



# **Institutional audit**

**University College Plymouth St Mark & St John**

**December 2010**

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## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) 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 for 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's) 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* 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

## Institutional audit: report

- 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 University College Plymouth St Mark & St John (the University College; Marjon) from 6 to 10 December 2010 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 College offers.

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

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is 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 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 College 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 in its on-campus and UK collaborative provision
- 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 its on-campus and UK collaborative provision

There can be limited confidence in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of academic standards and the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in overseas collaborative provision.

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University College has a series of initiatives designed to promote quality enhancement, which it sees as being related to the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy and effective quality assurance. The roles and responsibilities of the Head of Quality and Student Experience and the faculty leads have the potential to support a structured and systematic approach in the future to quality enhancement, building on the good practice established to date.

### Postgraduate research students

The audit found that the arrangements for the support of postgraduate research students were generally sound and consistent with the precepts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

## Published information

The audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University College publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## Features of good practice

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

- the structured and developmental way in which research and scholarly activity supports learning, teaching and continuous professional development
- the integrated approach and effective work of Student Support.

## Recommendations for action

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

The team considers it essential that the University College:

- in the context of its strategic intention to expand its overseas collaborative provision, establish secure and systematic institutional oversight of such provision, including the monitoring of compliance with its stated operational and institutional requirements.

The team advises the University College to:

- give consideration to whether the responsibilities and reporting lines in the executive and deliberative structures can secure reliable ongoing institutional oversight and assurance of academic standards and learning opportunities
- establish and maintain timeliness and effective action planning and completion of those agreed actions in relation to issues identified through institutional and local quality assurance and enhancement processes
- operate its programme approval processes in such a way as to ensure that all programmes are formally approved by the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee before students are enrolled
- define the procedures and associated responsibilities for notifying staff and students about changes to the Student Regulations Framework
- examine whether the current approach to the recording of matters discussed at meetings is sufficiently detailed and precise to establish clearly the status of decisions taken and demonstrate institutional assurance and oversight of the operation of learning and teaching at all levels in the institution
- strengthen the provision, particularly in the faculties, for student and staff representation and involvement in decision-making
- monitor whether the extent of the planned delegation of authority to faculty level is compatible with sound institutional management of the academic standards of awards and the quality of learning opportunities offered through collaborative provision.

It would be desirable for the University College to:

- clarify and define the responsibilities and procedures for variations to programmes of study, including definitions of minor changes and of modifications that entail revalidation
- keep under review the way in which material is presented in the Student Regulations Framework, in the interests of the clarity and accessibility of the various categories of information
- share external examiner reports with student representatives, including those studying through collaborative arrangements, in accordance with the HEFCE publication *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes, October 2006* (HEFCE 06/45).

## Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University College 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*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that, in general, the University College 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 University College Plymouth St Mark & St John (the University College; Marjon) was undertaken during the week commencing 6 December 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University College'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: Dr Sally Bentley, Professor Hilary Grainger, Dr Clive Marsland, Ms Martina Rohr and Ms Kate Wicklow, auditors, and Mr Stephen Murphy, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mrs Shona Patterson, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 University College Plymouth St Mark & St John is an independent Church of England voluntary college, originally founded as two separate colleges: St John's, Battersea (1840) and St Mark's, Chelsea (1841). The two colleges combined on the Chelsea site in 1923 and the College of St Mark and St John moved from London to Plymouth in 1973. On the granting, in 2007, of taught degree awarding powers the institution became University College Plymouth St Mark & St John. The University College's research degrees provision leads to awards of the University of Exeter. At the time of the audit, Marjon had approximately 2,480 full time equivalent (FTE) students, and 400 full-time and part-time staff, equating to 340 FTEs.

4 The University College's mission states that '[a]s a high quality and vibrant higher education institution with a strong community focus, providing learning and opportunity for local, regional, national and international markets our mission is to provide learning for life'. In support of this mission, the University College has seven key aims: to provide high quality learning programmes and work towards the achievement of university title; to achieve excellence in learning and teaching; to provide a high quality student experience; to deliver sustainable futures; to be inclusive and accessible; to work creatively in partnership; and to build capacity and good practice in research.

5 The University College's 2010-15 Strategic Plan emphasises the need to diversify income streams through, among other things, international student recruitment and short course and training provision with employers. The University College's strategic planning also includes the expansion of external collaborations and partnerships. A Centre for Partnership and Professional Development, reporting directly to the Principal, has been established recently to support some of the University College's key aspirations set out in the Strategic Plan.

6 The Academic Board, chaired by the Principal, is the senior academic governance body and is responsible for the oversight of the academic standards of awards and the development of the academic activities of the University College. The purposes of the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee and its Learning Enhancement Sub Committee are to establish 'a more comprehensive alignment of quality assurance and enhancement of the student learning experience'. Marjon identifies the Student Experience Council, reporting to the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee, as a forum for discussion of 'key issues' important to students. The Academic Development Committee, reporting to the Academic Board, considers all academic issues in relation to portfolio development and the approval of collaborative partnerships. There are two committees with responsibility for the provision and monitoring of resources: the Resources Committee and the Information and Learning Resources Committee.



