

University of Southampton

February 2008

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction	3
Outcomes of the institutional audit	3
Institutional approach to quality enhancement	3
Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students	3
Published information	3
Features of good practice	3
Recommendations for action	4
Section 1: Introduction and background	4
The institution and its mission	4
The information base for the audit	5
Developments since the last audit	6
The institution's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities	6
Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards	8
Approval, monitoring and review of award standards	8
Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points	9
External examiners	10
Assessment policies and regulations	11
Management information - statistics	12
Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities	12
Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points	13
Approval, monitoring and review of programmes	13
Management information - feedback from students	15
Role of students in quality assurance	16
Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities	17
Other modes of study	17
Resources for learning	18

Admissions policy	19
Student support	20
Staff support (including staff development)	21
Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement	22
Section 5: Collaborative arrangements	23
Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students	25
Institutional arrangements and the research environment	25
Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students	26
Progress and review arrangements	27
Development of research and other skills	27
Feedback arrangements	28
Assessment of research students	28
Representations, complaints and appeals arrangements for research students	28
Section 7: Published information	29

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of the University of Southampton from 11 to 15 February 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the institution's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

The membership of the audit team comprised Professor J Holford, Professor D Meehan, Dr F Quinault, Dr M Stowell, auditors, and Dr M Gilmore, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, QAA.

Outcomes of the institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the University is that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

In the view of the audit team, the University is succeeding through a consensus-building approach in establishing a culture in which enhancement is an integral part of institutional processes for managing learning and teaching.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

In the view of the audit team, institutional arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience; this is recognised as a factor in the University's high level of achievement according to external key performance indicators

Published information

In the view of the audit team, the University has implemented systems to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. In the case of programme handbooks issued to students, it is to develop guidance on minimum requirements to improve their consistency across the University.

Features of good practice

Features of good practice that the audit team identifies are as follows:

- the design of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan, enabling it to encapsulate both quality assurance and quality enhancement within the annual monitoring process (paragraph 57)
- the widespread and effective use of student feedback at all levels of the University (paragraph 66)
- the close working partnership between the University and its Students' Union in the context of making improvements to the student experience (paragraph 70)
- the approach taken by the University in fostering research-led learning (paragraph 73)
- the effective delivery of library resources in support of the student learning experience (paragraph 78)

- the development of the Student Resources Network, providing an integrated physical and virtual access point for students to obtain support and information in person, remotely and out of hours (paragraph 89)
- the arrangements for taking forward and embedding the University's strategy for enhancing the employability of its graduates (paragraph 91)
- the adoption of staffing policies which, in line with the University's stated aim, raise the profile of teaching relative to research (paragraph 97)
- the measures taken to engage staff in the formulation of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, and the framework the Strategy now provides for developing teaching and learning (paragraph 102).

Recommendations for action

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers it desirable for the institution to address are as follows:

- to review whether the powers delegated to, and exercised by, Associate Deans (Education) are accompanied by suitable checks and balances (paragraph 21)
- where university-level policy or procedural guidance is issued to schools, to make more explicit the degree of observance expected, so that it is clear whether local variation is appropriate (paragraphs 43, 87 and 96)
- to improve the provision of internally consistent progression and completion statistics for routine use by schools as an interim measure, until the planned central system for providing these statistics comes fully on-stream (paragraph 46)
- to ensure that due prominence is given to collaborative programmes in the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan and its underlying evidence base, particularly given the level of risk associated with collaborative arrangements which the University has itself recognised (paragraph 112)
- to monitor closely the consistency of programme handbooks with the guidance to be developed by a University working group, and with particular emphasis on the clarity of information concerning assessment policies and regulations (paragraph 135).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The University of Southampton traces its origins back to the Hartley Institution, founded in 1862 by Henry Robinson Hartley. This developed into a college, and in 1902 was renamed Hartley University College, awarding degrees from the University of London. A Royal Charter was granted to the University of Southampton in 1952, which enabled the institution to award its own degrees.

2 As at December 2007, the University had 21,105 students, shown by programme level and mode of study in the table below.

Level	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Undergraduate	14,194	2,030	16,224
Taught postgraduate	2,084	950	3,034
Research	1,391	456	1,847
Total	17,669	3,436	21,105

3 Teaching takes place across a broad range of disciplines, which are organised into 20 academic schools, grouped into three faculties: the Faculty of Engineering, Science and Mathematics, the Faculty of Law, Arts and Social Sciences, and the Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Sciences. Each of the three faculties has a Graduate School, providing a focus for matters of particular relevance to research students.

4 Most provision is located on the main Highfield campus; however, Biosciences is based at the Bolderwood campus, the School of Humanities at the Avenue campus, and Oceanography and Earth Sciences at the Oceanography Centre on the waterfront. Winchester School of Art has its own accommodation and student facilities in Winchester; the Medical School's teaching hospital is Southampton General, while nursing is offered in a number of hospital locations.

5 External partnerships include collaborative arrangements with local further education colleges and with overseas institutions, involving approximately 400 students, as well as strategic engagement with training organisations and employers. Much of the responsibility for the operation of these external relationships is devolved to the schools. In addition, the University awards the research degrees offered through two accredited universities (Chichester and Winchester).

6 The University's mission is to 'aspire to global recognition as an international provider of top quality research, education and enterprise activities'. Its Corporate Strategy aims to place the University, by 2010, among the UK's top 10 universities, in both research and education (the latter being the term adopted by the University for activities relating to teaching and learning, as distinct from research). The Strategy's broad vision covers world-class research, education that builds upon that research base, diversity of staff and students, rewarding staff for professionalism, and strategic links with educational and research institutions and multinational companies. The University's approach to its education mission, as outlined in the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, commits it to being student-centred and research-led, and to developing students' skills for employment.

The information base for the audit

7 The audit team was provided with reports on the following QAA reviews: the Institutional Audit, December 2003; Report on the review of research degree programmes, July 2006, not published; Major review of healthcare programmes in relation to allied health professions, November 2005, and Nursing and Midwifery, March 2006; Foundation Degree reviews of Childhood Studies, April 2005, and Working with Children, June 2005. The team also had access to reports produced by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, as made available by the University.

8 The University prepared for the audit under the leadership of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Education) and the Audit Leadership Group, consisting of the Director of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, the Associate Deans (Education) and the Chair of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. It provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper, supported by an evidence base, which included the University Calendar, the Corporate Strategy, the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, and the Quality Handbook, as well as committee papers, working group reports, annual monitoring statements, and evaluation and feedback data. The team had access to each school's quality assurance evidence base (covering the period 2005-06 and 2006-07), as well as access to the University's intranet.

9 The Students' Union provided a student written submission compiled by the present and previous Vice Presidents (Education & Representation). This was based on a questionnaire administered through course representatives, supplemented by information from staff-student liaison committees. The views of postgraduate and mature students were obtained through the relevant Students' Union officers. The Students' Union acknowledged that part-time students' views were under-represented in the information-gathering process.

10 The audit team considered how University processes and policies were applied at the programme level by looking at sampling trails in two subject areas, with a particular focus on documentation from recent periodic programme reviews.

Developments since the last audit

11 QAA's last audit of the University, in December 2003, resulted in an overall judgement of broad confidence in the institution's management of the quality of its academic programmes and the standards of its awards. The report on the audit contained four recommendations, which were followed up through a progress report submitted by the University in 2005. Thus the guidance on periodic programme review has been amended and the use of external advisers closely monitored (see paragraph 25 below), while issues associated with staff new to teaching have been addressed through the University's wider engagement with the national agenda for the professionalisation of education (see paragraph 94 below). In relation to collaborative provision (the subject of the remaining two recommendations), the University has introduced a risk-assessment procedure to determine the management processes to be followed in the case of particular relationships and also now requires partner organisations to submit an annual report to the responsible school (see paragraphs 109, 111 below). Nevertheless, the present audit team considered that further attention was required by schools to ensure explicit reporting on collaborative programmes (see paragraph 112 below).

12 Since the last audit, the University has taken steps to raise the profile of education relative to research, and this has been coupled with a move away from a centrally driven compliance model of quality assurance towards locally driven quality assurance and enhancement. It has been implementing a risk-based approach, balancing devolution of responsibility to schools with central oversight through the faculties, acting on behalf of the University (see paragraph 15 below). Recognising that these shifts in emphasis required cultural change, the University has been concentrating on developing education leadership roles and capacity; staff recognition and reward; strategy/policy/guidance; partnership working; dedicated resources; and fit-for-purpose monitoring and reflection.

13 In the interval between audits, the 2006 to 2010 Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy has been developed, placing greater emphasis on quality enhancement. The University has dedicated significant resources in support of its student-centred agenda, improving library services and technological support for learning and modernising learning and teaching spaces (see paragraphs 78-80 below). Its approach to delivering its educational goals is characterised by what is described in the Briefing Paper as 'partnership working'. This is exemplified in the networks and goal-oriented task forces or working groups that operate across the University (see paragraph 18 below), and in the partnership between the University and the Students' Union (see paragraphs 67-70 below).

