

The University of Northampton

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Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. QAA operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales.

The purpose of institutional audit

The aims of institutional audit are to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

Judgements

Institutional audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

These judgements are expressed as either **broad confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

Nationally agreed standards

Institutional audit uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, which include descriptions of different HE qualifications
- *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

The audit process

Institutional audits are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of institutional audit are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the audit visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the audit visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the audit visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the audit team five weeks before the audit visit
- the audit visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the audit team's judgements and findings 20 weeks after the audit visit.

The evidence for the audit

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the audit team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The audit team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work using 'audit trails'. These trails may focus on a particular programme or programmes offered at that institution, when they are known as a 'discipline audit trail'. In addition, the audit team may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality. This is known as a 'thematic enquiry'.

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*, published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

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

Following an application by the University College to the Privy Council seeking the grant of its own research degree awarding powers and university title, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was asked to advise the Privy Council as to whether such powers should be granted, based on the Government's criteria. A team of QAA assessors visited the University College in 2003-04 and 2004-05 to review the College's application. Following scrutiny of the institution's application and QAA's subsequent recommendation to the Privy Council, the University College was granted research degree awarding powers and the title The University of Northampton in August 2005.

To arrive at its conclusions the assessors reviewed quality assurance procedures in operation, spoke to members of the Governing Council, members of staff throughout the College and to current students, and it observed meetings of school boards, boards of study, examination boards, Senate and senior Senate committees, and read a wide range of documents relating to the way the College manages the academic aspects of its provision.

At the same time as the College was undergoing QAA scrutiny, it was also due to be engaged in a QAA institutional audit. The purpose of audit is to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards it offers. Audit leads to a judgement of confidence in the management of the quality and standards of the awards being offered by the institution. However, when an application for research degree awarding powers and university title has been successful, it can also

be concluded, on the basis of the evidence reviewed, that a judgement of broad confidence can be made on the management of quality and standards, therefore no further institutional audit visit is required.

Academic standards is a way of describing the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK.

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

This report provides a summary of the findings of the assessors, focusing on those areas that are relevant to institutional audit. The report also highlights some matters that a future institutional audit team may wish to pursue.

Outcome

As a result of its enquiries, the view of the team of assessors is that:

- broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University College's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards.

In due course, the institutional audit process will include a check on the reliability of the information set published by institutions in the format recommended in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's document, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance (HEFCE 03/51)*. At the time of the research degree awarding-powers scrutiny the College was alert to the implications of the document *HEFCE 03/51* and was moving in an appropriate manner to fulfil its responsibilities in this respect.

The structure of the institution

- 1 The contents of this report reflect the position of the then University College Northampton (the College) in April 2005, at the conclusion of the scrutiny of its application for research degree awarding powers and university title. The date signifies the end of a period of organisational restructuring which saw the number of the College's academic schools reduced from 11 to six, the appointment of executive deans (two of them from outside the College against internal competition) to head the schools, an increasingly devolved structure, greater decanal involvement in College-wide strategic development and a period of personnel change among senior institutional managers.
- 2 The College's governance arrangements are subject to the provisions of the Education Reform Act 1988. Its Governing Council, which has six subcommittees, notably Development and Review, has 25 members, including 13 independent members, the Rector and representatives of students, teaching and non-teaching staff.
- 3 Senate is the College's supreme academic body, and to it report Academic Policy and Management (APMC), Academic Quality and Standards (AQSC), Planning and Resources (PRC) and Research Committees. With the exception of PRC each has subcommittees reporting to it. Each school has an academic board (SAB). Most academic provision is organised within either an undergraduate modular scheme, the Common Academic Framework (CAF), or postgraduate modular scheme (PGMS) and then by subject fields of study, which have their own boards of study, as do the small and reducing number of programmes outside the two schemes.
- 4 The Rector, as Chief Executive, manages the College by means of a Directorate, comprising, in addition to herself, the three pro-rectors (Academic; Research and Business Development; and Resources) and the Director of Finance, and, more recently, a Senior Management Team (SMT), comprising the Directorate and the executive deans. The heads of support departments, who include the Dean of the Graduate School, the Director of the CAF and the Director for the Centre for Education and Staff Development, report to one of the pro-rectors.
- 5 The Rector, a dominant figure in the past, has made concerted, and, it appears to the assessors, thus far successful, efforts to achieve a more distributed authority structure and consultative culture. To this end she produced a White Paper, which was widely discussed within the College and contributed significantly to the restructuring already described. Academic staff who met the assessors welcomed the increased procedural clarity and transparency in decision-making associated with restructuring. Staff are now consulted formally on important strategic matters, and instanced a change in the fee policy for Foundation Degrees as an example of senior management's willingness to listen to representations from staff. The assessors also noted that the controversial transfer of one discipline to another campus proceeded after effective consultation.
- 6 Overall, in spite of some reservations about the effectiveness of PRC's approval of school plans, the future of which is currently being reassessed in the context of the new school system, the assessors consider the College's committee structure operates appropriately, with the majority of meetings effectively chaired, well-attended, and serving as a locus for lively and engaged discussion.
- 7 The College Mission Statement is reviewed annually, and articulated through its Strategic Plan. In September 2000, prompted in part by recruitment difficulties, a Strategic Review Group, comprising the Directorate and five governors, was established to appraise a range of options. This Group proceeded by means of widespread consultations culminating in a set of principles designed

