



**University of Southampton**

FEBRUARY 2008

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2008

ISBN 978 1 84482 830 2

All QAA's publications are available on our website [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

*Printed copies are available from:*

Linney Direct  
Adamsway  
Mansfield  
NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450481

Email [qaa@linneydirect.com](mailto:qaa@linneydirect.com)

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's (UK) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree-awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision, the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on 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.

### **Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex**

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006* - Annexes B and C refer).

## Summary

### Introduction

An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of the University of Southampton from 11 to 15 February 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the institution's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. To arrive at its conclusions, the team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and also read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In institutional audit, the term 'academic standards' is used to describe 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 United Kingdom. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

### Outcomes of the institutional audit

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

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

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

### Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

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

### Published information

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

### Features of good practice

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

- the design of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan, enabling it to encapsulate both quality assurance and quality enhancement within the annual monitoring process
- the widespread and effective use of student feedback at all levels of the University
- the close working partnership between the University and its Students' Union in the context of making improvements to the student experience

- the approach taken by the University in fostering research-led learning
- the effective delivery of library resources in support of the student learning experience
- the development of the Student Resources Network, providing an integrated physical and virtual access point for students to obtain support and information in person, remotely and out of hours
- the arrangements for taking forward and embedding the University's strategy for enhancing the employability of its graduates
- the adoption of staffing policies which, in line with the University's stated aim, raise the profile of teaching relative to research
- the measures taken to engage staff in the formulation of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, and the framework the Strategy now provides for developing teaching and learning.

### **Recommendations for action**

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

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

### **Reference points**

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure, which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the University took due account of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## Report

### Section 1: Introduction and background

1 An audit team from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of the University of Southampton from 11 to 15 February 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the institution's management of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The membership of the audit team comprised Professor J Holford, Professor D Meehan, Dr F Quinault, Dr M Stowell, auditors and Dr M Gilmore, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, QAA.

2 The University of Southampton awards its own degrees under a Royal Charter granted in 1952. It has some 21,000 students with 77 per cent being undergraduate, 14 per cent taught postgraduate and 9 per cent research; 84 per cent of students are full-time. The University offers programmes in a broad range of disciplines, which are organised into 20 academic schools, grouped into three faculties, each of which has a graduate school. It also has collaborative arrangements with local further education colleges and with overseas institutions, involving approximately 400 students, as well as strategic engagement with training organisations and employers. In addition, the University awards the research degrees offered through two accredited universities (Chichester and Winchester).

3 The University's mission is to 'aspire to global recognition as an international provider of top quality research, education and enterprise activities' and it aims, by 2010, to be among the UK's top 10 universities in both research and education. The approach to its education mission, as outlined in the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, commits the University to being student-centred and research-led and to developing students' skills for employment.

4 QAA's last institutional audit of the University, in December 2003, resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the institution's management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The present audit team found that the University had generally taken effective and timely action in response to the recommendations made in the previous audit report, although it considered that further attention was required by schools to ensure explicit reporting on collaborative programmes.

5 Since the last audit, the University has taken steps to raise the profile of education (teaching and learning) relative to research, and this has been coupled with a move away from a centrally-driven compliance model of quality assurance towards locally-driven quality assurance and enhancement. It has been implementing a risk-based approach, balancing devolution of responsibility to schools with central oversight through the faculties. In delivering its educational goals, the University is employing what it describes as 'partnership working'. This is exemplified in the networks and goal-oriented task forces or working groups which operate across the University, and in the partnership between the University and the Students' Union.

6 The University's academic management structure comprises a central University Executive Group, supported by three separate faculty management groups (deaneries) which are regarded by the University as an extension of the centre, acting as its local presence in coordinating and overseeing the activities of constituent schools and research centres. This management structure is supported by the committee system, with Senate being the authority on academic matters, having ultimate responsibility for academic standards. The University has a comprehensive range of policy statements and procedural guidance relating to academic standards and quality for both taught and research degree programmes.

