

Southampton Solent University

MARCH 2006

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.

ISBN 1 84482 459 4

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Printed copies are available from:

Linney Direct
Adamsway
Mansfield
NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450629

Email qaa@linneydirect.com

A report, in lieu of institutional audit, based on enquiries undertaken in academic year 2003-04, in connection with Southampton Institute's (now Southampton Solent University) successful application for taught degree awarding powers

Following an application by the Institute to the Privy Council seeking the grant of its own taught degree awarding powers, 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 Institute in 2003-04 to review the institution's application. Following scrutiny of the institution's application and QAA's subsequent recommendation to the Privy Council, the Institute was granted taught degree awarding powers in October 2004.

To arrive at its conclusions the team reviewed quality assurance procedures in operation, spoke to members of staff throughout the Institute, to current students and it read a wide range of documents relating to the way the Institute manages the academic aspects of its provision.

At the same time as the Institute 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 taught degree awarding powers 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 Institute'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 (HEFCE) document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance* (HEFCE 03/51). At the time of the taught degree-awarding powers scrutiny the Institute was alert to the implications of HEFCE 03/51 and was moving in an appropriate manner to fulfil its responsibilities in this respect.

The structure of the Institute

1 With 8,414 full-time equivalent students in 2002-03, a marginal increase on the previous year, Southampton Institute (now Southampton Solent University) claims to be the largest non-university institution of higher education in the country. Its academic structure revolves around three faculties - Business, Media Arts and Society, and Technology (including the Warsash Maritime Centre which operates on a separate

campus some miles away) - offering courses covering a wide range of academic disciplines and fields of practice. The staff profile reflects this, with more than 80 per cent having industrial experience, over 60 per cent a teaching qualification and over 50 per cent a professional qualification.

2 The Institute's origins lie in the mid-nineteenth century. It became a higher education corporation in 1989 and, since the first cohorts graduated in 1993, the Institute states that it has awarded some 20,000 degrees and 10,000 diplomas and certificates, as well as several thousand postgraduate awards, including 81 PhDs and 20 MPhils.

3 The Institute states that it has invested some £90 million in buildings, equipment and staff development since 1989, with comparable levels of investment envisaged during the planning period 2004 to 2008. The Institute's priorities include new studio facilities in media and cultural studies, technical equipment to support maritime undergraduate and postgraduate courses, a new water sports centre, cabling for intranet access in halls of residence, a new student record system and information technology (IT) upgrades.

4 For many years, the Institute has offered its awards under an accreditation agreement with Nottingham Trent University, with courses additionally accredited by a wide range of professional bodies. The Institute claims that diploma and, increasingly, Foundation Degree provision is an important part of its future planning.

5 In December 2003 the Board of Governors approved a new Strategic Plan for 2004 to 2008 for the Institute with key strategic priorities relating to learning and teaching, advanced scholarship, knowledge transfer and widening participation. In addition, the Plan also emphasises the Institute's commitment to community engagement. Consistent with this, the Institute claims its distinctiveness lies in good part in the nature and extent of this engagement, through curriculum, advanced scholarship and knowledge transfer and

outreach activities, with widening participation key to its mission.

6 Assessors noted that, in accordance with sector-wide good practice, a review of governance and decision-making was undertaken in 2002-03, aided by an external consultant. The review report, published in September 2003, found the Institute's governance procedures generally 'robust and fit for purpose', while recommending reform in several relatively minor areas. A meeting with four members of the Board provided a generally favourable view of the Board's competence, commitment and understanding of its responsibilities, and indicated that the distinction between governance and management was understood and respected. Assessors also noted a training programme for governors and a faculty liaison system designed to help them increase their understanding of the Institute, of which the governors spoke favourably.

7 Senior management lies in the hands of the Principal, as Chief Executive, and a small team of experienced and competent vice-principals. The Institute appears to assessors to be decisively led by its Principal, though Governors emphasised their confidence in the stability and robustness of the team as a whole, including its capacity to withstand any future personnel changes, and in the Principal's consultative approach to management.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

8 The Institute makes strong claims about the centrality of quality to its mission. It points to the contributions of a number of senior staff to the quality and standards agenda nationally and internationally, and to the institutional encouragement provided for all academic staff to engage with subject networks and to act as external examiners, panel members and advisers to other higher education institutions. It claims in particular to be helping to shape

the future of British higher education in areas such as media production and maritime education, where it is working closely with relevant industry, professional and skills training bodies. The Institute claims to be strongly committed to scholarship and critical self-reflection, to use evidence to underpin all its activities and to make routine use of external reference points, including external examiners drawn from the full range of higher education institutions, to inform its judgements about both quality and standards. Overall, so far as assessors are able to judge, these claims can be upheld.

