Higher Education Review of the University of Sunderland

November 2015

Contents

About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the University of Sunderland. The review took place from 16 to 20 November 2015 and was conducted by a team of six reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Michael Byde
- Dr Jenny Gilbert
- Dr Mark Irwin
- Professor Diane Meehan
- Ms Penny Renwick
- Mr Stuart Cannell (student reviewer).

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

In Higher Education Review, the QAA review team:

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

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 6.

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

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

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

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[1] The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code.
[2] Higher Education Review themes:
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859.
[3] QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.
[4] Higher Education Review web pages:
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about the University of Sunderland

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

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

Good practice

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

- The proactive and comprehensive approach to student recruitment that supports widening participation (Expectations B2 and Enhancement).
- The wide-ranging and embedded professional development opportunities made available to staff in the University and delivery and partner organisations (Expectations B3, B10 and Enhancement).
- The extensive and effective support mechanisms that meet the needs of the diverse student body (Expectation B4).
- The strategic and comprehensive approach to enhancing student employability through Sunderland Futures (Expectation B4 and Enhancement).
- The inclusive and evaluative approach to the development of academic appeals and student complaints policies and procedures (Expectation B9).
- The sustained and effective management of delivery involving partner organisations was considered good practice (Expectations B10 and Enhancement).

Recommendations

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

By June 2016:

- strengthen the process for determining when programme revalidation is required following cumulative minor modifications (Expectations A3.1 and B8)
- establish consistency in the use of penalties for coursework that exceeds the stated word length to ensure comparability (Expectation B6).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The work underway to improve the student representation structure (Expectation B5).

- The steps being taken to improve the effectiveness of annual programme review (Expectation B8).
- The actions being taken to assure the quality and standards of research programme provision across the University (Expectation B11).

Theme: Student Employability

The University of Sunderland (the University) has identified graduate employability as a strategic objective from 2014 onwards. This has led to the development and creation of Sunderland Futures to support student employability by developing skills, widening their experience and increasing their confidence. This is being monitored through using Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) data as an indicator of success.

The provision of generic employability skills lies with the Careers and Employability Service (CES) which provides a range of employment related opportunities to current students and alumni. Designated faculty careers advisers liaise with programme leaders in all campuses. The University has a Careers, Education. Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) Policy and the Graduate Employment Group oversees activity in this area. Faculties provide employment-specific modules including work-based learning and placements, while a range of University services provide activities such as volunteering, paid projects, career skills workshops, internships and study abroad.

Key employability initiatives promoted by the University include the Sunderland Professional Award (SuPA), an extracurricular award based on skills development demonstrated through the submission of a portfolio at any time during the University experience. Another example involves the Leading Lights scheme, where students develop leadership qualities and identify challenges faced in contemporary employment. Employability is supported further by the Futures Fund to assist students experiencing financial hardship who wish to take up a placement or employment opportunity.

About the University of Sunderland

The University is located in the north-east of England with roots that date back to 1901 when it was a municipal training college developing day-release programmes in pharmacy, naval architecture and engineering. In 1969 it became one of the first polytechnics and 23 years later achieved university status. Over 21,000 students were enrolled at the University in 2014, 85 per cent of whom were undergraduates and 15 per cent studying on a part-time basis. There are 270 postgraduate research degree (PGR) students, the majority of whom are PhD or MPhil students with the remainder studying for Professional Doctorate and Doctor in Business Administration (DBA) qualifications.

The University has three campuses - two in Sunderland, at the Sir Tom Cowie Campus by the sea, and the City Campus in Sunderland city centre, and one in London near Canary Wharf. It also engages in extensive partnership activity with 26 organisations, including over 1,200 students in further education colleges (FECs), and approximately 5,000 students studying overseas.

In recent years campus facilities have been redesigned, with examples including the Media Hub, the refurbishment of the Dale Building for Applied Sciences providing open learning spaces, as well as state-of-the-art laboratories for Pharmacy. The Priestman Building in the city centre is the new location for Fine Art and exhibitions. Within the last three years a new virtual learning environment (VLE) has been introduced for students in all campuses as well as partner organisations.

The University describes itself as a life-changing institution which widens access to higher education, develops industry and international links, and promotes the student experience and research. Its corporate plan is guided by a vision of being one of a new generation of great civic universities that is innovative, accessible, inspirational and outward-looking with international reach. Impact at local level is emphasised with the University being the third largest employer in the Sunderland region, an area characterised by relatively low participation in higher education with many of those eligible to undertake a university course coming from families with no tradition of post-compulsory education. In this context, 98 per cent of young full-time first degree students come from state schools and 45 per cent come from social classes 4, 5, 6 and 7. Four-fifths of the University's UK students are from the north-east. Despite the challenges posed by the regional economy, the 2015 DLHE survey noted that 92.5 per cent of the University's graduates were in employment or further study within six months of graduation.

Within this broad context, five strategic themes inform annual planning - opportunity, experience, sustainability, society and support. They are addressed by the academic faculties responsible for teaching and learning, academic development and research, and working with partners in business and industry. The themes are also central to the operation of the University's seven support departments, which include Academic Services, Marketing and Recruitment, Facilities, and Student and Learning Support.

The faculties that were in place in 2009 at the time of the QAA Institutional Audit - Applied Sciences; Arts Design and Media; Business and Law; Education and Society - are unchanged. The departmental structure has been replaced with a more flexible approach in order to organise learning opportunities in appropriate ways for specific subject areas and student groups. The Corporate Plan is overseen by the Board of Governors, with Academic Board having responsibility for the recently approved Academic Strategy, delegating implementation of its Learning and Teaching Plan (LTP) to the Student Success Committee (SSC). The aims include developing independent learners, providing staff development to support the learner experience, promoting learning partnerships, and creating innovative and appropriate learning environments.

The University has had a series of QAA reviews over the last six years. The Institutional Audit of 2009 returned an overall confidence judgement, with the subsequent implementation of changes to programme approval, personal tutoring, peer observation and mentoring, the management of work placements, and an internal review of postgraduate research provision. The QAA Audit of Collaborative Provision in 2011 also returned an overall confidence judgement, leading to the design of a module and programme database, improved systems for designing and monitoring information used by partner organisations, and new models of collaboration partnerships. The full franchise model used by the University in Trinidad was explored by a QAA Transnational Education (TNE) Review of the Caribbean in 2014-15, with outcomes including awareness-raising for staff and students of external examiner roles and reports, and the piloting of new electronic systems for managing the submission and assessment of student work. The 2014 QAA desk-based thematic review of London campuses also prepared an institutional report endorsing the University's operations, with actions which aligned with those of a recent internal review of the student experience at London.

The University is self-critical in stating that it does not regard all of these review and audit areas of activity as completed, they are instead viewed as key strategic drivers for continuous improvement.

Explanation of the findings about the University of Sunderland

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Findings

1.1   The academic regulations articulate an outcomes-based approach and locate the University's awards within the FHEQ. The University's guidance on programme development, and templates for programme specifications, make clear reference to the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements. The academic regulations define credit requirements for taught awards that align with the Higher Education Credit Framework for England. The University's processes provide for a check on alignment in annual review, supported by views from external examiners; alignment is also a topic of periodic review. These frameworks and processes would allow Expectation A1 to be met. In its review of evidence, the team considered the University's regulations and guidance documents on approval and review processes, as well as case studies of approval and review documentation. Members of staff were asked about their understanding of the national reference points for academic standards.

1.2   Programme approval and review panels receive copies of the relevant points of reference and the alignment of programmes with national benchmarks is clearly articulated in approval and review reports. Staff were able to articulate their engagement with national reference points, commenting that these are brought to life through dialogue with external examiners and reviewers from other institutions. Guidance documents on qualification characteristics are being used in practice. Programme specifications reviewed by the team make reference to relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, and there is evidence that their use is tested in approval and review processes.

1.3   The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low because alignment with FHEQ, qualifications characteristics, Subject Benchmark Statements and the credit framework is clearly articulated and embedded within the University's processes and working practices.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.4   The University's governance arrangements articulate the responsibility that Academic Board has for academic standards with the delegation of oversight for academic standards to various subcommittees.

1.5   The University's academic framework comprises the academic regulations, incorporated within the relevant sections of the Academic Quality Handbook (AQH), and related policies and procedures. The regulations state the basis on which qualifications are awarded for both target awards and exit awards. The University's rules for classification of awards define threshold standards and explain how achievement is differentiated. There is similar provision in the regulations for research degrees. Students studying with partners are subject to the same regulations. There are specific regulations to clarify the treatment of marks for placement years and study abroad. The University has provision to approve programme-specific regulations which must be approved by Academic Board. As noted in Expectation B6, the University's policy on Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) sets clear limits on the volume and level of learning that can be accredited and these limits are embedded in the formal regulations. This framework would allow Expectation A2.1 to be met.

1.6   In its review of evidence the review team considered the academic regulations for all cohorts of students alongside minutes of meetings where these were approved and discussed, studying examples of approved variations. The review team discussed the regulations in meetings with members of Academic Board as well as other groups of staff and students.

1.7   The review team noted that Academic Board maintains oversight of the academic regulations in practice, keeping them under review. The University maintains a comprehensive list of approved variations to the regulations and case studies, demonstrating that the process for variation works effectively. The University offers dual awards with one partner; the Academic Board has approved separate regulations for this purpose.

1.8   The academic regulations set clear criteria for progression and award. The review team explored the regulations on compensation, where students may fail some assessment components but receive credit for the module overall, noting that the University requires redundancy in the testing of learning outcomes to ensure that this does not undermine the requirement for students to achieve the learning outcomes.

