



**QAA**

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# Institutional audit

**University of Northampton**

JUNE 2009

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ISBN 978 1 84979 047 5

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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 the 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 then Department for Education 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 to 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 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 on 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 the 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, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

## Summary

### Introduction

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

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. 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 (UK). 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 of Northampton is that:

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

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

### Postgraduate research students

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

## Published information

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

## Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

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

## Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

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

It would be desirable for the University to:

- keep under review the committee structure for academic governance, to establish clarity in the designation of roles and responsibilities
- consider how the University may be assured that central policy and procedural requirements are observed in and across schools
- monitor the operation and reporting of periodic subject review, to confirm that the University's requirements for separation of the process from those for course approval and for minor modifications to programmes are met
- develop a more systematic approach to the use of the virtual learning environment across the University, in the interests of parity of student learning opportunities
- consider how assessed work can be returned in a timely fashion, so that students can apply the feedback in subsequent assessment tasks

- give further consideration to its approach to achieving its aim that each student will have a curriculum characterised by the principles and practice of employability
- ensure that data on student performance disaggregated by module and partner College is used routinely and consistently by external examiners, boards of examiners and in annual and periodic review.

### 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*
- frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that generally the University took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students; there remains work to be undertaken in respect of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

## Report

### Preface

1 An Institutional audit of the University of Northampton (the University) was undertaken during the week commencing 1 June 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Mrs E Barnes; Professor D Bonner; Mr G Curtis; Dr M Lockett; auditors, and Ms C Carpenter, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mrs S Patterson, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 While there was a university in Northampton in the 13th century founded by scholars from Oxford and Cambridge, it was dissolved by Royal Decree in 1265. The origins of the current University of Northampton therefore date from the twentieth century. The amalgamation of a number of local colleges led to the formation of Nene College in 1975, which grew further in such areas as health, as well as creating 'the largest concentration of leather related expertise in the world'. Nene College was granted taught degree awarding powers in 1995 and changed its title to University College Northampton in 1999. In 2006, it obtained research degree awarding powers and university title, becoming the University of Northampton.

4 The University's mission focuses on applied teaching and research, with the goal of being 'a student facing learner centred institution, nationally recognised and regionally engaged'. It retains a number of areas of strength from its heritage, including leather technology and health. In the academic year 2008-09, there were some 11,000 students studying at the University, with 750 in partner colleges and over 100 postgraduate research students.

5 The Vice Chancellor is supported by a Directorate team comprising three Pro-Vice-Chancellors (for Academic Affairs; Research and Business Development; and Strategic Planning and Resources), the Registrar and Clerk to the Governing Council, and the Director of Finance. There are also 11 professional support departments whose directors report to an appropriate member of the Directorate.

6 The University is organised into six academic schools: Applied Sciences, the Arts, Education, Health, Business and Social Sciences. Each school is headed by a dean, the majority of whom are supported by two associate deans, one with a broad quality remit, the other with responsibility for research and knowledge transfer. There is also a Graduate School within the University's Knowledge Exchange, its 'front door' for knowledge transfer and research activities.

7 The University uses modular frameworks for its degrees and, at the time of the audit, was implementing a single 'University Modular Framework' to cover almost all of its taught programmes. A taught programme requires completion of sufficient approved required and optional modules; in addition, students can personally 'tailor' a wide variety of joint honours programmes. As a result, the focus of the University's assurance of academic standards, for example, in assessment boards and external examining is at a combination of field and framework level, fields being groupings of modules in a subject area within a school, while the framework is University-wide across all subjects. As a result, while the University has an overview of academic performance at field and framework level, there is a less explicit perspective on academic performance at programme level.

8 Oversight of academic matters is delegated by the University's Governing Council to the Senate, which is advised and supported in its work by six standing committees and, in turn, their subcommittees. The audit found that the basic structure had served the University well as it exercised its newly-granted degree awarding power responsibilities, but that the committee



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

9 The University did not have an Institutional audit during the previous audit cycle as it was subject to extensive scrutiny during the evaluation of its application for research degree awarding powers and university title. A report, in lieu of Institutional audit, based on enquiries undertaken during the academic years 2003-04 and 2004-05, in connection with the University's successful application for research degree awarding powers and university title, was published in April 2006. The audit found that, in the main, the University had either addressed or made significant progress in addressing the findings of the report, as well as those of other audits and reviews.