- to underpin the future character of the College.
- 8 An important consequence of this review was a move to more cost centres, with a transparent allocation of income and costs to replace a more opaque annual negotiating procedure. The review also prompted the decision to apply for research degree awarding powers and university title as a step towards achieving recognition as a premier regionally focused university. The College remains committed to fulfilling its regional role, engaging fully with the widening participation agenda and significantly improving its retention rate. It has, in collaboration with other institutions, established a higher education presence in Milton Keynes, and enjoys good relationships with local colleges, in conjunction with some of which it has developed a suite of Foundation Degrees.
- 9 A central objective of the 2002-2005 Strategic Plan was to implement the strategic vision arising from the review without surrendering a number of capital projects designed in part to enhance the quality of the student experience. Following widespread discussion a new plan is currently being developed on the basis of a Futures Group, charged with enhancing the College's current operating environment. Academic and other staff advised the assessors that they have welcomed the consultation process initiated by this Group, which has heightened their commitment to the pursuit of key institutional goals.
- 10 The executive deans, under whose management the schools appear to the assessors to have begun operating in an appropriately confident manner, are crucial to the College's new academic management structure. Although schools have been permitted some organisational diversity within an overall congruent structure, in practice there is substantial interschool structural convergence. All schools have an executive (comprising the dean, associate dean[s] and other senior staff), a similarly constituted academic board, a school forum (a meeting of all staff in a school) and a school manager; all have created principal lecturer posts with responsibility for interschool activities, including learning and teaching (the learning and teaching coordinator); most have appointed an associate dean responsible for research and knowledge transfer; and, in a model which, in the view of the assessors, justifies institutional-level consideration, two have instituted a quality committee. In addition, the College has appointed three school accountants, each responsible for managing two schools' devolved budgets. All schools produce strategic plans reflecting institutional goals and addressing national benchmarks. These are discussed at school academic boards and, along with those of the support departments, at PRC.
- 11 Relationships between the Directorate and the deans appear coherent and satisfactory. The Directorate meets weekly and joins the deans in SMT meetings once a month. The deans advised the assessors that, while Directorate meetings are often used to discuss the early stages of development proposals, SMT now takes all significant decisions. The deans, all of whom have received training from a leading management college and have been assigned such institutional responsibilities as e-learning and the development of College cost-drivers, also meet informally on a monthly basis. In the view of the assessors the deans are functioning effectively, both as school managers and collectively, and managing the inevitable tensions between their school and their corporate responsibilities in an effective and professional manner.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

12 The College has a coherent structure for the assurance of quality and standards, with clear reporting lines at institution and school level. Senate has ultimate responsibility for oversight of quality and standards, but, as indicated above, operational responsibility is devolved to AQSC, into which the school academic boards report, as does the Audit and Review Committee (ARC). The Academic Office plays a key role in supporting AQSC and ARC, and has made a number of significant contributions to the development of institutional quality assurance procedures.

