

June 2009**Annex to the report****Contents**

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of Northampton (the University) from 1 to 5 June 2009 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards
- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in on-campus provision. Limited confidence can be placed in the University's current and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities in its taught collaborative provision.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit found that an approach to enhancement based on learning and teaching activities was being actively pursued within the University. There are operational plans for enhancement that provide for systematic activity in support of the University's strategic approach to improvements in the management of learning opportunities in its on-campus provision.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit found that the University's approach to management of its postgraduate research provision was rigorous and had developed in a positive way since the grant of research degree awarding powers. The audit team considered that the measured expansion of the research degree portfolio was matched by the development of the academic framework for research degrees. The University's approach is consistent with maintaining academic standards and expanding the range of opportunities for postgraduate research students. In particular, the audit identified the University's support for research students, centred on the Graduate School, as a feature of good practice in the University's management of its research degree provision. The audit confirmed that the University's management of its postgraduate research provision met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

The audit found that the University met all requirements and guidance about public information about the academic standards and quality of its higher education provision. It provides full and accurate information for staff and for current and potential students, and has in place appropriate systems and guidance for checking its accuracy and completeness, with the exception of collaborative provision, which was receiving attention at the time of the audit. Overall, the audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the academic standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the structured approach to the use of the *Code of practice* in the management of learning opportunities in on-campus provision (paragraph 28)
- the provision of readily accessible support for student learning through the Centre for Academic Practice (paragraph 56)
- the support provided to partner institutions as they develop their higher education strategies and associated policies and procedures, for the local development of a higher education culture (paragraph 95)
- the University's support for research students, centred on the Graduate School (paragraphs 114, 131).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- as a matter of priority, ensure that the University establishes a robust central system for the compilation and maintenance of a reliable, accurate, comprehensive and up-to-date register of all of its collaborative provision (paragraph 85)
- conduct an early review of the way in which annual and periodic subject review of collaborative provision are specified and implemented to ensure that the operation of all of the University's individual collaborative arrangements is appraised in a rigorous and timely fashion (paragraphs 89 and 91-93).

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- keep under review the committee structure for academic governance, to establish clarity in the designation of roles and responsibilities (paragraph 17)
- consider how the University may be assured that central policy and procedural requirements are observed in, and across, schools (paragraph 17)
- monitor the operation and reporting of periodic subject review, to confirm that the University's requirements for separation of the process from those for course approval and for minor modifications to programmes are met (paragraph 33)
- develop a more systematic approach to the use of the virtual learning environment across the University in the interests of parity of student learning opportunities (paragraph 46)
- consider how assessed work can be returned in a timely fashion so that students can apply the feedback in subsequent assessment tasks (paragraph 58)
- that the University give further consideration to its approach to achieving its aim that each student will have a curriculum characterised by the principles and practice of employability (paragraph 60)
- ensure that data on student performance disaggregated by module and partner College is used routinely and consistently by external examiners, boards of examiners and in annual and periodic review processes (paragraphs 89 and 90).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 University College Northampton was granted research degree awarding powers and university title in 2005, following which it became the University of Northampton. The University had 11,051 students in early 2009, including 106 research students and 763 studying at partner colleges.

2 The University's mission focuses on applied teaching and research, with the goal of being 'a student facing learner centred institution, nationally recognised and regionally engaged'. This approach is outlined in the University's 2005 to 2010 Strategic Plan, which includes five goal areas and nine sub-strategies that include widening participation; high-quality learning and teaching, including an emphasis on employability; and expansion of research and knowledge transfer with a focus on being 'business-facing'.

3 In the context of its regional role, the University's collaborative provision is focused on local and regional partner colleges. In addition, there is a growing number of small-scale international arrangements, typically taking the form of articulation agreements or similar. There is one small-scale research degree collaborative agreement with a local college.

4 The Vice Chancellor is supported by a Directorate team comprising three Pro Vice Chancellors (for Academic Affairs, Research and Business Development, and Strategic Planning and Resources), the Registrar and Clerk to the Governing Council, and the Director of Finance.

5 Structurally, the University is organised into six academic schools: Applied Sciences, the Arts, Education, Health, Social Sciences and the Northampton Business School. Each school is headed by a dean, the majority of whom are supported by two associate deans, one with a broad quality remit, the other with a research and knowledge transfer focus. A University-wide Graduate School was established in June 2000 and forms the 'core administrative, training and quality assurance portal for research degree business'.

6 There are also 11 professional support departments whose directors report to members of the Directorate. The Student Administration and Services section was formed in 2007, amalgamating four former departments, and is led by the Registrar and Clerk to the Governing Council. It is responsible for quality assurance, student administration relating to taught programmes and all student services.

The information base for the audit

7 The University provided the audit team with an institutional briefing paper (the Briefing Paper) and supporting documentation, including material related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The Briefing Paper contained references to sources of evidence that illustrated the University's approach to managing the security of its awards and the quality of its education provision. The team had access to electronic and/or hard copies of all documents referenced in the Briefing Paper. The team was also provided with access to the University's intranet site. The presentation of the sources of evidence was exemplary, with clear and accessible links to documentation on the University's intranet and webpages.

8 The Students' Union produced a student written submission setting out the students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management. The audit team is grateful for the students' engagement with the audit process.

9 In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the report arising on the Research Degree Awarding Powers and University Title scrutiny (2006)
- the report of the Review of research degree programmes 2006
- reports of reviews by QAA at the subject level since the previous Institutional audit
- reports produced by other relevant bodies
- the institution's internal documents
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Developments since the last audit

10 The University was not subject to Institutional audit in the previous audit cycle as it was under extensive scrutiny during the evaluation of its application for research degree awarding powers and university title. The scrutiny resulted in 'A report, in lieu of institutional audit, based on enquiries undertaken in academic years 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, in connection with the University's successful application for research degree awarding powers and university title' (the RDAP Report) in April 2006.

11 The RDAP Report did not make formal recommendations. The report noted areas for further development including: the effectiveness of student participation; the need for a common institutional approach to responding to external examiner reports; and a review of compensation arrangements. The present audit team considered that all of these had been addressed appropriately. An annex to the report also included undertakings from the University to: review its guidelines and processes for assuring the quality assurance of collaborative provision; review the way in which the institution disseminated areas of good practice identified in validation, monitoring and review reports; identify how the institution used outcomes from the National Student Survey; and review its new periodic subject review procedures. The audit found that the University had taken action in respect of these undertakings; there remains work to be undertaken in relation to the University's management of its collaborative provision (see Section 5). Other developments since the research degree awarding powers scrutiny are referred to, where relevant to the present audit, in the narrative of this annex.

12 There were no recommendations from the Review of research degree programmes, which highlighted as good practice the extensive range of support and training activities for both staff and students. The present audit team found that support for research students continued to be an area of strength (paragraphs 113 and 114).

Institutional framework for the management of academic standards and learning opportunities

13 Oversight of academic matters is delegated by the University's Governing Council to the Senate, which is chaired by the Vice Chancellor and is advised and supported in its work by six standing committees. These committees are the: Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC), Academic Policy and Development Committee, Learning and Teaching Committee, Planning and Resources Committee, Research Committee and Research Degrees Committee. Within this structure, the academic quality and standards of undergraduate and taught postgraduate provision essentially fall within the remit of the AQSC and research students within the Research Degrees Committee. Enhancement is linked primarily to the Learning and Teaching Committee.

14 There is an extensive structure of subcommittees beneath these top-tier subcommittees of Senate. The Academic Quality and Standards Committee has: the Academic Audit and Review Committee, which reviews and monitors quality assurance activities; the External Examiner Committee; the Programme Approval Committee; and six school quality standards and enhancement committees. The three research degrees boards report to the Research Degrees Committee, as does the Research Ethics Committee and, beneath it, school-level ethics committees. Subcommittees of the Academic Policy and Development Committee, in particular, the Lifelong Learning and Educational Partnerships Committee and the International Committee, play a significant role in managing the academic quality and standards of collaborative provision.

15 The University uses modular frameworks for delivery of its degrees. At the time of the audit, the majority of undergraduate programmes was covered by the University's 'Common Academic Framework' and taught postgraduate programmes by the 'Postgraduate Modular Scheme'. These frameworks will be replaced from September 2009 by a 'University Modular Framework' covering all taught programmes, including professional doctorates. A taught programme requires completion of sufficient approved required and optional modules; in addition, students can personally 'tailor' a wide variety of joint honours programmes. As a result, the focus of the University's assurance of academic standards, for example, in assessment boards and external examining, is at a combination of field and framework level, fields being groupings of modules in a subject area within a school, while the framework is University-wide across all subjects. As a result, while the University has an overview of academic performance at field and framework level, there is a less explicit perspective on academic performance at programme level.

