



Writtle College

Institutional audit

November 2010

Annex to the report

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Writtle College (the College) from 29 November to 3 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 the College offers on behalf of the University of Essex.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the College 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 on behalf of the University of Essex
- **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.

The audit team's view applies also to a joint delivery partnership in which the College was engaged at the time of the audit.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The College's approach to quality enhancement is characterised by a strategic commitment to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities linked to the College's own values and vision. The audit team found that the College takes deliberate actions at the College level to improve the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the College's procedures for the support, assessment and supervision of research degrees align with 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 the College publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of the awards it offers on behalf of the University of Essex.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the way in which the curriculum is designed, developed and delivered to take advantage of staff research and professional practice (paragraph 77)
- the comprehensive student support system and the demonstrable commitment of staff to the support and enhancement of student learning (paragraph 102)

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- the institution's strategic approach to staff development, including the reward and recognition schemes for academic and support staff (paragraph 109)
- the institution's strategic approach to enhancement (paragraph 125)

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- that the College takes effective steps to ensure that all students are aware of their rights of access to library resources at the University of Essex (paragraph 85)
- that graduate teaching assistants are given appropriate induction and training for their teaching role prior to starting their duties and receive regular formal feedback thereafter (paragraph 153)
- that the College ensures that comprehensive induction for all new postgraduate research students and training for new PhD supervisors is delivered in a timely manner (paragraph 157).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- that the minutes of committees should give a fuller account of matters discussed at meetings and record clearly the status of decisions taken and the follow-up to action points at the subsequent meeting (paragraphs 69 and 150).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The College is located near Chelmsford, Essex, and can trace its origins in land-based education back to 1893. In 2009-10, there were 970 full-time equivalent (FTE) higher education students, of whom 87 per cent were undergraduate and 13 per cent postgraduate, including a small number of postgraduate research students. The College employs 69 (56.9 FTE) higher education academic staff. It is one of the largest publicly-funded institutions in England, serving the agricultural, horticultural and associated industries.

2 Its vision is to be 'a distinctive place to study and to serve the environment through science and the arts'. Its mission is '...Transforming lives and the environment through inspiring education...'.

3 Since 1997, the College has enjoyed what it describes as a 'strong collaborative partnership' with the University of Essex, its validating institution.

The information base for the audit

4 The College provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and supporting documentation, including that related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The index to the Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the College's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. The team had a hard copy of the majority of documents referenced in the Briefing Paper; in addition, the team had access to the College's intranet.

5 The Students' Union produced a student written submission, setting out the students' views on the accuracy of the information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

6 In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the report of the previous Institutional audit in 2004
- the report of the one-year follow-up to Institutional audit, 2005
- the report of assessors appointed by QAA to scrutinise the College's application for taught degree-awarding powers, 2006
- the report of the mid-cycle follow-up to Institutional audit, 2007
- the College's internal documents
- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Developments since the last audit

7 Since the last institutional audit in 2004, two major developments have taken place at the College. The first was the College's application for taught degree-awarding powers submitted in late 2004; the second the appointment of a new Principal in 2006.

8 A team of assessors appointed by QAA visited the College during 2005 and a report of their findings was considered by QAA's Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers in early 2006. Having considered a draft version of the report, the College decided to place its application for taught degree awarding powers in abeyance until matters of governance and management raised in the report had been fully addressed. The application remains in abeyance.

9 Following the appointment of a new Principal, Professor David Butcher, in 2006 significant changes were made to the management and structure of the College. A Senior Management Team (SMT) of five replaced the larger eleven-person structure; a new SMT post, Head of Higher Education (HE), was created; and the former structure of two higher education faculties and four departments was replaced with four schools with devolved budgetary responsibility. In early 2010, the SMT agreed to a further academic restructuring involving the creation of two schools with effect from the start of the 2010-11 academic year, namely the School of Sport, Equine & Animal Science and Sustainable Environments, the latter incorporating the Writtle School of Design. The consolidation of higher education activity into two schools from 2010 was intended to improve communications generally and 'enhance...compliance to quality assurance and quality enhancement activity'.

10 In 2004, QAA's Institutional audit team advised that the College should:

- review the approach to action planning in the College's quality assurance processes to provide more clarity in the identification of responsibilities and timescales
- establish and implement clear requirements for the timely provision of formative feedback to students on coursework.

11 The audit team also recommended action it deemed desirable, specifically that the College should:

- review the approach to the administration of its Student Satisfaction Survey to secure a higher and, therefore, more representative response rate
- take steps to ensure that all students are aware of rights of access to facilities at the validating institution.

12 The current audit team confirmed that the College had addressed each of the above recommendations. It took the view, however, that further action is advisable in connection with the final recommendation concerning rights of access to facilities at the University of Essex. This is considered in more detail in paragraph 85. In addition, the current team took the view that further action is still desirable in connection with the minutes of the College's committees, in particular concerning the status of decisions taken and the follow-up to action points at the subsequent meeting. This is considered in more detail in paragraph 150.

Institutional framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

13 The policies and regulations that provide the institutional framework for managing academic standards and quality are defined in the following College documents: the Higher Education (HE) Undergraduate Academic Regulations, the HE (Taught Postgraduate) Academic Regulations and the Postgraduate Research Regulations. The College's Quality Assurance Manual identifies the procedures by which academic standards and the quality of the learning opportunities are managed and enhanced.

14 The College defines itself as a dual-sector institution, serving both further education (FE) and higher education (HE). The Academic Board, which is chaired by the Principal, is the senior committee of the College, with powers and responsibilities devolved to it by the Board of Governors. It is responsible for all academic matters, encompassing the interests of both FE and HE provision. The College operates two independent and parallel sets of structures led by a Head of HE and a Head of FE respectively. While the present audit focuses exclusively on the HE provision and the validated awards from the University of Essex, these two structures converge at the level of the Academic Board, which has oversight of, and responsibility for, the academic standards and quality of both.

15 The College's committee structure was reviewed in 2006-07 as part of the wider College academic restructuring that occurred at that time (see paragraph 9) and the terms of reference of the Academic Board and its various sub-committees are reviewed annually. The Academic Standards Committee (ASC), chaired by the Director of Academic Standards, is one of three key standing committees of the Academic Board, with delegated responsibility and authority for overseeing the operational management of academic standards and quality assurance.

16 The HE Learning and Teaching Group (LTG) and the Research Committee are the two other key standing committees of the Academic Board. The former is responsible, on behalf of the Academic Board, for the strategic development, support and enhancement of learning, teaching and assessment at undergraduate and postgraduate level and is chaired by the Head of the Learning and Teaching Unit. The Research Committee oversees the implementation of the College's Research Strategy and the management of postgraduate research students and is chaired by the College Research Co-ordinator.

17 Institutional responsibility for the management of quality assurance and enhancement rests with the holder of the relatively newly created post of Head of HE (see paragraph 9). Heads of schools, who report to the Head of HE, oversee the implementation of quality assurance and enhancement arrangements at school, scheme and module level. Within each school, course scheme managers manage, monitor and review delivery of the curriculum and the performance of students. They are supported by module leaders and school administrators. From early 2010, the heads of schools became full members of the ASC with the intention that they would have a 'more direct input to the development of quality processes...'.