13 AQSC, chaired by the Pro-Rector (Academic) and drawing its membership from schools, support departments and the Students' Union (SU), oversees all aspects of quality and standards across the College. Its agendas are wide-ranging, including receiving reports on approval and monitoring activities and considering proposed modifications to quality processes. While the conduct of meetings is satisfactory, the assessors note that on at least one occasion the Committee's reliance on oral reports or tabled documents for discussion, appeared to privilege the giving of information over debate; the assessors have, however, been assured by the College that the Committee does not normally proceed on this basis.

14 ARC plays an important role in ensuring that schools' quality assurance processes operate within prescribed College parameters. ARC receives and reviews documentation such as school annual review reports, auditing them against criteria which include external examiners' comments, past history, internal and external review, the proportion of good degrees, student retention rates and issues arising from the previous year's review. ARC has authority to refer back internal monitoring reports for expansion and enhancement, and can make recommendations to AQSC on the need for investigation or audit of school-related quality assurance procedures. The assessors saw

evidence that schools make appropriate responses to ARC when asked to review their monitoring reports. Overall, in the assessors' view ARC is a focused committee with a pivotal role in auditing the College's quality assurance; it effectively discharges its responsibilities, and its work constitutes a feature of good practice.

15 School academic boards (SABs) have devolved responsibility for the oversight of, and executive action concerning, quality assurance and matters relating to the student experience, and report directly on these matters to AQSC. SABs operate to a standard agenda, which includes student items, although the assessors noted significant variations in the level of student involvement in the meetings. Course and module monitoring is maintained by boards of study, which meet regularly and also have student representation. At module level, the field with ownership of the module is responsible for quality assurance and the quality of delivery.

16 PRC and APMC consider, respectively, the resource and academic aspects of new programme proposals. The operation of both these committees appears to the assessors to be generally effective. The assessors noted, however, that detailed discussion of the resource implications for them of new developments does not invariably take place. On exploring this issue further the assessors were advised by members of staff that the College's relatively small size and collegial ethos mean that the details of issues of this kind are normally resolved informally; it was also noted that all administrative and support departments are represented on PRC and that the relevant form contains a section on resource implications for them. While reassured by these explanations, the assessors believe it would be appropriate for the College to address the resource implications of programme approvals to service departments more formally and in greater detail, possibly in association with a review of the role of PRC in the approvals process.

17 AQSC delegates approval of new programmes to ARC, and approval of interim modifications to PAC, which in its turn reports to APMC. In both cases a rigorous formal procedure is followed prior to recommendations to AQSC being made, invariably involving external representation. The assessors, while noting that, operationally, the quality of this procedure is slightly variable, do not believe this variability is such as to threaten the integrity of the process as a whole.

18 In the absence until recently of a periodic course review system, the College's quality assurance procedures have traditionally placed great emphasis on school-level annual review and its auditing by ARC. School annual review involves an evaluation of academic delivery at module and course level, the critical reflection of academic staff on the previous year, feedback from students and progression and retention data. The head of school verifies to ARC that annual review has been conducted in accordance with regulations, and the school report is transmitted upward through the committee structure. The assessors were able to examine a number of positive examples of school level review reports.

19 As a contribution to annual review, each course produces a report covering actions arising from previous reviews, matters identified from student surveys, intake and progression data, teaching quality, assessment and academic standards, staffing and staff development, resources, academic management, an overall assessment and summary of intended actions, a course development plan, and copies of external examiners' reports and the responses made to them. While these reports are not produced to a standard template, their presentation appeared to the assessors to be very consistent. Annual review reports (at module, course, field and school levels) are generally sound, albeit with some variability in the degree of critical reflection - a point also noted in the course of an Investors in People review of the College undertaken in July 2003. Field, course and school reviews all result in action plans

monitored by ARC. The College does not routinely require SABs to report back on the outcomes of actions arising from the previous year's monitoring report, although, in an instance of local good practice from which the assessors consider the College generally might benefit, this is sometimes done locally. Overall, the assessors consider the confidence in the annual monitoring process, widely expressed within the College, is well founded.

20 Towards the end of the scrutiny process a periodic review system was introduced, with appropriate adjustments made to annual review designed to reduce the overall burden of work. This appears to the assessors to be a positive step, and, after a brief period of concern among staff as to the workload implications of an additional requirement, to have been largely welcomed within the College.