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

10 Ultimate formal responsibility for the management of academic standards lies with Senate. In practice, Senate delegates significant authority for the operational management of academic standards to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and the Research Degrees Committee. The former oversees the academic standards of taught programmes, and the latter the academic standards of postgraduate research degrees. The school quality standards and enhancement committees, reporting to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, play a key role in the management of academic standards at the local level. Each autumn term, a report from the Academic Quality and Standards Committee is made to Senate on academic standards, quality and collaborative provision. Any necessary actions arising on the reports are monitored through that Committee. The audit found the reports to be comprehensive providing a clear oversight at institutional level of the security of academic standards.

11 There are clearly defined and rigorous procedures at school and institutional level for programme approval. Programmes are approved through a validation event involving internal and external peer review, with appropriate reference to the Academic Infrastructure for the setting of academic standards. Final programme approval is given by Senate.

12 Annual review is conducted at subject, school and institutional level. The reviews consider statistical data on student admission, achievement and progression; evaluation by students of modules; and external examiner reports. The Academic Audit and Review Committee provides an institutional dimension by consideration of in-school audits of the process and through sample auditing of annual subject reviews. The audit found the annual review process to be effective in contributing to the management of academic standards.

13 Periodic subject review, operated on a rolling, five-year schedule, considers the operation and appropriateness of programmes, including those provided through collaborative arrangements. Further information about the periodic review of collaborative provision may be found in Section 5 of this report. The review panel includes external academic and recent graduate representation. The audit found that the process was clearly defined and reflective

in practice in its consideration of academic standards and that it allowed the University to be assured about the continued appropriateness of academic standards in the subject area. There are sound arrangements for reporting on the outcomes of the review, and institutional overview is gained by the involvement of the Academic Audit and Review Committee and the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, which in turn reports to Senate. There are satisfactory arrangements for action arising from the review. Review of a sample of periodic review documentation indicated that, on occasion, the review event included approvals of new routes and minor modifications to programmes; the University indicated its intention to apply its stated procedures in this respect more firmly in future. The audit team considers it desirable that the University monitor the operation and reporting of periodic subject review, to confirm that the University's requirements for separation of the process from those for course approval and for minor modifications to programmes, are met.

14 The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are set out clearly in a comprehensive external examiner handbook. There are sound arrangements for the appointment and induction of external examiners for framework boards, field boards, and award boards and for research degrees. External examiner reports are read at institutional, school and programme level, and responses are made on standard templates to matters raised in the reports. An institutional overview of the operation of the external examiner system is gained through an annual report to Senate from the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The audit found that there was effective involvement of external examiners in the assessment of students and that the University took seriously and responded thoughtfully to issues raised by the examiners. There is a systematic approach to identifying and taking action in respect of common themes and matters, with institutional significance arising from the external examiners' reports. The audit also confirmed that the University made strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment. The University has taken account of the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* in its approach to external examining which makes an effective contribution to the management of academic standards.

15 There is clear evidence of a systematic approach to the use of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in the setting, calibration and maintenance of academic standards. There are explicit requirements for reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and to subject benchmark statements in course design, approval and review. All programmes of study are defined in comprehensible and helpful programme specifications, which provide award, skill and assessment details. The institution involves relevant external professional and statutory bodies in the process of validation and review. The audit found that the University made good use of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards.

16 At the time of the audit, academic regulations, including those for assessment, progression and award, were contained within the framework regulations for undergraduate programmes, postgraduate programmes and professional doctorates. The regulations and assessment information, including procedural information about late submissions and mitigating circumstances are clearly specified and are included in the student handbooks. Module guides are, in the main, informative and include assessment and grading criteria that allow students to understand what they need to do to succeed in assessment tasks. Schools are required to produce local policies in line with institutional specifications. The audit found that assessment policies at school level followed institutional requirements. Overall, the audit confirmed that assessment practice and procedures were effective in maintaining academic standards.

17 Management information in support of the University's management of academic standards is produced and analysed by the University's Information Planning Unit, drawing on the University's records system. At the time of the audit, the University was planning to extend the functionality of the records system through the addition of 'single source' curriculum records and programme specifications in electronic format. The audit found that the data available to

subject teams to be comprehensive. The University recognises that there is scope for more effective use of the data in annual review. The annual report from the Academic Quality and Standards Committee to Senate analyses progression and award data for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and destination data for leavers, allowing Senate to maintain an overview of student achievement. Examination of relevant documentation established that the statistics provide adequate information to allow the University to monitor the security of academic standards of awards across its provision.