18 Central support for the maintenance of academic standards, quality assurance and the enhancement of learning and teaching is provided by the Centre for Academic Standards, Teaching and Learning (CASTLe), which was established in 2007. The Centre is managed by the Director of Academic Standards who also chairs the ASC, and his deputy, the Head of the Learning and Teaching Unit, who chairs the LTG. Within CASTLe the Academic Quality Systems (AQS) Office comprises the HE Quality Systems Manager and the Academic Systems Manager who are involved in the central management of quality assurance arrangements and procedures for the support of the schools. The Head of Learning Information Services, the Careers Centre and the Learning and Technology Unit are also managed as part of CASTLe. In addition, the CASTLe team also includes the English Language Co-ordinator and Postgraduate Co-ordinator roles.

19 The College's partnership with the University of Essex is managed by a Joint Management Board comprised of senior staff from each institution and chaired by the University's Dean of Academic Partnerships. The College operates in accordance with the University's Handbook of Validation and Review Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships and Rules of Assessment. The University is represented on the College's Board of Governors, its Academic Board and the Academic Standards Committee. Senior University staff chair College validation events and the University carries out an institutional audit of the College every five years.

20 Procedures of the University of Essex provide the broad context within which the College operates, and staff of the University are involved in key deliberative committees of the College. Nevertheless, the audit team formed the view that the relationship between the two institutions is now sufficiently mature for the College to feel confident enough to propose adaptations to University arrangements as they apply to the College, and for the University generally to be willing to accept such proposals. The team concluded that the College's framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is comprehensive and operates effectively.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

21 Taught programmes at both undergraduate and postgraduate level are subject to a formal process of validation by the University of Essex. The procedures to be followed are laid down in a University handbook that has been developed specifically for the validation of programmes in partner institutions. The Academic Quality Systems (AQS) Office plays a pivotal role in monitoring the validation status of the various programmes, and prepares the schedule of validation and periodic review events.

22 New course validation is intended to satisfy the requirements of the University of Essex as the awarding body, and meet the strategic planning cycle within the College. New course proposals generally arise at school level and require formal approval by the Academic Board following scrutiny of any resource requirements by the Senior Management Team (SMT). Each proposal is then forwarded to the University for outline approval for recruitment purposes.

23 The Briefing Paper described validation as a two-stage process, comprising an internal review of a proposal by a Course Development Review Panel (CDR), followed by a validation event involving external academics and specialists as well as representatives from

the University of Essex. Each validation panel is chaired by a dean from the University. The Briefing Paper noted that validation events are attended regularly by observers, for example, new staff as part of their induction, and by other staff as a mechanism for disseminating good practice in the process of course development.

24 A validation event, which involves consideration of course content, as well as teaching, learning and assessment strategies and their alignment with elements of the Academic Infrastructure (including the establishment of appropriate standards) leads to the production of a validation report that may contain conditions and recommendations to be fulfilled within a specified timescale. Since 2008-09, the University has introduced a process of sign-off to confirm a satisfactory response to any conditions and recommendations. The final stage of approval is granted by the Senate of the University, on the recommendation of the University's Academic Partnerships Board. The College's Academic Board receives notice of successful completion of validation at its next meeting. On the basis of scrutiny of the documentary evidence available, the audit team was satisfied that academic standards are appropriately safeguarded through the process of validation as set by the University of Essex and as implemented by the College.

25 The Briefing Paper stated that the process of annual course monitoring 'is designed to enable the institution to reflect on the performance of each suite of undergraduate and postgraduate courses over the past year...'. An annual monitoring report (AMR) for each taught programme is produced by course scheme managers. These reports draw together relevant evidence from a range of sources, including the minutes of the Student Staff Liaison (SSL) group and external examiners' reports. The College has adapted the standard University of Essex template by including additional sections designed to strengthen the action planning and monitoring cycle, to capture examples of good practice, and to celebrate student achievement. AMR reports are considered by course teams at meetings of the relevant course scheme review committee and reviewed by the Head of School, who forwards them to CASTLe, from where they proceed to the Academic Standards Committee (ASC) and the University of Essex.

26 In order to capture cross-College themes, an institutional-level AMR is compiled by senior staff, derived from individual, course-level reports. This is considered by ASC and the Academic Board before being forwarded to the Dean of Academic Partnerships at the University. The Dean's formal response, to both the individual and the institutional AMRs, is considered by the ASC and received by the Academic Board. The Dean's response to the AMRs for 2007-2008 raised a number of critical issues, mainly in relation to a lack of detail in some areas, selective engagement with student surveys and some absence of supporting data. The College's response in turn, which included provision of staff training in report writing, led to a more encouraging response to the AMRs for 2008-09, despite some lingering concerns over missing data. No issues were, however, raised in these reports that would bring into question the security of the academic standards of the awards offered in the University's name.

27 All taught courses are subject to Periodic Degree Scheme Review (PDSR), which the Briefing Paper stated 'normally takes place every five years...'. The PDSR also serves as a means for the formal revalidation (re-approval) of the course concerned. A mechanism exists for such reviews to be brought forward to an earlier date than planned if the University and the College agree that there is an 'appropriate reason', such as a major variation to a course. Following the changes arising from the College's undergraduate curriculum review in January 2008, the joint University/Writtle Curriculum and Quality Group agreed to implement a rolling programme of PDSRs.

28 Preparations for periodic review follow guidelines developed by the University of Essex with the review itself considering a wide range of documentation, including AMRs and

reports, to support a self-reflective analysis produced by the programme delivery team. Review panels, which are chaired by an associate dean of the University, have a broad membership and include external academic members, professional practitioners and a student member. The scope of periodic review is suitably broad, reflecting its additional function as a mechanism for revalidation purposes, and is designed to contain sufficient detail for the University to assure itself of the academic standards being applied. The review report is received by the College's ASC and Academic Board as well as the Academic Partnerships Board of the University, whose role it is to recommend approval by the Senate of the University.

29 The Briefing Paper drew attention to enhancement features of its periodic review process. These include the use of feedback from panel members to update and improve procedures, and the provision of training sessions for staff due to take part in upcoming validation and review events.

30 Overall, the audit team concluded that the processes of the University of Essex in respect of programme approval, monitoring and review are appropriately implemented by the College in order to secure and maintain the academic standards of the awards offered.

External examiners

31 The College regards external examiners as central to its quality assurance processes. Their roles and responsibilities are described in a University document available online entitled: External examiners at the University of Essex. This document summarises their primary function as to oversee the standards and quality of awards delivered at the College.

32 Staff are fully aware of the role that external examiners have and are positive about interactions with them. The College persuaded the University to allow external examiners to make an interim visit part way through the year in order to meet students, in addition to the end of year visit for the examination boards required by the University.

33 Information about the role of external examiners is contained in the student handbook. Despite this, students met by the audit team (with the exception of one who had been a course representative) did not appear to be well informed about external examiners. This may change with the introduction of the interim visit.

34 Potential new external examiners are proposed by course scheme managers and/or heads of school to the Academic Quality Systems Manager who checks that they meet the required criteria before forwarding the nomination to the University. External examiners are appointed by, and report directly to the University.

