



**QAA**

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# Institutional audit

**University of Portsmouth**

DECEMBER 2008

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## 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 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* 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, 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 Portsmouth (the University) from 1 to 5 December 2008 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 of the University. The audit did not include the collaborative provision of the University; that provision will be subject to a separate Collaborative provision audit at a later date.

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 is that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers
- 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

The audit team found that the University takes deliberate actions at the institutional level to improve the quality of the learning opportunities. The University has a structured and strategic approach to enlarging learning opportunities.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit team found that the University has a sound framework for its arrangements for postgraduate research students. The postgraduate research student experience meets the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education, (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. However, the audit team found that postgraduate students who also undertake teaching are not always promptly trained for this role.

### Published information

The audit team established that the University provides an extensive and accessible range of published information for prospective and current students both electronically and printed. The team concluded that reliance can reasonably be placed in the integrity and reliability of the information that the University publishes.

## Features of good practice

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

- the regular review and updating of University policies with consistent use of gap analysis
- the provision of case-studies for the training of external examiners
- the use of systematic feedback from students to inform major planning
- the role of the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement in coordinating and promoting developments in the student learning experience
- the University's pursuit of its employability and volunteering strategies including its cooperation with the Students' Union in these themes
- the use of strategic themes to direct a wide range of staff development activities
- the accuracy and comprehensive nature of the information provided to students.

## Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the University to:

- ensure that its policies for the management of the submission, security and return of student coursework are followed consistently.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- revise the external examiner report form with prompts for more detailed comment, in particular about learning opportunities in order to strengthen the enhancement value of these reports
- ensure that before postgraduate research students undertake teaching duties, they are trained for that role in accordance with the University's requirement.

## 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 elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of the University of Portsmouth (the University) was undertaken from 1 to 5 December 2008. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The audit did not consider the collaborative provision of the University; that provision will later be the subject of a separate Collaborative provision audit.

2 The audit team comprised Professor Mark Davies, Professor Geoffrey Elliott, Dr David Luke, Dr Monika Ruthe (auditors), and Ms Kathryn Powell, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr Alan Bradshaw, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The Instrument of Government for the University of Portsmouth was made by the Privy Council on 5 March 1993. The University has its origins in the Portsmouth Municipal College, which opened in 1908. The University is located in the heart of the City of Portsmouth and comprises two campuses: the Guildhall Campus and the Langstone Residential Campus.

4 The University is structured in five faculties: Creative and Cultural Industries; Humanities and Social Sciences; Science; Technology; and the Portsmouth Business School. The University has 19,629 higher education students, of whom 2,052 have international status for the purpose of fees. Of the student body, 14,899 are full-time, 4,730 part-time, 3,204 postgraduate taught and 487 are postgraduate research students.

5 The University's strategic plan sets out the four 'headline aims' of its strategy as follows: to give an excellent student experience focused on knowledge and skills essential for roles in the global workforce; to raise aspirations and to promote access to the University; to promote the discovery, development and application of knowledge through high-quality research; and to contribute to sustainable economic, social, cultural and community regeneration and development.

6 The University stresses its strong commitment to vocational education and professional recognition. Evidence for this statement is presented by the University through the introduction of the subject of journalism, the establishment of a School of Professionals Complementary to Dentistry and a School of Law, the development of employer-focused Foundation Degrees, engagement in the Lifelong Learning Network, and the establishment of progression agreements in vocational subjects with other education providers.

7 The information provided to the audit team included previous reports produced by QAA:

- Institutional audit, April 2004
- Foundation Degree reviews in Police Studies in June 2004 and Marine Systems Engineering in June 2005
- Major review of Allied Health Professions in March 2005
- Review of research degree programmes, July 2006.

8 The University provided the audit team with a helpful and informative Briefing Paper, and with a range of documents and information including the following:

- information on the University's website, including its undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses
- reports by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
- internal documentation of the University (contained within a CD-ROM appendix to the Briefing Paper)

- audit trails of two recent programme-level reviews
- additional documentation requested by the audit team during the visit.

9 The documentation presented by the University was detailed, clear and up-to-date, and enabled the audit team to undertake its duties effectively.

10 The audit team was grateful to representatives of the University of Portsmouth Students' Union who produced a student written submission that included detailed analysis of data on student opinions.

11 The previous QAA Institutional audit of April 2004 found that confidence could be placed in the University's management of the quality of its programmes, and its capacity to manage effectively the standard of its awards. Good practice was identified in the quality and range of opportunities for staff development and the processes underpinning this; the development of a strong and supportive culture of student support, with highly accessible staff and responsive mechanisms; and the development of new roles, and organisational structures, which assisted quality assurance and enhancement, and the security of standards.

12 In the 2004 Institutional audit, the University was advised to develop further its programme monitoring and review processes. Further recommendations were made for the University to review its approach to issues of variability between faculties in the implementation of operational procedures; to develop further the mechanisms which monitored the scope and range of external examiners' reports in order that these might more fully inform both internal reporting mechanisms and the requirements of Teaching Quality Information; to extend the practice of the sharing of external examiners between University awards and cognate awards offered by collaborative partners; and to develop the formal structures which ensured that students are fully represented in a consistent way across the University.