16 The operational framework for academic standards and quality is laid out in the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook, complemented by the Research Degrees Handbook, the Collaborative Provision Handbook and an External Examiner Handbook.

17 The audit found that the basic committee structure had served the University well, as it exercised its newly-granted degree awarding power responsibilities, but, that it had become more complex as the University has grown. Scrutiny of the interrelationships between the committees and their terms of reference found instances of overlap of responsibilities and/or extended chains of approval, by way of example the requirement for a number of committees to approve the appointment of external examiners. The audit team was of the view that the complicated reporting lines for the committees had the potential for matters to be considered at a number of bodies, with no clear route for reconciling the outcomes of such discussions. Conversely, there was also the possibility that issues might not be identified and discussed in any deliberative forum. The team considers it desirable that the University keep under review the committee structure for academic governance to establish clarity in the designation of roles and responsibilities. The audit found a number of instances where the University's expectations were not observed at local levels; for example, the use of the virtual learning environment; consideration of collaborative provision in monitoring and review activity; the content of module and course guides; engagement with personal development planning, and the timely return of assessed work. It would be desirable for the University to consider how it may be assured that central policy and procedural requirements are observed in, and across, schools.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

18 Many of the University's standard policies and procedures are concerned with both the management and assurance of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Those areas most closely associated with academic standards: the use of external reference points in programme approval, monitoring and review; assessment; external examiners, and aspects of management information are considered in this section on academic standards and the remainder under the management of learning opportunities.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

19 The Senate is apprised of the overall position of academic standards and achievement within the institution through two reports: for taught programmes the annual report from the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQCS) and, for research degrees, a Research Degrees Committee Annual Review. The audit found that these reports, supported by a detailed statistical base, provided a clear overview at institutional level of academic standards.

External examiners

20 The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are set out clearly in a comprehensive external examiner handbook. There are sound arrangements for the appointment and induction of external examiners for framework boards, field boards, and award boards and for research degrees. External examiner reports are read at institutional, school and programme level, and responses are made on standard templates to matters raised in the reports. An institutional overview of the operation of the external examiner system is gained through an annual report to Senate from the AQSC. The audit found that there was effective involvement of external examiners in the assessment of students and that the University took seriously and responded thoughtfully to issues raised by the examiners. There is a systematic approach to identifying and taking action in respect of common themes and matters with institutional significance arising from the external examiners' reports.

21 The report based on the research degree awarding powers scrutiny drew attention to the fact that external examiners were attached to fields and that therefore their reports considered matters at field, but not at course level. The University has resolved the matter by grouping programmes within subjects to secure external examiner scrutiny at the level of the award.

22 The University makes summaries of external examiner reports available to student representatives at programme boards. The University plans to make external examiner reports available through the virtual learning environment, an initiative that the audit team supports.

23 The audit confirmed that the University made strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment. The University has taken account of the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* in its approach to external examining, which makes an effective contribution to the management of academic standards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

24 The University's procedural documentation makes clear reference to the use of the separate elements of the Academic Infrastructure in approval and review processes. There are also policies for the involvement of relevant professional bodies in approval and review. Programme specifications are required for all programmes of study. The audit confirmed that approval and review processes took account of the Academic Infrastructure in the setting, maintenance and confirmation of academic standards. Documentation associated with approval and review processes showed a variability of emphasis on *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and subject benchmarks. The University generally involves professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) in validation and reviews, or through prior informal consultation.

Assessment policies and regulations

25 Module guides include assessment tasks and grading criteria so that students understand what is required of them to succeed. There is an institutional moderation policy which schools can adapt to produce local moderation policies that are approved by AQSC. The school moderation policies adopted a range of approaches, but they all met the University's minimum requirements. Discussion with staff and students confirmed that there was, largely, awareness of the requirements of the regulations. The student written submission pointed to problems caused by bunching of assessment deadlines for students on joint courses, which was confirmed by students whom the audit team met.

Management information - statistics

26 Management information in support of the University's management of academic standards is produced and analysed by the University's Information Planning Unit, drawing on the University's records system. The annual report from AQSC analyses progression and award data for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, and destination data for leavers, allowing Senate to maintain an overview of student achievement. The audit found that the data available to subject teams was comprehensive; the University recognises that there is scope for more effective use of the data in annual review. Examination of relevant documentation established that the statistics provided adequate information to allow the University to monitor the security of academic standards of awards across its provision.

27 The University stated in the Briefing Paper that it had developed comprehensive systems for the internal management of academic standards, using a range of complementary processes and sources of information and feedback. The audit found that the University's claim was justified and that there could be confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

28 There is clear evidence that the University makes systematic use of the *Code of practice* in the management of learning opportunities and that the precepts and guidance influence policy formation and contribute to the operation of monitoring processes. The Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC) annual audit of the University's practices against each section of the *Code* allows the University to consider whether adjustments to policy and procedures are necessary. The annual audit also allows the University to take stock of revised sections of the *Code* in a structured way. Examination of a range of policies and procedures by the audit team provided illustrations of the relationship of University policy and procedures to the guidance in the *Code*: the audit related to the section of the *Code* on students with disabilities was particularly noteworthy for the way in which it influenced practice across the University. The University also monitors its provision against relevant external benchmarks. The audit identified as a feature of good practice the structured approach to the use of the *Code of practice* in the management of learning opportunities in on-campus provision.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

29 The processes of approval, monitoring and review are laid out in the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook and the Collaborative Provision Handbook. The audit included consideration of examples of the processes of approval, monitoring and review in relation to the management of learning opportunities.

30 The approval process requires a panel, which includes external representation, to appraise the learning resources for the programme, the curriculum design, teaching and learning strategies, and the student experience. The report of each event is considered at an institutional level by the Academic Audit and Review Committee (AARC) to confirm that the process was conducted correctly, so as to secure the academic quality of the programme.

31 Annual monitoring involves a critical review of the operation of programmes and fields in the subject to support effective appraisal of the quality of learning and teaching. A complementary process, annual school review, covers student performance, module evaluation, student support, the currency of the curriculum, student surveys, and modules in need of additional support. Review of a sample of documentation associated with annual monitoring and review demonstrated that the processes were operating as intended, and contributed to the management of learning opportunities in the University's on-campus provision.

32 Periodic subject review, operated on a rolling five-year schedule, considers the operation and appropriateness of programmes, including those provided through collaborative arrangements. The review panel includes external academic and recent graduate representation. There are sound arrangements for reporting on the outcomes of the review and institutional overview is gained by the involvement of AARC and AQSC, which in turn reports to Senate. There are satisfactory arrangements for action arising from the review.

33 The University has identified that there is potential for the periodic subject review process to be distorted by the inclusion of consideration of minor amendments. In examples of periodic subject review seen by the audit team, consideration of minor amendments seemed, from the reports of the events, to have been a substantial element in the proceedings. There were also instances of course approvals being included in the periodic review event. The University has recognised, and the team would agree, that the effectiveness of periodic subject review could be compromised if the time for discussion were limited by consideration of matters outside the terms of reference of the event. The University has taken action to ensure that matters beyond the scope of periodic subject review are not included in the proceedings in future. The team considers it desirable that the University monitor the operation and reporting of periodic subject review, to confirm that the University's requirements for separation of the process from those for course approval, and for minor modifications to programmes, are met.

34 The audit found that periodic subject review was contributing to the University's management of learning opportunities in on-campus provision. Discussion of the University's approach to the periodic review of its collaborative provision may be found in Section 5.

Management information - feedback from students

35 The formal mechanisms for obtaining student feedback are through module evaluation questionnaires, student representation on boards of study, and the National Student Survey and institutional student surveys. Through inspection of documentation and reports from students, the audit team confirmed that the process was working adequately for students from on-campus provision. Information about the University's approach to feedback from students in collaborative provision may be found at Section 5.

Role of students in quality assurance

36 The minutes of Senate and first-tier committees show that the Students' Union representatives attend the meetings. Undergraduate students were generally satisfied with the training programme for representatives which, since the academic year 2008-09, has been provided by the Students' Union, and spoke of improved communications, especially at school quality standards and enhancement committees (QSECs) as a result of the training. Postgraduate students reported that the training was not particularly relevant, as they were familiar with University practices.