21 The College's regulations are mainly located in the scheme documents for CAF and PGMS, supplemented by policies and procedures on such matters as assessment, appeals and mitigating circumstances. Some programmes are currently outside the modular schemes, but the intention is to bring them all within the schemes by the end of 2005. The CAF office already exercises close control over the implementation of the regulations and this has recently been strengthened by the creation of the post of Director of Taught Programmes, which has been filled by an internal applicant with authoritative knowledge of both modular schemes.

22 The College has responded in two ways to certain difficulties in interpreting centrally produced management statistics experienced by some course tutors. First, it has been proposed that all relevant staff should receive training in this area to facilitate annual monitoring; secondly administrative staff will reduce the burden by as far as possible tailoring data for annual review purposes. As all courses move into CAF this support will be provided for all areas and will therefore enhance the College's use of data in its evaluation of academic delivery. The assessors consider this thoughtful and practical approach an instance of good practice.

23 The College has little collaborative provision, but is currently considering possible articulation arrangements with overseas providers. The Collaborative Provision Committee, which reports to AQSC, has overseen the production of a helpful Collaborative Provision Handbook, which describes the various forms of collaboration and the responsibilities of each party. Collaborative programmes are attached to a school and follow that school's normal quality procedures. The College appoints a moderator to take an overview of the quality and standards of all its provision at partner institutions, while for validated courses schools appoint a programme evaluator to act as a critical friend to the course team at the partner institution. Documentary evidence seen by the assessors suggests that programme evaluators' annual reports are critical and evaluative, and that appropriate monitoring of matters raised in previous reports occurs. Overall the College's collaborative partnership arrangements appear securely based, particularly given their limited scale. The assessors did note, however, that the initial stage of approval procedures lacks external involvement, and believe this could appropriately be reconsidered as part of any broader review which might be undertaken should the College indeed decide to expand provision.

24 Methods of obtaining feedback from students at module and course level vary across schools. Until recently there was no common questionnaire format, such that in some courses the student view was elicited predominantly (although not exclusively) informally, for example, through personal tutors. The College did, however, decide in the course of the scrutiny to take a more consistent approach to eliciting student feedback. Accordingly, following the recommendations of a working group of AQSC charged with exploring this matter, it has been decided to implement an institution-wide student evaluation questionnaire and to take a more standardised approach to module evaluation.

25 The College has a well-developed student representation system, with representatives trained both by the College and the SU.

Nonetheless, the assessors noted that, while students are represented on boards and committees, their participation level is variable, and conclude that it would be desirable for the College, in collaboration with the SU, to explore this matter further, addressing in particular the possibility of reviewing the effectiveness of the training of student representatives.

26 Representative groups of students advised the assessors that students are generally satisfied with feedback on assessment. Since academic year 2003-04 students have received a full breakdown of module marks, including examination performance, replacing an earlier and less popular system under which, where a module mark was a combination of coursework and examination, students were required to calculate the latter mark for themselves.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the standards of awards

27 External examiners' reports are central to the College's assessment arrangements, and, in part to address an historical problem of variability in quality, the College has recently produced a new template requiring examiners to respond to specific questions regarding the use made by course teams of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and benchmark statements. External examiners' reports are read at school and College level, with schools expected to evaluate the reports and make appropriate responses, although the assessors are unsure how consistent or strong institutional-level monitoring of these responses is. The Academic Office's useful Commentary on External Examiner Reports is submitted to the AQSC for discussion and approval, and, in the view of the assessors, provides a good summary of any institutional-level issues raised.

28 Heads of school are required to provide written feedback on actions taken in response to external examiners' comments. Although there is a requirement to use a standard

reporting format, documentation reviewed by the assessors suggest that this requirement is not always consistently applied, and that not all external examiners receive a formal response to the matters they have raised. The College is aware of at least some instances of this problem. In January 2004, for example, ARC reported that the outstanding issues to be addressed by the Academic Office included developing a common institutional approach to responding to external examiner reports. The College is also aware that the fact that external examiners are attached to fields and that their reports accordingly address field-related issues mean that courses do not necessarily have external examiners' reports to address in their reviews; it is not yet clear whether, and if so how, the College proposes to address this matter.