1.9   The review team concludes that the academic framework is transparent, comprehensive and applied consistently in practice; therefore the Expectation is met with a low level of associated risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.10   The University maintains programme specifications as definitive records, with a requirement for annual review by Programme Studies Boards (PSBs) alongside a process for maintaining and updating content. The specifications are published in the online prospectus, addressing concerns about the accessibility of specifications raised in previous review processes. Each module is required to have a descriptor that records indicative content, assessment scheme and learning outcomes. These procedures would allow the Expectation A2.2 to be met as they provide a definitive record of each programme, which is then published.

1.11   In its review of evidence the review team considered guidance on programme specifications and scrutinised example specifications for different programmes. It asked staff and students, including those from partners, about the definitive sources of information for their programmes.

1.12   The review team notes that programme specifications comply with an institutional template, setting out intended learning outcomes and attributes for the programme as a whole. They are consistent with the FHEQ and the Higher Education Credit Framework for England and show that account has been taken of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. Module outlines provide core information including credit value, level and assessment weightings.

1.13   In discussions with a range of staff and students, handbooks were consistently referred to as the definitive source of information. The handbooks include reference to the regulations and to programme specifications. The University has developed a new template which is intended to make programme specifications more understandable to a student audience, and is undertaking a project to further refine the approach by using a database and workflow system that will secure a single source of information about programmes. Key aspects of the specification are stored within the central student records system, acting as the source of data for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

1.14   Programme specifications can be updated after minor modifications have been agreed; the revised version being uploaded to the website. The effective date of any change is articulated in this process. Although it was not always clear in documentation how such changes apply to different cohorts of students, the team were reassured to hear that Faculty Quality Management Sub-Committees (FQMSCs) discuss transition arrangements, with students informed of changes via handbooks.

1.15   The review team concludes that the Expectation is met with a low level of associated risk because the University's overall approach to programme specifications is being applied consistently and appropriately, with the University continuing to reflect on how to refine its approach.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.16   The University's Academic Development Committee (ADC) is responsible for the initial scrutiny of proposals for new programmes and for partnership developments on behalf of Academic Board before they go forward for approval through the quality management processes. Professional doctorates go through the same approval process as taught programmes. The Research Degrees Group (RDG), a sub-group of Postgraduate Research Degree Sub-Committee (PRDSC), considers research degree proposals. RDG considers all PhD and MPhil students, plus those on professional doctorates once they enter the research phase. To secure consistency, programme approval is managed centrally by Academic Services with oversight from ADC and Quality Management Sub-Committee (QMSC) on behalf of Academic Board. The University's programme validation process is set out in the Quality Handbook, which takes account of the FHEQ and external reference points. These processes would allow Expectation A3.1 to be met.

1.17   In its review of evidence, the review team examined course approval documentation and associated guidance for its completion, together with sample reports of course approvals and modifications, and committee minutes. The team discussed the course approval process and supporting guidance with staff.

1.18   ADC receives proposals for new programmes, with programme approval processes supported by documentation that makes specific reference to the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements. The content and level of modules, qualifications and awards are described appropriately. As noted in Expectation A2.2, programme specifications and module descriptors form the basis of evidence for academic approval. The documentation is peer-reviewed by panels that contain academic externality and confirm alignment with the University's own regulations, national qualification level descriptors and Subject Benchmark Statements. External panel member nomination is approved by the chair of QMSC, with one academic external as a requirement and where appropriate there can also be an employer or PSRB representative. Approval event reports confirm the appropriateness of programme standards, including the intended learning outcomes for each award level, exit awards, and the target award. Evidence confirmed alignment with benchmarks and other points of reference. The approval of dual awards with a specific international partner included careful mapping to UK expectations and Subject Benchmark Statements. Reports are received and considered within the University's committee structure.

1.19   The PRDSC is responsible for oversight of the experience of research students including skills development and the approval of assessment decisions. The review team notes that a review of postgraduate provision in 2012 confirmed that standards were aligned with the FHEQ.

1.20   The procedures for dealing with minor modifications are set out in the Quality Handbook. There is a report of minor amendments to programmes maintained by Academic Services that is seen by QMSC. Changes to programme titles are approved at ADC. Programme learning outcomes cannot be changed via the minor modification process. The minor modification process permits faculties to approve significant changes to modules,

subject to external examiner approval, where a module contributes to the final award of a qualification. Minor modifications are approved through FQMSC and a version history is maintained. The University has moved away from a rigid approach to reviewing whether cumulative minor modifications might necessitate programme revalidation. In meetings, staff were unable to articulate the broad criteria that would inform such a judgement or an explicit process that is used to consider the effect of cumulative minor modifications. The review team **recommends** that the University strengthen the process for determining when a programme revalidation is required following cumulative minor modifications.

1.21   The University's course approval and modification procedures take appropriate account of its own regulations, national qualifications and credit frameworks, and Subject Benchmark Statements when setting academic standards. While the oversight of the effect of cumulative minor module modifications on determining the need for programme revalidation needs to be more clearly articulated, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met with low level of associated risk. This is based on the overall use of appropriate and consistent procedures for taught programme and research degree approval that are in accordance with the University's academic frameworks and regulations.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

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

Findings

1.22   Academic regulations define the credit required for progression and award at each level. Module learning hours are aligned with credit, while module learning outcomes are mapped against assessment. The achievements of students entering through APL or advanced standing routes are matched to defined learning outcomes. Programme learning outcomes are mapped against modules and documented in programme specifications. Approval and review panels check the contribution of individual modules to the programme and verify the alignment of learning outcomes with internal and external points of reference. The AQH provides a set of generic assessment criteria at foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate level, and also defines a process for approval of subject assessment criteria that must be agreed by QMSC, with all other subjects using the University's generic criteria. Collaborative provision and dual awards comply with the same regulations and processes. At PhD level, confirmation that all learning outcomes are met is recorded within the report completed by PhD internal and external examiners. These processes and procedures would allow Expectation A3.2 to be met.

1.23   In its review of evidence, the review team tested the systems in place by studying the academic regulations, the AQH, approval documentation, programme specifications, module descriptors and module guides. In addition, the review team met staff to explore their approach to assuring academic standards.

1.24   Module learning outcomes are mapped against assessments within a module descriptor. In some modules a learning outcome is tested only once and is only achieved when the relevant assessment is passed. In such a situation, or where there is a PSRB condition, the requirement to pass all module assessment components is sanctioned at the approval event or at Academic Board and stipulated within the programme specification.

1.25   Modules are mapped to generic programme learning outcomes and programme specifications demonstrate the relevant links. Changes to module learning outcomes during minor modifications ensure that programme outcomes are still achieved. As noted in Expectation A2.1, there is inbuilt redundancy with multiple module learning outcomes mapping to a single generic programme learning outcome allowing compensation to be applied at programme level.

1.26   Following the Cause for Concern regarding APL in 2013, the team confirmed that changes have been made to the overall process, including initial staff development and regular refresher sessions for staff assessing advanced standing supported by the introduction of a moderation process that involves the external examiner.

1.27   The review team agrees that there are appropriate systems and procedures for ensuring that credit and qualifications are awarded through the demonstration of assessment based on the achievement of relevant learning outcomes. The Expectation is therefore met,

with a low level of associated risk based on the satisfaction of UK threshold as well as the University's own standards.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.28   The University's Academic Board delegates operational responsibility for the monitoring and review of taught courses to ADC and QMSC. Programmes are reviewed annually through the PSB and institutionally on a six-year periodic review cycle. Reports of both processes are received and considered within the University's deliberative committee structure. Monitoring and review processes use external expertise to advise on whether the provision remains aligned with external reference points and the reports of external examiners to confirm that the standards set at approval are being maintained and achieved by students. Procedures for research students are set out in the Quality Handbook. The RDG considers the outcomes of annual monitoring. The Quality Handbook provides a framework for the periodic review of research programmes. These processes would allow Expectation A3.3 to be met.

1.29   In its review of evidence, the team explored annual monitoring and periodic review processes through consideration of guidance documentation, monitoring and review reports, minutes of relevant committees, and discussions with academic staff and students.

1.30   The periodic review process uses the FHEQ, relevant Subject Benchmark Statements and, where applicable, relevant PSRB requirements as reference points. Programmes are considered in clusters of cognate courses that are approved by QMSC, with appropriate panels checking that programmes continue to align with external reference points.

1.31   The comprehensive review by the University in 2012 of all postgraduate research was noted, including the Professional Doctorate and the Doctorate of Business Administration. A number of commendations and recommendations were made with the conclusion that the quality and standards of postgraduate research student provision meet the expectations of the University and were aligned with external expectations. An interim review is scheduled to take place in 2015-16.

1.32   Periodic review takes place every six years, unless a shorter period enables it to coincide with PSRB accreditation. The periodic review process, described in the Quality Handbook, includes programme revalidation and, like the initial approval process, confirms that design, content and assessment are appropriate for the achievement of learning outcomes. Periodic review uses the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements as reference points. There is a process to check that programmes remain aligned where subject benchmarks are amended. Review panels have access to assessment board minutes and to external examiner reports. Periodic review panels comprise internal panel members, plus up to three external subject specialists with criteria stipulated for appropriate qualifications and the avoidance of conflicts of interest. The review team noted the very detailed review panel reports, including commendations, requirements and recommendations. There is a sign-off process to ensure oversight of panels' requirements. There is mandatory training for new chairs and panel members including a refresher course every three years.

1.33   Both annual module and programme review processes are described in the Quality Handbook. Programmes on and off campus are reviewed annually by PSBs, overseen by and reporting to FQMSCs. External examiners are asked in their annual reports to confirm continued alignment with external reference points. Programme monitoring reports are detailed and comprehensive with external examiner reports, statistical data and student evaluation provided as appendices. A faculty report and over-arching action plan is considered by QMSC, which also considers a number of institutionally determined thematic issues and evaluates progress since the previous year.