9 For example, some support can be found in the fact that the Institute has never received an adverse quality judgement, in the successful outcome of developmental engagements in accountancy and computing science in 2003-04 and in the reports of a number of external accrediting bodies. In particular, the Institute claims that its BA (Hons) Journalism is one of only three such courses in the country to be accredited by all three relevant professional bodies (the National Council for the Training of Journalists, the Broadcast Journalism Training Council and the Periodicals Training Council).

10 In 2000 substantial modifications were made to the Institute's committee structure in order, mainly, to simplify and clarify reporting lines and expedite the management of business. The key structural change was the re-organisation of the previous eight faculties into three, each managed by a dean and three associate deans, supported by a faculty registrar. In the same year, associated with this structural change the Institute introduced a policy of increased devolution (described internally as 'delegation') designed to achieve both a reversal of the previously predominantly top-down approach to management and a wider change in institutional culture. A number of faculty-level academic staff met by assessors claimed that a benign consequence of delegation had been the enhancement of staff morale and, hence, of commitment to the Institute.

11 Delegation was introduced over a two-year period, the final phase, in August 2002, involving the transfer to deans, in effect on a

three-year licence, of responsibility for managing selected aspects of quality control and assurance. Other significant functions already delegated to faculties included administering course approval, validation, monitoring and review within a broad and somewhat flexible institutional policy framework. Delegation was managed by the Academic Board, charged with approving proposals from faculties as to the machinery each wished to deploy in discharging its delegated responsibilities. The Board reviewed the operation of delegation through reports received from the Academic Standards and Development Committee in June 2003 and July 2004; the framework as a whole is to be reviewed in 2005.

12 The same period of radical change saw the creation, in 2002, of the Academic Standards and Quality Service (ASQS), an office managed by a non-faculty dean with specialist expertise, and formed out of the amalgamation of the former Registry, Academic Quality Service and Academic Development Service. Members of ASQS attend external events regularly and act as institutional representatives on such national and regional bodies as the Academic Registrars' Council and the Standing Conference of Principals' Quality Management Group. Assessors noted that a 'team health' audit of ASQS in 2002-03, undertaken by the Personnel Service, found the new arrangements had settled down quickly and that staff were confident about their new roles.

13 A key responsibility of ASQS is the production of documentation to support the Institute's quality management activities. The assessors found the documentation produced by ASQS for use in 2002-03 and 2003-04 to be clearly written and well presented. The Quality Manual, extensively revised since 2001-02, brings together a wide range of information and sets out policies and requirements clearly. Overall, assessors agree with the recent Governance Review which concluded that quality of documentation was an institutional strength.

14 Central to the Institute's quality framework has been the progressive implementation of the new Academic Framework led by the Academic Framework Project Group under the direction of the Senior Vice-Principal (Academic). This ambitious initiative drew on the work of 35 task groups. It was designed to provide an institution-wide structure for academic management and development, and to promote a consistent approach to curriculum design, delivery and regulation, based on clear educational principles and taking account of QAA's Academic Infrastructure. A key theme is a student-centred approach to learning and teaching, designed to enhance the development of independent learners.

15 Overall, the assessors found evidence of careful management of the process, with an appropriate combination of active leadership and a participatory ethos, achieved by involving staff from both faculties and service areas. Staff and students who met assessors strongly endorsed the value of the Academic Framework, referring in particular to the enhancement to the student experience, the consistency provided by the educational principles and to a number of innovative and distinctive ideas and approaches. It appeared to assessors that the Academic Framework represented a mature and measured approach to policy development and implementation and that the Institute was now able to provide sufficient evidence of the effectiveness of this major piece of work for them to be confident that the structures underpinning and monitoring it were progressive and responsible.

16 So far as delegation is concerned, assessors are satisfied that responsible discussion took place prior to the decision being made to, respectively, approve and confirm delegated powers, and that appropriate documentation is now in place. They explored in some depth the wisdom of permitting each faculty to create different structures, and were persuaded, especially by faculty deans, that in practice any differences were both minimal and reducing, but that the opportunity to tailor arrangements to different disciplines and cultures had the great

benefit of enhancing the commitment of sub-faculty level staff. Assessors generally accepted the view of one respondent that delegation had in fact secured greater uniformity of practice than had centralisation, when departmentalism had been high and institutional commitment low, and it had proved impossible to achieve compliance across eight faculties.