37 The QSEC agenda include a standing item for student representatives and the minutes show that issues raised by student representatives are always considered. In most cases, matters of interest to the students are aired through a student representatives forum held in advance of the QSEC with one or two student representatives attending the QSEC meeting itself. Both undergraduate and postgraduate student representatives confirmed that these arrangements operated well, and that in some cases they received email notification of actions consequent upon issues that they raised. Student attendance at both the forums and at QSECs is variable, but the University anticipates that the revised approach to the training of representatives will improve student engagement with the QSECs.

38 Student representatives confirmed that they attended boards of study, and that they provided feedback in-class to their constituencies on matters discussed. In meetings with the audit team, student representatives were able to cite examples of changes made as a result of their input. Joint honours students are only able to be represented on one part of their programme, but generally considered that they had other satisfactory ways of presenting their views to the University.

39 The student written submission stated that the University invariably sought some form of student input when making changes to its practices. Minutes of working groups, for example the Student Communications Working Group, indicated that students were represented, normally by officers of the Students' Union.

40 There was evidence that the University involved students in decisions about policy or practice related to their learning experience and that, overall, the University's arrangements for student participation made a useful contribution to the management of the quality of learning opportunities.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

41 The Learning and Teaching Strategy (2005 to 2010) states that 'learning and teaching developments will be grounded in scholarship and pedagogic research'. The vision and key aims of the strategy include ensuring the engagement of staff in pedagogical research and scholarship. One of the corporate objectives is to establish a national and international reputation for pedagogic research. The Research and Knowledge Transfer Strategy (2005 to 2010) states that research is regarded not only as an end in itself, but as a means to support high-quality teaching. The audit noted that there had been progress towards full implementation of these objectives; a paper considered by the Learning and Teaching Committee in March 2009 defined what research and teaching and learning meant in the University's context, and set out an action plan aimed at 'further enhancing' linkages in this area. In meetings with the audit team academic staff offered little information about research and teaching linkages. There was evidence of research informed teaching in practice in one area: the critical appraisal for the Business and International Management (BIM) periodic subject review in 2008 noted that the research strengths of the division were an increasing source of curriculum development at the postgraduate level. At undergraduate level, there are modules in the 'strategy strand' of the programme, which have a focus on preparing students for a research-based approach. The Office of Learning and Teaching has established a group for pedagogic research and scholarship in higher education [PRASHEN] to encourage pedagogic research, to support bids for funding, and to share effective practice. At the time of writing, 31 members of staff from across the University had joined the network. In March 2009, the Learning and Teaching Committee confirmed that work on research and teaching linkages would be taken forward by learning and teaching coordinators.

Other modes of study

42 The University has ambitions to develop and increase its distance-learning provision. A Distance Learning Working Group has started to look at issues related to student support in distance learning following the University's Student Journey report (paragraph 50), which identified variability in support across the University. Three areas in particular will be considered more closely: pre-enrolment advice, timetabling staff contact times and resourcing. At the time of the audit little progress had been made; an action plan, in development since the start of the academic year 2008-09, had not been finalised.

43 The University has procedures for the validation of distance-learning programmes, and a policy for supported distance learning. Scrutiny of documentation for consideration of a proposal for a supported distance-learning programme with an overseas partner showed that appropriate care was taken in approving the partnership and validating the programme. The University has published guidance notes for distance-learning students that deal specifically with

the registration process, and also a guide to student services for distance-learning students. The library operates a postal loans service for distance learners.

Resources for learning

44 Information Services supports schools directly through academic support teams, which provide support for research, enquiry services, user education and information-skills training. They liaise with academic staff on library and information technology (IT) matters related to course development, academic planning, stock selection and review.

45 There are differences between subject areas in levels of satisfaction with learning resources. The Director of Information Services has developed an action plan in response to comment in the National Student Survey (NSS) and internal surveys, including a bid for additional funds for book and journal purchase, a review of library opening hours, the consideration of a 'learning commons' approach, and a rolling programme of updating IT equipment. The annual subject review for BIM for the academic year 2007-08 recorded improvements in learning resources including classroom facilities, increasing amounts of web-based resources, and improvements to the virtual learning environment (VLE). At the time of the audit, QSECs, working with their Information Services representatives, were considering how to improve further learning resources and were consulting students to seek information about areas for further development. The library collection development policy was updated in July 2008 and provides for close working with schools in the management of the library resources. It is clear that the University is committed to improving the learning resources available to its students.

46 Progress in the development of the VLE is monitored by the e-strategy Steering Group and reported to the Planning and Resources Committee, but the usage of the VLE is reported to the Learning and Teaching Committee. At the time of the audit, it had been reported at a recent meeting of the Planning and Resources Committee that staff might need support in using the VLE and that all staff should be at the threshold level of competence, known locally as 'filing cabinet', by the end of 2010. It was also reported that there were areas of the University where the VLE was not being used at all. By contrast, all law modules have a VLE site used in a variety of ways, for example: to post lecture notes, for formative tests, and for generic feedback on assignments. It was also noted that the aim was that more modules use the VLE, not just to enable improved access to materials, but also to facilitate active learning by students. Usage of the VLE varies, with a blended learning approach in some modules, as a means of communication in all modules, and the audit confirmed that there were a few areas where the VLE was not used to best effect. The School of Social Sciences carried out a survey of attitudes to, and engagement with, the VLE and concluded that more staff training on its use was required. The audit team considers it desirable that the University develop a more systematic approach to the use of the VLE across the University in the interests of parity of student learning opportunities.

Admissions policy

47 The Admissions policy and associated procedures are updated periodically, most recently, at the time of the audit, in April 2008. The policy and procedures draw on the guidance and relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*. Admissions are monitored in some detail through school annual review including an analysis by gender, age, ethnicity and disability. All courses have entry profiles in place. Students reported that their experience of the admissions process had been very good and that they had particularly welcomed the opportunity to discuss potential programmes of study with staff, including programme leaders.

48 Each school has an operational plan in line with the institutional strategic objectives for widening participation, which are monitored through school annual review. All schools have a widening participation coordinator and some schools, for example Business, have an Associate Dean with responsibility for widening participation. At an institutional level, widening participation is monitored by the Lifelong Learning and Educational Partnerships Committee

(LLEPC) through a Widening Participation Subcommittee. A review by the audit team of the agenda and minutes of the LLEPC established that a report from the subcommittee was a standing item, but the minutes did not reflect the detail of the discussion and the range of matters associated with widening participation considered by LLEPC.

49 The Widening Participation Subcommittee reviews the outcomes from the internal survey, and has found no significant difference in results between widening-participation students and others. Nevertheless, the University has recognised that there is little internal intelligence at school or programme level about how many widening-participation students apply and enrol, from where these students are drawn, their level of entry qualification, which courses they study, and their retention and academic achievement. Accordingly, at the time of the audit, the Academic Policy and Development Committee had recently approved a proposal from the Office of Educational Partnerships and Lifelong Learning to develop a system to track widening-participation students to gain information about recruitment patterns and student performance.

Student support

50 In 2005, the University commissioned a study by external consultants into the 'Student Journey' to produce a blueprint for improvements to the overall student experience in order to increase student satisfaction and retention, and to develop the effectiveness, and efficiency of the delivery of student services. A direct outcome of the study was the implementation of a recommendation to create a central Student Administration and Services (SAS) department, replacing a number of separate units, to be managed by the Registrar. Students are generally satisfied with the support provided by SAS, especially the financial guidance; there was a perception that the Avenue Campus was not as well served as the Park Campus, and joint honours students reported that they were required to go to the Park Campus for student services. The University's strategy for the development of the Avenue Campus includes the additional provision at that site of most of the services provided at the Park Campus. Other actions resulting from the Student Journey study relating to student support included: improvements to pre-arrival information and the introduction of a welcome weekend; modifications to the induction programme, and the development of a model for student guidance. Schools have student administration teams, which work with SAS and with academic staff to: support the delivery of the academic programmes; provide advice for students, and undertake the module level administrative work in relation to assessment.

51 A revised induction programme for students was introduced in 2008. Students were generally complimentary about the programme, but spoke of its intensity, especially for students joining the joint honours programme. Undergraduate students joining directly into the second year of their degree programmes are invited to join the first-year induction programme. A special induction programme, Mature Fliers, is offered for mature students; this is less intensive and caters well for the needs of mature entrants.

52 A Students' Charter is available on the VLE; students who met the audit team were aware of the existence of the Charter, but did not see it as having any particular significance for them.