14 At the time of the last audit, the Annual Operating Statement was the reporting mechanism by which schools could be held accountable for their provision. In 2006-07, it was replaced by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan (LTERAP), in which schools evaluate their activity over the previous year and reflect on their progress against the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy (see paragraphs 22-23, 54-57 below).

The institution's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

15 The University's academic management structure comprises a central University Executive Group led by the Vice-Chancellor, supported by three separate faculty management groups, known as deaneries, which coordinate and oversee the activities of constituent schools and research centres. Professional services in support of academic activity, including the Library, Information Support Services and Student Services, are the executive responsibility of the Registrar and Chief Operating Officer. Under the University's devolved structures of accountability,

the deaneries (led by deans) are regarded by the University as an extension of the centre and act as its local presence. Heads of school have responsibility for the portfolio of programmes within their schools, including programmes offered through collaborative arrangements. The academic management structure is supported by the committee system, with Senate being the authority on academic matters, having ultimate responsibility for academic standards.

16 Among the committees of Senate, the Academic Quality and Standards Committee determines the University's framework for quality assurance policy and procedures. In accordance with the University's devolved structures for accountability, the Committee receives annual reports from faculties, and works with them in reviewing procedures and ensuring equivalency in standards of monitoring, including monitoring of collaborative provision. It refers matters, as appropriate, to the Education Policy Committee, which has a remit for learning, teaching, assessment, learning resources, widening participation and collaborative arrangements and which reports upwards to Senate through the Policy and Resources Committee (a joint committee of Senate and Council, the University's governing body). Three other committees of Senate have specific roles in relation to quality and standards. Two of these are appeals committees, while the third is the External Research Degrees Committee, which makes decisions on the admission, progress and examination of research students in the University's accredited institutions. The University's Students' Union has formal representation on the Senate, the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and the Education Policy Committee.

17 Faculty Education Committees are subcommittees of both the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and the Educational Policy Committee. As such, they have responsibility for ensuring equivalence of standards and coordinating best practice within their respective faculties; they are also required to take a strategic view of their faculties' collaborative links, supporting constituent schools in their work with partner organisations. These committees receive reports from schools, in particular the LTERAP. They have responsibility for scrutinising and approving proposals for the creation, significant modification and withdrawal of programmes in the faculty, including collaborative programmes. They consider nominations for the appointment of external examiners and external advisers for taught programmes, and examination panels for research students, and also work with schools in preparing responses to the reports of external review bodies. At school level, the designation of the committee with responsibility for quality and standards varies according to individual school structures, although each school has a school board as its principal committee, as well as a staff-student liaison committee.

18 Consistent with its adoption of partnership working, the University makes extensive use of task forces, working groups and networks in developing institutional policy, with the majority of working groups involving representatives of the student body. Hence, the Education Policy Committee sets institutional policy after discussion through networks and it is both informed by and informs faculty education committees. Its chair, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) has the central leadership role with executive responsibility for learning and teaching. The role is supported by the Chair of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and by the Director of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, who combines a quality assurance brief with educational development. It is also supported by the University Directors of Education, who have specific portfolios, such as assessment, e-learning, or graduate employability, and by associate deans (education), who have overall responsibility for the quality assurance of learning and teaching for all taught programmes within their respective faculties and chair their Faculty Education Committee. Assistance is given by faculty executive officers and learning and teaching coordinators.

19 Within each school, a deputy head has specific responsibility for education leadership and within each faculty they work together under the leadership of their Associate Dean (Education). There is also a single university-wide group, the Deputy Heads Network Group, led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education). The Graduate Schools Network Group, led by the Chair of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, performs a similar coordinating function in relation to arrangements for research students.

20 The Quality Handbook (a web-based resource maintained by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit) contains a comprehensive range of policy statements and procedural guidance in support of academic standards and quality, and outlines the external drivers for the University's internal quality assurance framework, such as the Academic Infrastructure. For research degree programmes, the University's framework for quality assurance is provided by the Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision within the Regulations for Higher Degrees.

21 Included in the Quality Handbook is a Statement of Delegated Powers of the Senate, in relation to educational provision, quality and standards. The audit team used this as a point of reference in considering the University's devolved structures. However, the team was unable to gain a full understanding of the extent to which Associate Deans (Education) were operating by virtue of their own authority, as distinct from that of their Faculty Education Committee. More specifically, the team found the Statement of Delegated Powers to be unclear in its rendering as to where responsibility rested for the appointment of external examiners for taught programmes. Separately, the team found that there had been no explicit reporting through the committee system of the adverse outcome resulting from a particular Foundation Degree review carried out by QAA. The team considered this to be a matter of sufficient significance to warrant formal reporting, although it was evident from other documentation that the implications of that review were discussed extensively at faculty level and contributed to a focus university-wide on the aspect that had come under criticism. In addition, there were reports, such as those from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies that were sent to the Associate Deans (Education) for information, which the team believed might usefully be discussed by faculty education committees (see paragraph 33 below). In view of these observations, the team considers it desirable for the University to review whether the powers delegated to, and exercised by, Associate Deans (Education) are accompanied by suitable checks and balances.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

22 As stated in the Briefing Paper, the University's approach to managing academic standards is based on the premise that schools 'can be trusted' to maintain quality assurance procedures within an institutional framework. Therefore, in place of detailed reporting on quality assurance procedures and outcomes, schools are expected to maintain a quality assurance evidence base. This is organised as an electronic depository with a common folder structure across all schools and contains the policy, procedural and operating documents that schools draw on in preparing their annual Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan (LTERAP). In recognition that some action may take longer than one year to complete, there is an archive folder for LTERAP reports from earlier years, plus their associated operating documents.

23 The LTERAP is the primary mechanism by which the University (via faculties) and the schools assure standards. However, its scope extends beyond quality assurance, in that, although the starting point is a critical reflection on the previous year's activity, the intended focus of both the review and action plan is on the ways in which the school is seeking to enhance the student learning experience. In view of this focus, the LTERAP is considered further in relation to the management of learning opportunities (see paragraphs 54-57 below).

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

24 In designing a programme of study leading to a named award, schools must produce a programme specification outlining the overall standards expected of students in their knowledge, understanding and skills development. In its procedures, the University emphasises that the preparation of programme specifications should act as a stimulus for teaching teams to reflect on the learning outcomes of the programme, on how these are to be assessed, and on how they enable student progression through the levels of the programme, or permit qualification with an intermediate 'exit' award. The audit team saw many examples of programme specifications, enabling it to verify that these met the stipulated requirements.

25 New programme proposals must first gain strategic approval through a process that is managed at faculty level (see paragraph 52 below). Successful proposals progress to academic approval, first by the school and then by the faculty, through the Faculty Education Committee. At this stage, the programme specification is supplemented by detailed profiles of any new constituent modules and the programme regulations. An additional safeguard to award standards is provided by the involvement of external advisers, whose appointment and role have recently been formalised in a policy statement (the External Adviser Policy); this requires external advisers to submit a structured report for consideration as part of the faculty academic approval process. External advisers are similarly involved in significant modifications to existing programmes (defined as changes of 40 per cent or more of an award). There is upward reporting to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee of both new programme approvals and significant modifications through annual faculty reports. Minor modifications to programmes are the responsibility of the relevant School Board, with no upward reporting required.

26 The audit team was provided with a complete 'paper-trail' for programme approval in one school, which showed a process entirely consistent with the University's procedures (except that a precursor of the strategic approval process was then in operation). The programme specification and the preamble document, which deals with the rationale for the programme and with teaching, learning and assessment methods, indicated that there had been appropriate consideration of the relevant subject benchmark statement. However, from studying committee minutes, the team was unable to gain a clear impression of how the faculty academic approval process was operating in general, since it tended to be a matter of reporting to Faculty Education Committees from subgroups, which undertook the detailed consideration of programme proposals. The team was of the view that there might be benefit in greater formalisation of reporting and approval methods at the faculty level, particularly as progress reports from subgroups were, on occasions, deferred from one meeting to the next and it was commonplace for the chair's action to be used to give final approval to programmes.

27 Ongoing maintenance of award standards is achieved through the external examiner system, annual review through the LTERAP, and periodic (five-yearly) programme review. Constituent modules of a programme must also be reviewed every five years, either as an integral part of the periodic programme review, or alternatively through a separate exercise involving groups of cognate modules. Periodic programme review entails a panel event including an independent external adviser, thus excluding the current or recent external examiners from the role.

28 From documentation relating to periodic programme review, the audit team was able to confirm that programme specifications were being updated, as necessary, and that issues relating to standards were being addressed through the consideration of external examiner reports and data on student progression and achievement (see paragraphs 37, 46 below). The review reports, together with responses from schools to recommendations therein, are lodged in the quality assurance evidence base, enabling resultant action to be tracked through the LTERAP process. The reports on separate module reviews are also lodged in the quality assurance evidence base.

29 The approval, monitoring and review of award standards are conducted within processes that also evaluate the learning opportunities of programmes to provide the basis of quality enhancement (see paragraphs 52-59 below).