7 The Senate delegates certain of its powers to committees or postholders within the management structure, according to a published statement. With regard to Associate Deans (Education), who have overall responsibility for the quality assurance of learning and teaching for taught programmes within their respective faculties, the audit team was unclear to what extent

they were operating by virtue of their own authority, as distinct from that of their faculty education committee, which they chair. There were matters being dealt with through other channels that the team considered either should have been reported through the committee system or might usefully have been discussed by faculty education committees. The team concluded that there was a sufficient basis for reviewing the checks and balances on the delegated powers of Associate Deans (Education), as put forward in a recommendation (see paragraph 62).

## **Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards**

8 The University's approach to managing academic standards is based on the premise that schools maintain quality assurance procedures within an institutional framework, determined by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The University regards the close alignment of this framework with the Academic Infrastructure as fundamental to its approach, as borne out in the clear explanations of the components of the Academic Infrastructure within procedures, which include analysis of the implications for the University's practice. The University also keeps a watching brief on European quality assurance initiatives.

9 In accordance with the University's devolved structures for accountability, the Academic Quality and Standards Committee receives annual reports from faculties and works with them in reviewing procedures and ensuring equivalency in standards of monitoring between faculties. Schools are expected to maintain a quality assurance evidence base, according to a common structure, containing relevant policy, procedural and operating documents. They draw on this evidence base to prepare their annual Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan (LTERAP), this being the primary mechanism by which the University (via faculties) and the schools themselves assure standards.

10 Documentation for programme approval includes a programme specification, produced by the school, outlining the overall standards expected of students, supplemented by the programme regulations and profiles of any new constituent modules. New programme proposals must gain strategic approval, followed by academic approval, first by the school, then by the faculty. An additional safeguard to standards is the involvement of external advisers who are required to submit a structured report for consideration in the faculty academic approval process. Ongoing maintenance of award standards is achieved through the external examiner system, annual review through the LTERAP, and periodic (five-yearly) programme review. Constituent modules of a programme must also be reviewed every five years. Periodic programme review entails a panel event including an independent external adviser. These quality assurance processes are all subject to annual reporting by faculties to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee.

11 The audit team found that programme specifications were being prepared according to University requirements, with appropriate consideration of relevant subject benchmark statements, and that the programme approval process as a whole appeared to be operating in accordance with University procedures. The team also found that programme specifications were being updated as necessary through periodic programme review, with external examiner reports and data on student progression and achievement informing deliberations relating to standards. The review reports, together with responses from schools to recommendations therein, are lodged in the quality assurance evidence base, enabling resultant action to be tracked through the LTERAP process. In the context of programmes accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, the team noted that accreditation reports were considered by schools and also lodged in the quality assurance evidence base. However, the team was of the view that the University might be more systematic in drawing out matters of wider significance from these reports.

12 External examiners for taught programmes are nominated and appointed by schools, subject to faculty approval. Schools also have responsibility for the induction of external examiners and the University has acknowledged that further work is required to ensure that this is undertaken with greater consistency across the institution. External examiners are full members of school examination boards, which operate within University procedures that seek to ensure

equity, although not uniformity, of treatment for students. External examiner reports and schools' responses to them become part of the school quality assurance evidence base. Each faculty produces an overview of the reports and consequent actions, and this is used to inform the faculty's annual report on external examining to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The audit team found that the external examiner system was robust and that the University's procedures enable a proper oversight by the institution of the contribution made by external examiners in securing the standards of its awards. There are separate arrangements for the examination of research degrees and these are dealt with below.

13 The University has developed an institutional framework for assessment that is both prescriptive and advisory. The prescriptive elements are intended to ensure that the assessment policies and procedures adopted by schools are consistent with the *Code of practice*, while also enabling diversity of practice appropriate to disciplinary context. The advisory elements provide guidance for schools and programme teams on best practice in assessment. The University has acknowledged that allowing schools flexibility in relation to assessment has led to some inconsistency, and even to divergence, between 'official' regulations and those in programme handbooks. This situation has been addressed through arriving at an agreed set of university-wide rules relating to degree classification and progression, introduced from 2006-07, and a separate working group has been established to develop guidance and minimum standards for the content of programme handbooks, and other essential documentation made available to students.