1.34   The review team considers that the University's monitoring and review procedures take appropriate account of the national qualifications framework and Subject Benchmark Statements. In particular, the periodic review process aligns with academic and professional benchmarks when recommending continued course approval. On this basis, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

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

Findings

1.35   The University uses external expertise at the point that academic standards are set. External subject specialists are invited to attend approval events and in periodic review events there may be several external specialists attending different sub-groups. External examiners normally oversee a programme and all constituent modules; when this results in a heavy workload, additional module externals are appointed. External examiners are required to confirm that students have achieved the learning outcomes for a module and that markers and moderators are marking accurately against the marking criteria. External examiners generally scrutinise module samples from all locations delivering the module. In partner organisations, where volume and timing demands it, there can be multiple external examiners. The design of these procedures and processes would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.36   In its review of evidence, the team considered documentation from approval and review processes and from the moderation of standards by external examiners. The review team also discussed with staff the implementation of processes associated with securing externality.

1.37   Approval and review events make appropriate use of external experts, including the possibility of an employment specialist, when ensuring that learning outcomes are appropriately assessed. External expertise is afforded by at least one subject external panel member, with the nomination form certifying that the nominee has the appropriate experience with no conflict of interest. External examiners on cognate courses are often asked to comment when a programme is being rewritten although this is not universal practice across the University. Reports from the approval event include a summary of requirements, recommendations and good practice and are reported to the Academic Board. Professional doctorates are dealt with in the same manner.

1.38   The University has a protocol for accreditation and in accordance with the recommendations from the 2011 QAA Audit of Collaborative Provision report, a database of accredited programmes is maintained by Academic Services. PSRBs can provide an additional external representative at an approval event and PSRB approval can be concurrent with university approval; in some instances they follow the university approval event with common panel membership.

1.39   There is a policy on the role of external examiners with a procedure for checking at the appointment stage that they have the appropriate experience and are independent. Their appointment is approved by QMSC or by chair's action. External examiners complete standard templates that ensure they comment on all the necessary aspects of the module/programme and its assessment.

1.40   On the basis of the evidence reviewed and discussions with staff, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met with low level of associated risk because the

University has developed appropriate policies, systems and procedures for the use of external and independent expertise at key points during the setting and maintenance of standards.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

1.41   In reaching its judgement about the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered by the University, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.42   All of the applicable Expectations in this area have been met, with a judgement of low risk being reached in each case. The University maps national frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements for higher education provision to programme outcomes using transparent and coherent academic processes and regulations for determining how credit and qualifications are awarded. Definitive and accessible records are maintained for each programme and qualification, constituting the reference point for all subsequent delivery, assessment, and monitoring. Programmes are approved through the use of processes that ensure standards are set at appropriate levels, and academic credit is awarded where relevant learning outcomes are achieved through the application of appropriate regulations governing assessment. Monitoring and review processes are evident for all higher education provision, using relevant external frameworks and expertise.

1.43   There is one recommendation for Expectation A3.1 concerning a series of relatively small changes to programmes, with a need for the University to strengthen the process for determining when programme revalidation is required following cumulative minor modifications.

1.44   The review team concludes that the University's setting and maintenance of academic standards for awards **meet** UK expectations.

2   Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

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

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

Findings

2.1   Through its Academic Strategy, the University seeks to provide a flexible, accessible and responsive programme offer and framework, which meets the needs and expectations of students. Programme approval is managed centrally by Academic Services with oversight from ADC and QMSC on behalf of Academic Board. The University's processes for the design, development and approval of programmes are set out in the Quality Handbook, which takes account of the FHEQ and external reference points. The approval process applies equally to partner organisations. The design of these systems and procedures would allow Expectation B1 to be met.

2.2   In its review of evidence, the review team examined the University's guidance for programme approval and modification, and sampled programme approval and modification documentation. The review team also considered the minutes of committees where programme approvals and modifications were considered or reported and explored the programme approval process and supporting guidance through discussions with academic managers and staff.

2.3   Minutes of ADC document the presentation of outline proposals that initiate the approval process; while many are approved and move to the next stage, some are turned down and others given advice such that they return to a later meeting. There was detailed documentation for when new programmes are presented to ADC for approval, considering the rationale, the potential market for the programme, together with alignment with University and faculty strategy. This includes reference to key priority areas of the research-active curriculum, employability and e-learning.

2.4   During the programme development phase academic staff receive support from faculty and Academic Services colleagues. Where appropriate, external examiners are consulted, employer input is sought and service user and carer views provided. Faculties and Student and Learning Support (SLS), including the Library, VLE and CES, sign off resources before a programme is considered by an approval panel.

2.5   Approval documentation is peer-reviewed by an academic panel containing appropriate externality. Minutes from approval events indicate the range of documents presented at the event including the necessary framework levels and Subject Benchmark Statements. Any programme-specific regulations resulting from PSRB or other practice related requirements are considered at the approval event, documented and monitored where necessary. In response to the QAA Audit of Collaborative Provision in 2011, the University undertook a Quality Framework Review that took account of a range of internal and external drivers, and changes to process documentation and training have been made. For the panel approval process the key template is the programme specification, differentiated with undergraduate and postgraduate versions. The programme specification includes programme learning outcomes for each stage or phase of the award, which are

mapped to the specific modules and aligned to the strategy for learning, teaching and assessment. Specific attention is also given to retention, employability and student support.

2.6   Approval panels are chaired by a representative of QMSC from another faculty and membership includes three further QMSC representatives. Training is provided by Academic Services for panel members and chairs, and attendance is noted. Approval panels contain an external academic representative, who must be approved by the chair of QMSC against defined criteria, ensuring there are no conflicts of interest. Industry representatives are consulted on programme approval, but employers do not routinely serve on the actual approval panels. Students are represented on the PSB but do not currently serve on approval panels, with the review team recognising an opportunity for the student voice in programme approval to be strengthened. Following approval the panel can determine requirements which must be met before the programme can start, with recommendations addressed at a future date, usually through annual review.

2.7   The review team found that the University has robust processes for the design, development, approval and modification of its taught courses, and the course approval process makes relevant use of externality, including academic and professional benchmarking. Decisions from programme approval are reported through the deliberative committee structure. Where final approval is conferred, opportunities are provided to review and evaluate the approval process. While the participation of students in course approval panels does not currently take place, this does not pose an overall risk to the soundness of the approval process. On this basis, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

2.8   The University's recruitment, selection, and admissions policies are informed by its strategic priorities. The admissions policy, available from the University website, includes comprehensive support for applicants with disabilities and those from particular socially disadvantaged groups such as care leavers.

2.9   All recruitment to campus and partner organisations is the responsibility of the University, and although partners may also market and recruit, the final admissions decision lies with the University. There is one exception involving dual awards, where admissions decisions are a shared responsibility. All staff, including overseas agents are provided with contracts and codes of practice/good practice guidelines and trained in line with University policy and procedure. The University's policies and procedures for recruitment, selection and admission would allow Expectation B2 to be met.

2.10   In its review of evidence the team examined a range of documentation relevant to applications and admissions and discussed systems and procedures. Discussions involved senior staff and managers responsible for the maintenance of standards and quality, students at all levels within the University, and students and staff from collaborative partners in the UK and internationally.

2.11   The University has a process for annual review of its admissions policy and has provided evidence of how discussions in University committees has led to policy revisions. All stakeholders confirmed that recruitment and admissions procedures were effective, well organised and therefore fit for purpose.

2.12   The team recognised that the University effectively manages recruitment and admissions to both its campus and collaborative provision in the UK and abroad. Its processes are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive, and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures. There is also a comprehensive enrolment and induction programme for both UK/international campus students and UK/international partner organisations.

2.13   Moreover, the University ensures that its provision is aligned with, and often exceeds, sector expectations, including significant and effective engagement with widening participation. The University provides an exceptionally comprehensive and wide-ranging programme of events and activities for applicants and other stakeholders and engages in a great deal of sustained activity in schools and Further Education Colleges, including open days, twilight and individual tours. These activities are accompanied by subject-specific or applicant-specific briefings provided for staff, current students, carers, parents and guardians. They include support for disadvantaged groups illustrated by the University's award-winning provision for care leavers. On the basis of these observations, the review team concludes that the proactive and comprehensive approach to recruitment that supports widening participation is **good practice**.

2.14   The review team confirms that recruitment, selection and admissions policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. Their implementation is considered to be transparent, reliable, valid, and inclusive, underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes that select students who are able to complete their chosen programme. On the basis of these observations, the Expectation is met with a low level of associated risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*

Findings

2.15   The Academic Strategy (2013-16) sets out the University's strategic aims relating to learning and teaching. They are accompanied by key performance indicators (KPIs) which include student satisfaction, graduate employment, retention and progression, Higher Education Academy (HEA) Fellowship, as well as areas for improvement. Faculties agree targets within the overall KPIs as part of the University's annual planning round. The LTP sets out the University's aims and priorities for the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of learning and teaching. Academic Board is responsible for the Academic Strategy and delegates implementation of the LTP to the Student Success Committee (SSC) which replaced the Academic Experience Committee (AEC) in September 2015. Its membership includes academic and professional service staff and Students' Union sabbatical officers. The University has benchmarked its policies and procedures against Chapter B3 of the Quality Code and this framework would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.16   In its review of evidence, the review team explored the University's approach to learning and teaching through analysis of its Academic Strategy, LTP and associated action plan and People Strategy. A range of documentation provided to staff and students, alongside minutes and papers of relevant committees, was considered in addition to discussions with staff and students.