17 Assessors also noted that, in addition to the close collaboration among the three deans, both the cross-faculty responsibilities of the nine associate deans and cross-membership of faculty boards yielded further opportunities for disseminating good practice. Overall, in their view institutional structures offer a satisfactory framework for negotiation when jurisdictional or other issues arise, and confirm that one such issue (whether a standard cross-faculty reading week should be required) was efficiently and effectively resolved.

18 On the basis of meetings with various levels of academic staff, assessors confirm that the Institute's claim that delegation has led to a greater sense of 'ownership' of procedures and outcomes by faculty-based staff appears justified; they are also satisfied that faculties have sufficient administrative resources to enable them to permit the competent conduct of business.

19 Assessors noted that a system of internal academic audit, managed by the Dean of the ASQS, complements the delegation of quality-related activities to faculties. Every year internal academic audit undertakes a review of identified themes aided by a number of audit teams, each chaired by an appropriate person external to the Institute. These reports are considered by Academic Standards and Development Committee (ASDC) and, on the basis of scrutiny of both ASDC minutes and the 2002-03 internal audit reports themselves, assessors believe the Institute's confidence in the system is justified, through its means both of reviewing practice in relation to specified themes and of monitoring faculties' discharge of their responsibilities.

20 Accordingly, assessors conclude that, for the most part, delegation has settled down and that the structure is sufficiently robust for there to be confidence that any problems will come to light and that good practice in one part of the institution will be disseminated. They saw evidence to suggest that the faculties are conducting themselves responsibly in relation to their new powers, that ASQS is rigorous in the discharge of its duties and that the Institute is actively engaged with the national quality agenda and also developing its own state of the art approaches to quality management and enhancement.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the standards of awards

21 For many years, the Institute has offered its awards under an accreditation agreement with Nottingham Trent University. During that time it claims to have successfully maintained academic standards as well as progressively enhancing the quality of the student experience; in its turn the University has consistently expressed its support for, and confidence in, the Institute's performance. For example, the University responded to the Institute's 2003 annual report, which it described as 'exemplary', by stating that 'the University was assured of the quality and standards of the programmes at the Institute and the continuing health of the University's awards'.

22 Assessors were aware that a previous assessment panel had expressed uncertainty about some operational consequences of the discretion permitted to boards of examiners. Part of this complexity resulted from an apparently incomplete process of unitisation, causing potential overlapping responsibility between course and unit-based external examiners. Assessors were satisfied that, by the time of their visits, the position was clear. This clarification was achieved through the work of the Assessment Regulations Working Group, as a result of which a raft of reforms under consideration in 2001-02 had been

implemented in 2002-03. As a result, assessors are satisfied that lines of responsibility among different categories of external examiner are now generally clear.

23 In particular, the Institute claims that external examiners operate in teams, are attached to units within courses rather than to courses (although some might also examine for a whole course), and that all examinations of a single unit are examined by the same external examiner. This claim was confirmed by a review of external examiners' reports and duties; and although the Quality Manual does allow for additional external examiners to be appointed to facilitate moderation for a widely used unit, chairs of boards, who now appear well trained as well as competently supported and centrally monitored by ASQS, are, in the view of assessors, unlikely to find managing such a situation unduly taxing.

24 The Assessment Regulations Working Group was established to ensure the regulations are aligned with student learning, and learning outcomes are clear and equitable, and enable students and other stakeholders to have confidence in the standard of the Institute's awards. On the basis of an analysis of these changes, assessors consider that they signify an appropriate shift to an equitable, rule-based system generally in accordance with good sector-wide practice. Overall, therefore, assessors judge that the working group has made considerable progress towards both clarifying and improving the regulations, and that its work constitutes evidence of the Institute's commitment to monitoring the reliability and validity of its assessment procedures.

25 Assessors were aware that a previous assessment panel, which had visited the Institute at an earlier stage in the delegation process, had expressed concern for the security of standards in an increasingly devolved institution. The Institute, however, assured the present assessors that it had continued to enhance and strengthen its arrangements for securing and safeguarding the standards of its awards, drawing attention to various developments in respect of the management of

examination boards and arrangements for external examiners. On the basis of an examination of the work of ASDC entailing both documentary research and meetings with its Chair and some members, assessors consider that it is exercising an appropriate steer over the security of standards.