7 The Principal is advised by a Senior Management Team comprising: the Vice Principal (Academic); the Vice Principal (Resources); the deans of faculty; the Head of Financial and Corporate Services; and the Head of Marketing, Communication and Planning. The central Learning and Quality Unit is led by the Head of Quality and Student Experience, who reports to the Vice Principal (Academic).

8 The key executive and deliberative decision-making at faculty level rests with the two faculty deans and the faculty management teams. Faculties have programme and subject committees, in addition to staff-student liaison committees. Designated academic staff have faculty lead roles with responsibility for: quality assurance; learning enhancement and the student experience; research and ethics; employer engagement and international.

9 In 2003, the previous Institutional audit found that there could be broad confidence in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of the awards it then made on behalf of the University of Exeter. The audit also drew attention to the need for action in relation to aspects of the management of collaborative provision. The audit identified a number of features of good practice and made recommendations for consideration by the then College. A significant feature of good practice identified in the 2003 audit report was the caring ethos of the College, based on its Christian mission and heritage. The University College's continued commitment to the pastoral care of its students is exemplified by the integrated approach and effective work of the Student Support team in the provision of student support (see paragraph 54).

10 In response to the advice in the previous audit the University College undertook a substantial restructuring and, at the time of the audit, was completing a further realignment resulting from the 2009-10 strategic planning process. An important feature of the realignment is the creation of a two-faculty structure, being the Faculty of Education, Health and Welfare and the Faculty of Sport, Media and Creative Arts. The University College's committees have also been streamlined and restructured. The most senior deliberative body in faculties is the Faculty Management Team (FMT).

11 In the course of the audit, the audit team reviewed the constitutions and terms of reference for the revised committee structure and explored the extent of staff and student representation. There is no provision for student and staff participation at the faculty level beyond specified ex-officio involvement in the FMT, so opportunities for staff and student input into decision-making at that level are limited. The linkage from the FMTs to the 'centre' relies on membership of central committees by faculty leads, who may not be members of FMTs. There is a consequent lack of coherence between the deliberative structures at institutional and local level. Given the lack of a formal subsidiary relationship from the FMTs to any of the central committees, it is difficult to perceive where the accountability of FMTs lies. The audit team also found that the records of discussion did not always give a detailed account of matters discussed at meetings, nor did they record clearly the status of decisions taken and the follow-up to action points at subsequent meetings; these deficiencies make it difficult to confirm that there is institutional assurance and oversight of the operation of learning and teaching at all levels in the institution.

12 Matters including the formal oversight of academic development, approval and review of programmes of study, faculties' deliberative decisions which affect the academic portfolio, and the responsiveness of the University College to the student voice are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this report. The audit team considers it advisable that the University College give consideration to whether the responsibilities and reporting lines in the executive and deliberative structures can secure reliable ongoing institutional oversight and assurance of academic standards and learning opportunities. The University

College should also establish and maintain timeliness and effective action planning and completion of those agreed actions in relation to issues identified through institutional and local quality assurance and enhancement processes.

13 The audit team considers that the University College has an appropriate framework for the institutional management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, but that further work is required to clarify and strengthen the academic governance structure in the faculties in order to provide for more oversight and engagement of the academic community with quality assurance. These matters are discussed later in this report.

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

14 In preparation for the exercise of taught degree awarding powers, the University College designed its own framework for the management and regulation of academic standards which now governs the operation of its provision. The University College identifies its systems for the management of curricula and assessment as the primary means by which it assures the academic standards of its awards. Academic Board takes overall responsibility for the institutional management of academic standards but delegates the specification of academic standards to the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee, which oversees programme approval, monitoring and review, and is responsible for the maintenance of academic standards through examination boards. The two faculties have local responsibility for academic standards, including those for collaborative provision at programme level. The Assessment Regulations and Procedures are designed to ensure consistency of approach to the management of standards.

15 The Programme Approval Regulations and Procedures set out clearly two main stages in the approval process: Approval in Principle and Approval in Detail. Approval in Detail comprises two stages: Internal Scrutiny and a Validation Event, the latter including independent academic external involvement. The Learning, Quality and Standards Committee is responsible for the final approval of programmes. Reports of the approval process do not record in detail the discussion of the proposal; there is no standard approach to the recording of the detail of responses to panel recommendations. The audit found instances of delays and postponements of approvals, and the University College acknowledged difficulties encountered in the previous academic year in fulfilling the planned timetable. Delays in the formal approval resulted in one programme commencing while still subject to validation. There is a need for more realistic scheduling and a timely approach to approval, and a more detailed record of discussions and decision-making. The audit team considers it advisable that the University College operate its programme approval processes in such a way as to ensure that all programmes are formally approved by the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee before students are enrolled, in the interests of both the University College and the students.

16 The University College is aware that the approval process as currently specified and operated is not altogether effective, and plans in future to vest greater responsibility for the preliminary stages of approval with the two FMTs. The Learning and Quality Unit will have an advisory role in the preliminary stages of approval, retaining responsibility for the oversight and management of validation events. Since the summer of 2010, chair's action has not been permitted in respect of the approval of programmes. The audit team considers that the introduction of a template for the recording of the final approval of courses will strengthen the process.