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

30 In the Briefing Paper, the University describes the close alignment of its internal framework for managing academic standards with the Academic Infrastructure as 'fundamental' to its approach, and regards staff involvement in the development of the Academic Infrastructure as 'non-negotiable'. This is borne out in the clear and comprehensive summaries and explanations of the various components of the Academic Infrastructure in the Quality Handbook, which include analysis of the implications for the University's own practice.

31 There was considerable evidence of the University's engagement with the Academic Infrastructure from the reports of committees and working groups tasked with reviewing the University's practice and re-aligning it with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA, as sections were updated (see paragraph 50). A central record is maintained showing the consideration process undertaken and the outcome or response arrived at. A case in point is the comprehensive review of assessment policy and practice, in the light of the revised *Code of practice*, which led to amended and expanded institutional guidelines (see paragraph 40 below).

32 In relation to subject benchmark statements, it was evident from Faculty Education Committee minutes that revisions to these statements were routinely drawn to members' attention. In addition, programme specifications made appropriate reference to the content of subject benchmark statements (see paragraph 26 above) and also, reflecting their intended purpose, were presented in a style accessible to a student audience. Within individual module profiles, level was indicated by reference to both The framework for higher education qualifications and the University's own Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme.

33 With regard to standards of professional practice, many schools offer programmes with accreditation from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. Staff meeting the audit team clarified that accreditation reports were considered at school level, and in so far as they constituted part of the quality assurance evidence base, schools made reference to them, as relevant, in the LTERAP. Accreditation reports reach faculty level through being sent to the Associate Dean (Education). However, it was not apparent to the team from any documentary evidence that the University sought systematically to draw out matters of wider significance from these reports. This was in contrast to the way in which external examiner reports were treated (see paragraph 37 below), even though these followed an analogous route to the faculty, through the Associate Dean (Education).

34 The University keeps a watching brief on quality assurance initiatives in the European Higher Education Area through a working group formed in 2005. Further evidence of the University's engagement with the European agenda was demonstrated by its comments on the European Standards and Guidelines, and the 'tuning project' for the development of subject benchmarks, given in response to a parliamentary inquiry into the 'Bologna Process'. The University currently issues 'diploma supplements' on request, pending modifications to the student record system to allow these to be produced routinely for all students.

External examiners

35 School boards have delegated responsibility for establishing examination boards, which include the external examiner(s) as a full member. Examination boards operate within University procedures that seek to ensure equity, although not uniformity, of treatment for students. These procedures have recently been revised to incorporate a clearer definition of policy and guidance on practice, while allowing scope for schools to reflect particular requirements related to subject discipline. Thus schools may use their external examiners in a variety of ways, for example, in some cases conducting oral examinations.

36 The University has also recently updated the guidelines in the Quality Handbook on external examining of taught programmes. These cover the appointment and induction of external examiners, their generic responsibilities, and the reporting requirements. External examiners are nominated and appointed by schools, subject to faculty approval, which is normally sanctioned by the Associate Dean (Education). Schools also have responsibility for the induction of external examiners and the University has acknowledged that further work is required to ensure that this provides sufficient and consistent preparation for the role across the institution. There are separate arrangements for the examination of research degrees and these are dealt with below (see paragraph 131).

37 According to the Briefing Paper, the University has taken steps to shorten the timescale for dealing with comments from external examiners. Reports are now produced using a standard form and must be returned to the Head of School promptly (within eight weeks of the final examination board meeting). Schools send a copy of each report to the appropriate deanery and follow up with a copy of the Head of School's response to the external examiner. Both the reports and responses become part of the school quality assurance evidence base. Each deanery produces an overview of the reports and consequent actions for its faculty. This is sent to the Vice-Chancellor, together with the associated external examiner reports, and informs the faculty's annual report on external examining to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee.

38 The audit team saw examples illustrating every stage of the reporting process, including the faculty overviews, which highlighted issues deserving attention at university level. It was informed of instances where the Vice-Chancellor had asked schools to provide further information in the light of comments made by external examiners. The team concluded that the external examiner system was robust and that the University's procedures enable a proper oversight by the institution of the contribution made by external examiners in securing the standards of its awards.

Assessment policies and regulations

39 The University has developed an institutional framework for assessment that is both prescriptive and advisory. The prescriptive elements are intended to ensure that the assessment policies and procedures adopted by schools are consistent with the *Code of practice*, while also enabling diversity of practice appropriate to disciplinary context. The advisory elements provide guidance for schools and programme teams on best practice in assessment.

40 Initially introduced in 2000-01, the framework has been progressively refined, most recently after a review of school assessment practice conducted by a cross-institution working group, following the revision of the *Code of practice*. In the light of this review and the resultant report in December 2006, the University has amended the set of principles underpinning the framework and developed further its assessment policies, which are published in the Quality Handbook. These cover assessment workload, coursework deadlines and receipt, marking and moderation policies, academic appeals, and records retention, as well as specific topics, such as computer-assisted assessment and examinations for disabled and dyslexic students. The University recognises that one of the purposes of assessment is to provide students with feedback and the relevant policy offers advice on how this should be accomplished.

41 In the Briefing Paper, the University acknowledged that allowing schools flexibility in relation to assessment had led to some inconsistency and even to divergence between 'official' regulations and those in programme handbooks issued to students. This situation has been addressed through arriving at an agreed set of university-wide rules relating to degree classification and progression, which have been introduced from 2006-07, following consideration by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and approval by Senate. The necessary consensus was obtained through the work of task forces (the Harmonisation Task Force, in 2005, followed by the Progression Task Force, in 2006), which provide a good illustration of partnership working in action. In addition, a separate working group has been established to develop guidance and minimum standards for the content of programme handbooks, and other essential documentation made available to students (see paragraph 135 below).

42 The audit team noted that, while there was provision for schools to apply for exemption from the institution-wide schemes, the grounds on which this was permitted were restricted to incompatibility with the guidelines of key professional bodies or incompatibility with accepted practice in the subject in comparator institutions. Two schools have obtained exemption from the degree classification scheme based on requirements for professional practice, while a third has been granted temporary exemption while it introduces major changes to its programmes. In relation to progression rules, one school has been granted exemption and another has been allowed to phase in new arrangements. The team agreed with the University's view that the level

of consistency now achieved, even taking account of the exemptions granted, was a significant improvement. The team further noted that the University had now turned its attention to master's programmes, where there were analogous issues to be addressed.

43 The audit team recognised the challenge faced by the University in developing policies that are consistent and transparent, yet still accommodate legitimate differences between disciplines, particularly within a devolved organisational structure. The team also accepted that there was demonstrable evidence to support the effectiveness of the University's consensus-building approach. Nevertheless, the team remained of the view that, as in the case of assessment, the distinction between what was mandatory and what was optional might not always be absolutely clear. Noting that, in relation to the operation of examination boards, policies/procedures had been categorised as 'defined', 'advisable', or 'desirable', it reasoned that this kind of specificity might be employed more widely. The team considers it desirable for the University, in issuing policy or procedural guidance to schools, to make more explicit the degree of observance that is expected, so that it is clear whether local variation is appropriate (see also paragraphs 87, 96 below).

Management information - statistics

44 The Briefing Paper acknowledged that the use made by schools of statistical management information could be improved, and the audit team subsequently learned from meeting staff that, while student survey data were widely circulated, progression, completion and achievement data were only available from the central system on request. It was further explained that the new student record system was not yet fully functional and could not at present deliver these data at the level of individual programmes. Consequently, the University could not yet produce centrally the datasets necessary for schools to carry out cohort analysis.

45 Effective implementation of the new student record system is one of the goals of an ongoing University project (Academic Administration Enhancement Project). This project has already been instrumental in improving the quality of admissions statistics, as confirmed by staff who were making use of them, and the intention is that the system will begin to record the progress of this and each successive cohort, thereby allowing better management information to be produced.

46 Through the sampling trails, the audit team was able to verify that schools considered the progression and academic performance of different student groups within periodic programme review, although the team also noted that there were only sporadic references to this type of analysis in the LTERAP reports. Given that it was going to be some time before full cohort analysis was available, the team considers it desirable for the University to improve the provision of internally consistent progression and completion statistics for routine use by schools, as an interim measure, until the planned central system for providing these statistics comes fully on-stream.

Overall conclusion

47 The conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

48 In the Briefing Paper, the University identifies the 'two main pillars' of its framework for managing learning opportunities as the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy and the Student Entitlement Declaration. The key objective of the Strategy is to enhance the student learning experience by focusing on the following five themes:

- student-centred research-led learning
- employability

- inclusivity
- staff development and reward
- building the infrastructure for education.

Similarly, the Declaration, drawn up jointly with the University's Students' Union, is concerned with the development of students as independent learners and the improvement of the student learning experience.