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

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

19 The University draws systematically on the Academic Infrastructure as a point of reference in the formulation of policy and procedures. The approach includes an annual appraisal of the University's policies and procedures against the guidance in the *Code of practice*. A range of external benchmarks is also used to influence and to measure the success of institutional strategies. The audit team identified the structured approach to the use of the *Code* as a feature of good practice in the management of learning opportunities in on-campus provision

20 The University's Academic Quality and Standards Handbook is a clearly written guide to the approval, monitoring and review processes, specifying the requirements for preparation of documents, and timelines and processes. There are proper procedures to confirm satisfactory fulfillment of any conditions attached to course approvals. External input into programme approval and periodic review is secured through the participation of academic and, in some cases, professional body or practitioner panel members from outside the institution. The Academic Audit and Review Committee receives the reports of approval events to maintain an institutional overview and to confirm that the process is conducted in accordance with requirements. Review of documentation and discussion with staff confirmed that the approval process was rigorous in specification and in implementation, and made a contribution to the management of learning opportunities.

21 Annual monitoring is by subject, defined by the University as a collection of fields and programmes. The process involves a critical review of the operation of programmes and fields in the subject, drawing on discussion of the operation of modules through an annual review forum and of programmes at boards of study. Consideration is given to a range of matters, to allow effective appraisal of the quality of learning and teaching, and of curriculum design. There is also annual school review covering student performance, module evaluation, student support, the currency of the curriculum, student surveys, and modules in need of additional support. Review of a sample of documentation associated with annual monitoring and review demonstrated that the processes were operating as intended with respect to on-campus provision and contributed to the management of learning opportunities in the that provision.

22 One of the stated purposes of periodic subject review is consideration of the effectiveness of quality assurance and enhancement processes. The event is intended to cover collaborative programmes within the subject area, as well as on-campus delivery. A review of documentation associated with periodic subject review demonstrated that the continued suitability of learning opportunities for on-campus provision was given full consideration. The audit found that the periodic review process operated effectively in respect of the University's home provision. Discussion of the University's approach to the periodic review of its collaborative provision may be found in Section 5 of this report.

23 The University seeks feedback from students through module evaluation questionnaires for which there is a minimum prescribed format, to which schools may add questions. There are mechanisms for confirming that evaluations take place in accordance with requirements. There was evidence that students were aware of opportunities to provide feedback and that the feedback process was working as a mechanism for assuring and improving the quality of modules delivered at the institution.

24 Outcomes of the National Student Survey (the Survey), mirrored by an institutional student survey for those students not covered by it are considered by Senate in its annual report from the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. Results and consequent actions from the the Survey and the institutional survey are considered at a school level in the School Annual Review. Each school produces a written report on both the Survey and the institutional survey. As part of this actions are identified for implementation at school level. The compilation of all reports and actions is considered by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. Institutionally this is an effective way of responding to the feedback from the Survey and the institutional survey.

25 Overall, the audit found that the University's use of feedback from on-campus students contributed to the maintenance of the quality of the students' learning opportunities for those students.

26 The membership of Senate, the Academic Policy and Development Committee, Academic Quality and Standards Committee and Learning and Teaching Committee includes a sabbatical officer of the Students' Union. The Research Degrees Committee includes a representative of the research student community. At school and programme level, students are represented at school quality standards and enhancement committees, and at boards of study. Most of these committees operate a student forum, which is held in advance of the committee, allowing a wider discussion with student representatives than would be possible in committee. There is evidence that, while the level of student engagement may vary, student views are heard and taken seriously at the committees and boards of study. Course representatives whom the audit team met testified to often receiving helpful briefings prior to meetings where course issues were being discussed.

27 With effect from the academic year 2008-09, training for student representatives became the responsibility of the Students' Union with support from the Quality and Curriculum Services. The students' written submission was positive about this change and student representatives whom the audit team met reported that the training programme had prepared them for the role. There was evidence that the University involved students in decisions about policy or practice related to their learning experience, and that, overall, the University's arrangements for student participation made a useful contribution to the management of the quality of learning opportunities.