17 The University College's Quality Assurance Framework sets out the guidance for the annual monitoring of programmes. Programme reports and subject reports draw on a

broad range of management information and evaluations of provision. These two annual reports, scrutinised by the faculty management teams, contribute to faculty reports, which are submitted to the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee. Records of discussion of the reports at the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee tend to focus on operational matters such as the late submission of some of the reports, rather than on substantive matters of institutional significance. Faculties are responsible for the monitoring of improvement plans in response to matters identified through annual monitoring. As under the revised committee structure faculty management team minutes are not received at any of the central committees, there is no formal institutional oversight of faculty activities in this area.

18 All taught programmes are subject to periodic review, governed by the clear 'Regulations and Guidelines for Periodic Review' document. A formal re-approval process follows successful periodic review. Periodic review includes a suitable element of externality. Reports of Periodic Review panels, including commendations and recommendations, are reviewed by the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee but records of discussion of the reports give no indication of the depth or extent of that discussion. Faculties are responsible for monitoring action plans from periodic reviews as part of the annual monitoring process. The audit found that, while the specifications for annual monitoring and periodic review were sound, institutional oversight of the timely completion of action plans was not systematic.

19 There are discrepancies between the Briefing Paper and the Programme Approval Regulations and Procedures in respect of minor modifications to validated programmes or modules. In meetings with staff, the audit team heard different accounts of the procedures and responsibilities for the approval of such variations. The University College is aware of the possibility of 'change by stealth'. In practice, the deans of faculty are responsible for monitoring the impact of cumulative minor modifications on any given programme, before final approval is given by the Vice Principal (Academic). There is no central record of such changes to programmes. Any change not considered a minor modification leads to revalidation. The audit team considers it desirable that the University College clarify and define the responsibilities and procedures for variations to programmes of study, including definitions of minor changes and of modifications that entail revalidation.

20 The institution appoints two types of external examiner to support the assurance of the standards of academic awards: subject external examiners, with responsibility for cognate groups of modules, and general external examiners at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Academic Board delegates formal authority for the appointment of external examiners to the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee. The External Examiners' Handbook, issued to all external examiners on appointment, sets out clearly the criteria for nomination and appointment and the associated procedures. Inductions and briefings are provided and the audit found that external examiners were generally well supported in their role.

21 The University College operates a two-tier system of assessment comprising Subject Assessment Boards, relating to students' performance at module level, and institutional Progression and Award Boards, which make decisions on students' progression on their programme of study and recommendations to Academic Board for the conferment of awards. Subject external examiners' reports attest to the sound conduct of examination boards.

22 External examiner reports, produced to a template, require comment on the academic standards of programmes in relation to external reference points, on student achievement and on the assessment process. The University College plans to modify the report form from the 2010-11 academic session to require, rather than invite, qualitative feedback. The audit team welcomed this change, which should elicit comments that will

contribute more explicitly to quality improvement than those which result from the current form. The majority of reports seen by the audit team were positive. The general external examiner's report for taught postgraduate awards for the academic year 2009-10 made a number of significant recommendations in relation to the operation of the Programme Assessment Boards, which are being considered by a working group that will be making a formal response to the general external examiner.

23 There are sound arrangements for consideration of and responses to external examiner reports. An overview of generic issues raised by external examiners and the general external examiners is included in the Annual Programmes Report, which is considered by Academic Board. The institutional action plan is monitored by the Learning Quality and Standards Committee. External examiners have the opportunity to comment the following year at meetings of assessment boards on the ways in which the University College responded to matters that they raised. The audit found that the University College made good use of external examiners in its summative assessment processes.

24 Academic standards are defined as part of the programme development process by reference to the Academic Infrastructure and other relevant external reference points, as articulated in the Programme Approval Regulations and Procedures 2008, which take account of the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*. Approval and review reports routinely record reference to the *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and relevant sections of the *Code of practice*. Programmes are also benchmarked against the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. The principal professional, statutory or regulatory bodies for Marjon are Ofsted, the NHS, the National Youth Agency, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and the Higher Education Academy (HEA), and they are represented, where relevant, at periodic review and re-approval events. There are also formally constituted Professional Advisory Groups in place to ensure that developments in the fields of professional practice feed into the training provided for students. The University College's policy and procedures in relation to the *Code of practice* are monitored centrally by the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee. The audit team concluded that the University College makes appropriate use of the Academic Infrastructure in its approval, monitoring and review processes.

25 Detailed guidance on assessment policies, the constitution of examination boards, the conduct of assessment and on student progression is found in the Assessment Regulations and Procedures, which form part of the Student Regulations Framework. The Assessment Policy is directly linked to the University College's Learning and Teaching Strategy and e-Learning Strategy and draws on the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*. Assessment policies and regulations are monitored and reviewed annually by the Regulations Working Group, which then makes recommendations for any necessary changes to assessment policy and practice to the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee.

26 Students are informed of the regulations prior to arrival and at induction. Assessment details are available in module guides and handbooks. Programme specifications establish the relationship between curriculum and assessment, and module descriptors give clear indications of assessment weightings. The Student Regulations Framework is available on the website and when specific issues arise, for example if students are considering making an academic appeal, they will also be re-sent the relevant regulations. The student written submission suggested that 'improvements could be made to better ensure consistency across courses, the timing of feedback and to ensure relevance'; students who met the audit team considered that they were provided with clear information about assessment and were satisfied in terms of the loading of assessments and the quality and timeliness of feedback.