26 In addition, the ASQS undertook reviews of the operation of examination boards following the 2002 and 2003 seasons, and assessors are satisfied that all major issues relating to the conduct and decision-making of the boards raised in the review reports were appropriately addressed through the provision of workshops and training for academic staff, coupled with the production and dissemination of briefing notes by the ASQS.

27 Associate deans, who chair boards of examiners, advised assessors that they perceive safeguarding standards at institutional level as central to their responsibilities as examination board chairs. They expressed considerable confidence in the work of the boards, informing assessors that they receive repeated training and that it was inconceivable for any of them to be unfamiliar with the regulations. This claim was supported by the fact that, in addition to the annual ASQS reports on the conduct of examination boards, their effectiveness is monitored by periodic observation by internal visitors from ASQS and other faculties. Internal visitors, who observe up to one-third of all boards, are required to complete and submit report forms which appear to assessors to be well structured and to the point.

28 Support for the Institute's claims concerning the effectiveness of boards of examiners also derives from the scrutiny of recent external examiners' reports. This indicates examiners' satisfaction with the conduct of boards and identifies no major difficulties stemming from delegating to faculties responsibility for servicing the boards.

29 The Institute claims to have progressively strengthened arrangements relating to external examiners, including appointment, induction, training, renewal and the manner of engaging

with their reports. Assessors found these policies and their implementation generally satisfactory. New external examiners are provided with induction and training packs and encouraged (but not required) to attend training events. The external examiners' report form has been revised to place a greater emphasis on standards and on the robustness of assessment and examination board procedures. Clear procedures are in place at faculty and institutional level for addressing matters raised in external examiners' reports, and ASDC identifies emerging themes and reviews responses to them early in each academic year. Mechanisms for providing feedback to external examiners on actions taken have been strengthened.

30 Within this satisfactory context, assessors noted three matters to which future auditors may wish to give consideration. First, the very high satisfaction rates reported in the internal analysis of external examiners' reports which is submitted to ASDC reflects a count of tick-box responses to a series of yes/no questions designed to reflect the questions now part of the information set required by HEFCE 03/51, and does not always acknowledge that a number of external examiners wrote in qualifications to those responses. In addition, in a small number of cases it was not reported that external examiners had indicated that they had not been sent examination papers or course work (presumably because they annotated their response with this comment rather than including it in the 'open' section at the end of the form). In the view of assessors, while these omissions are regrettable, they should be put in context. Scrutiny of the reports as a whole, and the Institute's response to them, suggests that such omissions were exceptional and should not give cause for fundamental concern, particularly given recent (but as yet not fully tested) revisions to external examiners' report forms.

31 The second matter relates to the translation of individual issues raised by external examiners into broader policy concerns, and may be illustrated by two examples. First, from

the 2002-03 reports, assessors noted that all three external examiners associated with a programme had made similar critical comments, some of which appeared to question the institutional capacity to offer the programme. Although the Institute had identified the problem and signalled serious concern to the course team and the dean, it was not clear whether and, if so, how these comments would lead to a strategic review of the future of the programme. In discussion, the Institute was itself unsure of the procedure to be followed in such a situation.

32 The third issue relates to the profile of the external examiner cohort. Describing the progress made since July 2002, the Institute claims it has developed its arrangements for scrutinising faculty nominations of external examiners, including issuing clearer guidelines on nominations. Assessors noted, however, that in one faculty a sizeable minority of external examiners (including several independent consultants) had been recruited from the non-university sector, and that a significant proportion of them lacked any external examining experience. While assessors accepted that inexperienced examiners were paired with more experienced examiners and accepted that it might be appropriate, given the academic portfolio of this faculty, to appoint some examiners from outside the sector, the Institute itself claimed to have been displeased with some recent nominations from the faculty in question. It indicated that the ideal would be to seek candidates from those universities against which the Institute sought to benchmark itself. The Institute did not, however, appear to have in place any means of scrutinising nominations from course teams other than seriatim or any institutional strategy as to the type of institutions from which external examiners should be sought. In the view of assessors, the absence of such criteria, if not remedied, could impact on the standard of the Institute's awards in the longer term. The Institute has since stated that Academic Board has agreed such a strategy.

33 Overall, on the basis of discussion, reading and observations of examination boards in operation, assessors are of the view that the Institute's assessment regulations and its arrangements for examination boards and external examiners are both robust and developing, and adequate to safeguard the standard of its academic awards.