14 The audit team noted that, while there was provision for schools to apply for exemption from the institution-wide schemes, the grounds on which this was permitted were restricted and few exemptions were currently in force; it therefore concluded that a significant improvement in the level of consistency had been achieved. More recently, the University has turned its attention to master's programmes where there are analogous issues to be addressed. The team recognised the broader challenge faced by the University in developing policies that are consistent and transparent, yet still accommodate legitimate differences between disciplines, particularly within a devolved organisational structure. Nevertheless, the team retained the view that, as in the case of assessment, the distinction between what was mandatory and what was optional might not always be absolutely clear. Noting that, in relation to the operation of examination boards, policies/procedures had been categorised as 'defined', 'advisable', or 'desirable', it reasoned that this kind of specificity might be employed more widely, as put forward in a recommendation (see paragraph 62).

15 The University is seeking to improve the use made by schools of management information relating to student progression, completion and achievement. A new student records system has already delivered improvements in the quality of admissions statistics and will, eventually, provide the datasets necessary for schools to carry out cohort analysis. However, given that it was going to be some time before full cohort analysis was available, the audit team saw the need for an interim measure to improve the provision of internally consistent progression and completion statistics for routine use by schools, as put forward in a recommendation (see paragraph 62).

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

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

17 The University's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy has as its key objective enhancement of the student learning experience by focusing on the following themes: student-centred research-led learning; employability; inclusivity; staff development and reward; and building the infrastructure for education. Institutional responsibility for implementation of the Strategy rests with the Education Policy Committee, which, consistent with the University's partnership working approach, sets policy following discussion through networks and working groups.

18 The University ensures consistency of its practice with the various sections of the *Code of practice* by assigning responsibility for alignment to committees/working groups or key individuals. Wherever possible, it looks beyond the *Code* in promoting best practice; for example, the position paper on inclusive practice in learning and teaching is far wider in scope than the *Code* on students with disabilities. In developing programmes, the University requires external advisers to comment on learning opportunities, as well as on standards, and involves employers or representatives from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies in this capacity, in addition to academic peers. It also refers to other universities within its networks for both information and feedback.

19 The strategic approval of new programmes is concerned with the business case and resource implications, as well as alignment with institutional strategic priorities. Any issues emerging at this stage are taken up with the school before the proposal may proceed to academic approval. In recognition of their importance in delivering learning opportunities, the approval process places due emphasis on the provision of learning resources, a report on both library and information technology provision being mandatory.

20 With regard to periodic programme review, the audit team found that review panels had available to them extensive sources of evidence. However, it also found marked differences between periodic programme review reports in terms of their format and the clarity with which recommendations were presented. The team considered that the observed variation between reports was not a reflection of subject differences, this being the explanation given by staff, and was of the view that greater standardisation in reporting would be beneficial.

21 Annual monitoring, through the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan (LTERAP), focuses on key aspects of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy and there is an expectation that action plans will be reflected in schools' annual strategic plans, which are completed later in the year. The annual monitoring cycle begins with the submission of school LTERAP reports for review by the relevant faculty. Through the use of reading groups, comprising staff from component schools, the LTERAP reports are distilled into a summary for the whole faculty, identifying good practice for wider dissemination and issues to be addressed. The Academic Quality and Standards Committee receives the faculty summaries and decides on actions that may be required. The cycle begins in November and is completed by February.

22 The University is continuing to refine the LTERAP in response to user feedback and central scrutiny, with greater prominence now being given to arrangements for research students. The ways in which schools populate the quality assurance evidence base is being monitored through having schools complete a checklist and explain any omissions from the specified documentary requirements. The audit team found staff to be enthusiastic about the LTERAP, which they clearly regarded as an improvement on the previous annual monitoring process. Having gained first-hand experience of navigating the quality assurance evidence base, the team concluded that the basic conception of the LTERAP was a good one, balancing the need for thorough monitoring through the evidence base with a greater freedom to reflect on that evidence in the report itself; the design of the LTERAP is identified as good practice (see paragraph 61).

