educational provision (paragraph 16)

continue to evaluate the extent to which its arrangements for the annual monitoring pilot allow the University and faculties to maintain oversight of the quality and standards of educational provision (paragraph 23)

review the requirements for external examiner participation in the consideration of assessment tasks and outcomes at all higher education levels of undergraduate programmes (paragraph 27)

review its arrangements for the management of UU (University of Ulster) Health programmes delivered overseas (paragraph 79)

clarify the requirement for research supervisor training (paragraph 83).