The Institute's use of the Academic Infrastructure

34 Assessors are satisfied that the Institute is well-abreast of the developing choreography of the Academic Infrastructure, in particular *The framework for higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, and that it is taking meticulous steps to ensure, at validation and review, that proposals and programmes respectively incorporate up-to-date and accurate programme specifications, are matched against relevant benchmark specifications and take into full consideration the precepts specified in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA. In relation to this, every year at least one of the themes reviewed by internal academic audit and referred to above, is of the Institute's use of a section of the *Code*. These audits, undertaken by the ASQS, are reported to ASDC, and the recommendations arising from them are implemented at faculty level and monitored both by the relevant dean and by ASQS.

35 The newly created Institutional Research Team (IRT), part of the ASQS, is responsible for coordinating the Institute's response to the sector-wide information requirements set out in HEFCE 2003/51. The assessors are satisfied that the Institute is aware of requirements and expectations so far as teaching quality information is concerned and has appropriate structures in place to ensure that it continues to be so, and, so far as they can judge, is preparing appropriately for the publication of its information set.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

36 The Institute is close to final implementation of its Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Development Strategy (LTCDS). This strategy is integrated into the Academic Framework and covers all activities within each faculty, including course validation and review. Key aspects of student learning support have been carefully and systematically evaluated by the IRT, and assessors are satisfied that the system has attracted generally enthusiastic comment.

37 'Students 1st' is the generic name for an integrated Institute-wide student help and support system, opened in June 2003 and located in purpose-built accommodation. The Institute claims Students 1st is distinctive in coordinating all student services as well as the Students' Union, and providing an effective, efficient and integrated approach to learning and support which has already contributed to improved student retention. Assessors note that both new and senior students strongly commended the centre, and Students' Union representatives claimed to have been consulted closely on its design and on the services to be provided. More generally assessors can confirm that students are complimentary about the overall quality and accessibility of support available to them.

38 A further strand of activity is the rapid development of Learnwise software to facilitate IT-based learning, with almost 40 per cent of staff now incorporating Learnwise materials in their teaching. Students who met the assessors were aware of, and actively engaged with, Learnwise, reporting that it can be accessed easily from off-site locations and regarding it as a student-centred and flexible approach to learning.

39 LTCDS is also the basis of the Institute's staff development and enhancement policies. A critical initiative supporting the Strategy has been the establishment of the Learning and Information Service (LIS), which has a coordinating role as well as lead responsibility

for developing new learning technologies and a managed learning environment. Assessors examined LIS in some detail, and found staff strongly supportive of the new arrangements, reporting a more coordinated delivery of previously separate services and providing examples of significant enhancement.

40 Overall, in spite of a number of strategic issues resulting from the absence of a Dean of LIS at the time of the visits, assessors were provided with evidence to suggest that the Institute had made significant progress since October 2002 in implementing its plans for the reconfiguration of central services and establishing their activities. Assessors are of the view that the new arrangements represent a significant enhancement of service, and are achieving the Institute's intended outcomes.

41 All new academic staff, both full and part-time, are subject to a formal mentoring arrangement during the mandatory probationary period; appraisal and peer observation systems are in place. New full-time staff without a teaching qualification or experience are required, and part-time staff encouraged, to complete the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching (Higher Education), accredited by The Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, a course also available to experienced staff seeking to develop their expertise. At the time of the assessment visits almost 100 staff had successfully completed the programme. The Institute also runs an annual Learning and Teaching Conference for staff, organised around such themes as (to cite two recent examples) supporting learning and creative assessment. Though assessors were unable to evaluate these provisions they appear indicative of a commitment to learning and growth permeating the institution.

Conclusions

42 Southampton Institute is, in the view of assessors, a well-managed institution with a strong sense of academic identity and

community, a clear vision for the future and a sound, if rapidly evolving, structure for achieving it. Assessors found high levels of enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the Institute emerging in meetings with governors, staff of all levels of seniority and students. Governors expressed strong support for the management team and the self-reflective yet dynamic ethos which had been achieved; staff of all levels of seniority were both willing to engage in open and searching debate and demonstrated a strong commitment to the Institute's vision and mission; students emphasised the value they placed on the supportive environment provided for them, their collaborative relations with staff and on the learning support systems newly made available to them.