13 In response to these recommendations, the University formulated an action plan that was approved by the Quality Assurance Committee in November 2004. The University has stated that in developments since the audit in 2004 its 'overriding emphasis has been to ensure that it continues to improve the learning experience of students', and that this is a major strategic theme of the University.

14 Changes introduced by the University since the last Institutional audit have included developments in e-learning; in employability development; the creation of new roles, in particular, associate dean (academic) and associate dean (students) in each faculty; and the use of student feedback to set an agenda for enhancement.

15 Other developments consequent upon the last Institutional audit have included:

- efforts to ensure that procedures and policies are well understood and consistently implemented across the University
- the introduction of new external examiner reporting templates and, where feasible, the same external examiners having responsibility for similar home and collaborative courses
- measures to enhance student representation.

16 The Committee Handbook details arrangements for student representation in committees at faculty and University level. The relationship between the student body as represented by the Students' Union and the University has been strengthened since the last audit, and the Vice-Chancellor holds regular meetings with the President of the Students' Union to ensure engagement of the student body in University matters.



17 The previous good practice in the area of staff development reported in the Institutional audit report in 2004 identified the quality and range of opportunities for staff development and the processes underpinning them as one of the three areas of good practice. The University has taken effective steps to further this good practice by basing staff development around annual strategic themes, such as responses to the National Student Survey and employability. It has also developed the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement as a vehicle for enhancement impacting on staff development policy, and the annual cycle of learning and teaching conferences at faculty and university level.

18 From the evidence presented to it, the audit team concluded that the University had addressed the recommendations effectively.

19 The University's directorate is responsible for the strategic direction of the University, and comprises the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, two pro vice-chancellors and the Director of Finance.

20 The Academic Council has overall institutional responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards, which it discharges through the faculty boards and senior academic committees reporting to it. These committees and boards are the Academic Policy Committee; Quality Assurance Committee; Equality and Diversity Committee; Research and Knowledge Transfer Committee; Research Degrees Committee; Information Technology Committee; and the Ethics Committee. Responsibility for standards at local level is discharged to faculties and academic departments which are accountable to the Academic Council through faculty boards. Faculty boards are responsible for regulating the teaching and study of their respective subject areas, for considering the progress of students, and making recommendations on the appointment of external examiners and the award of degrees and prizes.

21 The University's approach to securing academic standards and managing the quality of learning opportunities is set out in the Framework for Maintenance and Enhancement of Academic Standards and Quality. The Framework emphasises that there is a major link between the quality of learning opportunities afforded to students and the standards that they achieve. It is supported by documents such as The Approval, Modification and Closure of Academic Provision, Programme Monitoring and Review: Policy, Procedures and Guidelines, Academic Regulations, External Examiner Regulations, Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students, and the Unit Management Handbook.

22 The comprehensive and accessible nature of the University's quality and standards framework has been enhanced through a programme of regular policy review, both for internal consistency and in recognition of changing external expectations. The University affirms, and the audit team agrees, that it embraces the need to secure external consistency through full engagement with nationally accepted reference points including the Academic Infrastructure published by QAA, and the expectations of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The review process includes consideration by the Academic Policy and Quality Group, which advises and makes recommendations to the Academic Policy Committee, Quality Assurance Committee and the University Learning and Teaching Committee for formal approval. The scope and schedule of periodic review is determined centrally by the Quality Assurance Committee. The new monitoring and review processes reference effectively both the *Code of practice*, published, by QAA, and the Institutional audit process. This policy review represents good practice because of its thoroughness.

23 The associate dean posts were established in response to the last Institutional audit report. These posts are of value in providing links between the University, faculties and departments that are essential to the University's devolved system of quality assurance. The associate dean (academic) posts are responsible for overseeing the quality and development of academic provision and securing standards within the faculties, and are responsible, with the associate deans (students), for the delivery of key aspects of the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy.

24 The University's approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities is set out in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2005-10, and the E-Learning Strategy 2007-10: Embedding and Advancing. The University stated that it is committed to ensuring that all students have the learning opportunities necessary to achieve the standards of their awards, and the audit team saw many examples of this commitment. The management of standards for research degrees is set out in the University's Code of Practice for Postgraduate Research Degrees, August 2008, and this is supported by documentation such as the Handbook for Postgraduate Research Degree Students, and the Handbook for Postgraduate Research Degree Supervisors. QAA undertook a Review of research degree programmes in July 2006. From its examination of the institution's response to the survey and the supporting evidence, the team formed the view that, overall, the University's ability to secure the standards and enhance the quality of its research degree programme provision was satisfactory.

25 It was the view of the audit team that the framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities adopted by the University was clear and effective.

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

26 There is a four-stage process for the approval of new courses. Firstly, proposals are presented to the faculty executive and to the University Curriculum Committee for consideration of resource implications and fit with University strategy; secondly, a programme specification and course structure are prepared, and the Academic Registry checks compliance of these with University policies and regulations. Thirdly, there is a curriculum approval event at which the approval committee, including a member external to the University, meets to scrutinise the proposed course. The committee may stipulate conditions (which must be addressed before students can be registered), and may also offer recommendations. Fourthly, the associate dean (academic) signs off the proposal, confirming that conditions and recommendations have been addressed. The report of the panel is considered by the Quality Assurance Committee for formal ratification, which may be given after stage 3 or stage 4. The audit team saw several examples of course approval documents; these demonstrated that the process had been conducted according to the University's requirements.