49 Within schools, the core process for evaluating the management of learning opportunities is the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan (LTERAP), which operates on an annual cycle (see paragraph 55 below). Similarly, the process for evaluating professional services is based on a review of achievements against objectives and, like the LTERAP, it draws on both student/user surveys and benchmarking against external reference points.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

50 As noted previously in the context of academic standards (see paragraph 31 above), the University ensures consistency of its practice with the various sections of the *Code of practice* by assigning responsibility for alignment to committees/working groups or key individuals. Thus, for example, the Inclusion Forum ensures alignment with the section on student disabilities, while the Admissions Review Group, ensures alignment with the section on admissions to higher education. The University, wherever possible, looks beyond the *Code* in promoting best practice; for example its position paper on inclusive practice in learning and teaching (*Developing Inclusive Practices*) is far wider in scope than the *Code of practice, Section 3: Students with disabilities*.

51 With respect to other reference points, at programme level, external advisers comment on learning opportunities, and the audit team saw instances where, in addition to using academic peers, schools also involved employers or representatives from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies in this capacity. The Briefing Paper gave examples of where the University had commissioned reviews from 'experts' from other institutions, while reports from working groups provided evidence that the University was referring to other universities within its networks for both information and feedback.

Approval monitoring and review of programmes

52 Strategic approval is concerned with the business case and the resource implications of a new programme, as well as its fit with institutional priorities, such as graduate employability or internationalisation. The process is managed at faculty level and entails the school in submitting an application (Strategic Approval Application form), which is circulated to interested parties, including the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), the Chair of Academic Quality and Standards Committee, and service providers, such as the library. Any issues emerging at this stage are taken up with the school before the proposal can be authorised to proceed to full consideration through the academic approval process (see paragraph 25 above).

53 Within both the strategic and academic approval processes, the University places due emphasis on the provision of learning resources in recognition of their importance in delivering learning opportunities for students. A report on both library and information technology provision is a mandatory documentary requirement for faculty academic approval, and the audit team learned that school liaison librarians made an active contribution to the learning resources reviews that underpin the report (see paragraph 78 below). The University has acknowledged that there is some overlap between the strategic and academic approval processes and is seeking to rebalance this as appropriate.

54 Annual monitoring through the LTERAP focuses on key aspects of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy by reporting under the following headings: approaches to learning; curricula design and assessment; resources for learning; organisational and staff development; and monitoring and evaluation of learning. There is therefore the expectation that action plans within the LTERAP will be reflected in schools' annual strategic plans, which are completed later in the year, thereby also aligning these plans with the Learning, Teaching and Enhancement Strategy.

55 The annual monitoring cycle is set in motion by the submission of school LTERAP reports for review by the relevant faculty through a process carried out by reading groups comprising staff from component schools. These groups also have access to the underlying school quality assurance evidence bases. The output from reading groups is distilled into a summary for the whole faculty, identifying good practice for wider dissemination, together with issues to be addressed, these being assigned to levels within the institution (schools, faculties, professional services, or centre). The faculty summaries are presented to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee where decisions are made about actions that may be required. The cycle begins in November and is completed by February.

56 The University is continuing to refine the LTERAP in response to user feedback and central scrutiny. For instance, after the first year of operation, the guidance documentation was amended to give greater prominence to arrangements for research students (see paragraph 116 below). The University has recognised that there is bound to be some variation between schools in the ways they populate the quality assurance evidence base, and has built in tolerance to deal with 'teething problems', such as 'broken' links to other web pages; however, progress is being monitored through having schools complete a checklist and explain any omissions from the specified documentary requirements.

57 From faculty summaries it was apparent to the audit team that staff welcomed the new approach to annual monitoring, regarding it as a real improvement, with one summary referring to the 'genuine sense of excitement' generated by the process. The enthusiasm for the LTERAP process was also evident among the staff the team met. The team gained first-hand experience of navigating the LTERAP quality assurance evidence base and concluded that its basic conception was a good one, balancing the need for thorough monitoring through the evidence base with a greater freedom to reflect on that evidence in the LTERAP report itself. The use of reading groups was apparently rigorous, with the team noting one example where a LTERAP report had been referred back to the school for further work. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the design of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan, enabling it to encapsulate both quality assurance and quality enhancement within the annual monitoring process.

58 The audit team was able to scrutinise documentation relating to periodic programme review through a sample based on two schools and involving four separate reviews of programme clusters. The sample covered single and joint degree programmes, as well as taught master's programmes. Included with this documentation (which was provided to support the sampling trails) was a record of School Board and Faculty Education Committee minutes, which showed how the reports of review panels and the responses to them were considered. In all cases, the sources of evidence made available to review panels were extensive, and one case illustrated the inclusion in the review panel of external advisers from an industrial background.

59 The audit team found marked differences between periodic programme review reports in terms of their format and the clarity with which recommendations were presented. The University's procedures include an indicative report template, but some staff who met the team expressed a preference for there to be flexibility in the style of reporting, to accommodate subject-specific differences. While being sympathetic to this point, the team considered that the observed variation between reports was not a reflection of subject differences and was of the view that greater standardisation in reporting would be beneficial, particularly when a number of reports were being read together, in order to draw out general conclusions.

Management information - feedback from students

60 Policy on student feedback was developed in 2002-03 in consultation with the Students' Union (Student Feedback Policy). It has since been expanded into a comprehensive series of policy statements covering the full range of mechanisms that the University routinely utilises to capture the student voice. These comprise the student representation system, annual questionnaire surveys and focus groups or related activities. The University's appeals and complaints procedures provide further means through which students may make their views known.

61 Students have formal representation on key institutional committees, normally through the University's Students' Union. Course representatives (numbering over 500 in 2006-07) are members of staff-student liaison committees within schools. As well as dealing with immediate business, staff-student liaison committees are encouraged by both the University and the Students' Union to consider the broader student experience by focusing on issues and trends identified from internal surveys and the National Student Survey (see paragraph 64 below). Representation at faculty level has recently been introduced as a way of bridging the gap between representatives at institutional and school levels. The student written submission suggested that this might give postgraduate students, particularly those on taught programmes, a stronger voice within the University through an identity that cut across school boundaries.

62 Student representatives meeting the audit team indicated they were satisfied that students' views were being listened to and taken into account, and that they as representatives were kept informed about action taken in response to points raised and given reasonable explanations for issues or suggestions that were not taken up. The student written submission made the point that reports from course representatives were frequently the primary driver for the agenda of staff-student liaison committees and that appropriate emphasis was given to 'closing feedback loops'; course representatives were greatly encouraged by the evident value being placed on their contribution. The team concluded that the University's perception of staff-student liaison committees as increasingly important vehicles for partnership working was well supported.

63 Student evaluation of every module on an annual basis is a university requirement. It is achieved through questionnaires completed by students at the end of each module and there is a standard form for this purpose (Standard Module Evaluation Form), although schools may use their own questionnaires, if preferred. Module evaluation reports are lodged in the school quality assurance evidence base and issues raised by students, together with recommended changes to modules, are reported through the relevant sections of the LTERAP. From these sources, the audit team was able to verify that schools were making good use of student feedback from module evaluation, in some cases using it to probe issues at the level of the programme raised in student experience questionnaires.

64 The University places considerable emphasis on the feedback it collects through annual student experience questionnaires returned by final-year undergraduate students, postgraduate taught students and research students (although from 2008 the research student questionnaire is to be issued every two years). The findings of these surveys are considered at a special meeting, chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, alongside the results of the National Student Survey and a report from the University's Students' Union on issues raised at staff-student liaison committees. The significance of this meeting in instigating action at all levels of the University was apparent from both the minutes and the Committee's report upwards to Senate. Ratings for questionnaire topics below a specified threshold were formally brought to the attention of schools and professional services, with targets set for improvement, while issues requiring attention university-wide were referred to task forces/working groups or relevant committees.

65 There is a specific working group (Working Group for Feedback from Students) whose role is to reinforce key messages from student feedback and maintain the momentum of resultant action during the year, as well as to review the content of the questionnaires themselves; the

research student questionnaire was under revision at the time of the audit. Further reinforcement is provided through a targeted discussion of questionnaires in each school, involving the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), the Director of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit and the school's senior team.

66 Schools report on action resulting from student experience questionnaires through the LTERAP, while professional services report directly to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. From LTERAP reports, it was clear to the audit team that schools were drawing on student views to inform their thinking in various areas, including graduate employability and assessment feedback to students, both of which the University has been seeking to improve in response to survey findings. In relation to professional services, the library's 'You said, we did' scheme was regarded by students as a particularly effective way of collecting feedback, acting on it and publicising the outcome. The University also collects feedback through focus groups, such as the regular 'Student Voice' events organised by Student Services. The student written submission highlighted the 'constant dialogue and consultation' conducted by Student Services to gauge student opinion with a view to improving support services (considered by the students to be of 'high standard across the board'). Altogether, the team considered that there was substantial evidence to support the conclusion that the University was both attentive and responsive to the views of its students. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the widespread and effective use of student feedback at all levels of the University.

Role of students in quality assurance

67 In addition to providing feedback through their representation on committees, students are linked into the University's executive structures mainly through the Students' Union. The President meets monthly with the Vice-Chancellor and the Registrar and Chief Operating Officer to deal with matters of general concern to the student body. There are also regular meetings between Students' Union officers and the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), for the purpose of discussing current strategic issues and planning any joint activities, as well as meetings with Associate Deans (Education), which afford opportunities to raise issues relating to particular schools or faculties. The effectiveness of these latter meetings was confirmed in the student written submission, which stated, 'nine times out of ten, by the end of the meeting a plan is actioned to resolve the issue'.

