



Southampton Solent University

Institutional Review
by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

June 2013

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About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Southampton Solent University. The review took place on 3-7 June 2013 and was conducted by a team of five reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Mary Carswell
- Dr Neil Casey
- Professor Julie McLeod
- Mr Ken Harris (student reviewer)
- Ms Ellie Smith (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Southampton Solent University and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - threshold academic standards¹
 - the quality of learning opportunities
 - the information provided about learning opportunities
 - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2.

[Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

In reviewing Southampton Solent University, the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [themes](#) for the academic year 2012-13 are the First Year Student Experience and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement, and the institution is required to elect, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² Background information about Southampton Solent University is given on page 4 of this report. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for [Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland³ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

¹ For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

² www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/ireni/pages/default.aspx

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Southampton Solent University

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Southampton Solent University (the University).

- Academic standards at the University **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.
- Information about learning opportunities produced by the University **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the University **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at Southampton Solent University:

- the strategic and innovative approach to employability, which includes extensive use of real-world learning and has a demonstrable impact on the student experience and the University's external profile (paragraphs 2.7.1-4 and 2.13.1-3)
- the comprehensive and inclusive range of support mechanisms for students, as exemplified by succeed@solent (paragraphs 2.2.1-2 and 2.12.2)
- the transformational impact of the Strategic Development Programme, which has enhanced student learning opportunities and engendered a more outward-looking and proactive attitude across the University (paragraphs 2.12.1 and 4.1-4).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following recommendations to Southampton Solent University.

The University should, before any Professional Development Awards are made:

- rename the Professional Development Awards to avoid any possibility of giving students, employers or other stakeholders the impression that these awards are the same as the main qualifications on *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and the *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England* (paragraphs 1.1.8-12).

The University should, within three months:

- ensure that prospective and current students studying Professional Development Units are systematically provided with advice and guidance to enable them to make informed decisions in relation to credit accumulation and achievement of awards (paragraphs 2.12.4-5).

The University should, for the 2013-14 academic session:

- ensure that external examiners' annual reports are consistently and systematically made available, in full, to student representatives (paragraphs 3.9-10).

Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

Southampton Solent University engages students at all levels across a range of quality assurance and enhancement processes and is taking active steps to strengthen this aspect of its provision.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland](#).⁴

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/ireni/pages/default.aspx

About Southampton Solent University

Southampton Solent University was granted taught degree-awarding powers in 2004, as Southampton Institute. It assumed its present title a year later when it was awarded university title. Research degrees were and continue to be awarded by Nottingham Trent University. Tracing its origins back to the nineteenth century, Southampton Institute was formed by mergers between art, technology and nautical colleges in the twentieth century. This historical legacy provided the foundation for the creation of Southampton Solent University. The mission of the University is: 'the pursuit of inclusive and flexible forms of higher education which meet the needs of employers and prepare students to succeed in a fast-changing competitive world'.

The University has grown significantly over the last five years. In 2012-13, there were 10,613 undergraduate students and 443 postgraduate students, of whom 68 were postgraduate research students studying for awards of Nottingham Trent University. The University operates across two main campuses, one at East Park Terrace and the other at Warsash - the location of the Warsash Maritime Academy, which specialises in training for professional ships' officers. The University also has teaching accommodation at other sites in Southampton (Saint Mary's, Test Park, Below Bar and the Sir James Matthews Building). The University describes a cautious approach to collaborative provision, choosing to work with a small number of regionally based organisations, each capable of contributing to the achievement of the University's strategic aims.

Since the previous QAA Institutional Audit in 2008, several major changes have occurred. In June 2009, the University received a substantial award from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)'s Strategic Development Fund to accelerate the implementation of its strategic plan for 2008-13. Emphasis was to be placed upon better serving the needs of a diverse student body, meeting the needs of employers, and responding positively to anticipated changes in the demand for higher education. Several cross-institutional changes have resulted, including:

- introduction of a professional development framework based on credit accumulation
- integration of 'real-world learning' in the undergraduate curriculum
- development of more flexible and responsive quality assurance processes
- establishment of strategic partnerships with local employers and colleges
- investment in corporate systems to support new approaches to conducting the University's business.

Several organisational changes have been implemented in the same period. Two new Deputy Vice-Chancellors have been appointed, prompting reallocation of responsibilities within the Vice-Chancellor's Group. The Faculty of Technology and the Warsash Maritime Academy have merged to form the Maritime and Technology Faculty (MarTec), while the Faculty of the Creative Industries and Society has created two new schools - the School of Art and Design and the School of Fashion. New academic support teams have been established within each faculty, while administration of postgraduate research has been recentralised. A new Employability and Enterprise Team has been established within the Learning Information Service. In recognition of its wider remit, the Academic Standards and Quality Service has been renamed Academic Services. Finally, non-medical helpers previously located within Access Solent have been outsourced.

The University considers that the challenges it faces are similar to those currently faced by other teaching-intensive universities. These include: continuing to attract and retain students; developing a distinctive student experience and course portfolio; and developing and maintaining effective partnerships.

Explanation of the findings about Southampton Solent University

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.⁵

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)⁶ is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.⁷

1 Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards at Southampton Solent University **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 The awards described by the University as 'traditional awards', which account for the greater part of the University's academic portfolio, are mapped to the appropriate level of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and meet the qualifications descriptors for those awards in full. In respect of these awards, the University meets this expectation. The University also has a small number of Professional Development Awards (PDAs) available within the Professional Development Framework. These are composed of Professional Development Units (PDUs), each of which is individually mapped onto the FHEQ with reference to the University's generic level descriptors. The review team was informed that PDAs do not need to meet FHEQ qualification descriptors in full because the University views them as 'short cycle' awards in contrast to the University's 'traditional awards'.

1.1.1 Academic Board's terms of reference specify responsibility for academic standards. This responsibility is devolved to the Academic Standards and Development Committee (ASDC) which, among other things, has responsibility for the effectiveness of the University's arrangements for safeguarding academic standards.

1.1.2 The Academic Handbook specifies that all the University's higher education provision is aligned with the FHEQ and the *Higher Education Credit Framework for England: guidance on academic credit arrangements in higher education in England*, and that credit is awarded for the achievement of learning outcomes. It calibrates all University units against FHEQ levels and notes the alignment of the University's generic level descriptors with the FHEQ. The review team saw examples of phase-two approval panel reports and reapproval reports which position 'traditional' programmes and units against levels of the FHEQ. These are received and discussed at ASDC. In addition, the template for external examiner reports requires commentary on standards against external reference points.

1.1.3 The University's responsibilities for setting academic standards against the FHEQ in respect of its collaborative provision are set out in the relevant section of the

⁵ The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However, it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.

⁶ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx.

⁷ See note 4.