53 At the time of the audit the personal tutoring system had recently been revised in order to strengthen the personal tutor role. All students are allocated a personal academic tutor. While the student written submission identified some flaws in the personal tutoring system, including difficulties in arranging meetings and personality clashes, in meetings with the audit team students were generally complimentary about the support provided by personal tutors, and also referred to the academic staff being readily accessible. The articulation of personal tutoring with students' personal development planning (PDP) is emphasised by the University. The University's PDP system is known as NUPAD (Northampton's Unified Personal and Academic Development) which includes MyPAD, an e-portfolio tool for each student. Originally introduced in 2005, a new version of NUPAD was launched in January 2008, along with a revised NUPAD Policy. The School of Education and the Law Division have adapted the system to suit the

subjects, taking account of professional body requirements, and in the case of law, PDP has been embedded within modules.

54 There has been significant effort made to promote NUPAD, including consideration of subject/programme gaps in each school; increasing the number of workshop sessions for students; encouragement to schools to take a more structured approach to staff awareness of MyPAD in the curriculum as well as to support PDP; the development of a toolkit of prompts to help staff and students use MyPAD more effectively, and the promotion of the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre case-studies in the use of PDP. A report on the first year of operation of MyPAD in June 2008 noted that there had been a significant increase in the number of sites created, but there was no data on the number of students involved. The report also noted that there was not much editing of sites and that it might be assumed that students were not making much use of MyPAD once they had set up a site. Students who met the audit team who had used NUPAD had generally used it only in the first year of their studies. They were critical of the system, citing complexity and inadequate training, as well as a lack of encouragement from some staff in the personal tutoring role. Academic staff told the team that there was a problem with student take-up of NUPAD. The University may wish to review its approach to PDP, with particular reference to the contribution of MyPAD and NUPAD.

55 A Retention Achievement and Progression programme (RAPP) is offered to students who are restarting or repeating years, to provide an extra level of support. In 2008-09, 91 students enrolled on RAPP, and the percentage of students on the RAPP programme who progress has risen from under 20 per cent in 2003 to 65 per cent in 2007-08. A separate Cause for Concern procedure is triggered when a student fails to attend seminars or submit assignments. The Cause for Concern process is a supportive measure which endeavours to resolve any problems that students are experiencing and provides them with a way forward to continue their studies. One school reported in its annual review that the adoption of a rigorous approach to the Cause for Concern procedure across the school had resulted in a large increase in the number of cases dealt with, from 55 to 137, and had improved retention.

56 The Centre for Academic Practice (CfAP), part of the Office of Learning and Teaching, offers specialist tuition across a range of graduate skills at all levels of study and a series of workshop sessions are offered at both campuses. Over 250 open-learning packs covering a wide range of academic and mathematics skills are available. CfAP also organises peer support through student mentors and facilitators. During the academic year 2007-08, 41 students across all schools acted as mentors. Over 2,300 tutorials across a range of topics were delivered during 2007-08, with almost 75 per cent of these on the Park Campus. In addition, during the same period, over 2,000 students attended workshops and support programmes/modules offered by CfAP. Academic staff testified to the benefits of having specialist support that relieved them of some of their responsibilities in this area. Students spoke warmly of their satisfaction with CfAP and with the support provided. The audit identified the provision of readily accessible support for student learning through the Centre for Academic Practice as a feature of good practice in the University's management of learning opportunities.

57 At the start of the academic year 2008-09 the University established an office where students could raise any concerns. 'Student Matters' is part of SAS and provides students with advice on University policy and associated procedures in relation to academic integrity, disciplinary matters, complaints and appeals. Students whom the audit team met were unaware of this development. At the time of the audit, the office had only recently been established so it was too early for its effectiveness to have been tested.

58 The University has a policy that the turnaround time for feedback is 'normally within four working weeks of submission'. The student written submission and students whom the audit team met reported that on occasion this deadline was missed, as was also reported in the National Student Survey. There was evidence in this area of variable local practice, which has the potential to disadvantage students. The team considers it desirable that the University consider how

assessed work can be returned in a timely fashion, so that students can apply the feedback in subsequent assessment tasks.

59 Plagiarism is being combated in two ways: through the use of specialist software, and the University's own module to help students avoid plagiarism (University of Northampton Plagiarism Avoidance Course - UNPAC). The University has guidelines for the use of the specialist software, but there were indications of varying practice between schools. The Northampton Business School has widely adopted the software across all levels, as was confirmed by students. The School also has a staff development focus on combatting plagiarism. Students from some other schools reported that the software was not used at all. The audit team came to the view that UNPAC had the potential to be a very useful device in counteracting plagiarism; the University may wish to consider ways of building on existing sound practice to secure a consistent approach across the University.

60 The University places considerable emphasis on the development of employability skills and a range of activities to develop employability skills is promoted by the Office of Learning and Teaching and supported by the Careers and Employability Services including: the Career Management Skills programme; work-based learning, work placements and community volunteering. The first objective of the Learning and Teaching Strategy is that the curriculum for each student will be characterised by the principles and practices of employability. In meetings with the audit team, although some students referred to discussion within their courses of careers options and visits from external people in connection with careers, they generally did not perceive or recognise these activities as explicit employability skills development. Discussion with academic staff in the course of the audit provided little evidence that the Learning and Teaching Strategy objective in respect of employability was being prosecuted in a systematic way. A review of documentation associated with periodic subject review of programmes found that there was little attention given to the development of employability skills in the curriculum. Given the University's emphasis on employability in the Learning and Teaching Strategy, the audit team considers it desirable that the University give further consideration to its approach to achieving its aim that each student will have a curriculum characterised by the principles and practice of employability.

61 A Student Communications Working Group was established in 2004, with the aim of improving the consistency and accuracy of information supplied to students. The student body is represented on the group by officers of the Students' Union. The group has developed a student communication strategy (referred to as Statement and Principles), and its recent achievements at the time of the audit included guidance to staff on e-communication with students, the development of a new student website, and a revised format for student induction.

Staff support (including staff development)

62 The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy identifies as a high priority the continuing professional development (CPD) of staff, to support and promote excellence in learning and teaching. There is a central programme of CPD activity arranged by the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLaT) which is aligned to strategic themes and meets identified development needs. For example, the e-strategy Board drew attention to the need for staff training on the use of SMART boards when they are introduced on the Park Campus and training was arranged accordingly. A network of learning and teaching coordinators (LTCs), working with OLaT, provides a 'hub and spoke' approach to staff development activity in learning and teaching. In meetings with the audit team, staff confirmed that LTCs provided an effective link between OLaT and the University Learning and Teaching Committee, and the schools. During the academic year 2008-09, there were 21 CPD sessions on aspects of learning and teaching attended by 265 staff. In addition, the Learning and Teaching Conference attracted over 70 school staff. In meetings with the team, staff spoke positively of the support provided both in the orientation programme and from ongoing CPD. In addition to the OLaT programme, there is a programme of general staff development events, which is well attended.

63 It was evident that a great deal of staff development was undertaken locally, in addition to that provided centrally; school-based activity is reviewed in school annual reports. At the time of the audit, the University was introducing a new CPD framework that was being piloted in the School of Health, with a view to rolling it out across the institution in the academic year 2010-11. It is an overarching career development programme that will be tailored to specific roles and include accredited courses. The University recognises that, in some cases, staff development was seen as an optional activity and is moving towards a 'this will need to be done' approach.

64 There is a high level of support offered for e-learning, which is one of the themes of the CPD programme; the University's inaugural Learning and Teaching Conference held in May 2008 included papers on the topic. The OLaT website carries examples of innovative practice in e-learning. Information Services manage the 'T-Pod', which provides a training and development room for staff to develop skills in technology enhanced teaching and learning. The support team within Information Services offers staff training sessions and Learning Technology drop-in sessions.

65 The University operates a comprehensive orientation programme for new staff, and all new staff are allocated a mentor. New and inexperienced staff are also expected to attend the Postgraduate Certificate Teaching in Higher Education course. Staff whom the audit team met confirmed that all new staff attended the University's staff orientation programme and those with recent experience of the programme confirmed that it was a highly successful experience.

66 All staff have an annual Performance and Development Review (PDR), and a mid-term review. Academic staff described the process as well documented and consistent, and confirmed that all those conducting PDR had to be trained, and that training sessions were available for those being reviewed. Outcomes of the review are a number of negotiated and agreed objectives, which may include staff development activity. Institutional staff development priorities are informed by PDR, but staff were of the view that the process for feeding staff development needs from reviewers, through deans and on to Human Resources was protracted, with the result that common areas of staff development needs are addressed at the school or division level, rather than centrally.