28 The University's principal strategies include strong aspirations that learning and teaching be grounded in scholarship and pedagogic research, and that research be regarded as a means to support high-quality teaching. At the time of the audit, an institutional approach had recently been developed that included the recognition of research and teaching linkages being integral to monitoring and review processes, and the production of a profile of research-informed teaching activity with a view to publishing effective practice. Discussion with staff and review of documentation indicated that progress in fulfilling the aspirations for research-informed teaching had been slower than was anticipated in the planned timetable for implementation of the institutional approach.

29 A Distance Learning Working Group reporting to the Learning and Teaching Committee, has a remit to identify and disseminate effective practice for distance learning. The University intends that by 2010 it will have in place provision for learning and teaching that is flexible in terms of mode and place of delivery. At the time of the audit, distance-learning programmes operated largely in the areas of business and of applied sciences with the former including

supported distance-learning partnerships with overseas institutions, and the latter supported by the relevant industry body.

30 There is effective liaison between Information Services staff, the Office of Learning and Teaching, and the school learning and teaching coordinators, about the provision of learning resources. Library and information technology (IT) facilities are provided at both campuses. Library resources are maintained and developed through an institutional collection development policy supplemented by school policies which are responsive to the needs of particular subject areas.

31 School policies are informed by the school quality standards and enhancement committees, and the work of school academic support teams within Information Services. Similarly, there is a maintenance and renewal strategy for IT facilities. Students with additional needs are supported by the extra-learning support and assistance team within Information Services. At the time of the audit, the University was considering a range of actions in response to comment about library resources and IT facilities expressed in the National Student Survey and other sources of feedback.

32 The University's virtual learning environment is in widespread use across the institution but, at the time of the audit, there were areas where its use was rather limited and pedestrian. At the time of the audit, the University was planning that all staff should be at the threshold level of competence (known locally as 'filing cabinet') by the end of 2010. Students whom the audit team met spoke of a varied experience of the virtual learning environment, the effectiveness of which was largely related to the enthusiasm of individual members of staff rather than explicit institutional expectations about the use of the virtual learning environment in supporting students' learning. The audit found that staff use of the virtual learning environment was growing and that the University was gradually increasing its provision of digital resources. The audit team considers it desirable that the University consider the development of a more systematic approach to the use of the virtual learning environment across the University, in the interests of parity of student learning opportunities.

33 The University's admissions policy aims to provide opportunities for students of all ages, including those who might not traditionally have secured entry into higher education. Admissions processes are well documented: an Admissions Code of Practice; an Applicants Charter; an admissions procedure for students with disabilities, a General Requirements for Entry, Special Admissions procedure; and a policy for the accreditation of prior learning. In addition, the University has a widening participation strategy which aims to welcome a wide range of learners not all of whom will be studying for specific awards or will come with traditional entry qualifications. Most students who met the audit team spoke enthusiastically of their experience of admission, especially the involvement of, and access to, academic staff. Some international students reported that they would have welcomed more information and that the recently established Student Administration and Services (paragraph 34) did not serve the interests of international students as well as the now defunct separate international student advice centre had done. The audit found that the University's admissions policy was fit for the purpose.

34 At the time of the audit, central student services had recently been combined within the new Student Administration and Services, centred on the Park Campus, with most services replicated at the Avenue Campus. While students were generally satisfied with the support provided by Student Administration and Services, there was a perception that the Avenue Campus was less well supported than the Park Campus. The University considers there to be no disparity between the facilities at the two campuses and is committed to maintaining equity of provision.

35 There is a comprehensive induction programme at local and institutional level, tailored to the needs of a wide range of entrants. At the time of the audit, the University had recently revised its approach to personal tutoring to strengthen the role. Although the student written submission included some critical comment about the University's personal tutoring system, students whom the audit team met were complimentary about the personal tutoring arrangements.

The University's personal development portfolio system, (NUPAD), and the associated e-portfolio provision, (MyPAD), are linked to the personal tutorial process. The University has made every effort to promote personal development planning, but NUPAD and MyPAD are not well used by students. There was evidence that the systems were elaborate and students spoke of complexity and a lack of training in the use of the systems.

36 Academic support is also provided by the Centre for Academic Practice which offers specialist tuition across a range of graduate skills at all levels of study through one-to-one tutorials, group workshops, open-learning packs or online support. The support offered by the Centre for Academic Practice is valued by students who make extensive use of the facilities offered. The audit found that the Centre represented an innovative approach to student support and concluded that the provision of readily accessible support for student learning through the Centre was a feature of good practice in the University's management of learning opportunities.