Academic Handbook. The same process is used for collaborative provision, although there is additional guidance on collaborative arrangements. It also states that 'exceptionally, as part of the programme development and design process, a perceived requirement for a programme to be exempt from parts of the Assessment Policy, Academic Framework or other academic policies and regulations can emerge'. As the research degree-awarding body, Nottingham Trent University is responsible for academic standards on the postgraduate research degree programmes that are delivered by Southampton Solent University.

1.1.4 The programme specification template references professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements and the Academic Handbook requires PSRB requirements to be included in relevant validation and review documentation. Reports of approval and reapproval seen by the review team confirm that due attention is paid to these requirements.

1.1.5 As well as what are described as its 'traditional' awards, the University offers a Professional Development Framework (PDF) which consists of Professional Development Units (PDUs) and Awards (PDAs). The Academic Handbook states that the standards for PDUs and PDAs 'are set and monitored in the same way as traditional awards, but the awards are based on credit accumulation, rather than a defined curriculum'. The minimum size for a PDU is two credit points and the maximum is 60 credit points. Faculties approve PDUs in line with University procedures, and these are then reported to the Academic Planning Committee which notes and monitors the development of, and recruitment to, PDUs. Management of the academic standards and quality of PDUs otherwise follows routine University procedures. Approved collaborative partners are also eligible to deliver PDUs.

1.1.6 The Academic Handbook states that PDAs are 'credit-based and levelled, meeting FHEQ requirements and ensuring that the academic value of a PDA is equivalent to that of traditional awards'. As learner-centred, demand-led provision, students can study any topic, in any sequence that will enhance their professional development. The PDF is based solely on the concept of credit accumulation. The review team learnt that the PDF operates without a predefined framework for units, having no pre-existing rules for combination (aside from some prerequisites), and no level progression requirements. While individual PDUs are validated, there is no validation event for PDAs and no programme specification or equivalent.

1.1.7 The title of the PDA is determined at the point of confirming the award, by Academic Services, on the basis of the JACS code of the majority of units undertaken. Monitoring of eligible students is undertaken by Academic Services which, according to the Guide to the Professional Development Framework, will arrange a review panel to look at the individual profiles of students for a variety of reasons, including the students' eligibility for awards. Once eligibility for a PDA is established, it is left to students to decide whether and when they wish to apply for an award. The review team heard that the review panel had not yet met and no awards within the PDF had been made, but that some students would become eligible for awards in July 2013.

1.1.8 The review team noted that the generic titles of PDAs (prefaced, for example, 'Professional Development Certificate of Higher Education', 'Professional Development Graduate Diploma', or 'Professional Development Postgraduate Diploma') closely resembled the titles of the main qualifications on the FHEQ. The University explained that PDAs were intended to be different from 'traditional' awards, in that they are based on credit accumulation rather than the achievement of validated, predetermined, intended programme learning outcomes, as well as being defined by different volumes of learning. In the light of the use of the same titles for what are intended to be different kinds of award, the review

team concluded that the nomenclature of the PDAs could potentially lead to confusion for students, employers and other stakeholders.

1.1.9 The Academic Handbook distinguishes between 'traditional' awards with a fixed credit rating, which the University has chosen to align with the *Higher Education Credit Framework for England*, and PDAs, which use generic award titles which closely resemble the main qualifications in the Credit Framework for England but which the University has chosen to allocate different minimum credit tariffs. For example, the University's 'traditional' Certificate of Higher Education specifies that students must achieve 120 credits, in line with the Credit Framework for England, while the Professional Development Certificate of Higher Education specifies a credit range of 30-120 credits. Similar differences are evident for all other PDAs.

1.1.10 The introduction of a lower minimum credit tariff has also had an impact on the number of credits student have to achieve at the level of the award in question. Calculations used in the Credit Framework for England have been extrapolated by the University and applied to the lower credit tariff. For example, in a 'traditional' Postgraduate Diploma of Higher Education, 90 of the required 120 credits would need to be at Level 7, while the Professional Development Postgraduate Diploma of Higher Education specifies that students will be eligible for the award provided they have achieved 'a minimum of 70 credits of which 50 per cent of those credits are at Level 7 or higher'.

1.1.11 The University made the case that there was a clear distinction between the PDAs and its 'traditional' awards, that this was understood by staff and students, and that the difference was evident on the certificates they plan to issue to students who claim a PDA. However, the review team concluded on the basis of what they had heard and the documents they had seen that there was significant scope for confusion which put academic standards at risk in respect of Professional Development Awards.

1.1.12 The review team therefore **recommends** that the University should, before any Professional Development Awards are made, rename the Professional Development Awards to avoid any possibility of giving students, employers and other stakeholders the impression that these awards are the same as the main qualifications on the FHEQ and the *Higher Education Credit Framework for England*.

Use of external examiners

1.2 Scrupulous use is made of external examiners at Southampton Solent University.

1.2.1 The University has assured itself that it is well aligned with *Chapter B7: External Examining* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) by conducting a comprehensive audit of alignment which went to ASDC in 2012. The role and responsibilities of external examiners in the context of the University's two-tier system of assessment boards are clearly set out in the Academic Handbook.

1.2.2 Policies for the nomination and appointment of external examiners are set out clearly and implemented systematically. Nomination of external examiners is undertaken by the External Examiner Scrutiny Group on behalf of Academic Board and on the basis of recommendations from Faculty Boards. Minutes seen by the review team illustrate discussion of criteria and include a comprehensive table of distribution of University external examiners by home institution. Reciprocity is also monitored via an annual Research and Enterprise Survey. Faculty representatives are responsible for monitoring appointment of their own staff as external examiners elsewhere.

1.2.3 External examiners are adequately prepared for their role. The University offers induction meetings and dedicated web pages to all external examiners and provides a

briefing day and mentoring materials for first-time external examiners. Guidance on roles and responsibilities is provided in the Academic Handbook and allows for confidential reports to the Vice-Chancellor and/or the QAA Concerns scheme.

1.2.4 The reports of external examiners are comprehensive and are considered thoroughly by the University. Report templates require external examiners to pay attention to and/or comment on standards of achievement at unit or award level, assessment setting and marking, and operation of Assessment Boards. Award external examiners are asked to comment on operation of assessment regulations and the conduct of Assessment Boards. The responsible Deputy Vice-Chancellor is required to read all reports. Faculties then review reports and the actions required by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and produce a written response. The report and response are subsequently presented to the relevant student/staff liaison committee. The review team saw examples of thoroughly completed reports and responses. Academic staff whom the review team met exhibited knowledge of University expectations and procedures relating to external examiners, and described the path of reports from the Vice-Chancellor's Office and Academic Services down to course level, and responses going in the opposite direction. Emphasis was placed on the significance of action plans as the outcome of annual monitoring.

1.2.5 Academic Board receives an Annual Review of Academic Standards and Quality which includes a section on general issues emerging from external examiner reports. The 2011-12 review noted the need to address the regulation on late submission of coursework. The review team was not clear how Academic Board monitors progress against actions identified in the report and concluded that it might be beneficial for the University to identify and monitor issues arising from the report more systematically.