43 Assessors are aware that the systems which they observed were in a state of rapid transition at the time of the assessment visits, and that, while considerable progress has been made, caution is necessary if the durability of the structures is to be assessed. The Institute had, when assessors visited, recently emerged from a period of rapid change and slight turbulence, cultural, intellectual and economic, reflected in the observations of an earlier assessment panel, and was now in a state of relative calm. While it is possible that the general enthusiasm described in this report is a honeymoon response, overall assessors consider this unlikely. The Institute has a clear and potentially achievable strategic plan, its new initiatives have been carefully budgeted and introduced on the basis of transparent consultation and provision for supporting the learning of both staff and students appears to assessors especially strong. While assessors initially formed the view that the Institute's dynamism derived primarily from the inputs of specific individuals and might, therefore, be vulnerable to changes of personnel, they are now persuaded that the structures are sufficiently embedded for this not to be the case. It is this point above all which, in the view of assessors, makes it possible for Southampton Institute to be able to be described as a mature institution, and for confidence to be expressed

in the quality of its provision and the standard of its academic awards.

44 Nonetheless, there are two broad issues to which future institutional auditors may wish to give consideration. These relate, first, to the continued ability of the LIS successfully to coordinate and innovate in its many areas of responsibility. While assessors take the view that LIS constitutes a significant step forward, not only is it very new and its brief very wide, but at the time of the visits it was lacking a Dean. The manner in which the new appointee assumes responsibility for LIS will clearly be crucial for its continued success.

45 The second area of potential interest to future auditors relates to external examiners where three specific issues may benefit from further enquiry. The first is the extent to which the redesigned external examiners' report forms enable the synthesised account provided to the ASQC to reflect accurately the more nuanced comments which, under the present system, have been presented in the most positive light possible. The second issue is whether in the future the system evolves in such a way as to enable institution-wide issues raised by external examiners to be addressed at an institutional (as opposed to faculty or sub-faculty) level. The third issue, also an institution-level one, is whether the Institute evolves a reliable method of dealing appropriately with less than ideal nominations for external examinerships. The issue is not to do with a capacity to reject demonstrably unsuitable nominations (this is not in question) but, rather, with a willingness to create and implement a more proactive policy for nominations than exists at present, and one that reflects an increasing confidence which permits the Institute to locate itself at an appropriate and realistic point within the higher education community. In addition, such a policy would be especially helpful to areas of the Institute developing cutting-edge programmes of study where a clearly-defined body of knowledge is not easily found within the sector, and where, accordingly the need to protect the standard of awards is especially acute but the means of doing so unusually challenging.

Appendix

The University's statement on developments since the audit visit

The University welcomes the opportunity to comment on the institutional audit report.

The report notes that it is based on visits by a team of QAA assessors during 2003-04 to evaluate Southampton Institute's successful application for taught degree awarding powers. Following the granting of those powers with effect from 1 November 2004, an application was submitted for university title. This led to a further visit from QAA Assessors in January 2005, and the granting of university status with effect from July 2005. QAA assessors were able, therefore, to note action taken following their visits in 2003-04 some of which have a direct bearing on points made in the audit report.

Both sets of visits covered institutional arrangements for governance and academic management as well as the management of quality and standards. The Institute's application for university title also involved scrutiny of the scholarship and pedagogical effectiveness of academic staff.

Since the visits in 2003-04, cabling for intranet access is now available in all halls of residence (paragraph 3) and the Institute had a successful QAA developmental engagement in Social Work in November 2004 (paragraph 9). The new Dean of the Learning Information Service, Dr Chris Hall from Bournemouth University, took up his appointment in May 2004 and consolidated and extended work on the strategic issues referred to in paragraph 40 of the report aimed at enhancing further the student experience. The impact of this is evident in the reports of external examiners referred to below.

The annual survey of themes emerging from the reports of external examiners for the academic year 2003-04 was considered by the Academic Standards and Development Committee and the Academic Board during the autumn of 2004 and made available to assessors during their visit in January 2005. The overwhelming message in terms of academic standards and quality of provision was a very positive one. According to these reports academic standards were appropriate, secure and comparable with the university sector. The use of the 'tick box' referred to in paragraph 30 of the report was considered at the annual workshop for external examiners in January 2005. Examiners were advised that they should regard this part of their reports as enabling them to make threshold judgements on the academic standards set and achieved to reflect the questions which are now part of the information set required by HEFCE 03/51.

Continuous quality improvement, ongoing course development, innovation and improved student performance were noticeable themes in written reports provided by external examiners. The relationship between the Institute and its external examiners was perceived by them as highly satisfactory, with induction, briefing and the examiners' workshop consistently singled out for praise. The rigour and integrity of the examination board process was affirmed. The quality of the student learning experience and the range and appropriateness of assessment methods were again two positive themes.