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

38 Further sources of student support are the Retention, Achievement and Progression Programme for students who are repeating a year and a Cause for Concern procedure to support students who are not attending classes. There was evidence of the efficacy of these initiatives in improving student retention.

39 There is a Careers and Employability Service, and the University attaches considerable importance to the development of employability skills. The Learning and Teaching Strategy lays emphasis on the curricular development of applied and vocationally-related learning and skills development 'enabling graduates to achieve employability rates commensurate with our national benchmarks'. This is re-inforced by the associated objective to 'ensure that the curriculum for each student will be characterised by the principles and practices of employability'. The audit found little evidence of the development in practice of employability skills in the curriculum. The audit team considers it desirable that the University give further consideration to its approach to achieving its aim that each student will have a curriculum characterised by the principles and practice of employability.

40 The audit found that, overall, the University's arrangements for student support made a satisfactory contribution to the management of learning opportunities.

41 The University's orientation programme for new staff is comprehensive and well regarded by participants; new and inexperienced academic staff are required to attend the Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education programme. Ongoing support for staff is offered through a wide-ranging programme of continuing professional development workshops and seminars. Learning and teaching coordinators support academic staff, especially in terms of awareness and implementation of new policy developments, and provide a link between school academic staff and the Office of Learning and Teaching. All staff have an annual performance and development review from which staff development needs may be identified. The audit team formed the view that the arrangements for staff development were satisfactory, although more might be done to encourage staff to take up the opportunities provided.

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

current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in on-campus provision.

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

43 At the time of the audit, the University's approach to enhancement focused on 'students' learning experience in higher education', and was driven by learning and teaching activities. The University's approach to enhancement is embodied in an 'Operational Plan' for learning and teaching that is updated annually, and is monitored by the Learning and Teaching Committee. The institutional-level Operational Plan is translated to school level. There are also local school enhancement plans. The audit found that the plans were an operational translation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy into activity and thus were well linked to the University's institutional development.

44 The Learning and Teaching Committee and the Office of Learning and Teaching lead in the implementation of the Operational Plan, supported by school learning and teaching coordinators, and a learning and teaching coordinator based in Information Services. The audit found examples of instances where the Committee had championed themes across the University, but it can take a long time to secure consistency of practice across the institution. The Office of Learning and Teaching is involved in a variety of activities, such as events designed to spread awareness of good practice, a readily accessible intranet site and internal 'Teaching and Learning Enhancement Awards'.

45 Other contributors to the University's enhancement of learning opportunities include quality assurance activities, stakeholder feedback and staff development. It was evident that academic staff saw quality assurance as being about opportunities for improvement rather than just confirmation of achievement of baseline expectations. As indicated by their title and the records of their discussions, quality standards and enhancement committees are a further effective institutional mechanism for quality enhancement. At an institutional level, there was evidence of circulation of good practice identified in reviews by the Academic Audit and Review Committee. The University acknowledges that enhancement activity in relation to partner colleges is an area for future development.

46 There is evidence that the University uses student feedback mechanisms to support enhancement at programme, school and institutional level. There is only limited evidence of feedback from other stakeholders, in particular employers.

47 In summary, there was clear evidence that an approach to enhancement, based on learning and teaching activities, was being actively pursued within the University. There are operational plans for enhancement, which provide for systematic activity in support of the University's strategic approach to improvements in the management of learning opportunities in its on-campus provision.

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

48 The aspirations and aims of the University's framework for the management of its collaborative provision are apposite. There is evidence of good practice in the support provided to UK partner colleges in developing their higher education provision. The processes of institutional and programme approval are sound and draw on the relevant precepts in the *Code of practice*. The recently introduced procedure for Institutional Review should provide the University with additional assurance of the security of operation of individual partnerships. The audit found that the implementation and execution in practice of the University's framework for collaborative provision did not enable the University to be assured of aspects of the quality of learning opportunities. First, at the time of the audit, the University's collaborative provision register was not complete or definitive, and therefore did not represent an accurate record of the University's collaborative arrangements upon which quality assurance could be based. Second, the audit found that consideration and reporting of the operation of collaborative provision in

annual and periodic subject review were deficient. The audit concluded that, as a result, the review processes could not be relied upon in institutional management of collaborative provision. The audit also found that more effective use could be made of management information relating to performance of students on some collaborative programmes in its quality assurance processes. For these reasons, the audit team concluded that there could be limited confidence in the University's current and likely future management of learning opportunities in collaborative provision.