Assessment and standards

1.3 Assessment strategies at the University are effective in ensuring that students are provided with opportunities to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes of their awards.

1.3.1 There is comprehensive guidance on assessment for staff. The Assessment Policy has clear sections on overall principles; responsibilities; production and approval of assessments; submission, receipt and return of assessments; marking (including a policy on anonymous marking); groupwork; peer assessment; students with special needs; and assessment feedback. It is aligned to relevant sections of the Quality Code, which is referenced as a general source. More directly applicable information is laid out in the Assessment Regulations and the Academic Handbook. The Assessment Regulations include information on pass marks; late submission, extensions, and extenuating circumstances; reassessment; compensation; advanced study awards; classification conventions; and generic grading criteria. The Academic Handbook on Assessment Practice contains clear information on setting assessments; marking and internal moderation; and external moderation. The same assessment information is provided in a different format for students in the Student Handbook. Students whom the review team met were aware of where to find relevant information but noted some customised arrangements at 'local' level.

1.3.2 The University states that assessment regulations are normally reviewed every five years and will be considered as relevant sections of the Quality Code are published. The University Review of Academic Standards and Quality, presented to Academic Board by ASDC, also picks out some themes, such as regulatory issues noted at Progression and Award Boards.

1.3.3 Close attention is paid to assessment strategies at course and unit approval. The comprehensive guidance and templates for Course Approval Phase 2 (CAP2) require

detail on the programme's approach to assessment (as well as learning and teaching) and assessment methods by unit. Documentation must also include programme specifications, the template for which requires information on matters concerning assessment. Unit descriptors also require information on assessment matters. CAP papers and reports of approval and reapproval confirmed that panels scrutinised assessment strategy at programme and unit level.

1.3.4 Assessment strategies are routinely reviewed by the University at both unit and course levels. Unit assessments are reviewed by peers using a comprehensive 'Internal Peer Review' template which incorporates links to relevant University policies, such as anonymous marking, grade descriptors and learning outcomes. For 2012-13, and better to align with *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code, the University has introduced the requirement for external examiners to be consulted on unit assessments. Annual Programme Monitoring and Periodic Academic Review both require review of assessment strategy and outcomes. 'Special Monitoring' arrangements may be invoked where data reveal 'worrying issues' regarding standards; in such cases, ASDC maintains oversight of progress. There is an annual consideration of assessment outcomes (classifications and progression) via the annual Review of Academic Standards and Quality. External examiners' reports comment on assessment design, attainment and standards.

1.3.5 There are comprehensive policies on accreditation of prior learning, academic misconduct, appeals and extenuating circumstances/extensions, and a set of clear examination administration procedures. The review team saw minutes of a Faculty Extenuating Circumstances Panel and a Faculty Accreditation of Prior Experiential/Certificated Learning (APEL/APCL) Sub-Committee, both of which demonstrated adherence to the University's clear procedures. The Review of Academic Standards and Quality for 2011-12 considered accreditation of prior learning, admission, and student achievement by Faculty.

1.3.6 Guidance on Assessment Boards thoroughly covers the composition and responsibilities of Unit Assessment Boards and Progression and Award Boards. The profile information is comprehensive, recording summary data as well as recommendations and decisions. Minutes seen by the review team demonstrate adherence to University expectations.

1.3.7 A programme of staff development is provided by Academic Services and over the last two years this has covered the move to grade marking and changes to the late work policy. New full-time and part-time staff are required to take the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, though the extent to which the modules focus on assessment is limited. New research degree supervisors are required to undertake a training programme that covers regulations for assessment of postgraduate research students.

1.3.8 Students were largely positive about information on assessment, the varied assessment diet and the overall volume of assessment. Concerns were mentioned, however, about the scheduling of assessment. The review team heard that these should be addressed 'locally' via the Internal Peer Review process. The Academic Handbook sets out requirements on assessment feedback, including a four-week return rule. Students reported varying experiences on both timeliness and quality of feedback, but pointed to a joint project on enhancing feedback between the University and the Students' Union. The student submission is complimentary about the way in which the University and the Students' Union have worked together on several issues such as plagiarism and extenuating circumstances, though it also notes continuing concerns about the University's definition of collusion. Students were also positive about Students' Union representation on the Extenuating Circumstances Panel.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.4 The University has effective processes for programme approval, monitoring and review that facilitate setting and maintaining of academic standards and ensure that students have the opportunity to demonstrate that they have achieved the learning outcomes of their awards.

1.4.1 Course Approval and Withdrawal Procedures and related documents require that courses set and maintain standards via course design and ensure that students can demonstrate learning outcomes via assessment. Faculty Boards approve new units and oversee amendments to programmes, taking care to ensure that appropriate academic standards are set and maintained and that students have the opportunity to meet them. CAP papers and final reports for validation and revalidation, seen by the review team, demonstrate that attention is paid to University expectations.

1.4.2 The Faculty Annual Programme Monitoring reports are required to evaluate aims, learning outcomes, curriculum and assessment, and student achievement. The review team saw examples of reports that confirmed adherence to University guidance, including Annual Programme Monitoring reports and action plans and minutes of Faculty Scrutiny Panels, which monitor the reports for Faculty Board. The Annual Review of Academic Standards and Quality makes brief reference to some thematic issues arising from this process.

1.4.3 The six-yearly Periodic Academic Review considers the currency, relevance and appropriateness of taught provision. Documentation required for Periodic Academic Review includes external examiners' reports, programme specifications, Annual Programme Monitoring documentation, relevant PSRB reports, reference to subject benchmark statements and a report on any 'Special Measures' monitoring. The PDF is subject to Periodic Academic Review, which will take place within six years of its commencement. There is a brief discussion of thematic issues arising from Periodic Academic Reviews in the Annual Review of Academic Standards and Quality.

Subject benchmarks

1.5 The University has effective processes for ensuring that programmes are aligned with any relevant subject benchmark statements.

1.5.1 Subject benchmark statements are taken into consideration at course approval, reapproval and periodic review. The course approval and reapproval process requires reference to subject benchmark statements and other external reference points, including PSRB statements. Criteria for the consideration of new awards include 'guidance contained in the relevant QAA subject benchmark statements'. Similarly, Periodic Academic Review requires reference to subject benchmark statements and other external reference points, including PSRB statements. The review team saw examples of Phase 2 Approval Panel reports and reapproval reports which reference programmes and units against subject benchmark statements and PSRB statements.

1.5.2 External examiners and external validation panel members are asked to comment on alignment of courses with subject benchmark statements and other external reference points.

1.5.3 Faculties provide comprehensive annual reports to ASDC on PSRB accreditations and other processes. PSRB outcomes are also noted in the Annual Review of Academic Standards and Quality.