67 The policy on peer support and review includes a range of activities, in addition to the observation of teaching. Staff confirmed that they are encouraged to follow the policy and that its requirements were mostly met through a team-teaching approach. Senior staff referred to the policy as an entitlement.

68 In summary, the University has in place structured arrangements for the management of learning opportunities in its on-campus provision. Students are involved in quality assurance through representation and consultation, and it is clear that their views are valued by the University. Staff and students are offered and benefit from support through a range of services and initiatives. The audit found that confidence could be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in on-campus provision.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

69 The University has shifted from a view of enhancement as 'largely ... an assumed element of the monitoring and review processes, the ongoing critical reflection of colleagues, and feedback from stakeholders', towards a more explicit approach. At the time of the audit, the University's approach to enhancement focused on 'students' learning experience in higher education', and was driven by learning and teaching activities. The Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) and the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLaT) lead on quality enhancement at institutional level and are supported by the learning and teaching coordinators, experienced members of the academic staff who play an important role in linking the institutional level with school and lower levels. They are often on the school's management team and take part in school learning and teaching groups.

70 The approach to enhancement is embodied in an operational plan for learning and teaching that is updated annually; the institutional-level Operational Plan influences school-level activity. Progress against the Operational Plan is monitored by LTC through reports from schools. Other contributors to the University's enhancement of the management of learning opportunities include quality assurance activities, stakeholder feedback and staff development. The audit found examples of instances where the LTC had championed University-wide themes, but it can take a long time to secure consistency of practice across the institution.

71 The Academic Quality and Standards Handbook is explicit that general quality assurance activities should contribute to the institutional approach to enhancement. It was evident that academic staff saw quality assurance as being about improvement, rather than as a compliance activity to secure minimum levels of provision. In addition, the role of the associate dean responsible for quality was also concerned with improvement, complementing the role of the learning and teaching coordinators.

72 While 'enhancement' is integral to the School Quality Standards and Enhancement Committees (QSEC), only one of 17 terms of reference for a QSEC is explicitly related to enhancement: '... assure the Academic Quality and Standards Committee that there are mechanisms in place for the dissemination and development of good practice arising from [sic] internal and external monitoring'. In practice, the discussions reported in QSEC minutes are more enhancement-oriented than would be suggested by the terms of reference, including, but by no means limited to, the School's Enhancement Plan, and thus represent a further institutional mechanism for quality enhancement. At an institutional level, there was evidence of the circulation of good practice identified in reviews by the Academic Audit and Review Committee.

73 The OLaT intranet site is readily accessible and provides a range of internal and external information on such areas as: internal and external developments; resources and funding sources; and the learning and teaching strategy's key themes of assessment, curriculum development, employability, e-learning and pedagogic research. An example of the impact of pedagogic research was improvement of the design of international student induction based on research by a National Teaching Fellow. OLaT organises a variety of activities designed to spread awareness of good practice, including learning and teaching conferences with internal and external speakers. It published a booklet associated with the 2009 Conference, Learning and Teaching: Enhance, about the enhancement of the student learning experience based on a wide range of case-studies. At the time of the audit, OLaT was planning to launch an e-journal 'Enhancing the Learner Experience in Higher Education'. There are also learning and teaching days in schools, which are well-attended.

74 Each year, the University offers up to six individual and two group teaching and learning enhancement awards. There are explicit criteria for their evaluation, for example 'evidence of impact on the student learning experience' and six designated themes, for example 'e-learning' and 'teaching informed and enriched by research'. Winners receive a cash prize and hold the title of University of Northampton Teaching Fellow.

75 The various student feedback mechanisms covered in Section 3 also contribute to enhancement at programme, school and institutional level. One example, confirmed by both students and staff was that issues arising from the student written submission had, at the time of the audit, already been taken to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee to identify issues to which attention should be paid. The audit found limited evidence of the structured use of feedback from other stakeholders, in particular, employers.

76 The audit found that an approach to enhancement based on learning and teaching activities was being actively pursued within the University. There are operational plans for enhancement that provide for systematic activity in support of the University's strategic approach to improvements in the management of learning opportunities in its on-campus provision.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

77 The University has developed a 'UK Education partnerships for University credit and awards strategy' to support and influence its development of new collaborative arrangements. The University also established and led the development of the Northamptonshire Federation for FE and HE and the associated Higher Level Skills Strategy 2008-2011. The latter strategy aims 'to improve aspiration and encourage engagement, progression and attainment in higher level education, training and skills development to support the expansion of a diverse, dynamic and self-reliant economy in Northamptonshire'. Through the development of partners for niche markets, the University aspires to enrich teaching and research. Staff whom the audit team met confirmed the mutual benefits of overseas arrangements in supporting the development of pedagogy and approaches to student support.

78 The University's Collaborative Provision Handbook and appendices set out the arrangements and documentary requirements for the approval, monitoring and review of collaborative provision. The Collaborative Provision Handbook is designed to supplement the guidance in the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook. The main processes and indicators used for assuring academic quality and standards in collaborative provision are the same as those used by the University for its on-campus provision. The Collaborative Provision Handbook specifies three main additional elements of quality assurance for the operation of collaborative provision: link tutors; annual reports on collaborative programmes, and bi-annual visits by staff from the Office of Educational Partnerships and Lifelong Learning (OEPLL).

79 A range of offices and committees within the University contributes to the management of collaborative provision. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic) has formal institutional responsibility for the University's strategic approach to the development of collaborative provision. The Director of the OEPLL, reporting to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic), has oversight of the development of new UK partnerships. The Director of the International Office, reporting to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Business Development), has responsibility for international partnerships. The Quality and Curriculum Services section, reporting to the Registrar, is responsible for operational oversight and management of quality assurance arrangements.

80 The Academic Policy and Development Committee (APDC) is responsible for developing, monitoring and reviewing the partnership strategy while the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC) oversees policies and strategy for academic standards, quality and enhancement in all collaborative provision. The Lifelong Learning and Educational Partnerships Committee (LLEPC) is a subcommittee of APDC and is responsible, with AQSC, for monitoring the experience of off-campus learners. It receives reports from the Link Tutors' Forum (paragraph 81). Since March 2009, a link tutor from each school has been in attendance at LLEPC meetings in response to the recognition by APDC of the importance of the role in the management of collaborative provision. The AQSC and LLEPC include representation from partner institutions. There is also representation on the Research Committee from the partner college involved in the delivery of research degree programmes (paragraph 129).

81 Link tutors are appointed for all programmes, including a University link tutor for programmes offered in partner colleges where the University does not have courses in a cognate area. Link tutors act as the first point of contact with the University for partner institution staff. There was clear evidence of the effectiveness of the link tutors in maintaining liaison and of mutual benefit in the arrangement. Staff from the OEPLL visit partners bi-annually, reporting to LLEPC and the relevant school quality standards and enhancement committee (QSEC). The terms of reference of QSECs make specific reference to the contribution of link tutor reports to monitoring of courses delivered in association with partner organisations; there was evidence of varying levels of interest in the OEPLL bi-annual reports at QSECs. Following the Internal Collaborative Audit (paragraph 82), a Link Tutor Forum was established to share good practice and to explore issues or concerns; the University confirmed that it was intended that the Forum

meet annually. The audit team is of the view that the Forum has significant potential as a vehicle for maintaining effective communication between, and across, schools and partner organisations.

82 In November 2006, the University conducted an Internal Collaborative Audit of its arrangements and procedures for the management of its collaborative provision. The panel conducting the audit included a member external to the University. The report of the audit recorded a number of recommendations for action. The University has taken action in response to the recommendations but progress has been slow in some areas, including the use of statistical information and student feedback in collaborative provision. The adequacy of periodic subject review as an instrument for the review of collaborative provision was questioned in the text of the report, but there was no formal recommendation for action in this area (see paragraph 93).

83 In February 2009, the University undertook a mapping exercise of collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning against the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. The exercise confirmed each precept as met. The audit found that the expectations of the *Code* were not fully met in respect of aspects of the University's management of its collaborative provision, in particular, the maintenance of the register of collaborative provision and the operation of periodic subject review, both of which are discussed in more detail below.