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

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

50 From 1992 to 2005, research degrees at the University were awarded by the University of Leicester. In August 2005, the University was granted research degree awarding powers at the same time as it gained full University title. At the time of the audit, research degree provision encompassed PhD and MPhil degrees, as well as a 'Practice-led PhD in the Arts' and a PhD by means of published works. In 2006, there were 37 full-time and 57 part-time research degree students and by the time of the audit, there were 48 full-time and 74 part-time research degree students.

51 The University's strategy for research is integrated with that for knowledge transfer. The goals of research and knowledge transfer activity are to contribute to the University's overall mission, in particular, to expand its regional role and business-facing agenda, as well as to feed into teaching. Developing the research degree portfolio is a core element of the research strategy, with this growth planned to be 'at a rate commensurate with this developing research environment'.

52 The University's framework for the operation of its research degree provision is contained in the Research Degrees Handbook. Typically students are enrolled and then transfer to registration with Advanced Postgraduate status with progression to MPhil or PhD. The audit found that the approach to the operation of research degrees as set out in the Research Degrees Handbook, met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

53 The Research Committee is responsible to Senate for oversight of research and knowledge transfer activities. The 'Research Degrees Committee' is seen by the University as the major instrument for assuring Senate that the academic quality and standards of research degree programmes are maintained and, in the case of academic quality, enhanced. The Research Degrees Committee has a number of subcommittees in two main areas: school-level research degree boards and the Research Ethics Committee. The Research Ethics Committee's role covers both research degrees and research conducted by staff. The University established the research degree boards to assist in the management of increasing number of research students. There was clear evidence that the boards were fulfilling their role, enabling the Research Degrees Committee to focus more on institutional matters.

54 In the area of research ethics, the audit team was satisfied that consideration of ethical issues was integrated with research student activities, but the complex Research Ethics Committee subcommittee structure defined in University's Ethics Code and Procedures was not operational.

55 A University-wide Graduate School was established in June 2000, and forms the 'core administrative, training and quality assurance portal for research degree business'. The Graduate School also provides opportunities for research students to network across disciplinary boundaries. Students whom the audit team met commented very positively on the support provided by the Graduate School, and in particular, the Senior Research Degrees Administrator. A survey undertaken by the University also indicated similar high levels of satisfaction with the



support in this area. There was clear evidence that the work of the Graduate School was a significant contributor to the positive view of research students regarding learning opportunities within the University.

56 The University's approach to research student induction and training has four clearly defined elements: induction; generic research training; discipline-specific training, and project-specific training. There was evidence, including positive feedback from research students, of systematic implementation of the University's requirements in this area. Further support for research students and their supervision is also provided in a set of 'toolkits' for applicants, students and supervisors.

57 The audit found that supervisory arrangements met the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The University's internal audit of its practice in this area identified monitoring of supervisory loads as an area where further action was required; the audit found that the University's processes to monitor and manage supervisory loads were sound.

58 There are robust systems for the nomination and appointment of external examiners, and for consideration of their reports. An institution-level internal review of external examiner reports found external examiners were satisfied, or very satisfied, with both academic standards and the conduct of PhD examinations.

59 The University identified that there was a need for further work in the area of support for postgraduate students who teach and, at the time of the audit had recently introduced a workshop-based programme for graduate teaching assistants. The audit found that research students were being prepared for opportunities to teach.

60 At the time of the audit, the University was offering research degrees through a local partner college. Scrutiny of documentation and discussion with staff demonstrated that the University's processes had been applied correctly to that provision and that the arrangements for the research degree collaborative provision were sound.

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

## **Section 7: Published information**

62 The content of published documents and information is controlled centrally by the Marketing and External Relations section and signed off as appropriate at school/department level. School websites and the intranet are managed through devolved authority to schools and departments. The website is highlighted by the University as the most important single source of information for all relevant stakeholders. The intranet web information service is user-friendly and extensive.

63 The process for approval of publicity and marketing materials in relation to collaborative provision is less well embedded and, at the time of the audit the University was developing procedures to manage the accuracy of published material in collaborative provision. At the time of the audit, responsibility rested with the Marketing and External Relations section, supported by

link tutors, the Office of Educational Partnerships and Lifelong Learning and the International Office as appropriate.