2.17   The minutes of SSC and AEC provide evidence of appropriate oversight and discussion of actions taken in relation to the priorities identified in the LTP. The review team also noted that the Academic Forum brings together a wider group of staff to facilitate consultation, and debate, on learning and teaching practice.

2.18   Learning and teaching activities are appropriately articulated in programme documentation including programme specifications and handbooks. Learning outcomes are defined during programme design, set out in programme specifications, and aligned with teaching, learning and assessment methods. The University has a wide-ranging portfolio of provision with evidence of good and innovative practice in teaching, learning and assessment including work-based learning, innovative and authentic approaches to the provision of feedback on assessment, group work, critically reflective practice and the use of Peer Action Learning Sets (PALS). Students described teaching as engaging and exciting and helping them to learn.

2.19   The University's policy for a research-active curriculum is explored in programme approval and periodic review and is currently a theme explored in annual review. Resourcing is available through the University's Research Curriculum Development fund to support the integration of research into teaching. The development of this approach was noted in the student submission as a good example of decisive action taken by the University to enhance the quality of teaching, being a direct result of student feedback from the 2014 National Student Survey (NSS) regarding satisfaction with the intellectual stimulation of their programmes. Students expressed increased satisfaction with the same question in NSS 2015. The impact of research on the curriculum was evident in the examples provided to the review team.

2.20   The University has an appropriate framework for the appointment and promotion of staff. Processes for recruitment are overseen by Human Resources who provide mandatory training for chairs and members of appointment panels. The Academic Staff Handbook sets out expectations and support for academic staff. New staff are supported through induction, and ongoing support is provided through a system of mentors. Where appropriate, new members of academic staff undertake the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The University's overarching academic role framework shows the contribution of teaching and learning as well as research to all the main academic grades and this is further reflected by criteria for professorial and readership appointments. The criteria for promotion were well understood by staff. The introduction of the role of Principal Lecturer for Learning and Teaching was a stated aim of the LTP, and in its discussions with staff the review team established that it is a key role in helping to further promote the importance of learning and teaching across the University and to share good practice.

2.21   The University's Peer Observation of Teaching Scheme (POOT) was reviewed in 2012 to clarify its role as a developmental process. There is no requirement for feedback from observations to be reported more widely, with discussions remaining confidential. The team explored the role of POOT in the systematic identification of good practice or issues to be addressed and heard how patterns and themes arising from observations emerge through team discussions, committee meetings, special interest groups and newsletters.

2.22   The review team confirmed that staff development is a priority in the LTP and the People Strategy, with each faculty also having its own LTP. The University's Academic Development Plan, approved by SSC (and previously by AEC) seeks to address both institutional priorities and faculty requirements. Staff can also identify development needs as part of the annual appraisal process, described as a valuable opportunity to reflect on the past year and set developmental targets. An extensive range of professional development opportunities is offered across the University, both generic and tailored to the needs of faculties and staff at both Sunderland and London. They include open sessions, lunchtime poster and show-and-tell meetings under the banner of Learning Matters, and workshops for the use and application of e-learning tools under the banner of 'techbytes'. There is evidence of detailed and proactive support for staff undertaking specific roles, such as chairs of assessment boards and appointment panels, supervisors of postgraduate research students, programme leaders and staff participating in approval and review processes. Furthermore, staff are helped with their applications for HEA Fellowship.

2.23   The University has a framework for partner staff development, and a dedicated member of the Academic Development Team supports staff development at delivery and partner organisations (both UK and overseas - as discussed in Expectation B10). This includes discussion and exploration of University processes, regulations and pedagogical methods and interests. The team saw and heard evidence of a comprehensive and sustained range of development opportunities offered to delivery and partner organisations. Staff both in the University and those in delivery and partner organisations were very positive about the professional development opportunities offered. On the basis of this extensive evidence the team considers that the wide-ranging and embedded professional development opportunities made available to staff in the University and delivery and partner organisations make a positive contribution to the students' learning experience and are **good practice**.

2.24   The University makes a coordinated effort to collect and analyse data on the effectiveness of institutional measures to enhance learning and teaching. This is achieved through reference to external data such as HESA, NSS, DLHE, PTES and PRES, alongside the collection and analysis of internal questionnaires and feedback through its representative structures. NSS data has been used to identify key areas of concern and subsequent action planning as illustrated by the establishment of a task and finish group led by the Head of

Academic Development to explore approaches to feedback on assessment. Another example involves analysis of data on student retention and progression and award outcomes leading to concerns regarding student achievement on top-up programmes. This has been addressed at faculty level and on those programmes with a significant number of international students; in the case of the latter issue the University has reviewed and revised its English language entry requirements and strengthened its in-programme English language support.

2.25   The review team concludes that the University clearly articulates and systematically reviews and enhances the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices and hence the Expectation is met with a low level of associated risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

2.26   The University's Academic Strategy sets out its strategic approach to the student experience. This strategy is operationalised through the LTP and accompanying action plan with implementation being delegated to the SSC (previously AEC).

2.27   The University conducted an institution-wide review of student support mechanisms in 2012-13 including its personal tutor system which has subsequently been revised. The University is currently focusing on graduate employability.

2.28   The University has benchmarked its policies and procedures against *Chapter B4* of the Quality Code with this framework allowing the Expectation to be met.

2.29   In its review of evidence the team explored the University's Academic Strategy, LTP and associated action plan. A range of documentation provided to staff and students, and minutes and papers of relevant committees, was considered alongside discussions with staff and students.

2.30   The University provides clear, current and accessible information to students on the learning opportunities and support available to them, including through programme specifications, student and programme handbooks, module handbooks and resources, the website, the VLE and associated electronic platforms. This observation was reinforced by documentation as well as comments from students in meetings. The University has core requirements in relation to staff use of the VLE, although the team heard that this is not formally monitored, while students receive a tutorial on its use. Currently the University supports different VLEs at its Sunderland and London campuses but has plans underway to bring London into line with Sunderland.

2.31   As noted in Expectation B2, the University operates a number of events to support student transition into University life, including a core induction programme and a Welcome Weekend for new students. Induction at the London campus is undertaken by academic and support staff assisted by academic staff from Sunderland. Feedback on induction is discussed at SSC and followed up through the Freshers' Working Group and/or the London Campus Operations Group. Students who met the review team were positive about their induction experience, students based at London stated that they had met staff from Sunderland during the induction process and that they had found this useful.

2.32   The University explores student support at its partners through the approval and review process. Induction for students in partner colleges is the responsibility of the college, with academic staff from the University attending where possible. Students progressing from foundation degrees within partner colleges get advice on progression routes from Partnership Liaison Officers, with tailored progression events and induction support. Students were satisfied with these arrangements.

2.33   Specialist student support within SLS includes Disability Services, Counselling Services, Health and Well-Being, Student Financial Advice, the Student Support Fund, the Chaplaincy, International Student Support, and the Student Gateway - the University's 'one-stop-shop' for student enquiries. A health and wellbeing team at the London campus interacts with staff based at Sunderland. Targeted support is also offered to care leavers through Marketing and Recruitment.

2.34   The University student handbook references the Equality and Diversity Statement and the Dignity at Work Policy and Procedure. On-campus students with disabilities can access guidance on learning support, including assistive technologies and learning strategies, through Disability Services. Disability Services work closely with faculty disability tutors and coordinators and reasonable adjustments and individual learning support needs are communicated to programme teams. The Service and Faculty Student Disability Advisory Group meets termly to share practice and concerns and reports to the University's Equality and Diversity Group. Guidelines on inclusive programme design are set out in the Quality Handbook.

2.35   Additional support for international students is provided through the International Student Support team and the Gateway. In-sessional English language support has recently been enhanced. The Faculty of Business and Law (FBL) employs three student academic advisers whose time is mainly dedicated to students for whom English is not their first language, supporting the development of academic skills through drop-in advice surgeries and online resources. This support is welcomed by students.

2.36   All students are enrolled onto Skills for Learning offered through the library service, covering information skills, study support skills and employability skills. Access is flexible and students can log in through the VLE or library pages as well as attending workshops and webinars.

2.37   At faculty level students are supported through module and programme leaders, student support officers, and a revised personal tutor scheme that encourages engagement and provides academic, development and pastoral support. Personal tutors are supported by a handbook. While there was some variability in student views relating to the personal tutoring system, the University has clear mechanisms in place for reviewing the implementation and effectiveness of the revised system - for example by incorporating it as a theme in annual review.

2.38   On the basis of this extensive evidence the team noted that the support provided to students at both faculty and University levels is comprehensive and was confirmed as effective by students. The University evaluates its effectiveness in a number of ways. The review team finds the extensive and effective support mechanisms that meet the needs of the diverse student body to be **good practice**.

2.39   The University has a well-organised approach to the provision of learning resources for supporting student development. They are carefully managed and enhanced, with the student submission confirming their high quality. Library provision at Sunderland and London is managed by SLS. The team notes that the NSS results in 2013 raised concerns about aspects of library provision; this was addressed through additional funding in both 2013-14 and 2014-15 and resulted in increased NSS satisfaction outcomes. The University's internal review of the London campus highlighted issues in respect of the library which have also been addressed. Students at both Sunderland and London were generally satisfied with library resources.

2.40   In addition to the development of employability policies and initiatives and building internal expertise, the University also engages with employers in a range of ways. They include professional body accreditation of programmes, industry input into curriculum approval and reviews, provision of placements and internships and guest speakers from industry. The employers who met the team were very supportive of the University and described engagement with a wide range of projects. While students were appreciative of the opportunities offered, students based at the London campus were less positive than students at Sunderland particularly in relation to availability of internships, placements and work-related learning.