1.5.4 Subject benchmark statements are not taken into consideration in respect of PDAs, as the qualifications scheduled for award at the time of the review are neither honours nor

master's degrees. Individual PDUs may be benchmarked against discipline expectations by means of JACS codes. In addition, specific units may also be benchmarked against other external reference point such as the Knowledge and Skills Framework and Skillset.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at Southampton Solent University **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 Professional standards for teaching and support of learning are maintained by the University.

2.1.1 The University assures itself routinely that staff and others involved in delivering or supporting programmes are appropriately qualified. A wide range of staff development opportunities is provided, including support aligned to the Higher Education Academy (HEA) UK Professional Standards Framework, to ensure that the University's commitment to the professional development of all staff is fulfilled. Under the overall leadership of a Deputy Vice-Chancellor, responsibility for staff development is delegated to faculties where appropriate. All staff new to higher education who do not hold an appropriate qualification are required to complete the PGCE Teaching and Learning in Higher Education within two years of appointment. Progress is monitored via annual reports to Human Resources. The review team saw evidence that experienced teachers support and mentor less experienced colleagues

2.1.2 Not all staff whom the review team met were familiar with the University's Personal Development Framework, which had been presented to the team as evidence of the University's strategic approach to staff development. It was, nevertheless, clear that staff were well aware of the opportunities available to them and the rationale that lay behind them.

Learning resources

2.2 The University's learning resources are appropriate and enable students to achieve the learning outcomes of their programmes.

2.2.1 The University has adopted a strategic approach to the overall deployment of learning resources. The review team found evidence that the Learning and Information Service Strategy has been implemented thoroughly. Evidence was provided of provision of specialist, subject-specific resources and, in general, staff and students commented very favourably on the quantity, variety and standard of equipment and facilities provided, noting in particular the introduction of extended library opening hours and the recent refurbishment of Mountbatten Library. The quality of the support services available to students was also found to be high, including those provided via Access Solent and succeed@solent, which provides a wide range of online learning skills tutorials, exercises, videos and interactive activities.

2.2.2 The review team noted that the quality of University services had been recognised externally through customer service awards for excellence. The team concluded that learning resources had made a significant contribution to the features of good practice identified elsewhere in this report (paragraph 4.10) and that the comprehensive and inclusive

range of support mechanisms for students, as exemplified by `succeed@solent`, constituted a feature of **good practice**.

Student voice

2.3 The University, working in partnership with the Students' Union, is acting upon its commitment to enable an increasingly diverse range of students to make an effective contribution to quality assurance at all levels and in a variety of contexts.

2.3.1 Students are represented on various decision-making bodies and working groups at all levels throughout the University, from student/staff liaison committees to the Board of Governors. The Student Experience Sub-Committee, a sub-committee of ASDC, is a dedicated committee for the consideration of student-related issues. Students routinely provide feedback for and participate in annual and periodic reviews. Training is provided via the course representatives system, managed by the Students' Union. In an initiative designed to promote students' contribution to quality assurance, the Students' Union is also evaluating the effectiveness of student involvement in various meetings in which students are involved.

2.3.2 The University has benchmarked itself against other local institutions and the Quality Code as part of a recent internal audit. It has reason to be confident that it is aligning with the new *Chapter B5: Student engagement* and has identified a few areas for enhancement. The review team saw and heard evidence of much closer collaborative working between the University and the Students' Union and noted wide use of data such as the National Student Survey (NSS), Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey and the University's own Student Unit Evaluations (SUE) to investigate the effectiveness of current arrangements for involving students in quality assurance processes.

2.3.3 Several areas in which the student voice could be strengthened have been identified and positive action is being taken. The response rate to SUE remains low and the Student Experience Sub-Committee is working to improve this, capitalising on the good work of student representatives. The Students' Union is keen to work with the University to promote the engagement of a wider range of students, rather than primarily Union officers, in some quality assurance processes. Efforts have been made to draw the attention of students to the benefits of getting involved in quality assurance. For example, 'You Said, We Listened' information is now displayed prominently on electronic screens across the campuses, and Students' Union STAR (Students' Teaching and Recognition) Awards are conferred annually on excellent teachers who are identified through student votes. The Students' Union is now working in partnership with the University to develop the role and contribution of student representatives.

Management information is used to improve quality and standards

2.4 The University makes effective use of management information to safeguard standards and assure quality, and to promote the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

2.4.1 The Research and Information Unit responds to and meets the strategic management information needs of the University. It is responsible for keeping the senior management of the University informed through, for example, annual portfolio analysis and annual monitoring data produced by Academic Services. The University uses various sources of data for management information: external sources such as the NSS, DLHE, Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES); and internal sources such as data from corporate systems and internal student questionnaires.

2.4.2 The review team saw and heard evidence that demonstrated how the University was collecting and interrogating management information with a view to safeguarding quality and enhancement and driving continual improvement. For example, analysis of data related to students complaints and appeals enabled the University to improve the effectiveness of its procedures. In another example, the MarTec Quality Enhancement Action Plan highlighted the need for improvements to learning resources and prompted the refurbishment of the design studio in Warsash Maritime Academy. Action plans also make provision for data to be used to support cases for delivering change in subsequent years.

2.4.3 The review team was informed that the University uses two sets of key performance indicators (KPIs): the first, known as the executive KPIs, is publishable and monitored by Management Board and the Board of Governors and operates at University level; the second, which is produced by Academic Services and is used for annual monitoring, operates at faculty level.

Admission to the University

2.5 The University's admissions policies are clear, fair, explicit and are consistently applied.

2.5.1 The University's commitment to social justice is evident in its comprehensive admissions policy. This is supported by the University's Academic Regulations, which are subject to periodic review. Various policies and procedures are also in place to ensure the consistent application of processes across the institution and the consistent provision of information to all types of applicant. Adequate provision is made for applicants who may bring alternative qualifications to those specified or other relevant learning experiences. The University also provides for applicants who wish to challenge their admission processes and/or decision and the review team saw evidence that such cases have been investigated in a fair and consistent way.

2.5.2 The University's approach to admissions has been informed by its evaluation of its processes in 'The Student Information Journey'. The information needs of students have been mapped from enquiry to enrolment. Students reported that the information they had received at each stage of the application process was accurate and informative. They commented very favourably on the ease of the application process, the speed of the University's responses and the wide variety of information they received, which ensured a smooth arrival and enrolment process.

Complaints and appeals

2.6 The University's complaints and appeals procedures are effective.

2.6.1 Students at all levels and comprehensive documentary evidence confirmed that complaints and appeals procedures are clear, readily available and fair. The processes that apply in cases of academic misconduct or extenuating circumstances are clearly differentiated and explained. There was evidence that students made use of the procedures and that the reports of cases specified actions to be taken as a result of complaints or appeals. Procedures are routinely monitored, reviewed and enhanced to ensure effectiveness, follow up action points and align with best practice. The Students' Union informed the review team that it feels integrated within the processes and plays key roles both in the operation of the procedures and in supporting students who invoke them.