23 Student feedback is a key input to the LTERAP report. It is a University requirement that, on an annual basis, students evaluate each module through a questionnaire. Issues raised by students, together with recommended changes to modules, are reported through the relevant sections of the LTERAP. Schools also report through the LTERAP on action resulting from student experience questionnaires, which are returned by final-year undergraduate, postgraduate taught and research students. The audit team found that schools were making good use of student feedback and drawing on student views to inform their thinking in various areas, including graduate employability and assessment feedback to students, both of which the University has been seeking to improve in response to survey findings. The team also found a number of effective mechanisms in place to collect feedback from students on professional services, such as the Library and Student Services.

24 The University places considerable emphasis on the feedback it obtains through student experience questionnaires, including the National Student Survey. Ratings for questionnaire topics below a specified threshold are formally brought to the attention of schools and professional services, with targets set for improvement, while issues requiring attention university-wide are referred to task forces/working groups or relevant committees. Further reinforcement is provided through a targeted discussion of questionnaires in each school, involving senior University staff.

25 Students have formal representation on key institutional committees, normally through the University's Students' Union, while course representatives are members of staff-student liaison committees within schools. Representation at faculty level has recently been introduced as a way of bridging the gap between representatives at institutional and school levels. The audit team found that student representatives were satisfied that students' views were being listened to and taken into account, and that they as representatives were kept informed about progress with actions being taken. Altogether, the team considered that there was substantial evidence to support the conclusion that the University was both attentive and responsive to the views of its students; the use of student feedback is identified as good practice (see paragraph 61).

26 In addition to providing feedback through their representation on committees, students are linked into the University's executive structures mainly through the Students' Union, whose officers meet regularly with senior staff. The University and the Students' Union work jointly in promoting best practice in student involvement in quality assurance processes and in the election/recruitment and training of student representatives. The audit team noted examples of active student participation in quality assurance processes at faculty level, such as the involvement of students in one faculty's LTERAP reading groups. The team also noted that the procedures for periodic programme review encourage student membership of review panels.

27 Through their membership of working groups, student representatives help to shape University policy and strategy; notable examples have included the Student Entitlement Declaration and the strategy for graduate employability. Students' Union officers also work with key staff on specific projects and there are occasions when the University and Students' Union share a joint platform. The audit team found that there were excellent working relationships between student representatives and University staff at all levels, enabling students to make an input to quality assurance processes both formally and informally, and noted particularly the close working partnership between the University and its Students' Union; this partnership is identified as good practice (see paragraph 61).

28 A key theme of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy is student-centred research-led learning, which is the University's approach to developing the links between activities related to research and activities related to teaching and learning. Essentially, this represents a particular model of programme design that offers students a learning experience as close as possible to the research experience. The aim is to develop skills in students which will be beneficial for later working life, as well as providing opportunities for progression to postgraduate studies. The audit team found that, through a number of focused schemes, the University was actively promoting staff engagement with research-led learning. The Learning and Teaching Week, 2007 was devoted to this topic as a means of sharing practice across schools; staff promotion criteria and other forms of recognition of achievement are being linked more closely with the objectives of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, and there are opportunities for staff to bid for funding for projects in priority areas identified in the Strategy. The approach to fostering research-led learning is identified as good practice (see paragraph 61).

29 With regard to provision delivered off-campus, mainstream quality assurance procedures apply to distance learning, but there is supplementary guidance on issues specific to this type of programme. The University has also developed comprehensive guidelines for placement learning, work-based learning, student exchange or study abroad to facilitate the management of programmes involving such arrangements.

30 Complementing the learning opportunities afforded through their programmes of study is the academic and personal support provided for students by the professional services of the Library, Information Support Services and Student Services. Human Resources and the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, meanwhile, contribute to staff support and development.

31 The University achieved a high ranking in the most recent National Student Survey for learning resources provision, which is the responsibility of the Library and Information Systems Services. Both these central services maintain close liaison with schools, programme leaders and students and report to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee on issues raised in student experience questionnaires, (including the National Student Survey) and school LTERAP reports. The audit team noted the positive comments from both academic staff and students about library services and the way in which the library was responding to pressures on space by reviewing the way in which journals are kept and digitising some of its holdings. The effective delivery of library resources is identified as good practice (see paragraph 61). In the face of increasing student numbers and a shift in the balance of requirements from dedicated teaching space to flexible learning space, the University is adopting a strategic approach to issues of timetabling and space management.