2.41   The Head of CES is also the head of the University's Sunderland Futures project, which has been set up in response to a recognition of the need to improve graduate employability rates for the institution, which had been below sector benchmarks (as measured by DLHE data) and the University's own targets. This project brings together a wide range of employment-related initiatives under one banner and has resulted in improved graduate employment rates. Outside their programmes of study, students at Sunderland have access to a range of opportunities including SuPA; the professional mentoring scheme, the 'Leading Lights scheme, internships and support for business start-up. Funding is available to support student participation in Sunderland Futures projects. At the time of the review, the University was in the process of setting up a bespoke version of Futures at the London campus but this was at an early stage of development. On the basis of the extensive evidence linked to employability, the review team considers that the strategic and comprehensive approach to enhancing student employability through Sunderland Futures is **good practice**.

2.42   The review team concludes that the University meets, with a low level of associated risk, the Expectation for student support through regularly reviewing and enhancing comprehensive arrangements and resourcing that enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B5: Student Engagement*

Findings

2.43   The LTP outlines the University's expectation and priorities in relation to student engagement. The Student Representation Policy details how students are involved within the academic structure, specifying what the key roles are and indicating their committee membership. The partnership between the University of Sunderland Students' Union (USSU) and the University is encapsulated within a relationship agreement, signed annually, defining the legal, financial and governance relationships. The University also engages students through a variety of surveys, including the NSS, PTES and Survey US.

2.44   There is strategic oversight of student engagement and representation through the SSC. Under this committee they have created working groups that explore specific areas, most recently the Task and Finish Group for Student Representation. The strategic emphasis that the University places on student engagement would allow Expectation B5 to be met.

2.45   In its review of evidence the review team explored this Expectation through examining the gap analysis of student engagement, the Student Representation Policy, Student Staff Liaison Committee minutes, student representative training documentation, programme and module study board minutes and the student written submission. Additionally, the review team questioned a range of staff and students throughout the review visit.

2.46   The review team considered student representation to be reasonably strong throughout the University, including the London Campus and each of their collaborative partners. The structures in place allow for formal feedback to be captured and processed through the University's deliberative and task groups. There is, however, less successful engagement at faculty level, which has led the University to establish a Task and Finish Group for Student Representation in order to identify methods for improvement. In addition, the review team found that there was no specific training provided to student representatives who sit on faculty committees. Therefore, the team **affirms** the work underway to improve the student representation structure.

2.47   The University has a strategic awareness and oversight of student engagement through the SSC and is currently in consultation regarding how to improve their student representative structure. On the basis of this observation, the review team concludes that the Expectation for student engagement is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

2.48   Assessment strategies are aligned with teaching and learning strategies and checked at approval and review. There is an Assessment Policy that covers aims, standards, marking and feedback to students and a Marking Policy that includes anonymity of marking and moderation. Programme handbooks and module guides communicate generic and subject-specific assessment criteria to students, as noted in Expectation A3.2. These criteria are applied when marking. The Student Guide to the Regulations and Programme Handbooks provide students with assessment rules. In the AQH there is guidance on learning outcomes and assessment, on choosing appropriate methods of assessment and on feedback to students. The Academic Misconduct Regulations are outlined in the AQH with an associated guide; and plagiarism-detection software is used to check assessments submitted. The design of these policies and procedures would allow Expectation B6 to be met.

2.49   In its review of evidence, the team read a range of documents related to assessment and studied module guides and assessment processes in operation. The review team also spoke to staff and students on the campus, and in partner institutions.

2.50   The University carried out a gap analysis on assessment, mapped against the Quality Code, in May 2014. As a result it completed the APL review and made minor amendments to invigilation and marking policy. There is an articulation policy for progression routes for students and a document for mapping credit from elsewhere against University awards. Where an external award is frequently used for advanced standing, there are guidelines, a process and form to facilitate the progression. Individual APL claims are considered through a process that was reviewed in the light of a QAA concern in 2013, and are checked by the admissions tutor or programme leader. There is frequent staff development and a rigorous process that is moderated annually by external examiners enabling further enhancements to the process.

2.51   The review team notes the University's compliance with the terms of reference for Assessment Boards for provision on campus and in validated and franchised partner organisations. Programme boards are chaired by an associate dean or head of department, with module assessment boards chaired by team or programme leaders. Dual award boards are chaired by the respective partner with representation from the University. Chairs and officers of assessment boards receive briefings that include consideration of issues raised by external examiners. PGR examiners and chairs of viva panels are also trained. These processes assure consistency in the operation of assessment boards with assessment setting, marking and moderation at partner institutions also complying with regulations.

2.52   The AQH specifies that feedback on coursework must be completed within four weeks, and that group feedback on exams must be placed on the VLE. Students reported that, with occasional exceptions, feedback on assessment was received within the prescribed period. The turnaround times at partner institutions has improved considerably with the introduction of a workflow system that emerged from the 2011 QAA Audit of Collaborative Provision.

2.53   Assessment information is supplied to students within module guides and they indicate that all assessment must be submitted in order to pass a module. Where a learning outcome is tested only once the requirement to pass all assessments in that module is explained in the Student Guide to Regulations and documented as programme specification regulations. It is not, however, always included in the applicable module guide and inclusion of this condition is not specified in the minimum requirements for module guides.

2.54   There is no reference to assessment word limits or penalties for exceeding word limit in the Assessment Policy, Marking Policy or Student Guide to the Regulations and some external examiners have expressed concern that word limits are not consistent across modules within the same programme. The review team was informed that word limits and penalties for exceeding the word limit are set within the module, and discussed at PSBs. However, some modules specify a word length but do not indicate a penalty for exceeding it. Where a word length is specified, the penalty for exceeding differs markedly between modules. The team therefore **recommends** that the University establish consistency in the use of penalties for coursework that exceeds the stated word length to ensure comparability.

2.55   Assessment and feedback is a priority in the LTP and, as noted in Expectation B3, a Task and Finish Group was set up, partly as a result of NSS responses, to explore feedback on assessment. This has resulted in small-scale constructive initiatives in several subject areas including a department-wide assessment planning day, support on assessment criteria, student target-setting and trialling of feedback using audio. Although there is a recommendation related to assessment, it is confined to one aspect, with awareness by the University of the need to explore assessment strategies and methods. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B7: External Examining*

Findings

2.56   There is a policy on the role of external examiners that applies to all examiners on taught programmes and details their role and responsibilities. A gap analysis was undertaken in May 2014 comparing the policy and procedures to the Quality Code and as a result the external examiner appointment form and the template for their reports was amended. Nominations are made at faculty level and considered by QMSC, and the criteria for appointment are included in the nomination and appointment form. In 2014-15 Academic Regulations were reviewed taking into account external examiners' comments. Absence of external examiners is dealt with formally by approval of an alternative arrangement. External examiners can raise serious concerns with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the contracts of external examiners can be terminated, although this is a rare occurrence. The design of these systems and procedures would allow Expectation B7 to be met.

2.57   In its review of evidence, the review team studied the policy and associated forms, and considered a wide range of external examiner and overview reports. Questions related to the use of external examiners were pursued during meetings with staff and students.

2.58   New external examiners are invited to an induction session and are sent an information pack that presents a comprehensive view of the assessment process and their role in moderation and confirmation of standards. There was positive feedback from this induction programme.

2.59   Most external examiners are allocated to a programme and all the modules within it; in cases where there are a large number of modules an additional module examiner may be appointed. A database is maintained indicating the modules for which each external examiner is responsible.

2.60   There is a standard reporting template for programmes and another for modules. These templates ensure that external examiners report on standards, comparability, conduct of assessment, operation of assessment boards, good practice, and areas for enhancement. Where external examiners have a responsibility for partner delivery, as well as on campus delivery, they are required to complete an addendum for each partner. While some examiners comment, many simply select 'yes' to confirm standards, marking and moderation, feedback and student achievement. As discussed in Expectation B10, the University has noted this difficulty and is taking action to encourage more effective feedback. Dual awards report in the same manner.

2.61   Faculties are responsible for responding to external examiners and the report, together with the faculty response, is made available to staff and students on the Academic Services section of the password-protected website. To encourage students to engage with reports, a poster was displayed on campus and distributed to partners. Overview reports for undergraduate, postgraduate and collaborative programmes are produced by Academic Services and considered by AEC (now SSC).

2.62   Due to the operation of a large number of partner delivery points with multiple start dates, and thus multiple assessment boards, the Faculty of Business and Law has found it necessary to appoint more than one external examiner for some programmes. To consider comparable performance across partners, the on-campus external examiner has been asked to act additionally as a chief external examiner. This examiner receives relevant partner

reports as they become available and is asked to comment on the extent to which standards and achievements are comparable with on-campus standards. There is no requirement for the chief external examiner to look at samples of student work that have already been scrutinised by another external examiner, nor to produce a compilation report. The chief external examiner may, however, choose to do so, with the role therefore relying on exception reporting. The team noted in particular that not all senior staff in the faculty are fully cognisant of the role. Following clarification of the chief external examiner's role and responsibility, the review team recognised that the post could contribute to the enhancement of learning opportunities.

2.63　　　The review team concludes that the University meets, with a low level of associated risk, the Expectation for the scrupulous use of external examiners through the implementation and monitoring of appropriate and rigorous systems and procedures.

Expectation:　　Met
Level of risk:　　Low

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

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

Findings

2.64 The University's Academic Board delegates operational responsibility for the monitoring and review of taught courses to the ADC and QMSC. Programmes are reviewed annually through the PSB and institutionally on a six-year periodic review cycle. Reports of both processes are received and considered within the University's deliberative committee structure. The University's processes for annual course monitoring and periodic review are set out in the AQH. Procedures for research students are defined by RDG considering the outcomes of annual monitoring. A periodic review process for postgraduate research programmes was developed in 2011. The design of these processes would allow Expectation B8 to be met.