29 The assessors consider the College's assessment regulations appropriate and generally consistent with those of other higher education institutions. Nonetheless the assessors did note that regulations currently permit unlimited compensation between different components of assessment within a single module, and that examples exist of very poor examination marks being compensated by good written work marks, including one instance in which a candidate passed without attempting the examination. This situation raises not only concerns of a broad kind but also particular difficulties for the College given its policy that all learning outcomes should be assessed. When this point was raised in discussion, the College responded by claiming that the programme validation process ensures that all learning outcomes are in fact assessed, but undertook to scrutinise the data to determine the extent of any problem which might exist. The assessors are confident that this will be done in an appropriately professional manner.

30 With very few exceptions external examiners express satisfaction with the standards of the College's awards. They write positively about their communications with the College, the integration of external examiners' comments into the institution's quality

assurance processes, the quality of assessment criteria, the pastoral support provided for students and the CAF, although a number draw attention to such developmental matters as students' referencing skills and the provision of feedback on examination performance.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

31 The main responsibility for providing learning resources lies with the library and information technology (IT) Services. The library has been considerably extended and the extensive IT provision is separately housed within the IT centres, with access provided on a 24-hour basis. While service providers acknowledged the existence of some limitations in the provision of out-of-hours support for part-time and graduate students, they anticipated that this aspect of provision will improve with the opening of a new student centre in September 2005. Good relationships appear to exist between the library and schools, with representatives of the former present at most school board and board of studies meetings. Both the library and IT services collect annual and regular user feedback, to which they respond. The assessors believe students have ample opportunity to make their views about learning support known, and that these views are conscientiously addressed at all levels.

32 The SU currently appears to play a more restricted role in student life than is the norm in some institutions, although facilities provided by the SU are newly subject to a service agreement. The President is especially enthusiastic about this development, in the expectation that it will enable the SU to extend its student support. Student representatives at all levels are encouraged to contribute to committee deliberations and not simply to report their concerns. Students consider their concerns are taken seriously and those who met the assessors spoke very positively about the learning supports available to them.

33 The College takes understandable pride in its inclusive approach to staff development, which it believes impacts positively on the quality of learning support available to students. The assessors especially noted the enthusiasm of technical staff about the College's personal development review system and the support they receive for staff development, including non-work specific development. Administrative and technical support staff also participate alongside academic staff in the leadership development programme. The College has two staff with responsibility for equal opportunities, and the College takes equality of opportunity very seriously, not least in respect of the needs of part-time staff and those with parenting responsibilities.

34 In terms of pastoral care, induction arrangements were strongly praised by the students who met the assessors. Each year students are allocated a personal tutor from among their academic tutors, and students were particularly positive about the support they receive under this system, identifying it as an institutional strength. The College is aware of the need to put in place further measures to improve retention rates across its programmes and, to this end, it has instituted a cause for concern process coupled with a retention and progression project, to identify at an early stage students not attending or contributing and hence at risk of withdrawal. There is evidence in some areas that these measures are already having some positive effect.

35 The College is committed to securing a more strategic direction to the development of learning and teaching. For this reason it introduced the post of school-based learning and teaching coordinators into the new academic structure; and, to serve as a fulcrum for these post holders, it recently created a new central post, Director of Learning and Teaching. In the wake of these appointments the College is currently developing an institutional strategy in which two of the emerging priorities are to enhance student employability and promote pedagogic research. The assessors believe this

initiative has the potential to contribute significantly to the strategic development of learning and teaching.

Conclusions

36 The assessors believe broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. Overall, it considers the College has a clearly defined set of committees and quality assurance systems, with explicit and well-understood reporting lines. There is effective cross-membership of key institution-level committees, and the fact that there is representation from both academic staff and staff from support departments facilitates a constructive dialogue between academic planning and resource needs. Students are appropriately represented on boards and committees at institution and school level, although the assessors did note that their participation level is variable, and believe it would be desirable for the College and SU to explore this matter further, addressing in particular the possibility of reviewing the effectiveness of the training of student representatives. The annual review process, albeit that there is some variability in the degree of critical reflection involved, appears robust, and the introduction of periodic review has the potential to strengthen the process further.