27 Where a proposed award is very similar to an existing award, or where a new award is based on an existing academic framework, the approval event may occur by correspondence. The audit team confirmed that this process was robust and involved external assessment of the proposal.

28 Approximately 50 per cent of the University's courses engage with one or more professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The audit team viewed the University's policies and procedures for such engagement as effective.

29 The processes for annual monitoring and periodic review focus, within broad disciplines, more on grouping courses according to their structure or their professional relevance, than by academic subject.

30 The annual monitoring focuses on a programme's fitness for purpose, and involves reports at unit and course level. Course leaders produce an annual standards and quality evaluative review report to a standard template. The head of department uses a template to produce a review report, the focus of which is all the courses within the department. The reports are considered at various levels within the University, including by the Quality Assurance Committee. The audit team considered that suitable institutional oversight of annual monitoring was maintained.

31 Periodic review of programmes draws on extant documents, particularly annual standards and quality evaluative reviews. The panel, which includes an external assessor, meets students and staff and produces a report that includes judgements on the fitness for purpose of curriculum and the effectiveness of annual monitoring. An action plan on the panel's report is produced at department level. The report and action plan are later considered by the Quality Assurance Committee. The audit team confirmed that the process is effective.

32 The audit team noted that the processes of annual monitoring and periodic review were familiar to staff at various levels within the University, and that the processes had been applied consistently and following the University's requirements. In conclusion, the team regarded the University's approval, monitoring and review process as effective in maintaining the academic standards of its awards.

33 In its Briefing Paper, the University stated that the role of external examiners is to report on whether standards are appropriate; on the comparability of student standards of achievement with those of similar programme at other UK institutions; and on the extent to which the University's processes for assessment and the determination of awards are sound and have been fairly conducted. In fulfilment of their role, external examiners do not assess student work nor give approval to academic decisions because, in the view of the University, such activities would compromise an impartial judgement on the conduct of assessment. Exceptionally, where a professional, statutory or regulatory body demands that an external examiner participates more directly in assessing students, the University appoints an additional external examiner to maintain an impartial view on the conduct of assessment processes. The audit team viewed this arrangement as effective.

34 The audit team regarded University documents concerning the roles, powers and responsibilities of external examiners as clear and accessible, and noted their considerable articulation with the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*. The team regarded the criteria and procedures for the appointment of external examiners as clear and robust, and noted significant discussion at university level on the proposal of individuals as external examiners.

35 External examiners are strongly encouraged to attend an induction event, and they have access to a University website to support their activities. The induction event and the website include detailed case studies of external examining. The audit team noted the comprehensive way in which the case studies brought into sharp focus the interaction of the regulations of the University with the role of the external examiner. As a result the team considered the provision of case-studies for the training of external examiners as a feature of good practice.

36 Through a detailed tracking of the reports and their progress across levels of the University, the audit team came to the view that the University makes good use of external examiners' reports. However, a sampling of external examiners' reports by the team revealed that, in many cases, external examiners gave little written description or analysis of their findings. The team considered that this may, in part, be due to the nature of the template that external examiners are asked to complete. Although the template asks for commentary, the issues on which commentary is required are not disaggregated. The team concluded that it was desirable that the University, in order to strengthen the enhancement value of external examiners' reports, revises, the report form by adding prompts for more detailed comment, in particular about learning opportunities.

37 The audit team came to the conclusion that the University was making strong and scrupulous use of its external examiners in securing the standards of its awards.

38 In its Briefing Paper, the University indicated that its approach to the requirements of the Academic Infrastructure is set out in its Framework for the Maintenance and Enhancement of Academic Standards and Quality. The audit team confirmed that the Framework was fully aligned with the expectations of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and the *Code of practice*, published by QAA.

39 Consultations on, and revisions to, elements of the Academic Infrastructure, and new elements of the Outcomes from Institutional audit series, published by QAA, are discussed at university-level committees. The University uses gap analysis as part of a systematic process to ensure that its procedures meet the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points. The Academic Policy and Quality Group receives and approves gap analysis reports. Resultant revisions to policies and procedures are submitted to the relevant

University committee for discussion and approval. The audit team considered that the gap analysis contributed well to the regular review and updating of University policies, and its thoroughness was a feature of good practice.

40 The audit team noted strong engagement of programme specifications with elements of the Academic Infrastructure, the University's Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students and the University's Curricula Framework Document. Course approval and review processes make scrupulous use of external assessors and engage fully with the Academic Infrastructure.

41 The University is at an early stage in responding to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, published by ENQA, and is aware of developments in this area.

42 Approximately 50 per cent of the University's undergraduate provision is engaged with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The audit team viewed the University's engagement with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies as effective in both meeting their requirements and maintaining award standards.

43 The audit team concluded that the University is making effective use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points in securing the standards of its awards.

44 The University stated that its Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students provided a common framework for assessment practices. The audit team was able to confirm a good engagement between the University's Code of Practice and the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students* published by QAA. The team considered the University's documents concerning assessment to be clear and comprehensive.