2.65 In its review of evidence, the team examined the University's guidance for annual monitoring and periodic review and sampled all levels of annual monitoring and periodic review reports. The team examined the minutes of committees where the reports were received and considered, and explored monitoring and review processes and supporting guidance through discussions with academic managers, staff and students.

2.66 Current processes for programme approval and periodic and annual review were revised through a Quality Framework Review that took into account comments from the Institutional and Collaborative audit reports, together with a range of external and internal reference points.

2.67 Annual review of taught provision takes place at module and programme level and incudes partner organisations. Module leaders provide an evaluative report for each module. The template encourages an open descriptive narrative by the module leader, where they broadly reflect on the operation of their module. The pro forma does not explicitly require reflection on external examiner or student feedback, nor is this feedback appended to the report. Programme monitoring reports are detailed and comprehensive with external examiner reports, statistical data and student evaluation provided as appendices. A development grid is used to enable a consistent framework. However, consideration of module-related issues or good practice is not strongly evidenced within the reports provided. The review team noted that there are plans to enhance the use of a data dashboard to inform annual review. Students do complete module or programme questionnaires and currently a more consistent framework is being developed by SSC.

2.68 Module and programme reports are considered by the relevant module and PSBs, which include student representation, and once approved these are considered by the FQMSC. The FQMSC produces an overview report and appended to these reports is the associate dean's report on collaborative partners. The overview report addresses key programme-related issues together with themes that have been identified by QMSC; currently these are employability, retention, research-active curriculum and personal tutoring. A sub-group of QMSC considers the themes but the review team notes that consideration in Faculty overview reports is inconsistent. The introduction of themes is encouraging a more evaluative approach but discussion of annual review at QMSC tends to focus on process. Programme specifications may be changed as part of the annual monitoring process to pick up changes that have been made through the minor modifications process plus any generic

changes that are not module related. Oversight of cumulative minor modifications has led to a recommendation under Expectation A3.1.

2.69   In 2012-13, the University recognised that the developmental potential of annual review was not being realised and subsequently staff development has been provided. Some improvement was noted in the quality of the reporting and outcomes of the annual review processes and the review team **affirms** the steps being taken to improve the effectiveness of annual programme review.

2.70   Research students undergo a formal progress annual review. Review panel members are trained and make recommendations to PRDSC regarding students' progress. Issues requiring further consideration are forwarded to RDG. There is currently no formal process for identifying recurring themes identified through the annual monitoring process.

2.71   Periodic review, which includes revalidation, is managed by Academic Services and reports to QMSC. Periodic review of clusters of programmes is undertaken by a panel operating on behalf of QMSC. Where a cluster involves a large number of programmes a number of sub-panels may operate. Panel membership includes external and student representation. External subject specialists are required for periodic review panels and sub-panels and employer feedback is often sought. The review is informed by a detailed evaluative report and determines alignment of the programmes with external reference points and reviews programme health. Guidance is provided to staff for the production of an evaluative commentary. Reports for review panels are very detailed and include commendations, requirements and recommendations. A clear process is in place to ensure any requirements made by the review panel are met and signed off by the panel chair before being reported to QMSC and Academic Board. There was a comprehensive review of postgraduate research in 2012, considered under Expectation B11, which reviewed provision across the university, including the Professional Doctorate and the DBA. The review panel included wide external representation and a recent graduate.

2.72   The Quality Framework Review provided a stimulus for student membership of periodic review panels and from 2014-15 USSU sabbatical officers have been full members of review panels. A training pack has been developed to prepare sabbatical officers for the responsibility. Current students are involved in sub-panel discussions and a recent QMSC meeting took feedback from students to improve their preparation.

2.73   Procedures for the termination of a programme within a partnership, or for the termination of a partnership and for any teach-out arrangements, are set out in the Quality Handbook. A request goes to ADC and is signed off at that stage by the DVC on behalf of Academic Board. Where there are existing students on the programme, teach-out arrangements are put in place and external examiners confirm that standards are maintained and the quality of the student learning experience. Where a whole partnership is to be terminated a termination letter is sent to the partner with details of the teach-out arrangements for the programmes and students concerned.

2.74   The review team concludes that the University has clear processes for the monitoring and review of programmes. Improvements are being made to the annual review processes and documentation in order to promote effective evaluation. The provision of staff development and the use of themes is supporting the improvement, but further work is needed to enable clear outcomes in terms of the quality of learning opportunities to be determined at module and programme level. Periodic review is thorough and makes

appropriate use of externality. On this basis, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

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

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

Findings

2.75   The University has a recently revised and fully comprehensive procedure for dealing with academic appeals and student complaints. The University also reviews the results of the complaints and appeals processes within the organisation, and externally with its collaborative partners as well as the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). This overall process includes detailed analysis of trends and issues. Appeals and complaints are dealt with in collaborative partnerships in the UK and internationally, in the same way that they are dealt with at the University, with appropriate variations in place to allow partners to process complaints directed to their provision, or for students to escalate them to the University and then the OIA. Academic appeals from students at partner organisations are dealt with directly by the University in the same way that they are dealt with for on-campus students, except in the case of dual awards where the student appeals to the partner institution in the first place. The University's policy and process for appeals and complaints would allow Expectation B9 to be met.

2.76   In its review of evidence the review team considered a range of documentation relevant to complaints and appeals. They also discussed systems and procedures with senior staff and managers responsible for the maintenance of standards and quality, with students at all levels within the University, and with students studying with collaborative partners in the UK and internationally. The review team also held meetings with staff from partner institutions.

2.77   Students on campus, and at its partner organisations, are provided with clear and comprehensive information, appropriate guidance and support, including impartial advice, advocacy from the University/and or partner staff, and the USSU. Further work is ongoing in conjunction with USSU on providing additional guidance for all students on the appeals and complaints process. Implementation of the revised procedure for handling appeals and complaints has led to cases sometimes taking longer to process than in the past, but staff believe this is a result of colleagues learning how to apply the revised process, rather than any systemic problem with the procedure itself, which the University is keeping under review.

2.78   The review team found that the University's academic appeals and student complaints policies and procedures align with sector expectations, providing opportunities for both informal early resolution and mediation that are fair, accessible and timely including generous time limits for students. Furthermore, the inclusion of a comprehensive set of guidance for staff and students is viewed by the team as detailed, proactive and transparent, as is the ongoing work to monitor and improve the process. The inclusive and evaluative approach to the development of the academic appeals and student complaints policy and procedures is **good practice**.

2.79   The team concludes that the University meets the Expectation for handling student complaints and academic appeals. There is low level of associated risk because of the quality of information, advice and guidance that is provided alongside the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of design and implementation procedures.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

2.80   The University provides a clear strategic rationale for its arrangements for working with others using a revised taxonomy of three models for collaboration - validation, full franchise and joint franchise. A partner review process allows the University to assess strategic alignment periodically, and this can be brought forward if significant concerns arise. The regulatory framework for the management and oversight of provision in partner organisations is set out in the AQH. Academic Board maintains oversight with more detailed scrutiny delegated to the QMSC. The University's academic regulations apply equally to franchised and validated provision. The University's institutional and faculty-level governance structures oversee provision delivered with others in the same way as on-campus provision. Approval and periodic review processes are the same, except that there are additional mechanisms to ensure that the particular context of partnership delivery is considered within the process. The University has arrangements for risk assessment and due diligence which separate the consideration of financial, legal and other due diligence matters from consideration of issues of quality and standards, enabling the University to make appropriate decisions about initiating and continuing each relationship.

2.81   All assessments take place in English and operate under the same assessment regulations as home provision. The University's external examining policy applies equally, and the processes for appointment and reporting make provision to ensure that the particular risks and issues associated with working with others are taken into account. The design of the University's framework for working with other organisations would allow Expectation B10 to be met.

2.82   In its review of evidence the team read details of the governance, approval and review arrangements for working with others, and considered a number of case studies which documented the way in which those processes are operating in practice. The review team met students and staff from partner organisations as well as staff from the University with responsibilities for overseeing these relationships.

2.83   Senior staff explained that a key learning point from the University's longstanding engagement with partner organisations was the importance of maintaining a close relationship with partners, with the relationship being supported by appropriate levels of staff time and resources. Staff at all levels expressed a commitment to partnerships that reflect the strategic importance to the University. Oversight of regional and overseas relationships are explicitly included within the briefs of members of the University's executive team. The University appoints designated members of academic staff to oversee the relationship with each partner organisation; for FECs these are the faculty partnership leaders while for overseas collaborations the equivalent role is that of centre leaders. These roles have clear and detailed job descriptions and are supported by dedicated training. Faculty partnership leaders and centre leaders were able to articulate clearly their role in quality assurance procedures and moreover their role in developing the overall relationship. Partner staff described varied and regular informal contact through email, videoconference, staff shadowing, and visits to and from the University. Students met by the review team were well informed and articulated clearly the relationship with the University. The University has developed a framework for partner staff development and has dedicated staff time and

resources to support this. A number of examples demonstrated how partners had been supported in understanding the University's processes and the expectations of UK Higher Education generally, with regional and international partners stating, as noted in Expectation B3, that they valued the development opportunities provided.

2.84   There is a dedicated member of library staff to support off-campus operations with partner organisations with the review team noting positive experiences reported by students, both regional and overseas, who are using the University's library resources - including online learning facilities and support.

2.85   For each arrangement, the respective responsibilities of each partner are set out in a quality annex which is appended to the formal agreement. The University further produces an operations manual which is aligned to the formal agreement and provides helpful detail about how the partnership is intended to operate. Partners have access to the AQH and there is a dedicated partnership website that gives details of formal processes. Programme specifications, handbooks and module outlines are among the sources of information provided to partners to facilitate effective delivery. The review team considered that the guidance and information to partners was clear and fit for purpose, continuing with the good practice identified previously in the 2011 QAA Audit of Collaborative Provision.