64 An Academic Database System provides a single information site for module and programme specifications, and award maps. The Quality and Curriculum Services has responsibility for updating the system to record the outcomes of validation, approval and subject or periodic review events. Schools are required to review programme specifications annually. Schools also complete an annual audit of module guides and programme handbooks, to ensure compliance with University minimum requirements. Students were satisfied that they received detailed and relevant information to support them in their engagement with modules and programmes.

65 Students receive a range of published information prior to arriving at the University, during their welcome week and throughout their studies. Materials are professionally presented, providing full, detailed information, in a student-friendly manner. Students reported that where information was only provided on the website it was less accessible, primarily due to lack of awareness on the part of the students as to where material might be found. At the time of the audit, the University was appraising the navigation of the website and location of materials to improve accessibility.

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

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

### **Features of good practice**

- the structured approach to the use of the *Code of practice* in the management of learning opportunities in on-campus provision (paragraph 19)
- the provision of readily accessible support for student learning through the Centre for Academic Practice (paragraph 36)
- the support provided to partner institutions as they develop their higher education strategies, and associated policies and procedures, for the local development of an higher education culture (paragraph 48)
- the University's support for research students, centred on the Graduate School (paragraph 61).

### **Recommendations for action**

67 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- as a matter of priority, to ensure that the University establishes a robust central system for the compilation and maintenance of a reliable, accurate, comprehensive and up-to-date register of all of its collaborative provision (paragraph 48)
- to conduct an early review of the way in which annual and periodic subject review of collaborative provision are specified and implemented, to ensure that the operation of all of the University's individual collaborative arrangements is appraised in a rigorous and timely fashion (paragraph 48).

## 68 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to keep under review the committee structure for academic governance, to establish clarity in the designation of roles and responsibilities (paragraph 8)
- to consider how the University may be assured that central policy and procedural requirements are observed in, and across, schools (paragraph 8)
- to monitor the operation and reporting of periodic subject review, to confirm that the University's requirements for separation of the process from those for course approval, and for minor modifications to programmes, are met (paragraph 13)
- to develop a more systematic approach to the use of the virtual learning environment across the University in the interests of parity of student learning opportunities (paragraph 32)
- to consider how assessed work can be returned in a timely fashion, so that students can apply the feedback in subsequent assessment tasks (paragraph 37)
- that the University give further consideration to its approach to achieving its aim that each student will have a curriculum characterised by the principles and practice of employability (paragraph 39)
- to ensure that data on student performance disaggregated by module and partner College is used routinely and consistently by external examiners, boards of examiners and in annual and periodic review process (paragraph 48).

## Appendix

### The University of Northampton's response to the Institutional audit report

The University is pleased at the overall findings of a number of elements of the audit that took place in June 2009 and has benefitted from the processes of preparing for the event and reflecting on its engagement with the audit team. We are particularly pleased with the positive findings in relation to the standards of all university awards and our arrangements for the management of the learning opportunities for students on-campus. It is gratifying also to learn of the audit team's endorsement of our arrangements for student support through the Centre for Academic Practice and our more general support for research students.

We share the challenges of the sector with regard to a greater parity across the University in the use of the VLE and in terms of the timely return of coursework, issues on which we have been engaged over the last two academic years, and we have made considerable headway in these areas. We will nevertheless continue to review our operations here and will sustain our efforts to increase the significant progress we have made in embedding employability into the curriculum. Senate regularly reviews its committee arrangements and has already changed its 2008/09 structures in the light of the new 2010-2015 Strategic Plan. We are in the process of defining more clearly the relative roles of periodic subject review and the arrangements for the approval of minor modifications to programmes.

We are also pleased to see as a feature of good practice the support that we provide to our partner FE Colleges in developing their HE strategies. However, we are surprised at and find little justification for the outcome and judgement in relation to the management of learning opportunities in collaborative provision. We believe that the apparent deficiencies of the Registers were not such as to place in doubt our capacity to manage the quality of our off-campus learning opportunities. The Registers have for some time reflected minor adjustments to secure continuing accuracy and we will ensure that MIS data for collaborative activities continue to provide adequate and appropriate information about student performance. We made a number of revisions to our Periodic Subject Review arrangements in 2008/9 to improve the review of our collaborative arrangements. We are further briefing programme teams and partners on these arrangements. We will continue to monitor the consistent and comprehensive implementation and effectiveness of these changes before embarking on any wholesale changes to our processes unless we discover major failings in the revised arrangements introduced last year.

July 2010

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RG 551 10/09