45 The Academic Registrar presents an annual review of examinations and assessment processes to the Quality Assurance Committee, where the audit team noted a full discussion of the contents of the review, with suitable, consequent action planning.

46 The students whom the audit team met were aware of the University's policy on academic misconduct and of the need to avoid plagiarism in their work. The students also confirmed that, in general, assessment criteria were issued to them in an understandable form. Students in their final year were aware of the methods for calculating their final degree grade.

47 One objective of the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2005-2010 concerns 'the explicit use of assessment and feedback to promote learning by providing useful, timely and relevant feedback' to students on their work. The students whom the audit team met were able to confirm that feedback to them was in general valuable, but indicated that there was considerable variability in both the quality and the timeliness of that feedback. Some feedback is issued after the University's target period of 20 working days, and after the feedback could be of use in preparation of the immediately following coursework. The students were also concerned about the variability between departments in the issue of receipts to students for work submitted. Students also stated that in a minority of cases students could, while collecting their assessed work, access the work of other students. In its Code of Practice for the Assessment of Students, the University indicates that 'departments must make provision for systems to ensure that coursework submission is secure, documented and that receipts are made available'. The team noted that the University was aware of the issues that the students had identified, but considered that effective remedies had not been carried through. The team concluded that it is advisable for the University to ensure that its policies for the management of the submission, security and return of student coursework are followed consistently.

48 The ultimate responsibility for the integrity of management information lies with the Academic Registry. Since the 2004 Institutional audit, the University has implemented a new student record system. The University identified difficulties in generating course reports that yielded the information required to maintain an adequate overview. The audit team confirmed

that the University was taking steps to resolve the difficulties, and agreed with the University that there had been no adverse impact on standards.

49 Course leaders and heads of department may also access student data that is compiled at defined census points through the 'At-A-Glance' system of reporting. Data generated through At-A-Glance is principally used to support annual monitoring by informing annual monitoring reviews of standards and quality. By examining documents associated with the annual and periodic review processes, the audit team came to the view that the University was using management information adequately to support both processes.

50 In maintaining institutional oversight of activity, higher-level committees of the University receive reports generated from data held in the management information system. The Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement also coordinates the production of data sets and reports concerning widening participation; these are widely distributed within the University. In the examples seen of the University's data, the audit team noted that there had been full discussion of the data, and that discussion had produced action planning.

51 The audit team confirmed that the University was using data in a suitable manner in order to secure the standards of its awards.

52 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

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

53 The University has a systematic process of gap analysis and update of its policies and procedures in order to take account of external changes and to ensure that its practices and procedures meet the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points.

54 The review of revised sections of the *Code of practice* is led by an officer of the University with a small team of experienced staff. It results in a gap analysis which is submitted to the Academic Policy and Quality Group for consideration and informs consideration of changes that might be necessary. Revised policies and procedures are submitted for consideration to the relevant University committee for consideration.

55 The audit team was able to confirm that reviews had been carried out rigorously with modifications made to University policy and procedures in the area of the quality of learning opportunities.

56 The audit team formed the view that the way in which the University reviews changes in the *Code of practice* ensures that there is complete coverage, and that any changes proposed receive well-informed consideration for incorporation into revisions of the University's policies and procedures, where these changes are then made clear to staff. The team concluded that the University makes effective use of the *Code of practice* and other external reference points, and it considered the regular review and updating of University policy, with consistent use of gap analysis, as good practice.

57 The requirements for course approval and modifications are specified in the Approval, Modification and Closure of Academic Provision document. The Academic Council is ultimately responsible for the approval of courses leading to awards of the University, but delegates some responsibility to the Academic Policy Committee, Curriculum Committee and the Quality Assurance Committee and, for research degrees, to the Research Degrees Committee. The programme approval procedures apply to both in-house (including distance and online learning) and collaborative provision. For the approval of distance and online learning courses, additional considerations apply and the approval of awards from external bodies takes into account their requirements.

58 In the University's procedures guidance is given to staff through associate deans (academic), and documentary requirements are specified in a document checklist which is also available on the course approval website of the Academic Registry. Training is provided for approval panel chairs and internal panel members. This is viewed as effective by staff.

59 Course approval processes involve consideration of strategic, resource, financial and policy issues, the market demand and the programme title by the University's Curriculum Committee. On occasion, proposals have not been supported or approved because of resource concerns.

60 Approval events also consider teaching and learning strategies, arrangements for academic guidance, student support, and skills development. For the approval of distance-learning courses approval committees must include at least one member who has experience in the delivery and support of distance or online learning provision, and the panel must have access to some intended learning materials prior to the event.

61 Through the composition of the approval committees, the University ensures that programme approval decisions are made independently of the staff delivering the programme. The committee chair is external to the faculty, and faculty committee members are external to the department in which the programme is offered. The approval committee reports its decision to the Quality Assurance Committee, which has oversight of the outcomes of all curricular approval events and formally agrees all approval decisions.

62 Through its reading of documentation, the audit team formed the view that the management of the quality of programmes, as evidenced in the procedures for the approval of programmes, was rigorous and effective.