32 The University's overall policy on admissions is underpinned by a commitment to recruit students from a wide variety of backgrounds. It is supported by a comprehensive range of related policy statements and operational guidance and, within this framework, schools set their own admissions criteria and operate their own recruitment and selection processes. Requirements for admission are published for each programme in prospectuses and on the University website, and training is provided for staff involved in selection and recruitment. The audit team found that responsibilities for the various aspects of the admissions process were clearly designated in the University's procedures between schools and the relevant functions within Student Services, while a network of staff with an interest in admissions had been established to facilitate a coherent approach and the sharing of practice. The team noted that the University was participating in a number of specific initiatives connected with widening access to higher education, which were given high priority by senior management.

33 The University's procedures designate personal tutors as the first point of contact for students on taught programmes in relation to academic and pastoral guidance; the procedures also state that the role of personal tutor may vary 'slightly' from school to school. Research supervisors perform the equivalent role for research students. The University has recognised the variable nature of student support between schools and it continues to monitor the situation through student experience questionnaires. A network of senior tutors has been formed to facilitate sharing of good practice. Noting student concern about inconsistency in the personal tutor role, with some tutors allegedly not meeting minimum expectations for frequency of meetings, the audit team concluded that there would be benefit in the University being more explicit about the necessary degree of observance with its procedures on tutoring. This would be timely, as several schools were reviewing their student support arrangements and in some cases transferring responsibilities of the personal tutor to other roles.

34 The University has invested heavily in the development of the Student Resources Network: a physical and virtual network drawing together a range of services for students, currently including those delivered by Student Services, the Library and Information Systems Services. The physical aspect of the Network comprises a new, purpose-built Student Services Centre, while the virtual aspect comprises Student Resources Online, giving students access to information and advice by telephone or email and out of hours. The Student Services Centre also houses the Students' Union Advice and Information Centre. The audit team found students to be appreciative of this 'one-stop-shop' approach and very positive about the quality and efficiency of services provided; the Student Resources Network is identified as good practice (see paragraph 61).

35 Over the past two years, the University has been developing its approach to graduate employability progressively, which is to integrate employability within all relevant strategies and policies and link action planning with the various stages of the student life-cycle. Work in the area is directed through a steering group, while faculty employability coordinators have recently been introduced to act as catalysts for change within schools and to add momentum by developing initiatives university-wide. The arrangements for taking forward and embedding the University's strategy for enhancing the employability of its graduates are identified as good practice (see paragraph 61). With regard to personal development planning for students, the audit team learned that, while this was not compulsory, it was considered by the University to be good practice. Every school was making some progress in developing appropriate practice in this area, with some schools having integrated activities within the curricula and others facilitating structured opportunities, through, for example, the development of an electronic learning log.

36 Human Resources has institutional responsibility for staffing policy and provides generic training, focusing on skills development, management and leadership. Training focused on learning and teaching is provided separately through the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, although the audit team found there to be good coordination between this and the Human Resources function. Professional training programmes include the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, accredited by the Higher Education Academy, which is compulsory for staff new to teaching, and the Postgraduate Induction to Learning and Teaching on offer to research students. Priorities for staff development are shaped by the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, but the team was informed that priorities were also influenced by suggestions emanating from schools. The team saw evidence of monitoring at university level of centrally provided staff development; for example, there was an evaluation of the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice programme in 2006-07. Evaluation of staff development activity within schools was routinely reported through the LTERAP.

37 Peer observation of teaching is organised at school level and the observation records form part of each school's quality assurance evidence base. The University's policy is that staff should have at least one teaching session observed each year. However, the audit team noted from school LTERAP reports that peer observation was not consistently being reported on, while some schools had acknowledged that the full annual cycle of peer observations had not been completed. The team learned that schools were not fully accepting of the University's requirements for peer observation of teaching and were looking for change. The team considered that this was another example where the degree of observance required of University policy was insufficiently explicit.