84 The University operates and makes publicly available a suite of registers that, together, cover the range of types of collaborative arrangement. The registers include details of: partner institutions; programmes being delivered; link tutors from both organisations and dates of approval. In most instances, the registers for partner colleges record the schedules for periodic subject reviews and for institutional re-approval of partner organisations; this information is not provided for articulation or supported distance-learning arrangements. The audit team noted that, with effect from the academic year 2008-09, articulation arrangements would be subject to periodic subject review. The presentation of the register makes it difficult, on occasion, to distinguish between the schedules for institutional re-approval and periodic subject review. The University's Internal Collaborative Audit in November 2006, was informed by staff that 'greater clarity would be helpful on the location of the holistic overview of collaborative provision'.

85 The audit found that there were omissions from the collaborative provision register and discrepancies in the recording of some review processes. The establishment of a systematic approach to ensuring that the collaborative provision register is accurate and complete would support more effective institutional oversight of collaborative provision, in particular, confirmation that all of its collaborative provision has been subject to periodic review. The University reported that from the academic year 2009-10, the registers would be generated from the Academic Database and that only dates of first approval and review would be included, with historical information stored elsewhere. The audit team considers it advisable that, as a matter of priority, the University establish a robust central system for the compilation and maintenance of a reliable, accurate, comprehensive and up-to-date register of all of its collaborative provision.

86 The University has a process of institutional approval which considers the suitability of potential partner institutions, with particular reference to the good standing and academic and financial stability of the proposed partner. Programme level approval is conducted separately by a panel which includes external members with the requisite academic expertise. The audit found that the institutional and programme approval processes were sound and drew on the relevant precepts in the *Code of practice* in their operation.

87 In June 2008, APDC identified a need to review periods of approval for agreements for both programme level and institutional level, and agreed that the period for programme-level arrangements should dovetail with periodic subject review, and that this should be reflected in the collaborative registers. It was also agreed that the University would introduce a process of institutional review, to consider the continued appropriateness of each collaborative arrangement. The University has drawn up a schedule for institutional re-approvals; at the time of the audit,

the University had not undertaken an institutional re-approval and so it was not possible for the audit team to appraise the effectiveness of the process in practice. Nonetheless, the specification for the process suggests that consistent observation of its requirements would provide the University with reliable information at institutional level about individual collaborative arrangements.

88 The approach to external examining in collaborative provision follows standard University procedures. The integration of home and collaborative provision in assessment and external examining processes within the University's academic framework provides for a consistent approach to academic standards across the University's provision. The Internal Collaborative Audit noted a lack of clarity about mechanisms for the identification, through external examiner reports, of matters relevant to collaborative partnerships; it was also uncertain how such matters would be communicated systematically to colleagues in partner institutions. As a result, a section was added to the external examiners' report form for comment on the comparability of academic standards and marking practices, and internal moderation across sites. External examiner reports confirm the appropriateness of academic standards across the University's collaborative provision. Samples of reports from external examiners in education and graphic design seen by the audit team made comment specific to the delivery of the programme across a range of collaborative organisations, and evidence of effective action taken in response. By contrast, in the area of business, there was no reference in the sample of external examiner reports seen by the team to provision in partner organisations.

89 The documentary requirements for annual review stipulate that all link tutor reports be included. An example of annual review examined in the course of the audit did not include link tutor reports for all of the arrangements in the register of collaborative provision. The corresponding periodic subject review did not record any discussion of either internally or externally derived student data, including results from the National Student Survey. External examiner reports did not make explicit reference to the operation of collaborative provision. No feedback was recorded from students in partner organisations. The critical review for the subject area did not offer any evaluation of delivery in partner colleges and the feedback from the panel contained little reference to delivery in partner organisations. The University's Internal Collaborative Audit noted a lack of clarity in how matters related to collaborative provision identified through annual reporting were communicated to colleagues in the partner institutions, and how such issues were resolved. The present audit found that this lack of clarity persisted in the annual monitoring of collaborative provision.

90 The University's Internal Collaborative Audit recommended action in respect of the availability of statistical information in relation to the operation of collaborative provision. The annual report on collaborative provision from the AQSC for the academic year 2006-07 noted that annual reports on collaborative provision contained limited consideration of data related to student performance, including recruitment, progression and retention, although the report to ASQC for the academic year 2006-07 did include some progression data, and there was reference to OEPLL reviewing student statistics. Much more detailed progression data for colleges by course was provided in the ASQC report to Senate in 2007-08. Nonetheless, from the evidence provided to the audit team it does not appear that information on performance of students in modules at partner colleges is used consistently at school level as part of the University's quality assurance processes, although the team heard that the Planning Unit provided information to schools on this issue. The audit team considers it desirable that the University ensures that data on student performance disaggregated by module and partner College is used routinely and consistently by external examiners, boards of examiners and in annual and periodic review processes.

91 The University's standard arrangement is that periodic review of provision delivered at a partner institution should be included within the periodic subject review of cognate provision at the University. AQSC reviewed the approach to Periodic Subject Review in 2007 and 'found that it was generally working well' and the University 'further enhanced the process in 2007' in respect of follow up action to the review process. Notwithstanding these modifications to the process, the audit found areas where information on the approach to be adopted in relation to the review of collaborative arrangements was lacking. The guidance on the identification of potential panel members does not include any requirement for nominees to have any knowledge of the operation of collaborative provision. The Collaborative Provision Handbook does not provide any detail about expectations for the involvement of staff and students from partner institutions in periodic subject review, beyond a statement of responsibility version in the summary of monitoring and review processes 'to pro-actively engage with PSR process'. The corresponding statement of responsibility for schools requires that they 'include partners as appropriate in the PSR process'. The guidance in the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook on the conduct of periodic subject review has as an aim that the process consider the continued appropriateness of any collaborative programme arrangements; nonetheless the pro forma for the critical appraisal document does not make explicit reference to collaborative provision, beyond an invitation to indicate any planned collaborative arrangements.

92 The audit took into account examples of periodic subject review which included elements of collaborative provision. Programme leaders, but no other staff from partner organisations were included on the subject team; not all partner institutions were represented. The version of the Academic Quality and Standards Handbook dated March 2009 (now the Validation and Review Handbook) stipulated that the review panel should meet a representative sample of students but did not include any detail about the approach to be adopted in relation to students from any associated collaborative provision; similarly the Collaborative Provision Handbook dated February 2009, did not provide any guidance for this area. In the samples examined as part of the audit, the review panel did not always meet students from partner organisations.

93 The report of the University's own Internal Collaborative Audit conducted in November 2006 noted that the University had introduced periodic subject review as the 'vehicle for the quinquennial review of courses grouped in subject areas'. The report stated that 'in meetings with staff, it became clear that this review methodology did not provide the opportunity for collaborative provision matters to be appropriately considered'. The report of the internal audit did not make any recommendations for action in relation to the consideration of collaborative provision through periodic subject review, and the University has not modified its approach in response to the comments noted in the report or as a result of the ASQC review of the process in 2007. The present audit confirmed that the inclusion and integration of the review of collaborative provision into annual and periodic subject review militated against thorough consideration and reporting of the operation of individual collaborative arrangements. It has been noted above that some types of collaboration do not have dates for review recorded in the register of collaborative provision: taken with the lack of detailed review and reporting at the local and central level of the operation of collaborative provision, it is difficult to see how the University can be certain that all of its collaborative provision is subject to review in accordance with its stated requirements. The audit team therefore considers it advisable that the University conduct an early review of the way in which annual and periodic subject review of collaborative provision are specified and implemented, to ensure that the operation of all its individual collaborative arrangements is appraised in a rigorous and timely fashion.

94 The University has mechanisms to gather the views of students at their collaborative organisations. Student representatives in partner colleges are trained through the University student representative training programme. Student representatives are invited to boards of study, but attendance is variable and, at the time of the audit, the University was taking action to try to secure better student participation in the deliberative structures for the management of collaborative provision. Partner institutions are expected to adhere to the University's module

evaluation guidelines, although, there was evidence that, on occasion, the requirements were not always met. In March 2009, the LLEPC emphasised the importance of annual reports on collaborative programmes reflecting fully on evaluation but noted that the National Student Survey and internal student surveys had a poor response rate in partner colleges. The University is aware of the need to establish a more structured approach to securing student feedback on matters relevant to collaborative provision. The University intends that OEPLL will establish student focus groups at partner colleges, to seek direct information about issues related to students' experience of study in its partner institutions.