63 Significant modifications or programme closure require approval by the Curriculum Committee, which considers the potential effects on existing students and applicants. The Approval, Modification and Closure of Academic Provision document specifies the process. Requests for modifications are reviewed by the Academic Registry which makes a recommendation to the Curriculum Committee. The audit team confirmed that approval decisions had been made adhering to the processes and criteria specified in the University's procedures. There is a clear process for programme closure and the University's procedures ensure that measures are taken to safeguard the interest of students in such cases.

64 The arrangements for annual programme monitoring are set out in the Programme Monitoring and Review: Policy, Procedure and Guidelines document. Key evidence to be considered in monitoring the effectiveness of programmes with regard to learning opportunities is clearly specified.

65 Boards of study review the quality of learning opportunities and ensure that internal and external requirements for learning opportunities are met. Membership of the boards includes student representatives. Boards meet twice each year and consider reports from staff-student consultative committee meetings. The audit team was able to confirm that staff-student consultative committees worked as intended.

66 Annual monitoring results in reports at departmental, faculty and university level. At departmental level, unit evaluation reports, course leaders' and heads of departments' annual standards and quality evaluative review reports are produced to a template. At faculty level, annual review group meetings take place, and a faculty executive meeting considers learning resource themes. At university level, the Academic Policy and Quality Group considers emerging quality assurance issues arising from annual monitoring, and the Chair of the Quality Assurance Committee provides a report to the Academic Council.

67 The Academic Policy and Quality Group has a standing agenda item to discuss issues arising from the heads' reports and faculty executive minutes. On the basis of these documents the Chair of the Quality Assurance Committee produces a report on academic standards and

quality enhancement, which is considered by the Quality Assurance Committee and the Academic Council.

68 Overall, the audit team formed the view that the annual course leaders' and heads' review reports are an effective tool for evaluating the management of learning opportunities on programmes, and for enabling discussion of this at programme and departmental level. The team concluded that annual monitoring represents an effective means to review each programme and to encourage planning for enhancement at programme, departmental, faculty and university level.

69 The audit team was satisfied that the University's periodic review process for maintaining the quality of students' learning opportunities was effective and comprehensive. Through the audit trails, the team was able to verify that the University's procedures had been adhered to, and that review events had been conducted in a rigorous manner. The team found that all review panels included external assessors as required, and had carefully considered the evidence base. Reports clearly identified the outcomes, key strengths of the provision, and any conditions and recommendations. Action plans arising from the reviews stated who was responsible for actions to be taken. The minutes of the Quality Assurance Committee demonstrated scrutiny of the reports, recommendations and the associated responses and action plans.

70 The University periodically assesses the effectiveness of its course approval, monitoring and review procedures and their implementation.

71 Policies and procedure on approval, monitoring and review are also reviewed every three years through the Quality Management Division and, from time to time, reviews of process as conducted may be arranged. No such review has taken place recently. There is also an annual internal audit to check that programme approval and review processes have been completed.

72 Overall, the audit team found the University's arrangements for approval, monitoring and review to be effective, and had taken into account the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*. These arrangements make an important contribution to the University's management of learning opportunities.

73 The University's arrangements for student feedback are set out in the Student Feedback Policy. The Policy requires the systematic collection of feedback at unit and course level through user surveys for all undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, and selectively on aspects of the University's student services. The University regularly reflects on its Student Feedback Policy as part of its policy review cycle and in response to student requests. In order not to duplicate the National Student Survey, course feedback is no longer required at final-year undergraduate level.

74 The audit team found that unit questionnaires were used consistently across the University, and that there was distribution to part-time, distance-learning and postgraduate students. The team found evidence of careful consideration of feedback results.

75 Students particularly valued unit questionnaires as a way for them to suggest changes. Issues raised in questionnaires are discussed at boards of study, and any changes made are communicated to students via staff-student consultative committees, through notice-boards or the intranet. There is, however, some student perception of insufficient consistency across the University in providing feedback on actions taken.

76 The audit team found that the University makes comprehensive and systematic use of the findings of the National Student Survey. The outcomes of the National Student Survey demonstrate continuous improvement in the perceived student experience over the previous three years.

77 The audit team also examined the collection and analysis of student feedback through service-user surveys and the use made by the University of the results from some recent surveys. Depending on the type, outcomes are discussed at departmental meetings and at University committees. The team found that student feedback gathered by user surveys had informed major planning decisions.

78 Overall, the audit team confirmed that student feedback is sought across the University through a variety of means. The team considered the use of systematic feedback from students to inform major planning as good practice. Feedback is also sought through the inclusion of students on departmental, faculty and University committees. This process is explained immediately below.

79 The University provides formal and informal opportunities for students to participate in quality management processes. Formal mechanisms exist through the committee system where students, through their representatives, are involved in committees at every level. Opportunities also exist for further consultation with students on specific issues. The University's arrangements and expectations for student representation at course and departmental level are clearly laid out in the Programme Monitoring and Review: Policy, Procedure and Guidelines document. Students are represented through course representatives at staff-student consultative committees and boards of study. At university level, student representation in committees is primarily through sabbatical officers of the Students' Union. The Students' Union views these opportunities as invaluable.