38 Criteria for staff promotion place an emphasis on the importance of a balanced portfolio of education and research, although the University has also created recognised pathways for staff wishing to pursue their career through the teaching and learning route, as well as introducing several specific schemes to raise the profile of education relative to research; these types of staffing policy are identified as good practice (see paragraph 61).

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

#### **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

40 The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy guides the institutional approach to quality enhancement over the period 2006-10. It was introduced after a planned, university-wide consultation extending over many months, involving a series of open forum events giving voice to a wide range of stakeholders, both staff and students, from across the institution. The strategy document is accompanied by a number of supporting documents developed through cross-university task forces. The audit team learned that the current Strategy represented a marked change from its precursor and that the succinct style of the main document was helpful in

engaging staff with its key themes. Staff, both academic and administrative, whom the team met were clearly familiar with the document and understood the nature and significance of its themes. The approach taken in the formulation of the Strategy and the framework it now provides for developing teaching and learning is identified as good practice (see paragraph 61).

41 As noted previously, the LTERAP reports focus on key aspects of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, and it is on these reports, together with the underlying evidence base, that the University largely relies in monitoring the effectiveness of the Strategy in improving the student learning experience. The University therefore recognises that the robustness of the methodology needs to be kept under evaluation to make sure that the LTERAP process fulfils its potential to provide the necessary management information to chart the progress of enhancement achieved.

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

### **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

43 Operational responsibility for collaborative provision is devolved to the host school, although the University keeps a central register of all its collaborative arrangements. These are the subject of formal organisational agreements between the University and the relevant partner organisations (memoranda of agreement), approved by faculties, acting on behalf of the University. Memoranda are required to address a range of topics, as indicated in a template. The audit team found that memoranda consistently addressed these topics, although there was variation in content and in the degree of detail included.

44 The University has two policy statements relevant to establishing collaborative arrangements, one dealing with the strategic and academic approval processes specific to collaborative provision, such as approval of the partner organisation itself, the other determining the management processes to be applied in the case of particular relationships. The latter involves a risk-based approach, in that it entails the assignment at the set-up stage of a risk category to the proposed collaboration, which in turn determines the package of approval, monitoring and review processes deemed appropriate to the relationship. The audit team considered that the introduction of risk assessment represented a significant strengthening of procedures and was an appropriate mechanism for overseeing academic standards and quality within a local responsibility model.

45 Mainstream procedures apply fully to collaborative programmes, including approval, monitoring and review, assessment, external examining and the issue of certificates and transcripts; the audit team was able to verify key aspects of this. University policy on the review of collaborative arrangements gives emphasis to additional areas requiring attention, which would not apply in the case of its internal programmes; again the team was able to verify the thoroughness of the process. With respect to the monitoring of collaborative programmes through the LTERAP, there is the additional requirement for schools to obtain annual reports from partner organisations on the operation and quality assurance of collaborative programmes and to lodge these reports in the school quality assurance evidence base.

46 The audit team found considerable variability in the way collaborative programmes were reported on through the LTERAP, and only in a few cases were the underlying reports from partner organisations available from the quality assurance evidence base. The team noted that the University had already issued revised guidance for schools concerning such reporting and was able to see some improvement in the latest round of reports. Nevertheless, given the level of risk associated with collaborative arrangements, which the University has itself recognised, the team emphasises the importance of ensuring that due prominence is given to collaborative programmes in the LTERAP, as put forward in a recommendation (see paragraph 62).

47 The audit team was able to confirm that there was rigorous oversight by the University of the arrangements for research students at its accredited universities, noting that a variant of the LTERAP had been introduced for these institutions.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

48 The University's arrangements for research students are set out in institutional regulations, which incorporate an internal Code of Practice, aligned to the *Code of practice* published by QAA. The Academic Quality and Standards Committee has responsibility for the development of University policy relating to research students and for its continued relevance in the context of external drivers. Schools have delegated responsibility for implementation and ongoing operation of arrangements that are consistent with this institutional framework, while faculties oversee the monitoring by schools of the quality of provision.