95 In December 2008, a conference, including staff from partner colleges, the University and other stakeholders, launched the higher education in further education strategies of a number of the University's further education colleges. The strategies were presented by the principals and higher education managers of the colleges, and were followed by a presentation on the Northamptonshire Higher Level Skills Strategy and a series of workshops covering a variety of strategic, quality assurance and curriculum development matters. The OEPLL offers feedback on the strategies. The audit team identified as a feature of good practice the support provided to partner colleges at institutional level, as they develop their higher education strategies and associated policies and procedures, for the local development of an higher education culture.

96 Details of partner institution staff who will be delivering the programmes are considered and approved in the approval process and there are procedures for approving and recording changes subsequent to initial approval. Any subsequent staff changes have to be communicated to the University for approval by deans and should be logged centrally on a register maintained by OEPLL. The record is updated each year following approvals and sent to partners to check for accuracy. Partner institutions have been requested to nominate a named individual in each college to be responsible for coordinating communications about staffing. At the time of the audit, in response to concerns identified internally, and also raised by an external examiner, the University was conducting an audit of the record of staff teaching on collaborative programmes to confirm its accuracy.

97 The aspirations and aims of the University's framework for the management of its collaborative provision are apposite. There is evidence of good practice in the support provided to UK partner colleges in developing their higher education provision. The processes of institutional and programme approval are sound and draw on the relevant precepts in the *Code of practice*. The recently introduced procedure for Institutional Review should provide the University with additional assurance of the security of operation of individual partnerships. The audit found that the implementation and execution in practice of its framework for collaborative provision did not enable the University to be assured of aspects of the quality of learning opportunities. First, at the time of the audit, the University's collaborative provision register was not complete or definitive and therefore did not represent an accurate record of the University's collaborative arrangements upon which quality assurance could be based. Second, the audit found that consideration and reporting of the operation of collaborative provision in annual and periodic subject review were deficient. The audit concluded that, as a result, the review processes could not be relied upon in institutional management of collaborative provision. The audit found that more effective use could be made of management information relating to performance of students on some collaborative programmes in its quality assurance processes. For these reasons, the audit team concluded that there could be limited confidence in the University's current and likely future management of learning opportunities in collaborative provision.

98 The University's approach to assessment and academic standards is consistent across its provision. Therefore, the audit found that the academic standards of awards offered were secure and concluded that there could be confidence in the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of awards offered through collaborative provision.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

99 From 1992 to 2005, research degrees at the University were awarded by the University of Leicester. In August 2005, the University was granted research degree awarding powers at the same time as the University title. Developing the research degree portfolio is a core element of the University's Research Strategy, with this growth being 'at a rate commensurate with this developing research environment'.

100 The University submitted nine Units of Assessment to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), which included 84 staff, being 19 per cent of the total staff numbers. Of this, 18 per cent was seen as internationally excellent and a further 76 per cent as nationally or internationally recognised. The outcome of the RAE indicates a strengthening over time of the research environment within the institution. At the time of the audit, there were 48 full-time and 74 part-time research degree students.

101 In 2006, QAA reviewed the University's research degree programmes as part of the desk-based 'Special Review of Research Degree Programmes 2005-06'. The review noted good practice in the 'extensive range of support and training activities for both staff and students' and the 'prototype Personal Development Portfolio for research degree students'. The present audit found that support for research students continued to be an area of strength at the University (see paragraph 114).

Research strategy

102 The University's strategy for research is integrated with that for knowledge transfer, and is expressed in the 'Research and Knowledge Transfer Strategy 2008-2010'. In this context, the Knowledge Exchange acts as the focus in the University for research and knowledge transfer services, and as the principal institutional interface for major sponsors, stakeholders and partners. The goals of research and knowledge transfer are to contribute to the University's overall mission, in particular, to expand its regional role and business-facing agenda, as well as to feed into teaching.

Postgraduate research degrees

103 The University offers PhD and MPhil degrees through submission of a thesis and viva voce examination. In addition, it offers a 'Practice-led PhD in the Arts' and a PhD by means of published works. The University's framework for research students is contained in the Research Degrees Handbook. Typically students are enrolled and then transfer to registration with Advanced Postgraduate (APG) status, with progression to MPhil or PhD through a further transfer process. Direct registration to PhD is also possible under certain conditions.

104 A framework for professional doctorates was approved in June 2007; at the time of the audit, no programmes were offered under this framework though specific proposals were being developed. The University anticipates that the first of the professional doctorates will be submitted for approval in 2009-10. Meanwhile, professional doctorates have been included in the new 'University Modular Framework', which covers taught degrees from Level 4 to Level 8.

Management of research

105 At an institutional level, management of research and knowledge transfer is a responsibility of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Business Development and the Director of Research and Knowledge Transfer, who is also the head of the Graduate School. At school level, an associate dean normally leads the development of research and knowledge transfer activities.

106 The University has 10 centres of excellence designed to be a focus for research activity, including research student provision. While the University's Strategic Review of Research in 2008 found that the centres' impact on research as a whole still appeared to be limited, research students saw them as a useful complement to the Graduate School.

107 The Research Committee is responsible to Senate for functional oversight of research and knowledge transfer activities. The minutes of the Committee indicate that it fulfils this role of strategic oversight of research activities, including reviews of the activities of the centres of excellence and recommendations to Senate for continuing approval of their status. The schools' research strategies are also reviewed at an institutional level by the Research Committee.

108 The Research Degrees Committee (RDC) is the major instrument for assuring Senate that the academic quality and standards of research degree programmes are maintained. Senate has delegated much of its authority in relation to research degrees to the RDC, covering admission, registration, progress, supervision, training and examination of research degree students, while properly retaining powers in relation to the appointment of examining teams, granting and conferment of awards and termination of student's registration.

109 The RDC has a number of subcommittees. These are in two main areas: school level research degree boards (RDBs), concerned with postgraduate research students within a school or group of schools and the Research Ethics Committee (REC), whose role covers all the University's research, both research degrees and research conducted by staff, including those in the centres of excellence. Two other subcommittees of the RDC are expected to result from the introduction of professional doctorates: the 'Professional Doctorates Framework Board of Study' and the 'Professional Doctorates Framework Assessment Board'. Their terms of reference and composition are defined in the Professional Doctorate Framework Regulations.

110 In response to the growing number of research students and to allow for increased delegation of decision-making to the lower level, authority for the approval of applications for registration of approved postgraduate students (APG registration) now rests with the RDBs. Their focus is quality assurance of research degrees at school level and monitoring of research degree progress. Scrutiny of the minutes of the RDBs indicated that they were fulfilling this role, enabling the RDC to focus more on oversight and institutional matters.

111 The audit team came to the view that there was scope for the process for the appointment of external examiners for research students to be simplified. Appointments are considered at school level by the RDB and then twice at institutional level: by RDC and Senate. The added value of two layers of institutional approval for each individual student was not clear to the team.

112 The University has published an Ethics Code and Procedures for research that clearly set out required ethical standards and the approval points for research students. The structure provides for a choice between two committees reporting into REC within each school: a School Research Ethics Committee (SREC) for research students and staff research, or a School Ethics Committee (SEC) for staff research. Reviews of documentation and information provided by academic staff indicated that arrangements differed between schools, while following the broad intent of the Code. At the time of the audit, given concerns raised about some elements of the operation of SREC/SECs, in particular communication with the REC, the REC had initiated a review of their operation and terms of reference.

Research student support

113 A University-wide Graduate School located within the Research and Knowledge Transfer Directorate provides academic leadership and professional support for research. It also offers opportunities for research students to network across disciplinary boundaries. Within the Graduate School there is a Senior Research Degrees Administrator (SRDA) who works with the Research Training Coordinator (Students) on the generic training programme, and with the Research

Training Coordinator (Staff) to develop supervisor training, in particular, the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Supervision and workshops for new and experienced supervisors. A full-time Training Coordinator (Research Degree Programmes and Contract Research Staff) was appointed in September 2008. The University requires that students studying for a research degree receive supervision, support and training on-site, with off-site study requiring specific approval by the RDC. This approach ensures that the full range of on-site research student support is available to all students.

114 In meetings with the audit team, students commented very positively on the support given by the Graduate School, and in particular, the SRDA. The postgraduate research experience survey undertaken by the University also indicated high levels of satisfaction, including with supervision. It is evident that the work of the Graduate School is a significant contributor to the positive view of research students regarding learning opportunities within the University. The audit identified the University's support for research students, centred on the Graduate School, as a feature of good practice in the University's management of its research degrees provision.