35 The induction of new external examiners occurs primarily at school level. They are supplied with information about the College, its relationship with the University, course-specific information, a copy of the previous external examiner's report and the course team's response to the report. Once appointed, external examiners are expected to visit the College as soon as possible in order to receive a first-hand introduction to the College, the course and the students. All external examiners are sent an information pack annually containing, among other things, the most up-to-date version of the University's document on the roles and responsibilities of external examiners. Staff reported that, in addition to being sent assignments for comment, external examiners also receive copies of the lecture schedule for each module in order to give a context to assessments for the module. The audit team felt that this enhanced the external examiners' ability to make a significant contribution to the overall curriculum.

36 Each external examiner must complete an electronic pro forma to produce their annual report. They are required to comment on the standards achieved and are given the opportunity to comment on other issues related to the quality of provision and the integrity of the College's assessment system.

37 The University forwards external examiner reports to the College where they are distributed widely to the Principal, the Head of HE, the Director of Academic Standards, the head of each school and the relevant course scheme manager. The College has well-defined procedures for responding to external examiner reports. These procedures require course teams to produce a detailed response and action plan. These are developed by course scheme review committees and then approved by the relevant head of school. Information from external examiner reports informs the course AMR and its action plan. Student representatives receive a copy of external examiner reports and are encouraged to share them with the students they represent.

38 Each course team's response to its external examiner report is sent to the external examiner and copied to the ASC. The institutional AMR (see paragraph 26) contains a summary of the key issues and areas of good practice identified by external examiners. Consideration of external examiner reports at ASC allows good practice to be identified and disseminated.

39 Overall, the audit team concluded that external examining was thoroughly and robustly embedded in the College's quality assurance processes and that staff not only adhered to the required procedures but regarded active engagement with external examiners as an important enhancement mechanism. Strong and scrupulous use is made of independent external examiners and the external examining process makes an effective contribution to assuring the academic standards of the programmes at the College.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

40 The College claimed in its Briefing Paper to have made extensive use of the Academic Infrastructure in establishing and maintaining standards and in managing the quality of the student learning experience. All taught awards offered on behalf of the University of Essex have been developed in accordance with the relevant regulations established by the University, and conform to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The University's framework informs the course design and validation processes in establishing the appropriate title and volume of credit for the level of an award. All modules are validated at, and designated an FHEQ level (4-7) and the requirements for gaining an award are defined in terms of the number of credits achieved at each level. Members of validation and review panels are expected to evaluate course proposals against the expectations of the FHEQ.

41 Documentary evidence scrutinised by the audit team confirmed that programme specifications, the use of subject benchmark statements in devising programme content, and reference to the *Code of practice* are consistently considered across the College and have become embedded in the approach of College staff. The vocational nature of many of the College's courses is reflected in the close involvement of external practitioners in the development and review of its courses.

42 The audit team concluded that, overall the College makes effective use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external points of reference in the management of academic standards across the College.

Assessment policies and regulations

43 The College's approach to assessment is embedded in the document, Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy: A Framework of Approaches for Writtle College, 2010-2013. The procedures for, and the management of, assessment and its outcomes are defined within the College's Academic Regulations (see paragraph 13), which incorporate the University of Essex Undergraduate and Postgraduate Rules of Assessment and Assessment Policy. The scheme level interpretation of the assessment strategy is considered at validation, giving rise to the principles of assessment defined in each programme specification. The assessment regulations for awards, which are reviewed annually by the Academic Quality Systems Office, apply to all taught programmes. A representative of the University sits on the College's Academic Board.

44 The arrangements with the University of Essex for postgraduate research degrees differ from those relating to undergraduate and taught postgraduate awards. The College adheres to and implements the regulatory framework as set out in the University's Higher Degree Regulations and postgraduate research students at the College are registered directly with the University.

45 The College is involved at the discussion stages when the University of Essex considers changes to regulations or assessment policy. Where appropriate, the College enhances the expectations set out in the University's Assessment Policy. For example, the College has extended the categories of student work, which will be double-marked to include assignments, introduced an extension of two weeks for late submission of work by students with capping at the pass mark, and deals with academic offences through a panel rather than through an individual as at the University. There is also scope for course-specific regulations at the College, which are approved by the University at validation, although the audit team found that the College had not exercised the option to introduce such regulations. The team did note that a regular condition set for course teams at validation is to ensure that programme and module specifications comply with the latest University rules of assessment and assessment policy guidelines.

46 The student written submission identified some issues associated with assessment, in particular the timeliness and quality of staff feedback. These concerns are reinforced by the College scores in the National Student Survey (NSS) and accord with the priorities identified by the University for enhancing the assessment process, partly through response to student feedback. The annual monitoring process for each course scheme now requires that the mechanisms for monitoring the quality and timeliness of feedback to students are reviewed and any issues addressed or features of good practice identified. In addition, formative assessment and feedback is emphasised as an important element of the assessment strategy. The comments from students who met the audit team confirmed that the attention given to timeliness and quality of feedback is leading to improvements and, in many cases, minimum expectations are exceeded.

47 Policy and procedures for the operation of a two-tier examination board system of module examination boards and interim and award boards are clearly identified and understood by all groups responsible for implementing these procedures. The College's examination and assessment frameworks are supported by detailed and comprehensive policies and guidelines, including complaints, appeals, academic offences procedures and assignment-specific grading criteria.

48 The audit team concluded that the College's assessment policies and regulations, based as they are on those of the University of Essex, are comprehensive and understood by those who implement them. The team also noted that they are

adapted from time to time more appropriately to reflect the College context within which they are applied, without any detriment to the academic standard of the final award.

Management information - statistics

49 Data is managed centrally through the Registry Office and higher education administrators. The College uses a variety of central databases, including the 'Columbus' portal for staff access. Information for reporting is organised by the Senior Management Information Officer. Data is signed off by the Principal.

50 Statistical reporting is used effectively within the College to review processes and procedures. This includes the annual monitoring process, quarterly business review and head of school staff reports. Statistical reporting is also used effectively in reports to the ASC, for example, to address College-wide issues such as retention rates and progression, as observed in the pilot five-credit module designed to support progression from further education to higher education.

51 Online access to course and module information and financial information for managers and staff is straightforward. Staff commented on the wealth of information available on the Columbus portal, including marks data, student lists and equality and diversity breakdown. Statistical information is disseminated widely, particularly to heads of schools.

52 Overall, the audit team concluded that management information used to inform processes and reviews is appropriate and accessible and is used effectively to monitor and enhance the student experience.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

53 Examination of the periodic review reports made available by the College at the request of the audit team provided evidence of the way in which the College has engaged with the Academic Infrastructure. In particular, due account is taken of relevant updated subject benchmark statements, programme specifications are revised, and relevant level descriptors from *The framework for higher education qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) are used to inform the review process.

54 The College undertook full reviews of its policies and procedures against the *Code of practice* in 2002 and 2009, as well as reviews when new sections had been revised or when new policies were being formulated. The College reports regularly - and in detail - in its institutional annual monitoring report to the University of Essex on its consideration of QAA updates to the Academic Infrastructure. A detailed report of the most recent review of the whole *Code of practice* was published for stakeholders in June 2010, and is intended to be updated as appropriate and to serve as an ongoing working document.