68 The University and the Students' Union work jointly in promoting best practice in student involvement in quality assurance processes and in the election/recruitment of student representatives. The Students' Union provides annual training for course representatives to which the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) is invited to contribute. While student representation at faculty level has yet to become embedded, the audit team noted examples of active student participation in quality assurance processes at faculty level, such as the involvement of students in one faculty's LTERAP reading groups. The team also noted that procedures for periodic programme review (in their most recently revised version) encourage student membership of review panels.

69 Through their membership of working groups, student representatives help to shape University policy and strategy. Notable examples have included the Student Entitlement Declaration, the associated Student Guidance Document, and the strategy for graduate employability (see paragraph 90 below). Students' Union officers also work with key staff on specific projects, as illustrated by their involvement with the promotion in schools of a revised form to be used for providing assessment feedback, and the work undertaken to raise student awareness of opportunities for student mobility across the European Higher Education Area through the Bologna Process. There are also occasions when the University and Students' Union share a joint platform, such as the events used to communicate the results of the National Student Survey and student experience questionnaires, and the visits to satellite campuses to sound out students' views for the purpose of informing decisions on strategic spending.

70 Both the student written submission and the student representatives who met the audit team confirmed that there were excellent working relationships with university staff at all levels, enabling students to make an input to quality assurance processes both formally and informally. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the close working partnership between the University and its Students' Union in the context of making improvements to the student experience.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

71 In the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, the University's approach to developing the links between activities related to research and activities related to teaching and learning is termed student-centred research-led learning. Essentially, this represents a particular model of programme design that offers students a learning experience as close as possible to the research experience. In a separate document (the Statement on Student-centred Research-led Learning), the University has identified the key characteristics of this model as: motivating students in their studies by giving them insights into current research activities within their discipline; providing teaching by staff who are themselves researchers in the field and therefore able to structure tasks and activities that correctly reflect the research process; adopting an approach to teaching, learning and assessment based on recognised good practice in the discipline; and engaging students in the skills of research and scholarship in a structured and incremental way. These skills are perceived by the University as beneficial for later working life, as well as providing opportunities for progression to postgraduate studies.

72 Staff meeting the audit team viewed research-led learning broadly in terms of creating an environment where students were encouraged to adopt an open and inquiry-based approach to learning. The student-centred aspect meant that this was realised through considering students' needs and aspirations. However, the staff also recognised that, while there were commonalities in approach (for example, the final-year dissertation or research project in most undergraduate programmes), there was not a simple standard way of achieving this learning environment, so schools needed to tailor their particular approach according to the specific discipline involved. In 2007, the University organised an annual event (Learning and Teaching Week, 2007) on research-led learning as a means of sharing practice across schools; however, the evaluation of the event revealed that participation across the University was limited.

73 In moving forward, the University is encouraging the engagement of staff with conferences or subject communities concerned with research and teaching, and is also linking criteria for staff promotion and other forms of recognition of achievement more closely with the objectives of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy (see paragraph 97 below). Further momentum is added through opportunities for staff to obtain finance for projects and activities in priority areas identified in the Strategy on the basis of bids to a centrally managed fund (Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund). The audit team found the students it met to be very positive about being at a 'research-led' University; they stated that their programmes challenged them to think critically within the context of their subject and had research-related input from the first year. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the approach taken by the University in fostering research-led learning.

Other modes of study

74 Most of the University's provision is campus-based and delivered through full-time or part-time programmes. The University has one programme delivered wholly online, a distance learning programme at master's level (MSc Geographical Information Systems) offered in partnership with two other institutions. Mainstream quality assurance procedures apply to distance-learning programmes, but there is a supplementary guidance document (Distance Learning), alerting those who design such programmes that there are likely to be different issues to be resolved compared with a programme designed only for face-to-face delivery, particularly in relation to the preparation and updating of learning materials, assessment methods and student support systems. This document also addresses the position of research students studying at a distance from the University.

75 In addition, the University has several Foundation Degrees delivered through partner colleges and incorporating work-based learning, as well as programmes involving a professional placement, student exchange or study abroad. The University has developed comprehensive guidelines for the management of all such arrangements, which are covered by a general policy statement on external relationships (External Relationships in Education Policy).

76 The University has recognised the potential of e-learning for transforming learning and teaching across all programmes and has formulated a university-wide strategy (e-Learning Enhancement Strategy 2006-10) to steer the assimilation of e-learning as a mainstream component of teaching. The working group responsible for drafting the strategy (e-learning Working Group) continues to advise on policy and to disseminate information on e-learning initiatives. Consistent with the University's consensus-building approach to implementing change, the strategy does not include targets for individual schools, although it commits the University to take part in the Higher Education Academy's benchmarking programme as a means of gauging overall progress. The audit team noted from its meeting with student representatives that, while there were variations between schools in the extent of e-learning available, the students were very positive about the e-learning provided by some schools.

Resources for learning

77 The Library and Information Systems Services (classed by the University as professional services) are centrally managed services covering the University's six sites. They are the executive responsibility of the Registrar and Chief Operating Officer and are required to provide an annual statement on current and planned activities to the Education Policy Committee, which regularly considers resources and support for learning throughout the year. In addition, they report to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee on issues raised in internal student experience questionnaires, the National Student Survey or school LTERAP reports. The University achieved a high ranking for the provision of learning resources in the most recent National Student Survey (fifth overall). As previously stated, the resource requirements for new and existing programmes are dealt with through the University's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review (see paragraph 53 above). The Briefing Paper indicated that both services sought to maintain close liaison with schools, programme leaders and students.

78 Staff meeting the audit team, confirmed that library staff (Academic Liaison Librarians) maintained an active presence at school level, coordinating the reports on learning resources required for academic approval of new programmes, participating in groups dealing with learning resources provision, and assisting staff involved in collaborative arrangements. They also commented on the library's use of the virtual learning environment to improve the provision of services to schools. The student written submission verified the effectiveness of the library's liaison with students, also giving examples of improvements to services resulting from student feedback, such as increased provision of workstations, extra facilities for group work, and extension of opening hours in the build-up towards examinations, now routinely introduced for each examination period. The team noted that the library was responding to existing pressures on space and to students' concerns about a potential reduction in study space on closure of the Bolderwood Campus in 2009-10, by reviewing the way in which journals are kept and digitising some of its holdings. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the effective delivery of library resources in support of the student learning experience.

79 According to the Briefing Paper, Information Systems Services strives to support learning opportunities by focusing closely on user needs, such as self-service wireless coverage across the campuses and support for internet cafés and informal learning spaces. It also oversees the maintenance of relevant technologies in all teaching spaces and there is a continual programme of upgrading and improvement, with an increased emphasis on service standards and centralised provision.

80 In the face of increasing student numbers and a shift in the balance of requirements from dedicated teaching space to flexible learning space, the audit team noted that the University was seeking to strengthen collaboration between professional services and schools in order to optimise the provision of learning resources. It is adopting a strategic approach to addressing issues of timetabling and management of learning space, involving several working groups, which have recently begun to effect changes, although further work is still to be done.

Admissions policy

81 The University has developed a comprehensive range of policy statements and operational guidance on admissions, which is set within an overarching institutional policy (Admissions Policy). The various statements cover topics such as equal opportunities, applications from disabled students, mature applicants, admissions with advanced standing, and 'compacts' with schools and colleges, all of which are underpinned by the University's commitment to recruit students from a wide variety of backgrounds. In addition, the University provides staff training (based on the UCAS Continuing Professional Development programme), comprising sessions on non-standard qualifications, interviewing, race relations, feedback to applicants, verification of qualifications and detecting fraud.

82 Within this policy framework and that prescribed by the University's admissions regulations (Admissions to Degree Programmes), schools set their own admissions criteria and operate their own recruitment and selection processes. Admissions quotas are agreed for each school as part of the University's annual strategic planning cycle and include targets for the relative proportions of UK/European Union and international students. Requirements for admission are published for each programme in prospectuses and on the University website. The audit team found that responsibilities for the various aspects of the admissions process were clearly designated in the University's procedures between schools and the relevant functions within Student Services. The arrangements for the admission of research students are described below (see paragraph 118).

83 A specific network (Recruitment and Admissions Network), which grew out of a two-year long project (Recruitment and Admissions Project), facilitates a coherent approach to admissions by bringing together relevant staff from schools and professional services. The continuing review of admissions is one strand of a separate project looking at the administrative functions more broadly (Academic Administration Enhancement Project). In the context of this latter project, separate working groups for undergraduate and postgraduate admissions keep a watching brief over policy and processes across the University, making recommendations as relevant to the Education Policy Committee. This involves them in monitoring statistics on applications and offers, reviewing recruitment and admissions practice, advising on staff training and support, and legal requirements.