49 The Graduate School within each faculty provides the mechanism through which schools are consulted on university-wide matters related to research students. An associated network group (Graduate Schools Network Group) facilitates discussion across faculties and has been involved in preparing papers on aspects of the arrangements for research students to be routed through the committee system, as well as in developing guidance documents for schools. The LTERAP is now the key document for assuring the quality of research degree programmes and the student research experience. The University is seeking to improve consistency of reporting through the LTERAP and the audit team encourages it to continue in these efforts.

50 With regard to the research environment, the University scores highly according to the various external metrics of research strength. Its internal Code of Practice includes a statement setting out for schools an expectation that research students will be able to study within a supportive research culture and have available to them suitable facilities and equipment, which, where appropriate, meet the requirements of the relevant research councils. The University is aware from various internal survey data that research students have concerns about the adequacy of space assigned to them and the audit team noted that the provision of a graduate centre had now been included in the University's estates strategy.

51 Research student admissions are governed by the University's admissions regulations and admissions policy, while induction is arranged through schools and, at faculty level, through the relevant graduate school. Information is also provided to research students through handbooks and on relevant websites. The audit team found that the information so provided was comprehensive, but there was considerable variation in the content and quality of handbooks; the team noted that the issue of consistency in student handbooks generally was to be progressed through a working group.

52 The University has clearly stated protocols for the supervision of research students and for the formal monitoring of their progress. The University expects all new supervisors to undertake appropriate training and the audit team saw evidence that this, as well as refresher training for more experienced supervisors, was taking place. Students meeting the team confirmed that supervisory arrangements were satisfactory, a view also reflected in the responses to the research student experience questionnaire. However, the team also learned from students that timescales and arrangements for progress and review varied considerably across different schools. While not expecting schools to adopt uniform arrangements, the University does expect compliance with its Code of Practice, and has sought to reinforce this through the issuance of further guidance in respect of supervisor handbooks (developed via the Graduate Schools Network Group). The University was ranked highly in a recently compiled national league table of research degree qualification rates; the team viewed this achievement as an indicator of the overall effectiveness of progress and review arrangements.

53 Comprehensive training is available for research students, provided through individual schools and the Graduate Schools, and aligned with UK research councils' guidelines. All schools have in place processes for identifying the training needs of individual research students as well as for allowing them to reflect on the effectiveness of this training. In addition, there is guidance or training to prepare students for producing their thesis or dissertation and for the oral examination. Training for students who act as teaching assistants is provided through the Postgraduate Induction to Learning and Teaching programme. There are guidelines on these arrangements which draw attention to the limits on working hours for research students recommended by the research councils.

54 As noted previously, there is a specific student experience questionnaire for research students and the audit team learned from students that informal mechanisms for giving feedback through supervisors or other staff members also worked well. In addition, the Students' Union has an officer dedicated to matters relating to postgraduate and mature students. Research students also have representation on relevant committees and on the Graduate Schools Network Group.

55 Research students are assessed through submission of a thesis or dissertation followed by an oral examination (*viva voce*), conducted by an internal and an external examiner. The University has produced assessment criteria for use by examiners in constructing their reports and recommendations; these criteria were developed with reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. The University requires that examiners have sufficient experience and appropriate subject expertise for their role and that they have no prior involvement in the student's work. All examiners must be approved at faculty level. Research students' complaints and appeals are dealt with through the University's normal regulations, and students are directed to the relevant procedures through the University's internal Code of Practice.

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

## Section 7: Published information

57 There are protocols assigning responsibility at appropriate levels of seniority within the University's organisational structures for the content of published information, including prospectuses and information on the University website. The prime institutional source of information for current students relating to student support and academic policies, procedures and regulations is the Academic Diary and Student Handbook, while the full academic regulations are in the University Calendar. Both documents were found by the audit team to be clear and comprehensive.

58 Students also receive programme handbooks produced by schools. The divergence of information on assessment matters between school handbooks and regulations in the University Calendar has already been mentioned, but student representatives meeting the audit team expressed more general concerns about the variability of programme handbooks. The team learned that a working group had been established to consider minimum information requirements for all student handbooks and that this group was due to report before the end of the current academic year. The team saw the need for close monitoring of consistency of programme handbooks with the guidance to be developed by this working group, with particular emphasis on the clarity of information concerning assessment policies and regulations, as put forward in a recommendation (see paragraph 62).