55 Other external reference points include, for example, a recent accreditation by the Landscape Institute in respect of Landscape Architecture and related courses, and reference to the Chartered Society of Designers during the process of drawing up new course proposals. Links with these and other professional bodies help to ensure currency of provision and inform the College's own approval processes.

56 Overall, the audit team concluded that the College's use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points, in particular its approach to the *Code of practice*, demonstrates a high level of engagement that effectively ensures the maintenance and enhancement of the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

57 The College's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review are described in detail in Section 2. The College maintains that its procedures for approval, monitoring and review form the foundation for the delivery of a high quality learning experience for its students that is well defined, up to date and underpinned by appropriate teaching, learning and assessment. To this end, the approval and review processes implemented by the College are designed to allow for detailed consideration of these elements. The templates and guidelines issued by the College for the use of course teams preparing for course development review, validation and periodic review clearly set out the supporting information required to inform debate and decision-making and to ensure the vocational relevance of programmes. The membership of approval and review panels, which includes external academic and industrial representatives, academic staff of the College and a representative of the University, ensures a breadth of expertise for the proper completion of the processes. Students are involved in review panels but not as members of validation (approval) panels.

58 During the process of new course development, the College seeks to ensure the application of a variety of assessments, embracing assignments, seminars, essays, portfolios, presentations and reports as well as examinations. An appropriate balance of these is achieved through the use of bespoke assessment grids, which are duly considered at the point of validation and subsequent review. This directly supports one of the key strategic objectives of the College's HE Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, namely to 'utilise a range of assessment types designed to promote learning, which provide continuing opportunities for formative feedback...'. The range of assessed work produced by students has been commended by external examiners.

59 Key also to the validation and review processes is the scrutiny of the resources required for effective programme delivery. As part of the validation process, therefore, published guidelines require submission of detailed information on resource implications together with confirmation from the Senior Management Team (SMT) of any additional resource provision, showing the level of costs involved. No validation proposal is allowed to proceed without such confirmation. Documentation seen by the audit team confirmed that this requirement is adhered to.

60 The annual monitoring report (AMR) template is designed to embrace all aspects of programme delivery and assessment, including outcomes of student surveys and external examiner reports. It also prompts additional commentary in areas such as recruitment and retention, feedback from employers and learning resources. Completed AMRs seen by the audit team were commended for their thoroughness and frankness and for the way that action plans from previous years are reviewed and new action plans for the year in prospect proposed.

61 Students are invited to fill in a module evaluation form on completion of a module, information from which feeds directly into the AMR process. While staff are encouraged to reflect and act on students' views gained in this way, the College expects that the wider implications of any proposed changes will be considered and approved before implementation. This is affected through completion of a module modification form by the module leader, which is processed by the Academic Quality Systems (AQS) Office and

requires approval, as appropriate, by the head of school, Academic Standards Committee and University's Academic Partnerships Board. In practice, most modifications proceed through the entire process due to the fact that University regulations will permit the College only to amend reading lists without the prior approval of its Academic Partnerships Board.

62 Overall, the audit team concluded that the College's arrangements for the approval, monitoring and review of its courses are effective in ensuring the continuing availability of appropriate learning opportunities for students to help them achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programme and attain their award.

Management information - feedback from students

63 The College's claim to be proactive in seeking student feedback and in endeavouring to address issues raised was broadly supported by students' views. The relatively small size of the academic community at the College and the good relations that are apparent between staff and the student body encourages a ready dialogue by which feedback can be given and received on an informal and regular basis.

64 Notwithstanding the apparent efficacy of these informal processes, the College has in place a variety of formal mechanisms to gain feedback from all students. For example, students are represented on a variety of College academic committees. These are detailed in paragraph 69. Additionally, the monthly meetings of the Student Union (SU) Liaison Group afford an opportunity for the SU Executive to offer feedback and raise issues of concern directly with the College Principal, Director of Finance and Director of Academic Standards. In practice, these meetings have tended to focus more on social and cultural issues rather than matters of academic import and, while these are important, the College has enhanced academic feedback through the recent appointment of an elected SU Academic Sabbatical Officer both to sharpen student engagement with academic issues and to communicate with students how the College has responded to their feedback (see also paragraph 70).

65 The College's Student Handbook for Higher Education Students 2010 explains other mechanisms by which students may contribute to the development of provision through formal surveys. A summary report of module evaluation feedback is passed to the relevant head of school for immediate action, and then to the relevant course scheme review committee on which students are also represented. Students whom the audit team met confirmed that actions had been taken as a direct result of this process.

66 The College conducts an annual College-wide satisfaction survey for all those not eligible to complete the National Student Survey (NSS). The purpose of this survey is to collect student views on general College facilities and course-related matters. The College has acknowledged that the response rate to this survey has been disappointing despite a recent small improvement in the rate of return. Students whom the audit team met were, however, generally supportive of both the number and range of surveys of their views and confirmed that discussions regularly took place at meetings with student representatives, which include feedback on actions taken.

67 All final-year undergraduate students are strongly encouraged to participate in the NSS. The College has achieved a level of response around the national average for the past three years. Analysis of NSS data is at the level of the school due to the relatively low numbers on some schemes of study. Based on the NSS data, heads of school produce an action plan to a standard template, which is received and monitored on an annual basis by the Academic Standards Committee (ASC) (which also has student members). Meetings with staff confirmed that survey results are discussed at school level, leading to enhancements in module or programme delivery. College-level issues identified through

scrutiny at school level are incorporated into the institutional annual monitoring report (IAMR) submitted to the University. The IAMRs scrutinised by the audit team confirmed that 'loops' are closed and action plans are regularly monitored and reviewed by the ASC.

68 Overall, the audit team concluded that the College makes effective use of management information derived from student feedback in assuring the quality of student learning opportunities.

Role of students in quality assurance

69 Students are represented on the College's Governing Body and on all College-wide academic deliberative committees and course scheme review committees. Additionally, students serve on the Periodic Degree Scheme Review Panel. A postgraduate research student representative attends meetings of the Research Committee and its Ethics and Welfare Committee. Although students confirmed that their views are taken into account by the College, it is not always evident from committee minutes how extensively students' views are solicited and recorded (see also paragraph 149).

70 The College has sought to remedy what it perceived as a lack of engagement by the broader student body in the area of student representation, through the establishment of an SU Academic Sabbatical Officer post (see also paragraph 64). This was implemented on a part-time basis during the 2009-2010 academic year and placed on a full-time basis for 2010-2011. The purpose of this post is to improve student representation on committees and increase the level of academic discussion within the SU. The role has also served to provide a focus for the training of student representatives. This has included updating and enhancing a document originally produced in 2007, the Student Representatives' Guide, which offers clear and concise guidance on roles and responsibilities as well as a helpful range of practical advice. Early indications suggest that the creation of this post is providing an effective means of enhancing student engagement with quality issues across the College. Students whom the audit team met expressed general satisfaction with the level and nature of the representation they had across the College and welcomed the new sabbatical post as a means of strengthening representation.

71 Each year group of each course is expected to nominate a student representative to attend meetings of the Student Staff Liaison (SSL) Committee. The purpose of these twice yearly meetings is to give students an opportunity to raise any issues of concern. Summaries of key issues from the SSL Committee are included as part of the AMR, and outcomes monitored by the AQS office. AMRs scrutinised by the audit team demonstrate a significant level of student input to the process, and responsiveness to students' concerns on the part of the College.