2.6.2 The University has seen a reduction in complaints. There is some evidence that this can be attributed in part at least to the work of the Students' Union and course

representatives in trying to resolve issues swiftly using informal channels in the early stages of complaints.

Career advice and guidance

2.7 The University's approach to careers education, advice and guidance is adequately quality assured.

2.7.1 The approach at Southampton Solent University is characterised by its strategic drive to embed employability within the curriculum and extend opportunities for 'real-world' learning into the wider student experience. Enabled by the academic framework and implemented through the Teaching and Learning Strategy, the University's approach is adequately quality assured through regular reporting, monitoring and review. For example, the Employability and Enterprise Committee keeps Academic Board informed about issues relating to employability. DLHE reports are overseen and provided by the Research and Information Unit and are discussed as part of annual monitoring and periodic review, with associated action plans.

2.7.2 Communication with students about careers is effective. The online careers pages are clear and easily accessible, encompassing the jobs directory, business start-up and skills support. In addition, the work of the Employability and Enterprise Team is identified not only in the careers pages but also in the teaching and learning pages, signalling that employability is an integral part of the infrastructure of the academic portfolio. Students whom the review team met had a clear understanding of the careers and skills support available through the careers support pages and were also aware of the way in which other support areas provide signage to careers pages.

2.7.3 Careers education extends beyond the curriculum. Extracurricular activities such as volunteering are supported by the Centre for Student Involvement, a joint venture between the Students' Union and the University. A recent report produced by the Students' Union indicates that there has been increased footfall and usage of Centre for Student Involvement, with the majority of students undertaking volunteering work within the University itself. However, although volunteering activities are visible on the web pages, the Centre itself does not appear to feature significantly.

2.7.4 Employers are actively engaged in careers education, guidance and advice. The review team also heard from employers whom they met that students were well prepared for real-world learning activities.

Supporting disabled students

2.8 The quality of learning opportunities is managed by the University to enable the entitlements of disabled students and others with specific needs to be met.

2.8.1 The review team found evidence of clear, ongoing and responsive support provided for those with specific needs. The University has a current Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity Scheme with clear actions. The University Student Equality Forum has responsibility for management and enhancement of equality matters and reports to ASDC with detailed data of all key equality groups against achievement. The Charter and University Strategic Plan both emphasise key principles of inclusivity. The equality agenda is designed to be cross-university. The Student Support Network, a group for student-facing staff which supports cross-boundary working, informs best practice and includes professional services and academic staff in its membership.

2.8.2 The effectiveness of the support provided is evaluated and monitored through several fora and informs the Student Support Network annual report. For example, a survey

conducted by Access Solent provides quantitative data and identifiable actions. Monitoring of the implementation of faculty-focused action plans is undertaken through the faculty student/staff liaison committee and faculty student forum.

2.8.3 Concerns have been raised, for example in the student submission, about disabled students achieving lower than expected employability outcomes. The review team noted that the University had adopted a proactive approach to address this issue and that targeted opportunities, such as leadership courses, have been identified in action plans and publicised on web pages.

Supporting international students

2.9 The University makes an appropriate quality of learning opportunities available to international students.

2.9.1 The University's strategic vision does not include a significant increase in numbers. Most of the international higher education students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, are located at the University's main campuses.

2.9.2 International students have clear and appropriate support both pre and post-admission. Information is produced both in hard copy and online. The review team saw evidence that learning skills support services provided by the University are in high demand by international students. Support with English language skills is overseen by the Faculty of Business, Sport and Enterprise, using some specific PDUs, and outcomes are monitored annually. A new Pearson Centre is in place to support English competency testing.

2.9.3 The progress and well-being of international students is systematically monitored by the University. International students, particularly undergraduate students, are monitored by a specific group called the Supporting International Students More Effectively Working Group (SISWG), which reports to the Student Experience Sub-Committee of Academic Board. The student submission is complimentary about the oversight SISWG undertakes and the support it makes available, for example the pilot scheme providing 'buddies'. Positive outcomes were confirmed by the International Student Barometer, which identified no serious issues at the University in 2011-12. The International Operations Group monitors the action plan formulated in response to the International Student Barometer and advises the Academic Planning Committee of any specific international issues it should consider.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.10 The provision of advice and guidance by the University to postgraduate research students enables them to complete their programmes of study. In addition, the University supports staff involved in research to fulfil their responsibilities.

2.10.1 Since 1992, Southampton Solent University has had a formal arrangement with Nottingham Trent University (NTU) for the award of research degrees. Southampton Solent University has no immediate plans to change this arrangement and work towards gaining research degree-awarding powers in its own right.

2.10.2 The arrangement between Southampton Solent University and NTU is supported by clear regulations and procedures. Both institutions have made provision for reciprocal membership of their respective research degrees committees. The review team saw evidence that NTU representatives are routinely present at meetings of Southampton Solent University's committee. The Research Degrees Committee of Southampton Solent University, which has delegated responsibility for quality management and enhancement of research degrees, reports to NTU annually through Academic Board and is able to make

recommendations to the research degrees committee of NTU for award of research degrees. The annual report to NTU gives a detailed view of enrolment, progression and completion of students. Recently reports have included more detailed cohort analysis together with action plans geared towards ensuring effective monitoring of progression and achievement.

2.10.3 There is a well articulated student feedback and representation process and postgraduate research student representatives are routine members of the non-confidential business of the Research Degrees Committee. Postgraduate research students whom the review team met were fully aware of the provisions within the relevant handbook and associated code of practice, which they found easily accessible, clear and informative about arrangements and regulations. Students are only admitted once the University is satisfied that suitable supervision arrangements are in place. All students are required to undertake the Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) in Research, which was revised following consultation to be accessible for all students through a variety of delivery mechanisms. Feedback is positive and completion rates are monitored through annual reports and supervisory oversight. This programme, together with a skills needs audit, ensures that learning support is appropriately targeted. Postgraduate research students who undertake any formal teaching complete a PDU which is accredited by the Higher Education Academy for Associate Fellowship.

2.10.4 The progress of postgraduate research students is supported and monitored. A programme of staff development is available for research supervisors and arrangements for monitoring the progress of postgraduate research students are effective and widely understood by staff. Project approval, ethical approval and supervision arrangements are addressed and confirmed early in the process. Annual progression monitoring considers routine reports from the student and supervisory team and oversees continuing compliance with ethical requirements, progression of PGCert Research, and progression of project and external dissemination arrangements.

2.10.5 The learning environment for postgraduate research students is satisfactory. Postgraduate research students appreciated the efforts made by Southampton Solent University to provide them with a stimulating research community. Both students and staff acknowledged, however, that this presented a challenge to the institution given the small numbers of postgraduate research students. The NTU annual report stipulates that postgraduate research students be supported to become full members of research clusters, defined as groups which bring together research staff and students within a particular discipline. In line with this, Southampton Solent University's website refers to a number of research clusters across the University within key cognate areas. The review team heard about a possible move towards fewer clusters, forging links between faculties and disciplines to produce a more concentrated research community.