2.86   The review team found evidence that the process for the annual and periodic review of partnerships is operating effectively. The schedule of partner reviews is comprehensive and the University provided examples of when reviews might be bought forward because concerns have been identified. Reports for annual and periodic review identify good practice and any issues of concern, with implementation of clear action plans. Annual reports from partners and University staff overseeing each partnership feed in to the standard annual review process in order to ensure the particular risks and issues that arise from working with others are taken into account. By way of illustration, the University acknowledges that the addendum to external examiner reports that provides for specific commentary on delivery with others is not being used consistently, and is responding by covering this in external examiner induction and individual follow-up. The University produces an annual overview report of external examiners' reports that draws out issues relating to working with others.

2.87   If partners do not submit a required report, there is an escalation process to secure the necessary input. Programme annual review statistics are available for provision by partner organisations, and the statistics for on-campus programmes can be filtered according to students progressing from partner colleges to help assess differential achievement.

2.88   The review team considered in detail the outcomes of the review process for one particular partner offering dual awards with the University, noting that while significant concerns had been raised by an external examiner about poor student achievement, all relevant groups of staff were aware of the issue and there is a comprehensive action plan in place that articulates how the University and its partner are addressing the concerns raised.

2.89   There are clear processes for approval and review of collaborations with employers, including placements. Any module involving a placement provides a handbook for employers following a standard template. Written information is supplemented by visits from University staff, and employers confirmed the effectives of the arrangements. There are periodic and annual review processes for study abroad providers.

2.90   On the basis of the extensive supportive evidence the team formed the view that a wide range of mechanisms, formal and informal, represented a determined commitment by the University to establishing firm relationships with others that enable partnerships to be managed successfully. The sustained and effective management of delivery involving partner organisations is **good practice**.

2.91   The review team concludes that the Expectation for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the University is met with a low level of associated risk, based on the sustained application of appropriate strategy and governance arrangements, the continuous evaluation of management systems and procedures, as well as the provision of clear and accurate information for students and delivery organisations.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*

Findings

2.92   The University offers research degree programmes leading to the award of Master of Philosophy (MPhil), Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Professional Master's (MProf), Professional Doctorate (DProf) and Doctor in Business Administration (DBA). The Professional Doctorate is currently being revalidated and recruitment to the DBA has been suspended while its future is reviewed. The University has no collaborative arrangements for research programmes but has appropriate processes in place for managing students who wish to study at a distance.

2.93   PRDSC reports to SSC and has oversight of processes relating to postgraduate research degrees. PRDSC delegates operational responsibility to RDG for consideration of research degree proposals, the appointment of and changes to supervisors, appointment of examiners, leave of absence, the outcomes of annual monitoring, extensions to the period of registration, withdrawals, and for checking that ethical approval has been given. All faculties have a faculty PRDSC charged with oversight of student progress. The Professional Doctorate and DBA each have a PSB and Programme Assessment Board which report to PRDSC. The minutes of these various committees and subgroups demonstrated that they are discharging their responsibilities effectively and in line with their stated terms of reference.

2.94   Regulations governing the award of research degrees are set out in the AQH, with the Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Students describing the roles and responsibilities of students and staff. The University carried out its first periodic review of its postgraduate research programmes in 2012 and will undertake an interim review in 2015-16. The University has benchmarked its policies and procedures against *Chapter B11* of the Quality Code, which would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.95   In its review of evidence the team explored the University's Regulations, Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Students, the report of the University's periodic review of research degrees and associated action plan and evidence, minutes and papers of relevant committees. Procedures and experiences were also discussed with staff and PGR students.

2.96   Students are supported by both central and faculty-based teams and structures. The Graduate Research Support (GRS) team is responsible for registration, annual monitoring and assessment and students commented on the helpful nature of the support provided by the team. A senior member of academic staff in each faculty, either an associate dean or head of research, oversees faculty arrangements for admissions, student support, supervision and progress and is supported by one or more Research Student Managers (RSMs).

2.97   The review team confirmed that faculties are responsible for considering PhD applications, agreeing the project and providing a supervisory team and resources. Research students are associated with areas of identified research activity and RSMs ensure that projects are aligned with staff expertise and capacity. Student registration is

overseen by RDG, which checks that an appropriate supervisory team and resources are in place. The University provides a central induction programme which all students, including those studying at a distance, must attend; faculties induct students into local arrangements. The University publishes a range of information to support students including a comprehensive research student handbook, the Code of Practice and academic regulations. Overall, students were satisfied with their experience of admission and induction and with the information and resources provided, although the student submission noted that some students felt that more information on available supervisors and their expertise should be published on the website. Furthermore, library resources were raised as an issue by students in the 2015 PRES.

2.98   Supervisory arrangements and requirements are set out in the University's Code of Practice. Supervisory teams comprise a Director of Studies and one or more additional staff. Supervisors have to be trained initially and updated annually with training sessions accompanied by a handbook. Supervisors are supported through the University's workload allocation model. Formal supervision sessions are expected to take place at least once a month, are recorded on a standard form and monitored by the GRS team. While the majority of students reported that this requirement was adhered to there was variability, with some students reporting meeting with their supervisors only once every two months. Students indicated satisfaction with their supervisory teams although the team heard of a small number of frequent supervisory changes in one area; evidence provided by the University demonstrated, however, that this was not typical.

2.99   Generic skills development is provided by the Academic Development team and overseen by PRDSC; the programme is aligned with the Researcher Development Framework. Subject-specific skills are addressed through supervisory teams and all students produce a personal development plan. Students had commented about variability in skills development offered through faculties and some were confused about aspects of the generic skills programme, such as which elements are compulsory. If planning to apply for a teaching or demonstrating role, students have to undertake training through the University's Preparing to Teach programme. While this was confirmed by students who met the review team, the University is concerned that the 2015 PRES suggested some students had not been appropriately trained and is in the process of following up through PRDSC.

2.100   Concerns about student engagement with the wider research environment were raised in the 2012 periodic review and following discussion at PRDSC a more systematic approach has been implemented. Faculties offer seminars and other events to which research students are invited and the University organises conferences and Research Fridays which are monthly workshops aimed at supporting PGRs; these events were valued by students. Students confirmed that support is available to attend conferences and external events.

2.101   Progress reviews occur after four and nine months and then annually by a panel. Students produce a progress report, give a presentation to the panel and complete a confidential form which allows them to raise any concerns. MPhil and PhD programmes are assessed by a thesis and viva; the research phase of the DBA and Professional Doctorate are assessed by a report, portfolio and viva. An independent member of staff chairs the viva and there is at least one academic external examiner, plus a professional external for the professional doctorates. PRDSC confirms the award of a research degree on behalf of Academic Board. The majority of students who met the team were clear about these requirements but a lack of clarity around what is required of them was raised by students in the 2015 PRES and in the student submission.

2.102   Completion rates are monitored by PRDSC. The University recognised that these were problematic and has taken action including the implementation of more robust review

and monitoring processes. Completion rates are now improving and for full-time PhD students they rose from 34 per cent in 2010-11 to 63.5 per cent in 2013-14.

2.103   Students are represented on PRDSC, Research and Innovation Committee (RIC), Professional Doctorate PSBs and faculty PRDSCs. Research student representatives attend Research Student Staff Liaison Committees (RSSLCs) held at faculty level. Student representatives were unaware of any formal training for their role but confirmed that they receive the minutes of RSSLCs which are then distributed more widely and were able to give examples of changes made as a result of their feedback. Students are also able to feed back their views on supervisory arrangements through the annual review process. PRES is undertaken biennially and results are discussed at PRDSC and there was evidence of the University analysing and responding to issues raised. Complaints and appeals processes are the same as for taught programmes and PRDSC's annual review of data on research students includes any complaints and appeals made.

2.104   The University's first periodic review of its postgraduate research programmes took place in 2012. The panel, included external members and a recent graduate. The comprehensive report demonstrated thorough evaluation which resulted in a number of recommendations. The University confirmed that the actions were complete and an interim review will take place as part of the process during 2015-16 to determine whether actions taken are effective and embedded. While a number of enhancements to procedures and roles have been made as a result of the review, the team noted that not all processes were operating consistently across the University. Examples include the frequency of supervisory meetings, variable awareness among research students of what is required of them, and variable access to faculty research skills training. In addition, in 2014 it became clear to the University that the research students in the Faculty of Business and Law were not satisfied with their experience and measures were taken outside of the formal structures and processes to address this issue through the appointment of a research learning support tutor. The University commented on the positive feedback from students regarding the role. On the basis of the ongoing evaluative approach to the research student experience through the use of review exercises, the review team **affirms** the actions being taken to assure the quality and standards of research programme provision across the University.

2.105   The review team recognises that, overall, the University provides secure academic standards and a suitable research environment to ensure the quality of learning opportunities for its research awards. There have been enhancements as a result of the 2012 periodic review and although there are still some issues to be addressed, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.106   In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Part B of the Quality Code, summarised in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.107   All of the11 Expectations in this area have been met, with a judgement of low risk being reached in each case.

2.108   There are six instances of good practice. For Expectation B2, approaches to student recruitment for widening participation are proactive and comprehensive. With Expectation B3, staff development is wide-ranging and embedded within University systems and procedures. Student support in Expectation B4 is extensive and effective for a wide range of learners and the Sunderland Futures programme is viewed as strategic and comprehensive. In Expectation B9 academic appeals and student complaints policies and procedures are inclusive and evaluative. Finally, for Expectation B10 the management of delivery with partner organisations is sustained and effective.