72 The issue of timeliness of feedback in relation to assessments has exercised the College for some time and was included as a recommendation in the QAA Institutional audit report of 2004. Examination of the action plans within AMRs since 2005-2006 showed a year-on-year improvement in this aspect and, in spite of some concerns about this matter still evident in the student written submission (SWS), students whom the audit team met expressed satisfaction that the issue had now been largely resolved. Indeed, there was praise from some students for both the timeliness and the quality of formative feedback (see also paragraph 46).

73 Overall, the audit team concluded that the College is making increasingly effective use of the views of students in its quality management processes and that the recent appointment of a full-time sabbatical officer may offer scope for further development in this area as the role grows and matures.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

74 The Principal has set out a clear strategic direction to raise the academic profile within the College in order to enhance its higher education provision. This is reflected in the College's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (LTAS) and its Research Strategy (RS). The overall aim of the LTAS is that 'learning and teaching excellence should be underpinned by research, scholarship and professional practice...', whilst the first objective set out in the RS is that 'learning and teaching should be informed and developed by the College's research activity...'.

75 During recent years, there has been a growing volume of research activity within the College. The College did not submit to the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), but intends to participate in the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF). The number of staff with PhDs has increased significantly in recent years through the development of existing staff (five staff gained PhDs in 2009) and a change in recruitment policy. Currently 23 (39 per cent) out of the 59 academic staff in the two schools have PhDs.

76 Opportunities to include research-informed material in the curriculum are deliberately designed into courses. Final-year dissertations are often linked to staff research areas. Students are encouraged to produce outputs that can be presented externally and some final-year undergraduates have presented posters and papers at conferences based on their dissertations. In addition to the formal curriculum, presentations are given by research-active staff during Study Week. Students who met the audit team gave many examples from different curriculum areas of ways in which staff had used their research interests and professional practice to inform their teaching, and the students valued this highly. It was clear that the staff's enthusiasm for their research specialities had been passed on to their students through the teaching and learning experience.

77 The audit team regards the way in which the curriculum is designed, developed and delivered to take advantage of staff's research and professional practice as a feature of good practice.

Other modes of study

78 The College does not currently offer any awards delivered solely through distance and/or e-learning. It has, however, invested substantially in establishing an infrastructure for e-learning across the College, including the appointment of an E-Learning Developer.

79 The College's study programmes offer a good deal of flexibility in meeting the differing needs of its students. Academic staff whom the audit team met confirmed that students are offered advice on appropriate module choices in order to ensure a consistent overall programme of study. In some instances, part-time students may transfer to the full-time mode of study dependent upon individual circumstances and aspirations. In such cases, tutors and other advisors assist students to develop personal development plans.

80 The College has also developed and validated courses to provide for the specific study needs of particular groups. These include a master's programme which is delivered at weekends; a Higher Certificate for those in work who can only attend for one day and an evening weekly; and a master's programme designed for delivery in blocks at times of the year when the demands on those who work in the related industry are at a minimum. The College claims that in all cases where programmes involve 'non-standard' delivery patterns, particular rigour has been applied during the validation process to ensure proper

consideration of the implications of these arrangements for learning and teaching, student support and resources.

81 Overall, the audit team concluded that the College has responded well to the demands both of its students and of the industries it serves in developing courses which offer a good range of flexibility in delivery patterns.

Resources for learning

82 The Head of Learning Information Services has overall responsibility for providing and enhancing student access to information. A Heritage Library management system assists the Library in planning and prioritising new purchases in order effectively to meet the challenges of a changing student profile, new course developments and the increasing demand for online resources. The Library measures its performance against national benchmarks through participation in the statistical returns both of the Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL) and the Mixed Economy Group Libraries (MEG-LIB). The College's Information Resources Policy, which was updated in July 2010, reflects a shifting emphasis towards providing access to resources rather than collection building, in line with new patterns of demand.

83 Library staff liaise regularly with module leaders to identify and source key texts and other electronic resources. Liaison between the Library and the College's Learner Services to facilitate additional support needs for disabled students is focused through a designated member of the Library staff. The Library is represented on a range of College committees and has assisted in developing College-wide policies on, for example, plagiarism and information literacy.

84 User feedback comes through three formal mechanisms: Student Staff Liaison Committee, Course Scheme Review Committee and its own 'suggestion box'. Recent examples of action taken as a result of such feedback include an increase in loan limits, an improved open-access catalogue, an integrated database search and changes to the short-term loan arrangements.

85 Access to information resources beyond the College Library includes borrowing rights for part-time students living at a distance from the libraries of other higher education institutions through the SCONUL Access scheme. Students on higher education programmes are also entitled to reading rights at the University of Essex Library. These range from substantial rights of access for postgraduate research students to more limited access for all undergraduate and postgraduate taught students. It was clear from meetings with students, however, that these rights - especially for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students - are not fully understood. This same issue was raised at the time of the previous QAA Institutional audit, when a recommendation was made that it would be desirable for the College to 'take steps to ensure that all students are aware of rights of access to facilities at the validating institution...'. The College's response to that recommendation included action to revise information published in College handbooks and review prospectus information. On the basis of evidence gathered at the time of the current Institutional audit, it was clear that this issue remains one of concern to the student body. Furthermore, reference to these rights in the 2010-2011 Student Handbook (page 45) is relatively cursory, and there is no reference to student access to the facilities of the University of Essex Library on either the Information and Library Services page (page 137) or the University of Essex pages (pages 14-15) of the new prospectus for 2011 entry. In the interests of ensuring that students are appropriately supported in achieving the desired academic standards, the College is advised to take effective steps to ensure that all students are aware of their rights of access to library resources at the University of Essex.

86 Computer resources are managed centrally through the Information Services department, and developments are reported annually to the Academic Board. Key developments since the last audit have included: a major revision of the College's website, a restructure and re-launch of the College's intranet, the replacement of the College's original virtual learning environment with Moodle, and the appointment of an e-learning developer within the Centre for Academic Standards, Teaching and Learning (CASTLe) Learning and Technology Unit. The College believes that all these developments have contributed to a 'significant improvement' in terms of ease of access and quality of information available to all College stakeholders. The staff and students whom the audit team met confirmed the value of Moodle as a valuable tool to assist with teaching and learning. International students in particular, especially those for whom English is not their first language, particularly appreciate having ready access to lecture notes and other course materials through Moodle.

87 The vocational nature of many of the College's courses requires a range of specialist resources, with particular emphasis on the estate. Resource priorities in relation to the estate and its specialist facilities are determined by the SMT. In the light of recent developments in the academic portfolio and in order to determine the key priorities for sustainability, the College has produced a new Estates Strategy 2010-2020. The new strategy sets out a clear vision both for the short to medium-term (one to five years) and for the longer, 10-year period, and is designed to be realistic and financially achievable. Against the background of a generally supportive and appreciative view on the part of students of the facilities available, some students whom the audit team met voiced concerns about the condition of some of the estate and its facilities; likewise, some external examiners have referred to mere 'adequacy' of certain facilities. In the view of the team, however, the evident creativity and likely achievability of the new Estates Strategy should address some of these concerns.