Supervision

115 Supervision is through a supervisory team rather than a single supervisor. Research degree tutors are required to provide two written reports a year to a designated RDB on students' progress; and to inform the SRDA and the Dean of the Graduate School if there are any serious or unresolved difficulties. There are required procedures that are observed in practice to log supervisory meetings.

116 The University requires that all supervisors new to the institution and new supervisors complete Part 1 of its Postgraduate Certificate in Research Supervision. In the academic year 2007-08, eight staff members took the first part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Degree Supervision, with six completing.

117 The University monitors supervisory loads through RDBs and the Graduate School, using records of supervisory point scores kept by the SRDA. Exceptions can be agreed by an RDB. Academic staff confirmed to the audit team that allowance was made in workload allocation for research student supervision. The University's own internal audit against the *Code of practice, Section 1: Research degree programmes*, found this to be an area where the expectations of the *Code* were only partially met, the team was satisfied that the processes in place were suitable for the management of supervisory loads.

Academic framework for research students

118 The Research Degrees Handbook provides a comprehensive summary of the University's framework for research degrees and is a wide-ranging guide for both students and staff.

119 The University has a clear approach to research student induction and training, defining four elements: induction; generic research training; discipline-specific training, and project-specific training. Initial induction is provided through sessions organised by the Graduate School every six months. Students who met the audit team reported that the sessions were very valuable introductory events. Students who enrol shortly after an initial induction session may have to wait several months before being able to attend. Although supervisory teams provide interim introductory support, given the value of this induction, the University may wish to review the scheduling of admissions to research degree programmes and the induction programme, to establish more coordination between the two.

120 Generic research training is provided centrally and consists of a series of workshops designed to raise students' awareness of issues to be tackled and tasks to be undertaken when carrying out postgraduate research. Discipline-specific training is provided within schools. Both staff and students confirmed that this took place, as did minutes of various committees and a review by the RDC.

121 The RDC monitors enrolment and transfers. Procedures for progression to APG, and then PhD/MPhil status, are set out in the Research Degrees Handbook. There was a peak of enrolments following the granting of RDAP, so careful interpretation of historical data is required when looking at progression and completion data. In the academic year 2007-08, 12 students obtained a PhD or MPhil and five students (4 per cent) withdrew.

122 Examination arrangements are set out in the Research Degrees Handbook. The academic standards are closely based on the doctoral level in the FHEQ. Students notify their 'intent to submit' at least three months before their planned submission date, which triggers the appointment of examiners. As noted above, this involves two committees for each student, with the final decision made by Senate.

123 The outcome of the examination is communicated to the RDC for approval and then on to Senate for the award. The University's approach follows normal practice, although with a recent enhancement through the introduction of a category of award subject to correction and minor amendments. The institution-level internal review of external examiner reports shows that external examiners were satisfied, or very satisfied, with both academic standards and the conduct of PhD examinations.

124 The Research Degrees Handbook provides an appropriate framework for student appeals at relevant points of the research student lifecycle, in particular, transfer and award.

Research student involvement in teaching

125 Students involved in teaching are required to have a minimum level of training in teaching in higher education. The students involved in teaching, whom the audit team met, all reported that they had been prepared for this role in different ways. One had undertaken the first part of the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education; one the University's induction workshops on 'Beginning Teaching in HE'; and one primarily through mentoring by the course tutor. Research students were made aware in induction of the need to undertake a training programme before becoming involved in teaching. While practice did not appear to meet in full the stated requirements in every case, the team was satisfied that research students were being given opportunities for teaching and that they were actively prepared for these. The University identified that there was a need for further work in the area of support for postgraduate students who teach and, at the time of the audit, had recently introduced a workshop-based programme for Graduate Teaching Assistants.

Collaborative provision for research degrees

126 The University has a single research degree collaborative arrangement, which is with a local college that has extensive links with the University, in particular, through taught programmes from HND to MSc level. The approach to approving this first external relationship for research degrees was based on the University's general approach to approvals in collaborative provision which the audit found to be sound (paragraph 86). Research in the collaborative arrangement is based on the specialisms of the college in land-based subjects.

127 The University convened an Institutional Approval Panel specifically to consider the College's research capability. The research collaboration is governed by a Memorandum of Cooperation between the University and the College that defines the College as providing 'a research base, facilities and supervisory support for research students'. College staff involved in supervision and students have access to facilities and training at the University.

128 The first two students were enrolled under this agreement in February 2008. In each case the Director of Studies for these students was a member of staff from the School of Applied Sciences. As with other University students, the supervisory team comprised two research-active members of staff, both of whom had completed doctorates.

129 The agreement provides for RDB representation from the College and on the Research Committee, and includes a requirement for an annual report to the RDC. A representative from the College was appointed to the Science Research Degrees Board from February 2007, and to the Research Committee from October 2008, after the first students were enrolled. At the time of the audit, no annual report had yet been presented to the RDC.

130 The audit team considered that the University's processes had been correctly followed and that, on the basis of the evidence available, the arrangements for the research degree collaborative provision were sound.

131 Based on the evidence provided and the views of staff and students, the audit found that the University's approach to management of its postgraduate research provision was rigorous and had developed in a positive way since the grant of research degree awarding powers. The audit team considered that the measured expansion of the research degree portfolio was matched by the development of the academic framework for research degrees. The University's approach is consistent with maintaining academic standards and expanding the range of opportunities for postgraduate research students. In particular, the audit identified the University's support for research students, centred on the Graduate School as a feature of good practice in the University's management of its research degree provision. The audit confirmed that the University's management of its postgraduate research provision met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

132 Published documents and information are controlled centrally by Marketing and External Relations (MER) and signed off as appropriate at school/department level. School websites and the intranet are managed through devolved responsibility to schools/departments, but coordinated by one person at that level. Students and staff pointed to the University website as the most important single source of information for all relevant stakeholders. The intranet web information service is user-friendly and extensive, and provided an accessible wealth of materials for the audit team.

133 At the time of the audit, the process for approval of publicity and marketing in collaborative arrangements relied largely on informal arrangements. The University has recognised the need to adopt a more systematic approach in this area and, at the time of the audit, was developing a strategy for managing published information in collaborative provision. Under the revised procedures, MER is responsible for checking the relevant material, reporting to Lifelong Learning and Educational Partnerships Committee (LLEPC). Link tutors, the Office of Education Partnership and Lifelong Learning (OEPLL) and the International Office, as appropriate, are also required to check documents. MER has produced a draft action plan that defines the role of departments in approving publicity and also identifies how the department can support partners in promoting higher education provision. The link tutor has responsibility for advising MER and keeping OEPLL and the International Office informed and for checking partners' publicity material.

134 An academic database system provides a single information site for module and programme specifications, and award maps. The Quality and Curriculum Services has responsibility for updating the system in response to validation, approval and subject or periodic review. Schools also complete an annual audit of module guides and programme handbooks, to confirm compliance with University minimum requirements; the school quality standards and enhancement committees monitor the content of module guides and report thereon to the Academic and Quality Standards Committee. Module coordinators also audit the material against criteria provided on a pro forma. Field chairs audit a minimum of 10 per cent of module and course guides. Students were satisfied that they received detailed and relevant information to support them in their studies.

135 A review by the audit team of the guides found that a number exceeded the minimum requirements; the team noted that there was a move towards directing students to sources of further information. It was also noted by the team that, for two areas in business, the field chair was having difficulty in gaining cooperation from staff in amending non-compliant guides. This is a further instance of an area where local practice does not meet University requirements.

136 New students receive a range of information both prior to arriving at the University and during their welcome week. In meetings with the audit team students reported the Getting Started pack remained helpful throughout their first year. Students reported, and the team concurs, that the Undergraduate Handbook, which includes a CD-ROM with regulations, provided an excellent guide to what students needed to know at all stages of their programmes of study. A range of other documents is also made available for staff and students, including a guide for students in partner colleges. Materials are professionally presented providing full, detailed information in a student-friendly manner. Students reported that, where information was provided only on the website, it was less accessible, primarily due to lack of awareness of where material might be found. At the time of the audit, the University was working to improve the navigation and accessibility of material on the website.

137 The Information and Planning Unit publish facts and figures, and externally and internally derived student-related data. The completeness and accuracy of information published is managed by Records Management.

138 The audit found that the University met all requirements and guidance about public information about the academic standards and quality of its higher education provision. It provides full and accurate information for staff and for current and potential students, and has, in place, appropriate formal systems and guidance for checking its accuracy and completeness, with the exception of collaborative provision which was receiving attention at the time of the audit. Overall, the audit found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the academic standards of its awards.

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