27 There is a lack of clarity about where responsibilities lie for notifying staff and students about any changes to the Student Regulations Framework and an issue over the timing of changes. The issue was brought into focus in the case of changes to arrangements for extenuating circumstances during the course of the academic year and the timing of those changes, so that students were not informed at the start of the academic year of the change in approach. The audit team considers it advisable that the University College define the procedures and associated responsibilities for notifying staff and students about changes to the Student Regulations Framework.

28 While the creation of an Information and Planning Unit has clearly led to progress on the production of improved student data, the University College is aware that there is further work to be undertaken in this area and is planning accordingly. Available data included in programme reports showed evidence of the use of a standard template for recording data; the data were limited to admissions, registration, progression and completion. The attendant commentary and the extent to which it was used to provoke analysis and reflection on these data in the context of academic standards varied across programmes. Progression and achievement data also inform the annual Self-Evaluation Document for Ofsted, and the University College is striving to respond to the recommendation from the most recent Ofsted inspection that it should 'improve the use of qualitative data related to trainees' attainment and progress against the Standards'. Overall, the audit team formed the view that good use was being made of the available statistical information at subject, programme and institutional levels, but would encourage the University College to build on its progress to date in improving the quality and range of data available for interrogation.

29 The findings of the audit are that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University College's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards offered through its on-campus provision.

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

30 The University College's normal frame of reference for its management of learning opportunities is its Learning and Teaching Strategy. The most recent Strategy was approved up to 2010, but its currency was extended to 31 August 2011. Consultation on the revision of the Strategy began in the academic year 2008-09 and the consensus was that the aims and objectives of the 2006-10 Strategy were still valid. The Academic Board agreed that the final revision be delayed to take account of the new Strategic Plan 2010-15.

31 The University College's general approach to the use of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of its provision is outlined above (paragraph 24). The focus of this section will be on the use of those elements of the Academic Infrastructure directly related to the management of learning opportunities.

32 The Academic Development Committee considers issues of resourcing and capacity during the Approval in Principle process. Approval procedures helpfully prompt panel members to consider key issues relevant to teaching and the learning opportunities of students; the records of consideration of such issues do not indicate or demonstrate the level or detail of discussion.

33 Annual monitoring occurs at module, programme, subject and faculty level and each has set headings, with the reports of the tier above collating and synthesising issues raised by those reports which feed into them. They monitor the learning opportunities of students through: the discussion of progression, retention and achievement data; module

and more general student surveys; external examiner and periodic review issues; matters relating to student support, staffing and accommodation; portfolio development; and research and staff development activities, though not all topics are discussed at each level. The programme-level reports are typically very brief; subject reports are longer and school/faculty reports are more detailed and thorough, with action plans focusing on different dimensions. In addition, School Learning and Teaching Plans have been used to implement the institution's overall Learning and Teaching Strategy at the local level.

34 The institutional annual report provides a collation of key issues, but monitoring of implementation of the resultant action plans is inconsistent. Faculty monitoring reports are noted by the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee. Although reports below faculty level follow the prescribed headings, the relevant committees do not discuss the relevant reports nor monitor their actions in a consistent or timely manner, focusing predominantly on operational matters and the organisation of the monitoring system; there is some evidence from very recent departmental meetings that more substantive matters are now being discussed. As noted above, the process for periodic review is clearly specified and there are prompts for panel members on consideration of learning opportunities but, as with other aspects of monitoring and review, the record of the meeting is confined to topics identified for discussion and the outcomes of discussion, with no indication of how the panel came to those decisions.

35 The institution is currently strengthening its quality processes. Notwithstanding the deficiencies in the recording of discussions noted above, overall the audit team found that the processes for programme approval, monitoring and review contributed to the management of the quality of the students' learning opportunities. The team considers it advisable that the University College examine whether the current approach to the recording of matters discussed at meetings is sufficiently detailed and precise to establish clearly the status of decisions taken and demonstrate institutional assurance and oversight of the operation of learning and teaching at all levels in the institution.

36 The University College gathers feedback from students, including the results of the National Student Survey, through a broad range of approaches, the results of which are considered by a number of individuals and bodies. The institution is acting to improve the management of this rather complex system for handling student feedback, particularly in the area of communicating its responses to matters raised by students.

37 Student Union sabbatical officers are members of the main University College committees and also other panels, including internal audits and periodic reviews, and boards. There are locally elected student representatives on Staff-Student Liaison Committees and the Student Experience Council, but not at faculty, departmental or programme-level meetings. Staff-Student Liaison Committees are thus a major programme-level mechanism for formal dialogue with students and the Student Experience Council is the key institution-wide forum. Staff-Student Liaison Committee minutes typically focus on student-generated issues; they do not receive reports at the programme or module level. None of the records of programme board meetings seen by the audit team made reference to the Staff-Student Liaison Committees. The institution recognises that the system is not currently working effectively. Given the reliance on Student Union sabbatical officers and the lack of student involvement in sub-faculty committees, other than the Staff-Student Liaison Committees, the audit team considers it advisable that the University College strengthen the provision, particularly at faculty level, for student representation and involvement in decision-making.

38 The University College has a long-standing commitment to relate teaching to research and advanced scholarship. The Learning and Teaching and Research Strategies provide context for systematic linkages between staff research activity and teaching.