80 The arrangements for student representation on committees at faculty and university level are specified in the Committee Handbook. The audit team confirmed that the student representation system operates as intended. Meetings take place consistently across the University and at the required times, following the template agendas. Required actions are clearly identified. Adaptations have been made for part-time and distance-learning students whose views are sought through email or the virtual learning environment.

81 Students confirmed to the audit team that the representative system generally worked well and that their comments were taken seriously. However, the consistency of responses to course representatives' suggestions also varied across the University. Student representatives receive training from the Students' Union for their role which they viewed as important. Previously, uptake of training had not been satisfactory, and the Students' Union had therefore made some significant changes to the training programme. Attendance has since improved, and the team saw evidence from the Students' Union that about 40 per cent of representatives had received training. The University records that about twice this percentage of registered course representatives has been trained.

82 In 2007-08, the Students' Union also undertook a review of the student representation system. As a result, bi-annual meetings of the course representative executive with senior management have been introduced. At the time of the audit, satisfactory progress had been made to implement the recommendations made in the review of the student representative system.

83 On the basis of the evidence available, the audit team reached the view that, overall, the arrangements for student involvement in quality management processes are effective, and the way in which the institution engages with students makes a valuable contribution to the maintenance of the quality of learning opportunities.

84 The University hosts an annual Learning and Teaching Conference, and this is supported by annual learning and teaching conference events at faculty level. The themes have included the incorporation of research and scholarship into learning opportunities. The Research and Knowledge Transfer Strategy 2008-2012 makes a distinction between research, knowledge transfer and scholarship, and these activities are expected to inform teaching.



85 The University's approach to embedding research in the curricula is through staff research expertise and experience, the teaching and learning conferences, faculty research seminars and involvement of associate deans in faculty learning and teaching committees. Faculties encourage research-informed teaching; the audit team saw criminology as a good example of teaching and curricular design being based on staff research activities. The Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement, has a significant role in ensuring that the student learning experience is underpinned by staff development in these areas.

86 The periodic review process requires that department commentaries include consideration of how current research and scholarship have been reflected in the curricula since the last periodic review. The University has also made a new staff appointment in the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement to support teachers in developing student research in the curriculum.

87 The institution's overall strategic arrangements and approach are effective in encouraging and maintaining links between research, professional knowledge transfer, and teaching and students' learning opportunities, and the role and work of the Department of Curriculum and Quality Enhancement show good practice.

88 The University has developed a new e-learning strategy. The University has a small number of programmes which are delivered through distance or online learning. The University defines distance learning as a mode of study, either through print-based learning materials or through online materials. In 2007, it incorporated its Code of Practice of Distance Learning into its regular quality policies and procedures. In addition to the extra requirements for distance-learning provision at the programme approval stage (see above), particularly with regard to learning resources, there are additional requirements for programme monitoring.

89 There is a central e-learning team based in the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement, which assists staff in the delivery, support and assessment of distance-learning and online provision. Each faculty also has an e-learning coordinator. Staff particularly valued the quality and breadth of the support provided in this way.

90 The University advises students on the secure delivery of assessed coursework, and electronic submission of coursework is currently being piloted. In the University's development of academic practice, some students now submit their own work to a plagiarism detection system, and submit the report with their coursework.

91 Students reported that the quality of study materials was excellent and that they received them in good time. Information and support were also rated highly, as was feedback on work submitted. Arrangements also exist for the collection of feedback from students, and the audit team heard that distance-learning students are invited to provide feedback to staff-student consultative committees via email. The team found evidence that this mechanism was used consistently.

92 E-learning is supported by the use of a virtual learning environment. The audit team found that all students were involved in some form of e-learning (primarily blended learning), but that the extent to which this was the case varied across departments. Students saw the virtual learning environment as a useful and convenient learning tool, and reported that access was usually reliable.

93 The audit team confirmed that the University has effective mechanisms to ensure that staff involved in the delivery, support and assessment of distance and online learning provision are competent and understand their role. The University also has sufficiently robust systems to ensure the security of assessment for such provision. The team concluded that the University's arrangements for other modes of study are effective and make a significant contribution to the quality of students' learning opportunities.

94 Since the last Institutional audit, significant improvements have been made to the learning resources through investment in buildings, such as the extension of the Library, and new technology. Remote access to the intranet has also been widened, and the wireless network has been extended so that all students living in University halls of residence now have broadband access in their rooms. The University Strategic Plan identifies the development of blended learning as a priority for the further development of learning resources for the period of 2007-12. The Academic Skills Unit provides additional printed and online learning resources to support students' study-skills development. The majority of students make use of the interactive website that provides guidance on academic skills and offers worksheets.

95 Students expressed to the audit team satisfaction with the quality and accessibility of resources and facilities. Library and information technology facilities are rated as good, with dedicated support available if needed. The study-skills materials are seen as very useful. Students particularly appreciate the improvements made to the library and, as a result, usage of learning resources and facilities has increased. National Student Survey results also show that student satisfaction with learning resources has risen consistently over the previous three years.

96 The audit team concluded that the University's arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources are effective.