2.10.6 The Research and Enterprise Committee oversees the Research and Enterprise Strategy and supports faculty plans for enhancing the research environment through projects and conferences. Postgraduate research students have received financial support to attend relevant conferences to build personal research networks and disseminate their work.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.11 The University manages its collaborative arrangements effectively, enabling students to achieve their awards.

2.11.1 The Partnership Strategy provides a clear vision for the University's collaborative provision which includes partnerships with regional providers, international exchanges and arrangements for credit recognition. There is no strategic intention to expand current collaborative provision, which is relatively small. The annual report to Academic Board

provides a register of current partnerships, though the review team noted that requirements in the Academic Handbook to keep changes to programme titles up to date and to give notice of potential new partnerships had not been fully met, reducing the capacity of Academic Board to exercise effective oversight. The report describes a prime focus on a small number of regional organisations, which include one further education college, one NHS Trust and a professional body.

2.11.2 Collaborative arrangements are facilitated and regulated effectively by the University. The Guide to Partnerships and Off-campus Activities clearly sets out the different arrangements aligned with each partnership approach. The Guide plus the due diligence regulations articulate a process from initial interest expressed at faculty level to approval at University level. A two-step due diligence approach operates, the latter stage of which authorises the release of publicity and the start of marketing activity. ASDC is responsible for monitoring and evaluation of collaborative provision. Faculty reports concerning collaborative provision are discussed at ASDC meetings, supported by management data supplied by the Central Services. Link tutors maintain effective communication with collaborative partners to ensure that University standards are maintained. It was apparent to the review team that processes were sufficiently well understood by all the parties involved at each level of the University.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.12 The quality of learning opportunities delivered through flexible and distributed arrangements, including e-learning, is managed effectively.

2.12.1 The Teaching and Learning Strategy expresses the University's commitment to flexible learning and the University's regulations provide clear guidance on requirements and expectations of online courses. As part of the Strategic Development Programme, the University's virtual learning environment, called SOLonline, has been developed to support flexible delivery and is now fully operational via the University portal.

2.12.2 SOLonline is easily accessible and has adopted a clear and appropriate approach to online learning. Online support is also provided through succeed@solent, and staff support is also available. On the advice of Access Solent, Learning and Information Services have improved the accessibility of IT support for international students and those with specific needs. MyCourse is utilised by students for accessing course information and for contacting staff.

2.12.3 The University has introduced online assessment submission on a voluntary basis and is monitoring the outcomes robustly. Students were clear about when online assessment submissions could be made and what this entailed.

2.12.4 Online PDUs have been developed by academic teams together with a dedicated team in the Learning Information Service, which supports the University's commitment to meeting employers' needs in a flexible and responsive way. The Handbook states that when students have amassed sufficient credit at the right level, they can choose to request a PDA or to continue studying for additional credit or for an award at a higher level. Students are promised assistance to help them select appropriate units, though the review team noted that, in the absence of any overall coordination of the PDF, the source of advice varied across academic areas, with guidance being provided by a course leader in one case and other academic staff in others. Generally, the review team was unable to discern a consistent approach to academic counselling for students on PDUs, particularly in respect of credit accumulation and achievement of awards.

2.12.5 The team therefore **recommends** that the University take steps to ensure that prospective and current students studying Professional Development Units are

systematically provided with advice and guidance to enable them to make informed decisions in relation to credit accumulation and achievement of awards.

Work-based and placement learning

2.13 The University manages the quality of learning opportunities delivered through work-based and placement learning effectively.

2.13.1 The University has adopted a strategic approach to embedding real-world learning into the curriculum and extending it into the wider student experience. The Employability and Enterprise Strategy is driven and supported by the Employability and Enterprise Team, which forms part of Learning Information Service and has been realigned to support the implementation of the Strategy. Oversight of the Strategy is undertaken by the Employability and Enterprise Committee, informed by annual programme monitoring, a scrutiny report and DLHE data. The approach is supported by sections of the Academic Handbook, which have been revised for this purpose.

2.13.2 The Employability and Enterprise Strategy is implemented and embedded by a variety of means. Templates for curriculum design have been modified to include real-world learning. Some PDUs are designed to promote learning through work-related activities and are evaluated within faculties. Placement and enterprise activities within faculties are supported by the Employability and Enterprise Team. Staff development has been made available to assist staff in making the transition to the new approach. Placement providers and students are supported by a clearly written handbook, which covers matters such as mutual expectations, legal and health and safety requirements, and contact details. Peer-to-peer mentoring for students on placements has been identified as a productive initiative and continued funding has been identified.

2.13.3 The strategy has received favourable responses from external commentators. External examiners, who are asked to comment on the strategy for embedding real-world learning in revised report forms, comment favourably on the outcomes. Employers comment that they are impressed by the preparedness and clear expectations of the students who undertake placements with them. The strength of faculty liaison was seen as instrumental in ensuring positive placement outcomes.

Student charter

2.14 A student charter, setting out the mutual expectations of the University and its students, is available.

2.14.1 The current Southampton Solent University Charter clearly sets out expectations of the University and its students. It can be found on the online portal under 'student documents' and in extracted form in the undergraduate prospectus. All students whom the review team met were aware of the Charter, which is seen as useful and widely available.

2.14.2 The Student Handbook signalled that a new Charter would be ready for 2012-13, but it became clear to the review panel that it was not yet ready for dissemination. The new Charter has been developed and approved by Academic Board. It is intended to align with the University's mission and to emphasise key values. Links to related policies are embedded within the Charter document. The Students' Union was involved in its development, and consultations with staff, the Students' Union and students have been undertaken. Students took on the task of designing and branding the final version, providing a good example of the extent to which real-world learning is embedded within the matrix of the University.

2.14.3 The new University charter is more succinct than its predecessor and clearly communicates the ethos of the University. The new charter focuses primarily on what undergraduate students are entitled to expect of the University: there is no link, for example to any policy documents about ethics in postgraduate research. The expectations that the University might have of students are less clearly articulated. The review team would encourage the University to ensure that it continues to communicate the expectations it has of its students, in a form of its choosing that is signposted and accessible to all students.

3 Information about learning opportunities

Outcome

The information about learning opportunities produced by Southampton Solent University **meets UK expectations** that the information it produces for its intended audiences is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

3.1 There are effective mechanisms at Southampton Solent University for ensuring that information for the public is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. Academic Board exercises overall responsibility for the Information and Communication Strategy and the quality of information about learning opportunities. The Management Board, advised by the Information and Communication Committee, maintains oversight of public information. A comprehensive Management of Information Policy has recently been introduced, providing clarity as to sign-off responsibilities. Academic Services has taken responsibility for ensuring that the University aligns with Part C: Information about higher education provision of the Quality Code, and has set up a task and finish group to oversee this process.