84 From its discussions with staff, it appeared to the audit team that the recruitment and admissions groups were proving useful forums for resolving issues and sharing practice. Staff cited a number of examples, including managing student expectations regarding accommodation, and dealing with requests for feedback from applicants. The undergraduate recruitment and admissions group has also been making use of data from a survey of applicants, including both those who had accepted and those who had declined an offer of a place. In addition, the team noted that the University was participating in a number of specific initiatives connected with widening access to higher education, which were given high priority by senior management. There have also been recent improvements to the admissions statistics made available to school managers and admissions tutors, which now include useful demographic parameters (see paragraph 45 above).

Student support

85 The University's procedures (as set out for staff in the University Calendar) designate personal tutors as the first point of contact for students on taught programmes in relation to academic and pastoral guidance; the procedures also state that the role of personal tutor may vary 'slightly' from school to school. Research supervisors perform the equivalent role for research students and the specific arrangements are detailed below (see paragraph 120). Responsibility for student support in collaborative provision rests with the partner organisation, oversight by the University being maintained through normal quality assurance processes.

86 In its Briefing Paper, the University has recognised that there are student concerns about the variable nature of student support between schools and it continues to monitor the situation through student experience questionnaires. However, in this regard, the audit team noted that recent analysis showed combined honours students, whose support arrangements cut across schools, to be no less positive than single honours students. A recent development is the formation of a specific network (Senior Tutors' Network) to facilitate sharing of good practice. The team could appreciate the potential for this network to improve consistency between schools and learned from staff that initial areas of focus would include student induction and mitigating circumstances in relation to assessment.

87 It seemed to the audit team from both the student written submission and meeting with student representatives that the students' main concern was the inconsistency they perceived in the personal tutor role, with some tutors allegedly not meeting minimum expectations for frequency of meetings. In the team's view, there would be benefit in the University being explicit about the necessary degree of observance with its procedures on tutoring, so that it is clear whether local variation is appropriate (see paragraph 43 above). This would be timely, as the LTERAP reports indicated that several schools were reviewing their student support arrangements and in some cases transferring responsibilities of the personal tutor to other roles.

88 In 2003, the University reconfigured Student Services to combine central student administrative and operational functions with student support services. The University has also invested heavily in the development of the Student Resources Network. This is a physical and virtual network drawing together a range of services for students, currently including those delivered by Student Services, the library and Information Systems Services. The physical aspect of the Network comprises a new, purpose-built Student Services Centre, while the virtual aspect comprises Student Resources Online, giving students access to information and advice by telephone or email. The Student Services Centre also houses the Students' Union Advice and Information Centre, providing a service independent of the University, while also making manifest the Students' Union's partnership with the University in the provision of student support.

89 The student written submission was very positive about the quality and efficiency of services provided through the Student Services Centre, with students particularly appreciating the 'one-stop-shop' approach. With regard to the Careers Service, they drew a connection between its under-utilisation, identified through final-year student experience questionnaires (see paragraph 66 above), and the location of the service in a separate and less accessible building. The audit team appreciated that there were space constraints and also understood that issues relating to the profile of the Careers Service were being addressed within the broader context of graduate employability. Therefore, notwithstanding this point, the team identifies as a feature of good practice the development of the Student Resources Network, providing an integrated physical and virtual access point for students to obtain support and information in person, remotely and out of hours.

90 Over the past two years, the University has been developing its approach to graduate employability progressively, which is to integrate employability within all relevant strategies and policies and link action-planning with the various stages of the student life-cycle. This is set out in a position paper (Employability at the University of Southampton). Work in the area is directed

through a steering group (Employability Steering Group), which routinely reports on progress through the Education Policy Committee. Faculty employability coordinators have recently been introduced on fixed-term appointments to act as catalysts for change within schools and to add momentum by developing initiatives university-wide.

91 The audit team formed the view, from documentation and discussion with staff, that faculty employability coordinators were already having an effect. They were developing links between schools and professional services, in particular the Careers Service, and involved in activities relating to employer engagement. The postholders themselves were clear about the importance of sustaining the impact of their work in the longer term by retaining a focus on the key priorities of embedding employability within the curriculum, and establishing relevant activities within schools' mainstream operations. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the arrangements for taking forward and embedding the University's strategy for enhancing the employability of its graduates.

92 With regard to personal development planning for students, some aspects of which relate to the development of skills and attributes relevant to career planning and future employment, the University has produced guidance for staff (Personal Development Plan Briefing Paper). Senior staff clarified for the audit team that, while personal development planning was not compulsory, it was considered by the University to be good practice, and that one of the learning and teaching coordinators was taking a lead in promoting personal development planning, and was in contact with all schools. The team learned that every school was making some progress in developing appropriate practice in this area, with some schools having integrated activities within the curricula and others facilitating structured opportunities, through, for example, the development of an electronic learning log.

Staff support (including staff development)

93 The University has in place a comprehensive set of human resources policies, procedures and associated guidance covering staff appointment, induction, performance review and promotion. It also offers extensive staff development opportunities tailored to meet the needs of different groups of staff at various levels of the organisation.

94 Generic training, focusing on skills development, management and leadership, is provided through the Staff Development Unit within Human Resources on the basis of an institutional plan (University Staff Development Plan), informed by consultations with schools and professional services. Training focused on learning and teaching is provided through the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit and includes the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, accredited by the Higher Education Academy, which is compulsory for staff new to teaching; the Postgraduate Induction to Learning and Teaching on offer to research students, as well as a continuing professional development programme for experienced staff. Priorities for staff development are shaped by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, for example, development in support of student diversity is to be given focus in 2007-08; however, the audit team was informed that priorities were also influenced by suggestions emanating from schools. In addition, the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit organises seminars on specific topics and guest lectures, as well as the annual event showcasing internal good practice in learning and teaching (University Learning and Teaching Week), based on a different theme each year; it also publicises external events. Individual schools run their own staff development programmes, in some cases with support from the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit.

95 It appeared to the audit team that, although the provision of staff development was distributed between the two central units, there was good coordination between them, and the annual programme of opportunities was published in a single comprehensive brochure (Staff Development 2007-08), also available online. Events are open to part-time teaching staff, including postgraduate teaching assistants, as well as to teaching staff in partner organisations,

and schools are expected to draw to the attention of these staff any relevant opportunities. The team saw evidence of monitoring at university level of centrally-provided staff development programmes and events in the minutes of the Education Policy Committee, which has institutional responsibility for overseeing these activities in liaison with the Human Resources Policy Committee. For example, there was an evaluation of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice programme in 2006-07. Evaluation of staff development activity within schools was routinely reported through the LTERAP.

96 Peer observation of teaching is organised at school level and the observation records form part of each school's quality assurance evidence base. The University's policy (Peer Observation of Teaching - University Policy) is that staff should have at least one teaching session observed each year. However, the audit team noted from school LTERAP reports that peer observation was not consistently being reported on, while some schools had acknowledged that the full annual cycle of peer observations had not been completed. The team learned that schools were not fully accepting of the University's requirements for peer observation of teaching and were looking for change. In one school, for example, there had been a shift in emphasis away from having one's teaching observed with a view to receiving constructive feedback, towards observing the teaching of others in order to learn and develop one's own practice. Without taking any particular view on how peer observation should be conducted, the team considered that this was another example where the degree of observance required of University policy was insufficiently explicit (see paragraph 43 above).

97 In general, criteria for staff promotion place an emphasis on the importance of a balanced portfolio of education and research. However, the University considers that it has been progressive among research-led universities in facilitating career advancement through the teaching and learning route and has created recognised pathways for staff wishing to pursue their career in this way. Key posts include learning and teaching coordinators, and, at professorial level, University directors of education. Other schemes raising the profile of education include the Vice Chancellor's Learning and Teaching Awards, to recognise staff individually or as teams whose teaching is deemed to be 'inspirational' or innovative, and the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning Awards, to recognise staff providing learning support across the University, rather than within a single school. The audit team identifies as a feature of good practice the adoption of staffing policies, which, in line with the University's stated aim, raise the profile of teaching relative to research.

Overall Conclusion

98 The conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

99 The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy guides the institutional approach to quality enhancement over the period 2006 to 2010. It outlines the themes on which the University plans to focus, in order to enhance the student experience and the direction the University intends to take in developing teaching and learning.

100 As explained in the Briefing Paper, the Strategy was introduced after a planned, university-wide consultation extending over many months involving a series of open-forum events giving voice to a wide range of stakeholders, both staff and students, from across the institution. The Strategy document is accompanied by a number of supporting documents developed through cross-university task forces and completed by the end of 2006-07. The audit team was told by staff that the current Strategy represented a marked change from its precursor, not only in content, but also in approach and presentation. In particular, they found the succinct style of the main document helpful in engaging staff with the Strategy's key themes.

101 The Education Policy Committee has responsibility for the implementation of the Strategy and for establishing suitable action plans for the remaining period covered by it. The five themes (student-centred, research-led learning; employability, inclusivity; staff development and reward; and building the infrastructure for education) are standing agenda items for the Committee, while other regular discussion items, articulating with the main themes include: the quality assurance/quality enhancement interface; the student voice; resources and support for learning; and outreach and partnership.