Approval, review and monitoring procedures also require strategies, panels, teams and report writers to consider research and scholarly activity in relation to student learning opportunities. A 2005 HEA Change Academy project developed and planned the implementation of a new Research Strategy that stressed the continuum between research and scholarly activity, and the link between academic and professional practice. Other activities in this area include faculty research days, online and/or in-house journals in each faculty and the creation of the Centre for Educational Research. Faculty leads for research and ethics will take this work forward. Staff development and appraisal systems support research into both pedagogic practice and subject knowledge. The structured and developmental ways in which research and scholarly activity support learning, teaching and continuous professional development are identified in the audit as a feature of good practice.

39 The Strategic Plan sets out the aspiration to increase employer engagement and part-time provision. The University College has a long tradition of vocationally-oriented courses, with a strong emphasis on professionally accredited programmes and those with a work-related and work-based learning focus. In line with its Employability Strategy and an associated Placement Learning Policy, the University College has an active approach to work-based and work-related learning, offering a wide range of opportunities to develop employability skills within the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities. A new role of Faculty Lead in Employer Engagement was established from the academic year 2010-11 to support the strategy and extend employability-related learning across the curriculum.

40 The framework for the delivery of flexible and employment-related learning is provided by the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the e-Learning Strategy. In meetings with the audit team, staff acknowledged that the establishment of the new virtual learning environment, LearningSpace, had been at the expense of a more strategic and consistent development of e-learning and flexible and distributed learning. The University College has made a successful start with the provision of Marjon Re-useable Learning Objects, which present learning in small, self-contained units, for example, approaches to enhancing presentation and essay writing skills, as well as supporting subject-specific learning.

41 Overall, the audit team concluded that the University College was developing and embedding employability effectively throughout the curriculum and offering students a wide range of opportunities with appropriate support. The University College's arrangements for technology-enhanced learning are still at an early stage to support the aspirations of the five-year Strategic Plan.

42 In meetings with the audit team, staff and students expressed general satisfaction with learning and teaching facilities and resources. They confirmed that the new virtual learning environment, LearningSpace, now functioned as an effective means of communication, offering access to learning resources as well as opportunities for an interactive learning tool. Students and staff appreciated the comprehensive training programme for LearningSpace.

43 The University College took notice of critical statements emerging from student surveys on the availability of some learning resources and is taking measures to improve its resources. The Library Business Plan 2010-11 raised concerns about the capacity and learning environment of the library, and the University College has responded with a phased refurbishment plan for the library to be completed during the academic year 2010-11. The Library Annual Reviews from the two previous years point to understaffing in the library, particularly at the professional staffing level; the relevant action plans do not indicate whether this issue has been resolved.

44 The University College provides free laptops to home and EU students as part of its access agreement. The Marjon Open Learning Unit offers free support and training in IT

skills and the navigation of LearningSpace, as well as opportunities to gain additional recognised IT qualifications. Students whom the audit team met praised the 24-hour IT access room with on-site IT technician support.

45 The University College's timetable is centrally managed and available on LearningSpace. There were a number of comments in a range of student feedback mechanisms about late publication of timetables, to which the University College responded by bringing forward the module selection process and the establishment of a Service Level Agreement. Staff also informed the audit team that refinements in line with the exploration of further technical enhancements were forthcoming.

46 There is a systematic approach through the annual planning process to the resourcing of programmes. Learning resources are monitored through Faculty and Departmental Business Plans and are considered by the Resources Committee. The Library Annual Review Reports are presented at the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee. The University College is responsive to staff and student concerns about the adequacy of learning resources. The audit found that the arrangements for the management and provision of learning resources in the University College's home provision were effective.

47 In accordance with its Widening Participation Policy, the University College welcomes student applications from a diversity of backgrounds. Student selection is made on the basis of suitability for studies, which includes academic achievement, professional and personal experience and potential to succeed. The Admissions Policy is complemented by a Policy for the Accreditation of Prior Learning.

48 Students whom the audit team met were generally very positive about their admissions experiences and the information and support they received. The University College offers visit and open days to prospective applicants. The Schools and College Liaison team arranges visits to schools by Marjon student ambassadors. The Widening Participation Coordinator also arranges visits to local schools by AimHigher Student Ambassadors; the team met students who were actively engaged in these schemes and who reported very positively on their experience.

49 The University College offers an induction to honours degree studies for Foundation Degree students during their final year at the partner colleges, and provides early additional support for the dissertation/project module before entry into the final year at the University College.

50 The audit team found that the University College's admission arrangements were fit for purpose and operated in accordance with the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice*.

51 One of the aims of the five-year Strategic Plan is the provision of a high-quality student experience by creating a 'vibrant student support hub', delivering student support responsive to the needs of students. Student Support provides a personal and flexible service to enhance the student experience and contribute to achievement and retention. It is evident that the staff work within the provisions of the Retention Strategy, the Widening Participation Strategy and the Employability Strategy and provide a comprehensive, well-publicised network of support activities. The University College obtained re-accreditation for the Matrix Standard for its Student Support Team in March 2009. The Careers Service has developed a range of activities firmly embedded in the programmes of study or as extra-curricular activities, reaching out to current students as well as to graduates for up to five years after completing their programmes.