37 The external examiner system appears sound at both College and school levels, and to contribute significantly to assuring the standards of the College's academic awards. The College maintains a high level of awareness of, and engagement with, the institutional implications of external examiners' comments. At school level there is evidence that matters raised by external examiners are appropriately considered and acted upon, and at institutional level the Academic Office is centrally involved in dealing with these reports. Nonetheless, the assessors note that ARC identified 'developing a common institutional approach to responding to external examiner reports' as one of a number of outstanding issues to be addressed

by the Academic Office at the time of the scrutiny. Accordingly the assessors encourage the College to take any steps necessary to ensure that all issues raised by external examiners are addressed in an appropriate and timely manner and that the examiners are appraised of the responses to their comments in a timely and consistent manner.

38 The assessors also note that the College undertook to review its compensation arrangements to ensure an appropriate articulation between its assessment methods and its policy that all learning outcomes should be assessed. It assumes, therefore, that the College will have proceeded with this review shortly after the completion of the scrutiny process.

39 The assessors consider that the College's learning infrastructure operates efficiently and is underpinned by effective internal communications. Resource needs are effectively identified, suitably related to academic requirements, and properly monitored. Comments by staff and students suggest that library and IT facilities provide a sufficient resource to support the academic programme. Students met by the assessors praised the quality of their learning and pastoral support, and overall the assessors believe the College is making conscious and realistic efforts to develop a holistic learning environment for the benefit of all its members.

The University of Northampton's response to the report in lieu of institutional audit

The University of Northampton very much welcomes QAA's report in lieu of Institutional Audit, and is pleased that the enquiries on which it is based led to the award of Research Degree Awarding Powers and University title in the summer of 2005.

The University was much encouraged by both the report and the dialogue with the Assessors that preceded it, and these have helped it shape its priorities for quality assurance and enhancement matters. Since the conclusion of the enquiries, the University has implemented the alterations to the annual monitoring procedures through the new focus on annual monitoring at field level (to be reviewed at the end of the current academic year) which complements the programme of periodic subject reviews. Over the next year, the University will

- review the guidelines and processes for assuring the quality assurance of collaborative provision, following an audit of current practice;
- review the way in which the institution disseminates areas of good practice identified in validation, monitoring and review reports;
- consider ways in which the institution will use outcomes from the National Student Survey in quality assurance and enhancement activities;
- review the scope, depth and detail of the new periodic subject review procedures.

The University is currently piloting an institution-wide student questionnaire which attempts to capture students' views on both academic and campus-life activities. Consequent on the receipt of research degree awarding powers, Senate has made some adjustments to its committee structure by placing the Research Degrees and Learning and Teaching Committees in central roles reporting direct to Senate.

Further to the detailed points raised in the report

- Conversions into the Frameworks (para 21) - Between 2003-2006 those taught programmes (both undergraduate and postgraduate) that were not in the framework have undergone re-organisation (and in some cases re-validation) to enter the CAF or PGMS structure.
- Student participation (paras 25 and 36) - Training has been delivered by staff from Academic Office (rather than by varying committee volunteers) in conjunction with the Students Union, with a single session per school being held as part of an introductory meeting within a wider agenda. This has enabled greater consistency and promoted continuous improvements in the training. The University is currently engaged in a second stage bid to the Higher Education Academy to fund a project entitled Student Participation and Representation in Enhancement, Assurance and Development, which will build significantly on the good practice developed to date.
- External Examiners associated with Fields rather than courses (para 28) - As QA responsibility is focused within Fields this is an appropriate arrangement in general. Specific arrangements (eg in Education) are in place where coverage of the course dimension is an additional need. Further adjustments may follow the University's review of the new annual monitoring arrangements.
- External Examiners (para 37) - Academic Office, on behalf of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, is conducting annual audits of School responses to external examiner reports. Such responses are required to be timely and in a consistent format and these requirements have been tightened up and reiterated to Schools. The adequacy of responses to external examiner reports is also checked via annual review and with the examiners themselves in the subsequent year's report.

- Internal compensation within modules (para 38) - This is a design feature of our frameworks and assessment is tailored to the demands of this approach and subjected to appropriate scrutiny at validation and change of approval events, which confirm that all learning outcomes will be achieved by successful candidates.