59 The audit team was able to verify that the University was able to provide the type of information on teaching quality now being recommended to be published locally in place of the qualitative summaries on the TQi website (now Unistats). In the case of external examiner reports, these will now be shared with students through their representatives on staff-student consultative committees.

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

## **Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations**

61 Features of good practice identified by the audit team:

- the design of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan, enabling it to encapsulate both quality assurance and quality enhancement within the annual monitoring process (paragraph 22)
- the widespread and effective use of student feedback at all levels of the University (paragraph 25)
- the close working partnership between the University and its Students' Union in the context of making improvements to the student experience (paragraph 27)
- the approach taken by the University in fostering research-led learning (paragraph 28)
- the effective delivery of library resources in support of the student learning experience (paragraph 31)
- the development of the Student Resources Network, providing an integrated physical and virtual access point for students to obtain support and information in person, remotely and out of hours (paragraph 34)
- the arrangements for taking forward and embedding the University's strategy for enhancing the employability of its graduates (paragraph 35)
- the adoption of staffing policies which, in line with the University's stated aim, raise the profile of teaching relative to research (paragraph 38)
- the measures taken to engage staff in the formulation of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy, and the framework the Strategy now provides for developing teaching and learning (paragraph 40).

62 Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- to review whether the powers delegated to and exercised by Associate Deans (Education) are accompanied by suitable checks and balances (paragraph 7)
- where university-level policy or procedural guidance is issued to schools, to make more explicit the degree of observance expected, so that it is clear whether local variation is appropriate (paragraphs 14, 33 and 37)
- to improve the provision of internally consistent progression and completion statistics for routine use by schools as an interim measure, until the planned central system for providing these statistics comes fully on stream (paragraph 15)
- to ensure that due prominence is given to collaborative programmes in the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Review and Action Plan and its underlying evidence base, particularly given the level of risk associated with collaborative arrangements, which the University has itself recognised (paragraph 46)
- to monitor closely the consistency of programme handbooks with the guidance to be developed by a University working group, with particular emphasis on the clarity of information concerning assessment policies and regulations (paragraph 58).

## Appendix

### The University's response to the institutional audit report

The University is extremely pleased with the evaluation made by the audit team in their 2008 Report. It is particularly encouraging that the team identified many examples of good practice in the areas in which we have been investing time and effort. Furthermore, the recommendations made were in the category of desirable and as such are enhancement issues rather than considered to be issues likely to jeopardise the standard of our awards or the learning opportunities available to students. Overall, the report recognises the commitment of the staff at the University of Southampton to the achievement of the highest academic standards.

Notwithstanding the positive nature of our report, we are committed to quality enhancement and so a post-audit review has been initiated. Appropriate steps will be taken to address the recommendations made and other issues raised in the report. Some action relating to these was already in hand at the time of the audit visit, such as:

- ongoing work to improve communication with schools on collaborative programmes, to ensure that the definitions used within the University are clearly understood and programmes reported accordingly
- a working group, under the leadership of an Associate Dean (Education), which has been established to ensure the coherence of information supplied to students by the institution and by its schools
- the Management Information data team are working on providing progression and completion statistics in a more user-friendly form, based on the methodology piloted in 2007 for entry statistics, for routine use from 2008.

The University will review the checks and balances surrounding the powers delegated to the Associate Deans and the way that it indicates to schools the degree of observance expected for university-level policy and procedural guidance.

Additionally, work has also begun on some other issues.

- Peer observation policy and procedures are being reviewed to enable schools to gain maximum benefit from this, and to learn from current practice within the University and elsewhere. A consultation exercise was held in April 2008 and a working group will report by the end of the summer.
- The Senior Tutors' Network was established last year and has already begun to consider the nature of personal support for students and will seek to review our policy and procedures to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.

We are aware that we must monitor and review systems and processes to ensure that they remain fit for purpose and contribute to a positive student learning experience. This positive audit outcome reinforces our confidence that we are in a good position to build on current successes.