52 All students are allocated a personal tutor, drawn from among the academic staff, who provides a first point of contact for pastoral care and academic support. An additional



feature of the University College's comprehensive support system is the specialist support offered by the Academic Counsellor, who is located with the Student Support team. The Academic Counsellor is responsible for the operation of the personal tutor system, which entitles students to a number of scheduled meetings as well as one-to-one meetings. Students are well aware of their entitlements, which are included in the programme handbooks, and they are particularly appreciative of the individual meetings with personal tutors. The relevant policy and guidance has been updated to take account of the recent institutional restructuring.

53 A pilot for an e-mentoring scheme seeking to improve retention, community cohesion, academic performance and conversion of applicants to places is another example of the proactive and imaginative response of the University College to the needs of its students. This project aligns strategically with the Retention Strategy, the Widening Participation Strategy and the Employability Strategy, using student peers and student ambassadors as mentors for applicants and students new to the University College.

54 The audit team met students who were overwhelmingly positive about the support they were receiving. The integrated approach and effective work of Student Support are identified as a feature of good practice in the audit. The institutional approach to student support makes a cohesive, comprehensive and effective contribution to the management of student learning opportunities.

55 The University College has comprehensive policies for staff recruitment, appointment, induction and probation, and procedures to oversee their implementation. Staff new to teaching are required to undertake the Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Development: Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, which is accredited by the HEA. For newly appointed staff who are not yet members of the HEA the successful achievement of the first module is a condition for completion of probation.

56 Staff appraisal is managed through the Performance and Development Review Scheme and the teaching of all academic staff is observed following the guidelines of the University College Peer Observation Scheme. The University College recognises that there is a need for more effective monitoring of both of these processes. There was evidence of some progress towards a greater degree of consistency in compliance with the requirements of the schemes.

57 There are staff development days in faculties. There is also a Learning, Teaching and Research Conference with a full and varied programme of internal and external contributions on learning through research and learning through practice. Staff who met the audit team were positive about how their development needs are met. Overall, the team found that the University's arrangements for staff support were fit for purpose and effective in contributing to the management of learning opportunities in the University College's home provision.

58 There can be confidence in the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students in the University College's on-campus provision.

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

59 In meetings with the audit team, University College staff were clear in their belief that their processes for quality assurance lead to enhancement of quality. As such, the institution's view is that its methods for assuring the academic quality and standards of programmes through annual monitoring, external examiners and periodic review activities

create opportunities to promulgate good practice across the institution through annual faculty reports. The institution also undertakes a series of annual internal audits, which ensure that practices take account of the Academic Infrastructure while highlighting areas for further enhancement.

60 The University College has recently appointed a Head of Quality and Student Experience to work with the faculties in the enhancement of provision. The faculty lead roles for learning enhancement and student experience are intended to ensure that local innovation is disseminated to the whole institution. At the time of the audit it was too soon to appraise the effectiveness of the contribution of the faculty leads to quality enhancement.

61 The University College sees innovations in teaching and learning as one of the main drivers for enhancement activities across the institution. The institution aims to nurture the talents of academic staff for delivering a high-quality educational experience through recognition and reward. The University College has a set of strategic enhancement projects, such as the annual learning and teaching awards, which have helped the institution to develop the skill of their staff in areas such as e-learning. There are a number of projects which have been initially funded by the learning and teaching awards and also research which have had a direct impact on the enhancement of teaching and learning at the University College. Staff who met the audit team reported that they were very motivated by the teaching awards and felt that the time and resources given to them to research pedagogic practices was invaluable.

62 The audit team came to the view that the institution has a range of activities which contribute to the enhancement of the management of learning opportunities, but there is scope for a more systematic approach. The planned improvements in the collection of management information should assist in this area. The early approval and implementation of the revised Learning and Teaching Strategy should provide a framework for a structured approach to quality enhancement, building on the diverse initiatives to promote, identify and disseminate good practice.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

63 The University College's Strategic Plan 2010-15 includes a commitment to extend the institution's UK and international collaborative activities. The University College's Briefing Paper noted that 'the new emphasis on partnership in the Strategic Plan will lead to a steep learning curve and that there are considerable risks, as well as opportunities, associated with this development'. The Vice Principal (Academic) has overall responsibility for collaborative provision within the University College. At the time of the audit operational management of collaborative provision had recently been devolved to the faculties, with the retention of central oversight by the Vice Principal (Academic) and the Learning and Quality Unit.

64 The University College has a range of collaborative partners in the UK and overseas. There are also short course and externally-funded partnerships in the UK, particularly associated with school-based education in the South West of England. The audit team noted the contribution the University College is making by such partnerships to the educational life of its region. The academic provision delivered with partners is well aligned to areas of the University College's expertise: teacher education and English language provision for overseas provision; sport and education for UK provision.

65 The total number of students studying through the University College's collaborative arrangements is 1,007 students in overseas programmes of study, 78 from UK Foundation Degree provision and 1,781 on short course and other UK provision. The University College

categories of collaborative provision include: accredited in-house overseas partnerships, supported distance learning, customised off-campus delivery, franchise/accreditation, and placement learning. The University College maintains a Collaborative Provision Register.