88 Overall, and notwithstanding the need for greater clarity of communication with regard to access to the library facilities of the University of Essex (see paragraph 85), the audit team was encouraged by the College's clear commitment to the ongoing development of resources for learning, and in particular its intentions for the estate and associated facilities.

Admissions policy

89 Student admissions are managed centrally through the Admissions Office; day-to-day responsibility for recruitment rests with an admissions officer in each department. Each admissions officer has clear terms of reference and detailed expectations of the role and is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the College's Admissions Policy, overseen by the ASC. The Policy is mapped against the *Code of practice, Section 10: Admissions to higher education* and strategic vision of the College, and monitored through departmental service-level agreements.

90 The College's entry criteria are clearly defined and communicated to students through pre-arrival material and the prospectus, and are available online. The admissions procedure is evaluated by the admissions registry survey and through the Application Mystery Shopper report. This report contains generally positive reviews on the accessibility and efficiency of the admissions process. Staff commented on the usefulness of the report in improving communications in the admissions process and helping admissions officers to evaluate and improve their admissions procedures.

91 The College has a widening participation strategy, with clear lines of reporting and details of a number of outreach schemes including the Centre for Environment and Rural

Affairs and the Centre for Art and Design in the Environment. The strategy contains guidelines for measuring and evaluating widening participation rates and how the policy is applied to the College in practice through a series of institutional key performance indicators.

92 The College Open Day is viewed favourably by students who commented in particular on the friendly atmosphere and approachability of staff on the day while noting the lack of interaction with second and third-year students. The informative nature of the open day is reinforced in the College's Enquiry Mystery Shopping document, which comments on the high standard of information and the positive atmosphere of the open day.

93 Staff involved in recruitment and admissions are supported through the College's use of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme. This programme includes an introduction to best practice involving a series of conferences, regional events and guidance information. Staff commented favourably on its usefulness. Subject admissions tutors are supported through easily accessible admission information and guidance from the Head of Registry, which help to ensure that the standards and criteria for recruitment are met.

94 The audit team concluded that the College's admissions procedures and their implementation are fit for purpose and effectively maintained by clear quality assurance and evaluative processes.

Student support

95 The College offers student support at school level and centrally, in particular through the Learning Services Unit and the Careers Advisory Service. Each course scheme manager takes responsibility for supporting students and allocating personal tutors. The audit team noted that the Course Scheme Manager is a key point of contact for students throughout their degree programme. The responsibilities of course scheme managers are clearly defined, with set objectives and good access to supporting information. Students commented favourably on the support offered by course scheme managers and the 'open door' policy of staff across the College. The SWS noted that the support system at the College is to be 'highly commended' and that 'there are no barriers to students studying at Writtle...'.

96 The College's Higher Education Student Handbook contains a wealth of information regarding support mechanisms, admissions process, disability, and international advice and support. Students whom met the audit team commented favourably on the Handbook, citing it as a good reference document. The content of subject-specific course handbooks are reviewed by course scheme review committees, while the generic Student Handbook is reviewed by the Student Sabbatical Officer. Evidence of review was clear from scrutiny of the minutes of meetings of relevant committees.

97 The College has a tutorial policy with detailed objectives including the expectations of each type of tutorial. This is outlined in the Quality Assurance Manual and is available to staff via Moodle. Staff are provided with a pro forma, detailing the tutorial record and action plan of a student. Students commented favourably on the College's personal development planning (PDP) system and its value in future employment. Students are allocated a 15-minute slot per academic semester with their personal tutor. This was a matter of some concern for students who felt this time period should be extended. However, the audit team observed that students also use course scheme managers as a point of advice and support and that personal tutors were flexible with the 15-minute allocation if a student required more time.

98 The College has procedures in place to incorporate PDP into student learning and has shown itself to be supportive through the process of PDP. The College embeds PDP into the generic Level 4 Sector Studies and Level 5 Academic and Professional Development modules, which students are required to attend. The College offers a PDP induction weekend for taught postgraduate students at the start of their course intended to introduce them to the importance and purpose of PDP. Students commented on the amount of information available and its helpful content but suggested that it was more relevant for some courses than others.

99 Disabled students are supported on arrival with individual support plans, which are provided to relevant members of academic staff. Students who have specific access requests are provided with a confidential pro forma, detailing the learning support needed and access arrangements to be implemented. The Higher Education Handbook also contains details of access arrangements for examinations and assessments linked to the College's Disability Equality Scheme. The College's Equality and Diversity policy outlines the expectations on staff and students regarding disability support and access. The College initially had a support network for disabled students in land-based education, including champions with an interest in disability issues. Since 2006, the activities of these champions have been embedded within the College's curriculum and procedures, and disability issues are now considered by the College's Equality and Diversity Group. The audit team concluded that these arrangements were well mapped to the *Code of practice, Section 3: Disabled students*. Disability and access issues are incorporated within staff development programmes offered by the Learner Services Department with sessions covering, for example, dyslexia and dyspraxia. The team was advised that there is dedicated support for disabled students in the College Library. Students commented favourably on the support offered by the Learner Services Department, particularly for students with dyslexia.

100 Support for international students includes a range of language courses available prior to arrival, and ongoing language support, all of which is described in the Student Handbook. There is a dedicated international team of advisors, including an English Language Coordinator who is responsible for the language courses. An International Student Advisor advises international students on immigration matters, runs the induction for students undertaking English language courses, and provides cultural support and advice. Students commented favourably on the ease of access to support offered on a needs basis and tailored specifically to each student.

101 The College offers careers advice through its Careers Advisory Service, which was MATRIX accredited in May 2010. Details of this advice are provided in the Student Handbook. The audit team noted various methods, including lunch and learn and internship opportunities, used to inform students of the advice available. The Careers Advisory Service also offers employment advice to students and to alumni for up to three years after graduation. Course-related careers advice was readily available from course scheme managers. Students also obtain what they felt was helpful employment advice from their tutors, although such advice, it was suggested, can vary in its usefulness. The team noted that the strategic objectives of the Careers Advisory Service contained in the Career Service Development Plan are mapped against the *Code of practice, Section 8: Career education, information, advice and guidance*. The Plan is approved by Academic Board and updated as required.

102 Overall, the audit team concluded that the student support system at the College is comprehensive, and regards the demonstrable commitment of staff to the support and enhancement of student learning as a feature of good practice.

Staff support (including staff development)

103 Staff support and development opportunities are described in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The College's human resources function is overseen by the Human Resources Department whose annual report is monitored by the Academic Board. Human resource policies and procedures are outlined in staff literature and clearly linked to the College's Human Resources Strategy. This Strategy details the College's plans to improve staff development and support and is updated every three years. Its implementation is monitored as part of the Strategy.

104 All new staff members are offered a mentor or 'buddy'; this complements the College's induction process. The terms of reference of the mentoring scheme are made clear in the induction and probation procedure, which details the objectives and arrangements of the scheme. The guidance outlines the benefits of the mentoring scheme and includes a confidentiality agreement. Staff commented favourably on the mentoring system, praising its supportive element. In addition, 'buddies' appeared to have considerable interaction with their designated mentor, helping to coordinate their lecture preparation, techniques and delivery. Guidance given to mentors supports this activity, detailing clearly the expected responsibilities of the mentor and mentee.