97 The Academic Registry is responsible for the University admissions policy, which was reviewed in 2007 as part of an Admissions Code of Practice. The policy includes the admission of students with disabilities. Information on admission requirements for each programme is clear and available to students on the University's website. The University has a policy on accreditation of prior learning. The University is keen to accept students who progress through the route of the new age 14 to 19 years diplomas.

98 The University has schemes to encourage applications from international students, including articulation arrangements with overseas institutions, a wide range of exchange arrangements, as well as international preview days. International students are supported by pre-sessional and in-session language courses.

99 The audit team heard very positive comments from students about their experiences of the application and pre-enrolment process. As a result of the discussions and reading, the team formed the view that there was fair, effective and consistent implementation of the admissions policy.

100 The University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy includes the promotion of educational and personal success and independence in an inclusive, accessible, relevant, supportive and learner-focused environment. The student written submission reported that students find that academic support at the University is of a very high standard, and that the further support services provided by the University were excellent.

101 The University provides clear information and guidance about its expectations for student support both to staff and to students. Specific sections of the website are designed for various categories of student: for example, mature, international and postgraduate. For students with special needs there is a process whereby support can be arranged before arrival.

102 The audit team heard from the students appreciative views about the care and thoroughness of University support from the time of open days and applications through to arrival and integration during the first term. The University is committed to providing all students with a personal tutor. The students also informed the team that staff are often also available informally. The student written submission raised some concerns about variations in the frequency of contact within the personal tutoring system, and this view was reinforced by some students whom the team met. The team concluded that the personal tutoring system was available and well communicated to students, although many students did not take advantage of the opportunity. The students informed the team that staff are often available on an informal basis, which complements the formal arrangements.

103 The University has a long involvement in using personal development planning to ensure that students at all levels are aware of opportunities available to them, to support the increasingly individual nature of learning, and help with the needs of students with diverse educational experiences, external commitments and varying expectations of higher education. The audit team was informed that some students are not fully engaged with personal development planning where it is not integrated into the curricula.

104 The University's Department for Employability was established in 2008. It offers a wide range of services to all students, and has been charged with developing an employability strategy, encompassing careers advice and guidance, volunteering, work experience opportunities and employability through the curricula. The University's cooperation with the Students' Union is particularly strong in this area. The audit team judged that the vigorous pursuit of the employability themes was an aspect of good practice in the context of the University's commitment to personal and vocational development.

105 A student counselling service provides a confidential professional service for individuals and student groups. The International Office provides specialised advice and guidance for international students. The audit team met international students who were very happy with their experiences at the University. The students expressed high levels of satisfaction with the range and provision of support services and the quality of academic support.

106 The audit team concluded on the basis of documentary information available and evidence gained from meetings with staff and students that the University's arrangements for student support are effective, and maintain the quality of students' learning opportunities.

107 The 2004 Institutional audit report identified 'the quality and range of opportunities for staff development and the processes underpinning them' as one of three areas of good practice. The University has taken effective steps to further this good practice by basing staff development around annual strategic themes, the development of the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement as a vehicle for enhancement impacting on staff development policy, and the annual cycle of learning and teaching conferences at faculty and university level.

108 The University's strategic coordination of staff development is through the Staff Development Group, which has responsibility for ensuring that staff have the knowledge and skills needed in University activity. The University offers a Foundation Degree in Education Administration, with members of University support staff enrolled. The University operates an annual learning and teaching award scheme that is being revised to offer further application opportunities to a broader base of staff as part of the strategic themes of the University. Academic staff new to the University and without the requisite teaching experience are expected to attend a Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, and performance on this programme forms part of probation and initial appraisal.

109 In the view of the audit team, the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement plays a pivotal role in coordinating enhancements to staff development, supporting staff in practical developments in e-learning, and reporting on student services. The Department has evolved into a significant driver in enhancing both the staff and student experience. The workshops of the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement monitor the University's use of guidance published by QAA on the development and delivery of various aspects of support, such as the development of distance-learning material.

110 In the view of the audit team, the institution's use of strategic themes to direct a wide range of staff development activities and the integrated arrangements for staff development are effective and an aspect of institutional good practice.

111 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

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

112 The audit team saw much evidence of deliberate actions taken at the institutional level by the University. Examples of these include the establishment in 2004 of the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement and the implementation of a new virtual learning environment, an extension to the library and a Department for Employability.

113 At the time of the audit, the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement was in its fourth year; its remit was to enhance the quality of students' learning experiences and to promote student success. The Department plays a central role in advising, guiding, supporting and developing staff and students through the dissemination, promotion and embedding of good practice in academic departments, and has been created to play a strategic role in enhancement.

114 Examples of enhancement recorded by the audit team included the Annual Learning and Teaching Conference and the Faculty Learning and Teaching Week. These two events serve the purpose of bringing together academic and support staff, along with staff from collaborative institutions. The team found the annual conference to be an inclusive approach to staff development and an effective mechanism for enhancement and sharing good practice.

115 In the operation of its committee structure, the University has deliberative structures for considering the enhancement of student learning opportunities. It also has individual and group roles for the operation of the University's intentions. Overall, the University has a structured and strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

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

116 The University will be subject to a separate audit of its collaborative provision.

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

117 Under the Academic Council, the University Research Degrees Committee, chaired by the University Director of Research Degrees, delegates authority as necessary for debating and implementing the policies and regulations that support the University's research degree programmes. The Research Degrees Committee considers student feedback and annual standards and quality evaluative reviews from associate deans (research).