66 The University College splits approval of programmes for delivery from approval of partners. Proposed partnership arrangements are approved by the Academic Board on the recommendation of Academic Development Committee. The University College states that, subject to some variation in assessment, which would be recorded in the legal agreement, arrangements for assessment of students in collaborative provision and external examining arrangements are the same as for on-campus provision. Specified approval periods are in place for collaborative provision and the University College operates periodic review of its collaborative provision in line with its standard arrangements for periodic review. Given the difficulties noted earlier with the volume of work arising from the approval and periodic review of home provision, the University College will wish to ensure that the scheduling and programme of work for the periodic review of collaborative provision allows for the process to be conducted fully in accordance with the stated requirements.

67 The University College's risk register includes appropriate mechanisms for risk assessments of proposed new collaborative provision developments, in addition to codified due diligence arrangements which form part of the executive approval process through Academic Development Committee. Collaborative provision development is judged to be medium risk on this register. While financial and political risk are clearly appraised and planned for by the University College, academic risk is not given such overt priority in the planning process for future developments.

68 The University College has made efforts to take account of the relevant precepts of the *Code of practice* in its management of collaborative provision. The publication of the Collaborative Provision Principles and Procedures document in February 2010, which builds significantly on the previous Regulations for Academic Partnerships document, provides a framework for the management of collaborative arrangements.

69 The audit team reviewed documentation relating to the operation of the University College's UK collaborative provision and found it to be sound and operating as intended. There is detailed approval documentation, including signed and dated franchise and accreditation and validation agreements, due diligence documentation and validation documentation for the partnerships. Staff-Student Liaison Committee minutes demonstrate programmes of study being delivered to the benefit of students.

70 The University College operates an overseas arrangement with a partner in Pakistan to deliver a Certificate in Professional Education and a Certificate in Higher Education through a combination of supported distance learning and approved University College tutors in various sites in Pakistan. The arrangement was approved and commenced in the academic session 2006-07 with the Certificate in Professional Education. Subsequently the arrangement was extended to the partner institution's operation in Malaysia.

71 In 2009, in response to representations from the partner institution about the awards available to the students, the University College undertook an investigation into the provision, which led to agreement to validate the Certificate in Higher Education. The investigation did not look more widely at the operation of the provision. An approval panel then recognised an additional 60 credits to allow students to gain the Certificate in Higher Education rather than the Certificate award under accreditation of prior experiential learning and accreditation of previous learning arrangements. In November 2010 the Credit and Short Course Approval Panel, acting within its remit as a 'quasi-examination board', awarded

129 students the extra 60 credits required to guarantee a Certificate in Higher Education award.

72 Difficulties associated with the operation of the provision include adverse comment from the external examiner on marking standards and the related inadequate preparation of tutors, deficiencies in the operation of staff-student consultative committees, and no annual monitoring reports for the provision. Staff have been prevented from travelling to Pakistan because of the risks involved and ensuing communication difficulties mean that the University College is unsure as to the assessment regime and teaching schedule in Pakistan. It has not been possible to hold assessment boards for the academic year 2009-10 in accordance with normal University College requirements.

73 The audit team recognises the aspiration of this educational partnership to deliver educational skills against a background of political and environmental uncertainty. Nonetheless, the audit team did not see or hear evidence that the University College had taken sufficient steps to safeguard both itself and its students in Pakistan from difficulties that might have been anticipated, given the initial identification of the political context as a strategic risk by the University College. The documentation provided to the team does not demonstrate strategic or operational superintendence of the provision. The lack of contingency planning has meant that monitoring of the provision, collection of student feedback, and assessment arrangements, including external examining, have not operated so as to secure reliably both the academic standards of the awards and the quality of the learning opportunities. At the time of the audit, the University College had not come to a decision on how to proceed with the management of the partnership to fulfil its responsibilities to and protect the interests of the students registered for its awards.

74 The audit team considers it essential, in the context of its strategic intention to expand its overseas collaborative provision, that the University College establish secure and systematic institutional oversight of such provision, including the monitoring of compliance with its stated operational and institutional requirements. The audit team recognises that the University College has incorporated the previously free-standing Centre for International Language Teacher Education into a faculty where it will be subject to established quality assurance and monitoring procedures, but the revised arrangement was too recent for the audit to appraise its effectiveness. Nonetheless, given that substantial responsibility for the operation of the University College's provision in Pakistan was delegated to local level, the team also considers it advisable that the University College monitor whether the extent of the planned delegation of authority to faculty level is compatible with sound institutional management of the academic standards of awards and the quality of learning opportunities offered through collaborative provision.

75 The audit found that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards in its UK collaborative provision. Confidence can also 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 its UK collaborative provision. There can be limited confidence in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of academic standards and the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in its overseas collaborative provision.

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

76 The University College's postgraduate research programmes lead to awards of the University of Exeter. There have been no new postgraduate research students registered with the University College since September 2008, and the few remaining students registered for such awards are nearing completion. Ongoing negotiations with the University of Exeter may result in a renewed accreditation agreement for postgraduate research provision within the University College.