105 All staff, both permanent and fixed-term, are subject to a probationary review. The College's probation criteria clearly define the role and responsibilities of a line manager, including procedures for dealing with unsatisfactory performance. The probationary period lasts six months during which time staff have two review meetings (three if necessary). The expectations of each meeting in the probation process are clearly outlined in the probation procedure. Staff receive a pro forma that details the criteria for the review of performance, working relationships and attendance. They are linked to the individual PDP of each staff member.

106 Existing staff are expected to undergo peer observation of their teaching once a year; new staff are encouraged to undergo this in the first six months of their employment. An observation pro forma provides both a structure for recording comments and the basis for agreed outcomes. The information provided from observation sessions is utilised to develop individual teaching practice.

107 Each staff member's personal development review is facilitated by the relevant academic line manager and centrally monitored by the Human Resources Department, which monitors Performance and Development Reviews (PDRs) against the Training Needs Analysis. Line managers are given access to information on 'MyWi', the staff and student intranet, including guidance detailing the preparation required, the review process itself, with clear grading criteria, and the creation of a development plan. Information gathered from PDR activity is reflected in departmental strategic objectives through the Training Needs Analysis.

108 The University offers a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Practice, which forms the basis of professional accreditation in learning and teaching for new and inexperienced teaching staff, and is open to all staff involved in supporting learning. The audit team noted that staff who had recently completed the Postgraduate Certificate commented positively not only on its structure and content but also on its usefulness in disseminating good practice amongst staff. Members of staff are required to work towards a Higher Education Academy Fellowship. At the time of the audit visit, the College was drawing up plans for staff to gain a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education Practice.

109 The College's strategic approach to staff development, including the reward and recognition scheme for both academic and support staff (see paragraph 123), was considered by the team to be a feature of good practice.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Management information - quality enhancement

110 The College's approach to quality enhancement is embedded in the five themes of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2009-2010. By the time of the audit this had been superseded by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy: A Framework of Approaches for Writtle College, 2010-2013. This approach to enhancement, which was described as a College-driven, proactive approach confirms that the student learning experience will be enhanced and underpinned by a focus on student-centred approaches; employability; staff development and reward; research-informed learning; curriculum design and delivery; and learner feedback and evaluative frameworks. The Strategy integrates the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy with the College's E-Learning Strategy and activities for the implementation of the Strategy are detailed in local school plans. To this end, each school action plan uses the five aims of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy as its strategic objectives.

111 The HE Learning and Teaching Group (LTG) is the forum in which issues relating to learning and teaching are discussed. The LTG brings together key staff with a common interest in learning and teaching issues from across the College and plays a central role in quality enhancement. School representation is critical to the work of the Group in encouraging consideration of learning and teaching issues at school level and feeding back the views of colleagues to inform ongoing developments. Recent LTG activities have included a review of the College's tutorial policy, a review of the policy for assignment return times and identification of opportunities for continuous improvement offered by regular processes such as peer observation of teaching. The LTG manages a learning and teaching fund from which it is able to support projects aimed at encouraging innovation and the enhancement of learning and teaching. Bids are invited from academic staff on an annual basis and are assessed against criteria that take into account their fit with the College's HE Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy and school-level action plan(s). In many cases, the outcomes of those projects have subsequently been showcased at staff development events.

112 The consolidation of higher education activity into two schools with effect from the start of the academic year 2010-2011 (see paragraph 9) was intended to improve communications and ensure consistency in quality assurance and quality enhancement activity. At the time of the audit it was too early to judge the effectiveness of this reorganisation.

113 CASTLe provides a focus for pedagogic scholarship and research. As reported in paragraphs 74-77, the audit team saw considerable evidence of research and scholarly activity informing learning opportunities for students. In addition, and as part of CASTLe, the College has a focus on the use of technology, in particular the virtual learning environment through the Learning Technology Unit. This Unit supports individual academics and the schools to enhance and develop their presence on Moodle and, for example, through podcasts.

114 The Human Resources Department and CASTLe work together to provide a programme of professional development workshops and staff development activities,

such as the College's annual learning and teaching day. Strong links exist between the strategic enhancement objectives of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy and staff development needs as identified in each school's learning and teaching action plans. Staff are encouraged to engage in both internal and external activities.

115 The College was able to identify examples of innovative and good practice through a variety of processes, including periodic degree scheme review, validations, external examiner reports, annual monitoring reports, and student surveys such as module evaluation questionnaires. External examiner reports, for example, inform the action plan considered by the Academic Board and there is much evidence of action arising from external examiner comments.

116 The University and the College have a joint Curriculum and Quality Group that discusses quality assurance and enhancement. College staff also participate in other University-led curriculum groups in business and management, conservation and sport.

117 The College's approach to validation is one in which a validation panel and programme team work together to enhance the quality of the proposed provision. Recent validations have increased the level of detail required for each aspect of assessment so that it is more clearly specified. A summary of feedback on validation and periodic review events obtained from panel members is reported to the ASC, which considers good practice, common features and cross-College issues.

118 As noted in paragraph 25, the College has modified the University of Essex Annual Monitoring Report template more effectively to capture good practice. These reports are prepared by course scheme managers in each school who comment on common themes, areas of good practice for dissemination within the College and issues for consideration at College level. The Academic Board considers, in particular, those issues forwarded to it with College-level impact and generates an action plan that is monitored by the Academic Board, by the relevant head of school and by course scheme managers. The audit team saw a selection of AMR reports and considered that they are a useful way of enabling the College's quality assurance structures to support the quality enhancement agenda. The AMR process for each course scheme requires the mechanisms for monitoring the quality and timeliness of feedback to students to be reviewed and any issues to be addressed or features of good practice to be identified. Enhancement measures include provision of a feedback deadline on the assignment brief and return of work within four weeks, which is being adhered to, and bettered, in most cases.

119 The College views the professional development of staff as central to its approach to quality enhancement and has continued to develop and enhance its human resources processes in the light of structural and management change. The College had a successful Investors in People re-approval in 2007 and is also pursuing a policy of recruiting higher education academic staff who hold a PhD where the discipline allows. Staff are encouraged to become fellows of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and participate in external examining and external professional activities. The University supports the development of College staff with a number of enhancement activities, including workshops and seminars, to which College staff contribute. These joint activities share good practice, enhance student learning experiences and strengthen the higher education ethos of the College. Through all these actions and the approachability of staff, the audit team found there to be a demonstrable commitment of staff to the support and enhancement of student learning.

120 The College has considerable staff expertise in the provision of student support and the University enables additional coordinated mechanisms to develop staff in order to enhance that support. The University has, for example, begun to develop practitioner networks across its partner institutions so that staff with expertise in support for disabled students work together to share information, experience and good practice.

121 A recent enhancement initiative was the introduction of an undergraduate Study Week each semester from 2009-2010. During these weeks students depart from their normal timetabled programme of study to participate in a range of wider learning activities including guest lectures, visits and seminars. This brings students from different year groups and, in some cases disciplines, together to share and enrich their learning experiences and includes some joint activities with the University of Essex.

122 The College involves students in the identification of areas for enhancement in many ways. These include the National Student Survey (NSS) and internal college satisfaction surveys, end-of-module evaluation questionnaires, student membership of committees at all levels, the outcomes from complaints processes, and the use of new technology. The role of students in quality assurance is reviewed as part of institutional validation or review and recommendations to enhance the role of students in quality assurance are made where this is thought appropriate.