3.2 Information for prospective students helps them to select their courses with an understanding of the academic environment in which they will be studying and the support that will be made available to them. The Research and Information Unit is responsible for ensuring compliance with the requirements of the Key Information and Wider Information Sets (KIS and WIS). The Marketing and Communication Service is responsible for approving publicity material used by collaborative partners, and memoranda of agreement detail the responsibilities of each partner in respect of information for students. Information for prospective students is mainly web-based, with hard-copy prospectuses available on request. Course information, including programme specifications and unit descriptors, is reviewed and updated annually and published by the Marketing and Communication Service in conjunction with faculties. All course web pages provide a range of relevant information, including industry focus and career opportunities. Each undergraduate course page has a KIS display and a link to Unistats.

3.3 Both the Marketing and Communication Service and Academic Services are involved in processes for the approval of new courses and course suspension or withdrawals, and take responsibility for the accuracy of information on the University and UCAS websites. Information for prospective students includes the admissions process for different categories of students and information about course cost and the availability of bursaries. The 'HelloUni' website, which aims to answer questions students might have about student life, is a comprehensive resource for prospective and newly arriving students, set out in an easily navigable and user-friendly format. Information is overseen for accuracy by Academic Services.

3.4 Specific guidance is available for prospective international students via the International Recruitment Office, the international section of the website and through agents. Materials do not use consistent terminology to differentiate between non-UK EU students

and non-EU students, which means that some information on fees and immigration lacks clarity due to significant differences in the status and entitlements of these categories of students. All international students who accept an offer receive the same pre-arrival pack regardless of status. The reviewers therefore formed the view that the pack could potentially cause confusion, as information is not always clearly associated with student status.

3.5 Students have raised concerns about lack of information for prospective students about additional costs such as field trips or specialist equipment. Students indicated to the review team that they were satisfied that the University has responded by agreeing to publish this information on the website for 2013 entry, and both on the website and in hard copy for future years. At the time of the review visit, this information was in the process of being uploaded to the website and the review team was informed that this would be complete by the end of August 2013 for the recruitment round starting in autumn 2013.

3.6 Information for current students, at all levels, is comprehensive and informative. The Student Handbook is provided to all new students and is available on the web in an accessible format. It covers all key aspects of provision, such as assessment regulations and policies, with signposts to relevant documents via the portal. Academic policies and procedures are in the Academic Handbook and changes are flagged up to students annually at re-enrolment. Detailed course information and Student Unit Evaluation Reports are published on the myCourse virtual learning environment, and NSS results at subject level are made available via the portal. Students can also access personal information such as results and timetables online. The Student Survival Guide, which covers non-academic matters, is presented in a student-friendly style.

3.7 The University takes direct responsibility for producing all certificates and transcripts, regardless of where the student has studied. When students complete their studies they receive a certificate detailing their achievement and, where appropriate, a European Diploma Supplement. The University is considering introducing the Higher Education Achievement Report from 2014-15. The Solent Graduate Network, which is open to all current and past students, provides regular news updates and publications.

3.8 Information available to those responsible for academic quality and standards is appropriate and sufficient to enable them to discharge those responsibilities effectively. The information detailed in the HEFCE circular letter 2011/18, and in particular the KIS and WIS, is up to date and accessible to the institution's stakeholders.

3.9 The University states in its self-evaluation document that external examiners' reports are presented annually to student/staff course committees, or their equivalent, by course leaders, but the review team heard from students that, although the content of reports was discussed at course committees, the reports themselves had not been seen by student representatives. The University's Programme Monitoring Process requires that reports be made available to annual monitoring panels for scrutiny. The review team was informed that reports are included in a single documentation set made available at annual course review meetings, rather than being distributed to each panel member. As many student representatives were recorded as being unable to attend the meetings, they would not have had access to the reports unless they made a specific request to see them. Examples of notes of these meetings, seen by the review team, varied significantly in the degree to which they made reference to issues raised in the reports. Information in myCourse explains the context of these reports and informs students about how they might obtain a copy, but no reference is made to student representatives having sight of a copy.

3.10 The review team therefore **recommends** that the University should, for the academic session 2013-14, ensure that external examiners' annual reports are consistently and systematically made available, in full, to student representatives.

4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at Southampton Solent University **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 The University takes a strategic approach to enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities. The Strategic Development Programme, introduced in 2009 to accelerate the implementation of the University's 2008-13 Strategic Plan, has a strong enhancement theme. It aims to 'create a self-sustaining capability to build close relationships with employers, embed employability into the curriculum and develop flexible learning, all underpinned by robust business systems and a modern organisation'. Part of the emphasis has therefore been placed on developing an infrastructure: for example, an upgraded Student Records System and an improved virtual learning environment have been put in place as enablers for enhancement of student learning opportunities. A series of staff development activities has underpinned the revised approach.

4.2 Enhancement initiatives are well integrated within mainstream activities of the University and are having widespread beneficial effects on both students and staff. The review team heard from staff that the Strategic Development Programme had been instrumental in creating a more positive ethos across the University. Independent, external evaluation of the Programme confirmed that staff had felt empowered to try new approaches to learning and teaching. Key themes of the Programme included employer engagement, student employability, flexible delivery and enhanced progression. The reviewers found convincing evidence of a strong commitment to ensuring the sustainability of the improvements made as a result of the Strategic Development Programme beyond the duration of the Programme.

4.3 The review team identified the transformational impact of the Strategic Development Programme, which has enhanced student learning opportunities and engendered a more outward-looking and proactive attitude across the University, as a feature of **good practice**.

4.4 Enhancement initiatives in respect of employability, undertaken by the University, have had a demonstrable impact on the quality of student learning opportunities. Recognising the need to improve employment outcomes and further prompted by the Strategic Development Programme, an Employability and Enterprise Team has been established to provide a focus for careers support, mentoring, placements, employment and business start-up. The strategic lead is provided by the Employability and Enterprise Committee, the membership of which includes two Deputy Vice-Chancellors and all Deans. This has raised the profile of employability and enterprise, as evidenced by the recently introduced Employability and Enterprise Awards, which recognise achievements of both staff and students in relation to employment, volunteering and business start-up. Early indications from the most recent DLHE survey show an improvement in graduate-level employment of around eight per cent.

4.5 Opportunities to experience 'real-world' learning are embedded within the undergraduate curriculum. University policy requires that all Level 5 and 6 'traditional' award-bearing courses must include, within the core programme, opportunities for all learners to benefit from summatively assessed 'real-world' learning, normally amounting to at least 20 credits per level. This requirement is embedded within course approval and monitoring processes.

4.6 Many courses also include a work experience placement. In order to encourage and support students to take up placements, a new peer-to-peer mentoring scheme has been piloted in 2012-13. Students who have taken placements help those in subsequent years to find, apply for and secure placements. Seventeen mentors were involved in the pilot year and the scheme was judged very successful, particularly in relation to the improved confidence students reported feeling about the placements process. The scheme is now being developed and expanded.