102 As noted previously, the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan (LTERAP) focuses on key aspects of the Strategy (see paragraph 54 above). Although schools exercise considerable autonomy over the way they frame the comments they include when completing LTERAP reports, it was apparent to the audit team that the need to address these key aspects was important in encouraging developmental thinking at school level. Staff, both academic and administrative, whom the team met, were clearly familiar with the strategy document and understood the nature and significance of its themes. The corresponding reporting mechanism for professional services is the annual statement of current and planned activities, which in future will be a combined statement covering the central academic support services. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the measures taken to engage staff in the formulation of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, and the framework this Strategy now provides for developing teaching and learning.

103 The LTERAP reports are helpful in underpinning the dissemination of good practice across the University. Dissemination of good practice is also achieved through other mechanisms described in detail elsewhere in this report. These include: the working of committees, networks and groups (see paragraph 18 above); continuing professional development sessions and related events, for example the Learning and Teaching Week (see paragraph 94 above); and roles working across schools, such as learning and teaching coordinators, faculty employability coordinators and associate deans (education)(see paragraphs 18, 90 above). By way of illustration, one faculty holds regular education away days at which new examples of best practice are shared between the constituent schools.

104 In monitoring the effectiveness of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy as a means of enhancing the student learning experience, the University is aware that it is placing considerable reliance on the LTERAP reports together with the underlying evidence base. It therefore recognises that the robustness of the methodology needs to be kept under evaluation to make sure that the LTERAP process fulfils its potential to provide the necessary management information to chart the progress of enhancement achieved.

Overall conclusion

105 In the view of the audit team, the University is succeeding through a consensus-building approach in establishing a culture in which enhancement is an integral part of institutional processes for managing learning and teaching.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

106 The University keeps a central register of its collaborative programmes. According to its own taxonomy, this provision comprises: franchise arrangements with further education colleges, mostly involving Foundation Degrees or Post Compulsory Education and Training programmes; a well-established accreditation arrangement relating to a bachelor's degree in art; and several partnership arrangements involving master's programmes in engineering and science, including an Erasmus Mundus programme and a programme delivered online (see paragraph 74 above). There are, in addition, admissions agreements with overseas institutions and the audit team was informed that the University's internationalisation strategy influenced the choice of partners, in favour of large institutions with international reputations.

107 Under franchise arrangements, the University retains overall responsibility for the content, delivery and assessment of programmes, and for quality assurance arrangements. In the case of accreditation, although the University remains ultimately responsible for the quality of programmes and the standards of the awards, it exercises limited control over quality assurance functions, on the basis of its prior approval that arrangements operating in partner organisations are suitable. Where partner organisations have their own degree awarding powers, the arrangement is referred to as a partnership. Within the University, operational responsibility for collaborative provision is devolved to the host school.

108 Collaborative arrangements are the subject of formal organisational agreements between the University and the relevant partner organisations (memoranda of agreement). They are approved by faculties acting on behalf of the University, with professional support provided by the University's Legal Services, the library (in relation to learning resources provision) and the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, which holds copies of the memoranda. A template is provided, which requires that memoranda address a range of topics, including allocation of responsibilities between the partners for assessment, admissions, resources and teaching staff, publicity and promotional material, intellectual property, and data protection. The audit team looked at a number of memoranda of agreement and, although there was variation in their content, and in the degree of detail included, they consistently addressed these topics. However, the team saw little reference to staff-student liaison in the memoranda it read, which the University may wish to note in the context of its student-centred agenda.

109 The University has two policy statements relevant to establishing collaborative arrangements, one dealing with the strategic and academic approval processes specific to collaborative provision, such as approval of the partner organisation itself (Collaborative Provision Policy), the other determining the management processes to be applied in the case of particular relationships (External Relationships in Education Policy). According to the Briefing Paper, this latter policy involves a 'risk-based' approach, in that it entails the assignment at the set-up stage of a risk category to the proposed collaboration, which in turn determines the package of approval, monitoring and review processes deemed appropriate to the relationship. Application of this approach ensures that faculties become involved at an early stage and the University maintains, based on staff feedback, that the procedures are simpler to follow and less ambiguous than those in operation previously. The audit team agreed that the introduction of risk assessment represented a significant strengthening of procedures, which went a long way towards addressing the points raised through earlier QAA reviews concerned with the appropriate mechanism for overseeing academic standards and quality within a local responsibility model.

110 Mainstream procedures apply fully to collaborative programmes, including approval, monitoring and review, assessment, external examining and the issue of certificates and transcripts. By reference to documentation, the audit team was able to verify key aspects of this: assessment arrangements for collaborative programmes were set out in programme specifications and handbooks as for internal university programmes; external examiners reported on collaborative programmes using the standard form; and schools considered and acted on recommendations from external examiners. The team also saw examples of external examiner reports on collaborative provision being considered within the Learning and Teaching Review and Action Plan (LTERAP) reports. University policy on the review of collaborative arrangements (Review of Collaborative Provision), gives emphasis to additional areas requiring attention, which would not apply in the case of its internal programmes. From the review reports available to the team, the thoroughness of the process was evident, although it seemed to the team that some reviews had been undertaken mainly as a response to issues raised in external review reports.

111 The monitoring of collaborative programmes is reported through the LTERAP in the same way as internal programmes. However, there is the additional requirement for schools to obtain annual reports from partner organisations on the operation and quality assurance of collaborative programmes, and to lodge these reports in the school quality assurance evidence base. The audit

team was unable to gain a clear view of the effectiveness of this annual monitoring through the LTERAP process. Over its first two years of operation, there was considerable variability in the way collaborative programmes were reported on, and only in a few cases were the underlying reports from partner organisations available from the quality assurance evidence base. For instance, one collaborative programme was subject to specific monitoring arrangements through a memorandum of agreement that pre-dated the LTERAP process, while another programme, identified with the faculty rather than with the school, was reported on separately outside of the LTERAP.

112 The University had reached a similar conclusion about the extent to which collaborative programmes were being reported on through the LTERAP process at the end of its first year of operation and issued revised guidance for schools accordingly. The audit team observed that this seemed to have had some effect on the attention paid to collaborative arrangements in the second round of reports. Nevertheless, the team considers it desirable for the University to ensure that due prominence is given to collaborative programmes in the LTERAP and its underlying evidence base, particularly given the level of risk associated with collaborative arrangements, which the University has itself recognised.

113 There are separate arrangements for research degree programmes at the University's accredited universities (Chichester and Winchester). These are dealt with by the External Research Degrees Committee, on which the accredited institutions have representation, reporting to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The audit team was able to confirm from the minutes of these committees that rigorous oversight by the University of the arrangements for research students at the accredited institutions was being maintained. The University has also introduced a variant of the LTERAP specifically for the accredited institutions.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

Institutional arrangements and the research environment

114 The University's arrangements for research students are set out in institutional regulations (Regulations for Higher Degrees), which incorporate an internal code of practice, (Code of Practice for Research Candidature and Supervision), aligned to the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. These documents also reference other related policy statements and procedural guidance within the Quality Handbook (Guidelines for Doctoral Degrees). The Academic Quality and Standards Committee has responsibility for the development of University policy relating to research students and for its continued relevance in the context of external drivers. Schools have delegated responsibility for implementation and ongoing operation of arrangements that are consistent with this institutional framework, while faculties oversee the monitoring by schools of the quality of provision.

115 The Graduate School within each faculty provides the mechanism through which schools are consulted on university-wide matters related to research students. An associated network group (Graduate Schools Network Group) facilitates discussion across faculties. Its membership, as for other such groups, embraces relevant academic staff, faculty managers and professional services staff, as well as Students' Union officers, thus giving the community of postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers a presence and influence extending beyond schools. It became clear to the audit team that the role of the network group was still evolving. As indicated in the Briefing Paper, it was assuming an operational role in preparing papers on aspects of the arrangements for research students and routing these through the committee system. It has also been engaged with developing guidance documents for schools, notably the guidance on supervisor handbooks (Guidelines for Schools to assist with their preparation of Supervisor Handbooks). This, the University hopes, will lead to more consistency between schools in their supervision, monitoring and review of research student progress, as well as in other areas covered by the internal Code of Practice, such as student induction, handbooks and research skills training.

116 As mentioned previously (see paragraph 17 above), there is variation in committee structures at school level; nevertheless, there was evidence from committee minutes of the thorough consideration given by individual schools to arrangements for research students. The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan (LTERAP) is now the key document for assuring the quality of research degree programmes and the student research experience. In an effort to achieve greater consistency in reporting from schools on these matters, in the light of the first year of LTERAP reports, the University issued revised guidance to schools. While the audit team could see from the subsequent year's reports that this had resulted in some improvement, variability in reporting was still evident and the team would encourage the University to continue in its efforts to achieve an acceptable level of reporting from all schools.

117 With regard to the research environment, the University scores highly according to the various external metrics of research strength. Its internal Code of Practice includes a statement (Research Environment Statement), setting out for schools an expectation that research students will be able to study within a supportive research culture and have available to them suitable facilities and equipment, which, where appropriate, meet the requirements of the relevant research councils. The University is aware from various internal survey data that research students have concerns about the adequacy of space assigned to them, although the research students who met the audit team regarded space as generally satisfactory. The team noted that the provision of a graduate centre had now been included in the University's estates strategy, albeit on a rather long time horizon.

Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students

118 Research student admissions are governed by the University's admissions regulations and admissions policy (see paragraph 81 above). The audit team was able to verify that schools were depositing their admissions policies in the school quality assurance evidence base and that there was reporting on research student admissions through appropriate school committees. The team learned from staff that cross-university working through the postgraduate admissions group (see paragraph 83, above) was providing a useful forum for discussion and the resolution of common issues.

119 Induction is arranged through schools and, at faculty level, through the relevant Graduate School. Students who met the audit team confirmed that they had received appropriate induction, which for international students also included opportunities for pre-sessional English language courses and ongoing language support. Information is also provided to research students through handbooks and on school and Graduate School websites. The team formed the view that the information so provided was comprehensive, but noted that there was considerable variation in the content and quality of research student handbooks. The team would encourage the University to define minimum expectations for the content of student handbooks, noting that this was to be progressed through a working group (see paragraph 135 below).

120 With effect from 2005-06, the University has stipulated that each research student should be supervised by a team of at least two supervisors, one of whom is the main supervisor with primary responsibility for supervision of the project and for providing academic advice, while the other is a named coordinator who ensures that the required administrative processes for the student are carried out. There is the additional requirement that at least one member of the supervisory team has had previous experience of supervision to successful completion. Schools provide their own handbooks for supervisors, and the University has tackled inconsistencies between schools by issuing guidance, including recommendations on the frequency of supervisory meetings.

121 The University expects all new supervisors to undertake appropriate training, and there was evidence, in minutes of meetings at school, faculty and university level, of training both for new and inexperienced supervisors and refresher training for more experienced supervisors. Students meeting the audit team confirmed that supervisory arrangements were satisfactory and

the team noted that this view was also reflected in the responses to the research student experience questionnaire. In the particular case of joint supervision arrangements involving another institution, the University's guidelines emphasise the importance of formalising such arrangements and ensuring that they meet the requirements of its internal Code of Practice.

Progress and review arrangements

122 The University's internal Code of Practice defines the need for formal monitoring of research student progress, including the consideration by an appropriate panel of progress reports at key stages, at the minimum on an annual basis. The Code also deals with the criteria and mechanism for transfer of registration from MPhil to PhD.

123 The audit team learned from students that timescales and arrangements for progress and review varied considerably across different schools; the team also noted that this issue had been flagged by the Graduate Schools Network Group. Senior staff confirmed the University's expectation of compliance with its internal Code of Practice, although they clarified that schools were not being required to adopt a uniform method of monitoring research students' progress. In response to inconsistencies in practice, the University has sought to reinforce its internal code of practice through the issuing of further guidance in respect of supervisor handbooks and the requirement for schools to lodge their procedures for progress monitoring and review in their quality assurance evidence base.

124 The University was ranked highly (second place) in the HEFCE Research Degree Qualification Rates, 2007, which covered the period 1996 to 2006. The audit team viewed this achievement as an indicator of the overall effectiveness of progress and review arrangements.

Development of research and other skills

125 Training for research students, provided through individual schools and the Graduate Schools, is designed to map onto the Joint Skills Statement, published by the UK Research Councils. Generic research and other skills training is offered, some utilising external funding (Roberts money), through both internal and external providers, for example the UK GRAD programme. It was evident to the audit team from the University's website, student handbooks and from meeting students, that the training opportunities on offer were both comprehensive and extensive. Recognising the difference between providing opportunities and ensuring sufficient take-up by individual students, the University is currently considering, through the Graduate Schools Network Group, whether there should be further guidance on minimum expectations of skills training for research students.

126 All schools have in place processes for identifying the training needs of individual research students at the outset of their programmes and for providing opportunities, at least annually, for students to reflect on the effectiveness of the training they have received in meeting their requirements. The exact method of achieving this varies from school to school, with some using informal one-to-one discussions between student and supervisor(s), and others adopting a more formal personal development planning approach, with related paperwork. The audit team learned from students that individual training programmes were determined by a mixture of personal choice, guidance from supervisors and compulsory courses; it also established that there was guidance or training to prepare students for producing their thesis or dissertation and for the oral examination.

127 There are opportunities for research students to act as teaching assistants, for which training is provided through the Postgraduate Induction to Learning and Teaching programme. There are specific guidelines on these arrangements (Guidance for Part-Time Staff, including Postgraduate Teaching Assistants), which draw attention to the limits on working hours for research students recommended by the Research Councils.

Feedback arrangements

128 As noted previously, there is a specific student-experience questionnaire for research students. Hitherto, this has been an annual survey completed online, but from 2008 it will be conducted only every two years, with a view to improving on the current response rate of 40 per cent. The mechanisms for responding to issues raised in student experience questionnaires are outlined above (see paragraphs 64-66). The audit team was told by students that informal mechanisms for giving feedback through supervisors or other staff members worked well and this might be one reason for low completion rates of questionnaires. Another feedback route is through the Students' Union, which has an officer dedicated to matters relating to postgraduate and mature students.

129 Research students have representation on institutional committees, including the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and the Education Policy Committee, as well as on the Graduate Schools Network Group. The audit team learned from the student representatives it met that there were difficulties in engaging postgraduate students in wider representational activities, possibly because of their close affiliation with schools. In this regard, the team noted the inclusion of postgraduate representatives in the nascent initiative to promote student representation at faculty level (see paragraph 61 above.)

Assessment of research students

130 Research students are assessed through submission of a thesis or dissertation followed by an oral examination (*viva voce*), conducted by an internal and an external examiner. The University has produced assessment criteria for both MPhil and PhD degrees for use by examiners in constructing their reports and recommendations; these criteria were developed with reference to the qualification descriptors within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

131 All examiners must be approved at faculty level, a responsibility normally exercised by an Associate Dean. University procedures stipulate that examiners should have sufficient experience and appropriate subject expertise to be able to carry out their role effectively and that they should be completely independent, having no prior involvement in the student's work. The internal and external examiners each prepare a separate report before the oral examination and a joint report after the examination according to a standard form (Examiners' Joint Report and Recommendation form).

Representation, complaints and appeals arrangements for research students

132 Research students' complaints and appeals are dealt with through the University's normal regulations, and students are directed to the relevant procedures through the University's internal Code of Practice. These cover the grounds for appeal against a decision not to permit a transfer of registration from MPhil to PhD, as well as the grounds for appeal against assessment decisions relating to the award of a degree.

Overall conclusion

133 In the view of the audit team, institutional arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience; this is recognised as a factor in the University's high level of achievement according to external key performance indicators.

Section 7: Published information

134 The University website provides the main point of access to published information for prospective students and the general public. The undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses (both printed and web-based formats) are the responsibility of Corporate and Management Services within the remit of the Registrar and Chief Operating Officer. There are protocols assigning responsibility for information content at appropriate levels of seniority within the University's organisational structures. The prime institutional source of information for current students relating to student support and academic policies, procedures and regulations is the Academic Diary and Student Handbook, which also includes the Student Entitlement Document and the Student Guidance Document. The full academic regulations are to be found in the University Calendar, available to students on the University website. The audit team found both documents to be clear and comprehensive; it also found there to be a wide range of useful information for both students and staff on the website and its associated intranet (SUSSED).

135 Students also receive programme handbooks produced by schools. The audit team considered a range of student handbooks and found that they differed substantially in terms of content and quality. The divergence of information on assessment matters between school handbooks and regulations in the University Calendar has already been mentioned above (see paragraph 41), but, more generally, student representatives meeting the team expressed concern about the variability of programme handbooks, which was particularly apparent to students on joint-degree programmes spanning more than one school. The team learned from senior staff that a working group had been established (as part of the Academic Administration Enhancement Project) to consider minimum information requirements for all student handbooks and that this group was due to report before the end of the current academic year. However, the team also learned that by the time of the audit visit (February 2008) the group had yet to convene its first meeting, leading the team to conclude there was a risk that the minimum information requirements might not be reflected in handbooks provided for the 2008-09 academic year. The team considers it desirable for the University to monitor closely the consistency of programme handbooks with the guidance to be developed by this working group, with particular emphasis on the clarity of information concerning assessment policies and regulations.

136 In its Briefing Paper, the University indicated that it had always met the requirements for published information on the TQi website in relation to both the quantitative datasets and qualitative summaries. The latter are no longer required, and instead it is being recommended that relevant information be published locally (HEFCE 06/45, Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: phase two outcomes refers). The audit team was able to verify that the University was able to provide the type of information now being suggested, since, in the main, this was already available electronically. In the case of external examiner reports, no longer being published as qualitative summaries, these will now be shared with students through their representatives on staff-student consultative committees.

137 In the view of the audit team, the University has implemented systems to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. In the case of programme handbooks, it is to develop guidance on minimum requirements to improve their consistency across the University.

RG362a 06/08

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ISBN 978 1 84482 830 2

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786