118 The University Research Degrees Committee takes a strategic overview of research degree provision at the University. It delegates to faculty research degrees committees responsibility for the approval, supervision and examination of individual candidates. To ensure consistency across faculties, the University has an institution-wide set of regulations and a University Code of Practice to which all faculties must adhere.

119 The admission and induction of research students are managed by the schools and departments within the faculties. Entrance requirements, recruitment procedures and admission decisions are clear and well documented. Information on programme and admission procedures is made available to applicants through the postgraduate prospectus, departmental literature, and on the University's website. Guidance is given to staff in the Handbook for Postgraduate Research Student Supervisors, and in training workshops. Students who met the audit team commented that they felt the practice of second and third-year postgraduate research students assisting with the induction was very valuable.

120 The University allocates each student a supervisory team, consisting of a director of studies and up to two additional supervisors. Students confirmed that where specialised expertise or industrial experience was required, but was not available within the supervisory team, further specialist advisers were made available.

121 Procedures for monitoring supervision were reviewed by the audit team. Students are subject to an annual appraisal to review progress from both their own perspective and that of the supervisory team. Appraisal forms are the main basis for the management of students' progress.

122 Research students are required to undertake the Postgraduate Certificate in Research Methods. This University programme is customised to local needs by faculties and departments.

123 The audit team found that the University publishes clear criteria for the assessment of research degrees.

124 Research students are offered the opportunity to provide support teaching on undergraduate and master's programmes. The University states that students receive formal training in such duties prior to beginning teaching. However, the audit team found that this was not always the case. The team, therefore, considered it desirable for the University to ensure that postgraduate research students are given training prior to taking up a teaching role.

125 The audit team found that the University has a sound framework for its arrangements for postgraduate research students. The University has taken action in response to the report of the QAA Review of research degree programmes (2006). The postgraduate research framework and postgraduate experience meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

126 The audit team examined published information, including University-wide policy and procedural documentation, departmental documentation, course handbooks, regulations, the University's website and intranet, the undergraduate prospectus and committee minutes. The team established that the University provides an extensive and accessible range of published information for prospective and current students and staff both electronically and printed.

127 For enrolled students, the University provides a wide range of information both printed and on its website, including University-wide policy and procedural documentation; departmental documentation; course handbooks; guidance on University policy and regulations; prospectuses; and committee minutes.

128 In meetings with the audit team, undergraduate students confirmed that the publicity material and prospectuses, including the international materials, both printed and on the University website, gave an accurate account of the institution that reflected their experience since arrival as students. More detailed course literature distributed during open days was also mentioned as being very helpful in determining their choice of degree programme.

129 The student written submission stated that the University had informed students with published guidance from the application stage as early as two years before enrolment. Undergraduate students met by the audit team were generally supportive of the conclusion in the student written submission that the information provided to students was extensive, reliable and accurate.

130 Postgraduate research students met by the audit team were satisfied with information provided by the University and confirmed that the handbook published by the Academic Registry made it clear what was expected of them during their time with the University.

131 The audit team established that the University provides an extensive and accessible range of published information for prospective and current students, both electronically and in hard copy. The team considered the quality and accessibility of information provided by the University to be a feature of good practice.

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

### **Features of good practice**

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

- the regular review and updating of University policies with consistent use of gap analysis (paragraphs 22, 39, 54, 56)
- the provision of case studies for the training of external examiners (paragraph 35)
- the use of systematic feedback from students to inform major planning (paragraph 78)
- the role of the Department for Curriculum and Quality Enhancement in coordinating and promoting developments in the student learning experience (paragraphs 85 to 87, 89)
- the University's pursuit of its employability and volunteering strategies, including its cooperation with the Students' Union in these themes (paragraph 104)
- the use of strategic themes to direct a wide range of staff development activities (paragraphs 107 to 110)
- the accuracy and comprehensive nature of the information provided to students (paragraph 131).

### **Recommendations for action**

133 The audit team advises the University to:

- ensure that its policies for the management of the submission, security and return of student coursework are followed consistently (paragraph 47).

134 It would be desirable for the University to:

- revise the external examiner report form with prompts for more detailed comment, in particular about learning opportunities, in order to strengthen the enhancement value of these reports (paragraph 36)
- ensure that before postgraduate research students undertake teaching duties, they are trained for that role in accordance with the University's requirements (paragraph 124).

## **Appendix**

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

The report confirms that our strategies for quality assurance and quality enhancement are appropriate and working well. We are particularly pleased by the very positive tone of the report throughout and that among the strengths identified, our use of student feedback to inform major planning, the accuracy and comprehensive nature of the information provided to students and our approaches to employability in collaboration with the Students' Union are noted, since these reflect a wider culture and ethos across the University in which the student experience is prioritised.

The audit team highlighted many areas of our work of which we are proud and we appreciate the process through which our achievements are reflected back to us through the critical scrutiny of peers.

The recommendations were already identified for action through our annual monitoring processes and will be included in our continuing discussions about quality enhancement.

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