2.109   One recommendation is made within Expectation B6 regarding the need to establish more consistency in the use of penalties for coursework that exceeds the stated word length in order to ensure comparability across faculties, programmes and modules.

2.110   There are also three affirmations involving Expectation B5 for the University's current work with improving student representation at faculty levels, Expectation B8 for the effectiveness of annual programme review, and Expectation B11 for research programme provision.

2.111   On the basis of the documentation provided and meetings with staff and students, the review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

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

Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

Findings

3.1 The University provides information in a range of accessible paper-based and electronic formats for prospective and current students in the UK and abroad, and for those studying within partner organisations. Published information includes the University's strategies, policies, and procedures as well as programme and module details linked to learning resources and support service. There are monitoring systems for ensuring that information is current and accurate. The University publishes terms and conditions in the Student Handbook, with links to the AQH, providing a comprehensive information set for students, and other stakeholders on how the University assures academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The University has benchmarked its policies and procedures against Part C of the Quality Code, which would allow the Expectation to be met.

3.2 In its review of evidence, the team explored a wide range of documentation relevant to the provision of information about standards and learning opportunities, in addition to exploring the VLE and internet. The team also discussed information systems and procedures with senior staff and managers responsible for recruitment and admissions, students and staff at all levels within the University, and students and staff from UK and overseas partner organisations.

3.3 The team found that the University provides clear, detailed, and accessible information on the programmes it offers, the support and resources it makes available to students, and what the University in turn expects of students. The University's website is well designed and organised, and has a very user-friendly search function. Postgraduate students also have dedicated webpages, and the London campus has its own website. Published information includes clear descriptions of the University's mission, values and strategy. The University employs a rigorous system for checking and approval of information and its delivery for itself and support partner organisations in the UK and abroad prior to publication.

3.4 A range of electronic resources, training, guidance and software applications are made available via the University's student and staff extranet My Sunderland. Current students on campus and abroad are also provided with a range of information including programme handbooks and module guides.

3.5 Students based in UK further education colleges and overseas institutions are provided with information by the respective partner organisations, and oversight of published information is maintained at faculty and University levels. In addition, the University provides induction information to all partner students in the UK and abroad. All graduates are provided with degree certificates and transcripts, and the Higher Education Achievement Report is available for on-campus students. The USSU is encouraged to comment on the quality and accuracy of information provided by the University. The University is also providing additional guidance to students on how modifications to provision are consulted on, in line with recent Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) guidance on Higher Education Institution's responsibilities under the Consumer Rights Act 2015.

3.6   In conclusion, the review team found that the University is rigorous in its processes for checking the quality, completeness and reliability of information published by the University, or on its behalf by partners in the UK and abroad. Therefore the University is meeting, with a low level of associated risk, the Expectation for the provision of fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy information to staff, students and other stakeholders.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

3.7   In reaching its judgement about the quality of the information about learning opportunities the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Part C of the Quality Code, summarised in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.8   The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. There are no recommendations, affirmations, or features of good practice.

3.9   The University provides information for the public about its higher education provision. Information is accessible, appropriate and accurate for prospective and current students, as well as those with responsibility for maintaining standards and assuring quality.

3.10   On the basis of the documentation provided and meetings with staff and students, the review team concludes that the quality of information about learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

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

Findings

4.1 The Quality Management Policy sets out the basis for the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement. The University has embedded enhancement within their LTP and sets their strategic framework for initiatives to enhance student learning. Each faculty also has a respective LTP that identifies key objectives that may differ between one another, which is monitored through an action plan, carrying out any adjustments as necessary. The University states that one of the key priorities is to ensure that staff are supported and developed for their roles, which is made possible through robust staff development opportunities. The design of this strategic framework at Senior Management, Faculty and Support Service levels would allow the Enhancement criteria to be met.

4.2 In its review of the evidence, the team explored all appropriate evidence including SSC minutes, information regarding staff development opportunities, the work undertaken relating to Research-Active Curriculum and the Quality Management Policy. Additionally, the review team discussed aspects of enhancement with a wide range of staff and students.

4.3 The review team confirmed that approaches taken by the University ensure that there are opportunities for enhancement to be made throughout the institution. This observation is linked to the key aims within the LTP that outlines specific indicators and targets across a range of topics including student support, assessment, feedback, organisational management and oversight, and academic practice and support.

4.4 The review team noted good practice for widespread staff development (see also Expectation B3) that is supported throughout the University. Sessions relating to learning and teaching have increased from 105 in 2012-13 to 513 in 2014-15, demonstrating that the strategic objective is clearly being followed through. This includes workshops called the Creative Classroom, which explore perceptions of learning and teaching and alternative pedagogical practice. Additional workshops include Learning Matters, which provide an opportunity for staff to disseminate good practice and share problems. Where possible, all opportunities are made available to collaborative partners. For partners where physical distance poses difficulties, the University will carry out appropriate staff development through visiting relevant organisations.

4.5 Widening participation is a key priority for the University. The responsibility of the recruitment of students within all partner organisations ultimately rests with the University. As noted under good practice in Expectation B2, all staff responsible for recruitment are trained in line with University policy and procedures, including being provided with codes of practice and good practice guidelines.

4.6 The University has a clear strategic rationale for working with partner organisations. Planning and delivery arrangements with further education colleges plan and support progression pathways for widening participation, while overseas arrangements allow international students access to a UK higher education provider. As noted for good practice in Expectation B10, these partnerships have a high level of scrutiny as they are periodically reviewed externally and internally, allowing the University to assess how effective they are and whether improvements can be made. This process can be brought forward at any time if a significant concern arises.

4.7   As noted in Expectation B4 and for the Theme, the University identified a major strategic initiative for improving and supporting graduate employment from 2014 onwards. This led to the development and creation of Sunderland Futures to support student employability by developing skills, widening their experience and increasing their confidence. Students considered the services and schemes to be beneficial and extremely useful for the progression of their respective careers.

4.8   The University is currently developing a Practice Sharing Knowledge Base in which staff members are able to share their good practice and learn from each other. Although this is a relatively new initiative, the review team recognises that when fully developed it will be an extremely effective mechanism for enhancement.

4.9   The review team concludes that the University has developed numerous strategic objectives and associated activities that are not only acted upon but also improved, and that extend throughout the institution and its partner organisations. The overall outcome involves the systematic embedding of enhancement throughout the University; the Expectation is therefore met with a low level of associated risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.10   In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of learning opportunities the review team matched its findings against criteria specified within the Quality Code, summarised in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.11   The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. While exploring enhancement the team further noted a series of sustained developments and improvements that have emerged from numerous review and evaluation exercises, mapped clearly to the University's mission and strategy. Examples from the provision of learning opportunities illustrate these enhancement related achievements.

4.12   Staff development is identified as good practice within Expectation B3, with the team further noting links to Enhancement based on the strategic and wide-ranging activity embedded through the University and its partner organisations.

4.13   Approaches to recruitment are identified as good practice in Expectation B2, with the review team noting the strategic fit between the procedures and activities used and the deliberate development of the University's widening participation priorities.

4.14   Approaches to the management of delivery through validated and franchise partner organisations are identified as good practice in Expectation B10, with the review team noting the University's sustained and continual refinement of operations and procedures through a series of detailed and extensive review exercises.

4.15   The review team found that students considered graduate employment services and schemes to be beneficial and extremely useful for the progression of their respective careers, leading to the good practice in Expectation B4.

4.16   These good practice findings illustrate the continuous evaluation by the University of its policies, practices and procedures. They reflect deliberate, sustained, rigorous, and systematic improvements that are in line with overarching strategic objectives. On the basis of the documentation provided and meetings with staff and students, the review team concludes that the enhancement of learning opportunities at the University is to be **commended**.

5   Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

5.1   Under the umbrella of Sunderland Futures are a large range of potential opportunities offered to students, including SuPA, professional mentoring, the Leading Lights scheme and internships.

5.2   Within the London Campus there is a bespoke futures package that has been implemented by the Business Development Manager. This is relatively new and does not have the plethora of opportunities that pertains under Sunderland Futures.

5.3   As noted in Expectation B4, SuPA is an extracurricular, non credit-bearing award that recognises the skills students have acquired within and beyond their programme of study. Students reflect on their skills development and prepare an evidence-based portfolio that is submitted at any time during their university experience. A member of staff from CES, an academic and an employer then assess the student's submission. The review team heard from a number of students who gained the SuPA award and described the positive impact it has had on their respective employment. Furthermore, the review team found that local employers held the SuPA award in high regard as recognition of achievement.

5.4   Leading Lights is a scheme held over a four-day period in which students explore what leadership means and potential challenges that current employers face. There are 50 places every year which are currently only offered to Sunderland students.

5.5   The University provides the opportunity for students to team up with a professional mentor within the commerce, industry or public sectors. Students usually meet with the mentor three times over a period of five months. Applications have increased from 92 in 2013-14 to 152 in 2014-15.

5.6   The University offers four-week summer internships and graduate internships that range from three to 12 months' duration. The review team heard from students who have taken part in these internships and found them to be effectively managed with significant benefits.

5.7   The Futures Fund is an initiative to assist students who wish to take up a place or other opportunity but cannot afford to do so. This endowment provides grants to support personal, academic and professional development.

5.8   CES provides support regarding employment to current students, and to graduates up to three years after graduation. Students are able to make individual appointments to discuss and seek advice on writing a CV, interview techniques and other activities such as psychometric tests. This is strategically overseen by the Graduate Employment Group, which meets bi-monthly and is chaired by the Director of SLS.

Glossary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

e-learning
See technology enhanced or enabled learning

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

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

Flexible and distributed learning
A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations.
See also **distance learning**.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or **e-learning**)
Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

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

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

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