77 Regulatory requirements for postgraduate research students are those of the University of Exeter and are published in the University College Student Regulations Framework. Arrangements for the supervision of research students are sound and clearly identified in the framework. Arrangements for the assessment of research students are secure, as are the arrangements for complaints and appeals. The University College has demonstrated a reflective and considered approach to research, including provision for the development of its postgraduate research student base, by means of: its Strategic Plan; its Research Strategy; the developmental work of its Research Committee; its support for current postgraduate students; and its operational arrangements for postgraduate provision, including training in research methodologies.

78 Postgraduate students feel well supported by the University College and in particular by their supervisors and tutors. Some concerns were expressed over the availability of written research resources, especially books in the library. Research methods training is available through the University of Exeter for postgraduate research students at the University College who are registered for University awards. There are arrangements for training of postgraduate research students who teach.

79 The audit team found that, overall, the arrangements for the support of postgraduate research students are sound and consistent with the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## **Section 7: Published information**

80 There are defined arrangements for the maintenance of institutional and local areas of the University College website and for the authorisation of published material. There are standard templates for the production of programme handbooks, programme specifications and module descriptors. The audit team found some inconsistencies in the format and content of some of the documentation provided.

81 The approach to the monitoring of material published by collaborative partners is the same as for on-campus provision. There was evidence of action taken in respect of incorrect information published on a partner's website. There is no systematic approach to monitoring material published about and on behalf of the University College by partner institutions.

82 The student written submission and students whom the audit team met commented favourably on the accuracy of published information which the University College produces. There is a variety of useful information included in the Student Regulations Framework, but the presentation of the material can make it difficult to find particular items. The audit team therefore considers it desirable that the University College keep under review the way in which material is presented in the Student Regulations Framework, in the interests of the clarity and accessibility of the various categories of information.

83 The University College states that the Staff-Student Liaison Committees have overall responsibility for sharing external examiners' reports with students. A review of Staff-Student Liaison Committee minutes by the audit team found no reference to external examiners' reports. It is desirable that the institution share external examiner reports with student representatives, including those studying through collaborative arrangements, in accordance with the HEFCE publication *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes, October 2006* (HEFCE 06/45).

84 The audit team found that, in general, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University College 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**

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

- the structured and developmental way in which research and scholarly activity supports learning, teaching and continuous professional development (paragraph 38)
- the integrated approach and effective work of Student Support (paragraphs 51 to 54).

### **Recommendations for action**

86 Recommendations for action that is essential:

- in the context of its strategic intention to expand its overseas collaborative provision, establish secure and systematic institutional oversight of such provision, including the monitoring of compliance with its stated operational and institutional requirements (paragraph 74).

87 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- give consideration to whether the responsibilities and reporting lines in the executive and deliberative structures can secure reliable ongoing institutional oversight and assurance of academic standards and learning opportunities (paragraphs 11, 12)
- establish and maintain timeliness and effective action planning and completion of those agreed actions in relation to issues identified through institutional and local quality assurance and enhancement processes (paragraph 12)
- operate its programme approval processes in such a way as to ensure that all programmes are formally approved by the Learning, Quality and Standards Committee before students are enrolled (paragraph 15)
- define the procedures and associated responsibilities for notifying staff and students about changes to the Student Regulations Framework (paragraph 27)
- examine whether the current approach to the recording of matters discussed at meetings is sufficiently detailed and precise to establish clearly the status of decisions taken and demonstrate institutional assurance and oversight of the operation of learning and teaching at all levels in the institution (paragraphs 33 to 35)
- strengthen the provision, particularly in the faculties, for student and staff representation and involvement in decision-making (paragraph 37)

- monitor whether the extent of the planned delegation of authority to faculty level is compatible with sound institutional management of the academic standards of awards and the quality of learning opportunities offered through collaborative provision (paragraph 74).

88 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- clarify and define the responsibilities and procedures for variations to programmes of study, including definitions of minor changes and of modifications that entail revalidation (paragraph 19)
- keep under review the way in which material is presented in the Student Regulations Framework, in the interests of the clarity and accessibility of the various categories of information (paragraph 82)
- share external examiner reports with student representatives, including those studying through collaborative arrangements, in accordance with the HEFCE publication *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase two outcomes, October 2006* (HEFCE 06/45) (paragraph 83).

## Appendix

### **University College Plymouth St Mark & St John's response to the Institutional audit report**

University College Plymouth St Mark & St John welcomes the judgement of confidence in the soundness of its current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards in its on-campus and UK collaborative provision and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students in its on-campus and UK collaborative provision. We are also very pleased to note the areas identified as good practice, in particular, the structured and developmental way in which research and scholarly activity support learning, teaching and continuous professional development and the integrated approach and effective work of Student Support which are at the heart of this teaching-led institution.

However, the University College was disappointed that the audit team expressed limited confidence in its management of the academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students in overseas provision. The University College feels that there was little cognizance of the changes put in place before the audit to ensure robust oversight of such provision. It also feels that this opinion seems to have been based primarily on one programme in a partnership, which was severely affected by political instability in the partner country and which was under review at the time of the audit. As a result of the review, the partnership was terminated in January 2011. In addition the Collaborative Provision Regulations and Procedures were updated following the audit of Malaysian provision in February, with further revisions prior to implementation of the revised regulations in December 2010.

The University College welcomes the constructive feedback on its quality assurance procedures contained in the report and is responding positively to the essential, advisable and desirable recommendations for action and evaluating the impact of changes made prior to the audit.



**RG 712 05/11**

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