4.7 Real-world learning also enriches the wider, extra-curricular student experience. For example, Solent Creatives has been established as an agency designed to help bridge the gap for students between academic learning and business. Students work on freelance contracts with local businesses, which gives them additional real-world learning and raises the external profile of the University. For students interested in sport, the University provides extensive sports activities and facilities through Sport Solent, but also uses sport as a way of creating work experience opportunities for students. Sport Solent is responsible for the Southampton PE and School Sport Partnership which provides a wide range of coaching and volunteering projects through Edusport Solent and Southampton School Games. The University has also sought to employ its own graduates through a range of job and internship schemes.

4.8 The University, in partnership with the Students' Union, promotes real-world learning through the Centre for Student Involvement. The Centre provides opportunities for students to get involved in volunteering, peer-to-peer mentoring, societies and enterprise funding initiatives. This includes 'Trial, Adapt, Launch' - a scheme through which students can apply for small grants and get support in developing, testing and launching new ideas.

4.9 Employers whom the review team met confirmed that they have a positive perception of the University, that it has developed a reputation for being responsive to their needs, and that students arrived well prepared for work.

4.10 The review team identified the strategic and innovative approach to employability, which includes extensive use of real-world learning and has a demonstrable impact on the student experience and the University's external profile, as a feature of **good practice**.

4.11 Other evidence of enhancement included the introduction of the 'On track' scheme to identify and support vulnerable students, a coordinated approach to enhancing the experience of international students, and the involvement of students in the branding of the proposed new Charter. Student feedback, including the NSS and other relevant data such as DLHE, is evaluated systematically and is looked at from an enhancement perspective.

4.12 Good practice is identified and disseminated through a variety of means, including annual monitoring, committee discussions and papers, scrutiny of external examiners' reports and an annual teaching and learning conference. Awards schemes such as the Employability and Enterprise Awards and the STAR Awards are also used as vehicles for celebrating and sharing good practice.

5 Thematic element

Each academic year, a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for special attention by QAA's Institutional Review teams. In 2012-13 there is a choice of two themes: the First Year Student Experience or Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

The review team investigated student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement at

Southampton Solent University. It found clear evidence that Southampton Solent University engages students at all levels across a range of quality assurance and enhancement processes and that the University is taking active steps to strengthen this aspect of its provision.

Innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

5.1.1 In 2012-13, the University undertook a review of its practice in relation to student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement systems. The purpose of the review was to assure the accuracy of the University's claim that 'student engagement at Solent operates at many levels'. The full review report was considered by ASDC in April 2013, which accepted the recommendations.

5.1.2 The review team saw numerous examples of student engagement in practice, including the Centre for Student Involvement which coordinates student volunteering activities and is described as a unique partnership between the Students' Union and the University. The Centre provides a location from which students can lead and develop voluntary activities and provides links to the University's real-world learning agenda. Students reported a positive experience of Centre.

5.1.3 Students are represented at all levels of the University, from programme committees through to the Management Board and the Board of Governors. Students reported that they felt engaged with the Senior Management Team, and this sense of engagement has been strengthened by the decision taken in 2012-13 to invite the Students' Union President to observe meetings of the Management Board of the University. In addition to this, the Vice-Chancellor has a regular meeting with the Students' Union sabbatical officers. The review team also heard concerns expressed by the student body about a perception that student representation on committees is undertaken only by Students' Union officers. They noted that officers were keen to extend representation to the wider student body to give the University sufficient opportunity to consult with a range of current students.

5.1.4 The University is encouraging students to co-chair working groups with members of academic staff. The review team noted that to date only Students' Union officers have had this experience and that the development has met with varying degrees of success. The Students' Union highlighted the need to undertake further development with academic staff to assist them in understanding the role of co-chairing.

5.1.5 The review team was informed that students were encouraged to prepare and submit papers for discussion at formal committee meetings. Examples were seen but it was noted that this initiative was currently confined to papers prepared and submitted by the Students' Union.

5.1.6 The review team heard a number of examples of other innovations aimed at encouraging greater engagement of students, including peer-to-peer placement support, Re-So (a student-run pop-up shop), and student contributions to the annual Teaching and Learning Conference and Student Exchange Conference.

5.1.7 The University, in collaboration with the student body, has undertaken a revision of the Southampton Solent University Charter. The review team heard that this process began in 2011-12 and that a new Charter had been approved. Students expressed frustration with its slow implementation.

5.1.8 The Students' Union has introduced the STAR Awards, with over 70 staff being nominated for awards by students in 2012-13. Employability and Enterprise Awards have recently been introduced as an annual event.

Staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality

5.2.1 The review team saw clear evidence of partnership working between staff, students, Students' Union officers and senior managers of the University.

5.2.2 The review team saw evidence that students participate in University quality assurance and enhancement processes, including annual programme monitoring, periodic academic review, extenuating circumstances, and complaints and appeals. They do so in two ways: indirectly through providing comments as part of a process, and directly through participation at events or as members of panels.

5.2.3 Opportunities for student representation are available at programme level through staff/student liaison meetings and Student Forum/Student Voice meetings. The University acknowledges some variability across faculties and has already initiated action to improve consistency and take-up of opportunities by publicising the role more widely and providing greater support for those who take it on.

5.2.4 The review team saw evidence of Students' Union involvement in sector-wide debates in relation to student engagement.

Acting on student contributions and 'closing the feedback loop'

5.3.1 The Solent Unit Evaluation (SUE) is a key mechanism for obtaining feedback from students. It gathers both qualitative and summative feedback from students - with the qualitative feedback covering both unit strengths and areas for improvement. There was evidence that programme teams were acting on feedback received to amend curricula.

5.3.2 The student response rate to the SUE is low, at 15 per cent. The University is actively trying to improve this response rate through a number of initiatives, including enabling students to complete SUEs via a smart phone/iPad app. A marked increase in response rates, to 28 per cent, has been reported by the University for 2013.

5.3.3 The University's Research Information Unit is designed to respond to and meet the strategic management information needs of the University. It was also regarded as a good operational resource by the staff whom the review team met. In addition to the SUE, the Research and Information Unit undertakes analysis of all major external surveys, including the NSS, PRES, PTES and DLHE. This analysis is forwarded to the relevant University committees for action. The review team heard examples of how the University had responded to this analysis and communicated results to students.

5.3.4 The University has introduced a 'You Said, We Listened' mechanism, the primary function of which is to ensure that students are aware of direct action taken by the University to address issues they have raised through the various feedback mechanisms. The review team heard evidence of the effectiveness of this initiative in meetings with both staff and students.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of threshold academic standards, learning opportunities, enhancement and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

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

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Code of practice *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

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

enhancement learning opportunities Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

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

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

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

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

operational definition A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

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

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

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

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

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

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

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

RG 1186 08/13

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ISBN 978 1 84979 895 2

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786