Staff development and reward

123 The College participates in several reward schemes that recognise staff who have contributed significantly to learning. A reward and recognition group was set up in order to develop reward initiatives, an outcome of which was the introduction of the annual College Excellence Award intended to recognise and reward both academic and administrative staff who demonstrate excellence in their teaching, assessment, guidance or support for those who contribute to the wider student experience. The College is in the process of developing a professional standards framework involving collaboration between the Human Resources department and CASTLe.

124 Promotion opportunities are available twice a year. Applications are evaluated by a College review panel with written terms of reference. It was evident to the audit team that promotion opportunities arise from the Performance and Development Review (PDR) process as stated in the promotion application form. Staff are supported by their line manager in their application for promotion. The College Review Panel is also the body that handles applications for accelerated increments, contribution pay and other pay-related structural adjustments.

125 The College does not formally define quality enhancement and may wish to articulate more clearly the meaning of enhancement and good practice at the College. The audit team nevertheless concluded that the College's approach to quality enhancement was characterised by a strategic commitment to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities linked to the College's own values and vision. The team found evidence that this enabled the identification of strategic enhancement opportunities and formed the view that the College has a planned, integrated and strategic approach to quality enhancement that underpins and brings cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities, and which is a feature of good practice.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

126 At the time of the audit the College had only one partnership arrangement. This is with HAS Den Bosch in the Netherlands and involves joint delivery of postgraduate taught awards in Horticulture and Animal Science validated by the University of Essex. These courses are delivered for one term at Writtle College and a second term at HAS Den Bosch, with the dissertation undertaken at either institution (at the choice of each student). The partnership is governed by a memorandum of agreement between HAS Den Bosch and the College and a formal agreement between HAS Den Bosch and the University of Essex.

127 The College's internal processes for oversight of the student experience are also used in partnership arrangements. The University appoints an external examiner for the whole provision and the University's Dean of Academic Partnerships makes an annual monitoring visit to HAS Den Bosch. The audit team saw evidence that, from a quality assurance perspective, these courses are treated in exactly the same way as courses delivered entirely at the College.

128 Between the Briefing Visit and the Audit Visit, the College received formal notification from HAS Den Bosch that, for financial reasons, it intends to withdraw from this partnership at the end of the academic year 2010-2011.

129 Although the College currently has no strategic plans for development of partnerships, it is currently exploring an opportunity to develop articulation arrangements with institutions in China. This is still at a very early stage and the College is being guided by the University and using the University's handbook as a reference point for this development.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

130 As indicated in paragraph 74, the College has a strategic priority to raise its academic profile through the development of its research base and intends to make a submission to the Research Excellence Framework in order to gain recognition for its achievements. The College's research strategy for the period 2010-2014 confirms that research activity should make a major contribution to the maintenance of an appropriate academic culture and should include as many academic staff as possible.

131 In 2007, the University appointed a senior member of staff to act as Research Co-ordinator on a fractional basis (currently 0.4 FTE). The Research Co-ordinator chairs the Research Committee and is charged with developing research activities across the College.

132 In 2009, the University carried out a periodic review of the College's postgraduate research (PGR) provision and commended the efforts the College had made to establish a dynamic research culture. On the basis of its own enquiries, the audit team felt that this commendation was well deserved.

133 There has been significant growth in the number of PhD enrolments over the five years to 2010. In 2006 there was only one PhD enrolment. By 2010 there were 11 new enrolments, six students in the second year of study, one in the third and five in completion or further completion (making a total of 23).

134 Applications for research degree programmes are considered by the Research Co-ordinator and monitored by the Research Committee. PGR students at the College are

registered directly with the University, although they do enrol at both institutions to ensure that they have access to appropriate resources.

135 There is a one-day induction programme at the College and a two-day induction programme at the University, called 'FirstSteps', which College PGR students may attend. It appeared to the audit team that the induction process is less effective than it might be. The College induction is delayed until November when all expected PGR students have arrived. This means that earlier arrivals may have to wait for up to two months for their induction process. Furthermore, students are not always notified about the FirstSteps programme in a timely manner and so some do not attend it.

136 The responsibilities of supervisors are laid down by the University. Each student's supervisory team normally consists of two supervisors of whom at least one must have previously supervised at least one student to successful completion. Although the Briefing Paper stated that the supervisory arrangements must be approved by the Research Committee, the audit team could find no evidence in the Committee's minutes of supervisory arrangements being discussed. Furthermore, the Research Co-ordinator stated that only in exceptional circumstances would someone without a doctoral qualification be a PhD supervisor and such people would need to be specifically approved by Committee. However, the team found that several supervisors do not have a doctoral qualification. Nor could it find evidence of approval of these individuals in the minutes of the Committee. Discussion with the Research Co-ordinator and the Head of HE revealed that some supervisory arrangements were agreed between the Head of HE and the Research Co-ordinator (acting as Chair of the Research Committee), but that these decisions might not always have been reported formally to the Committee.

137 In view of the increase in the number of PhD students, the College has expanded its supervisory capacity both through new appointments and by using existing staff. Those new to supervision are required to attend the University's course 'Introduction to Supervising Research Students' and are encouraged to attend other courses related to postgraduate supervision run by the University's Teaching and Learning Unit. There is, however, no system in place for recording that this takes place.

138 New supervisors may be the principal supervisor but are paired with an experienced supervisor (who may have related expertise but not necessarily in the specific specialism of the principal supervisor) in an attempt to ensure good supervision. However, there is evidence that this is not always achieved. One student reported needing to seek guidance from the Research Co-ordinator after having missed some of the induction process because the principal supervisor was not certain about some of the procedures. The Research Committee's minutes record concerns that 'some supervisors were not aware of their responsibilities in relation to general supervisory arrangements and specifically Supervisory Boards...'. The second supervisor appears in some cases not to play a very active role. This may be because some supervisors are responsible for several students, albeit mainly as second supervisor.

139 PGR students' progress is monitored twice a year by a Postgraduate Research Students Supervisory Board (PRSSB). The PRSSB provides written feedback to a student and produces a written report for the Research Student Progress Committee, which in turn reports to the Research Committee. The information contained in the PRSSB reports is comprehensive and requires reflection on the part of a student as well as input from a supervisor. The audit team saw some examples of informative and helpful PRSSB reports. However, it appears that some supervisors are not fully aware of their responsibilities with regard to PRSSB and the subsequent paperwork required.

140 PGR students at the College have access to developmental activities at the University, such as the FirstSteps course (see paragraph 135), and the postgraduate personal development planning weekend at the College. During the College induction, students complete a self-assessment form to help them identify research and generic skills that they may need to develop. Furthermore, in addition to monitoring their academic progress, PRSSBs report on the generic and specific skills of the student (with both self and supervisor assessments). Supervisors manage the training required for the development of specific skills related to the research work being undertaken. This can include guiding students to take taught master's-level modules at the College.

141 Each PGR student receives a written report after each PRSSB that enables them to monitor their own progress. However, as noted in paragraph 140, it appears that not all supervisors are aware of their responsibilities to produce written reports. Consequently some students may not receive as much formal feedback as expected.

142 Since PGR students are directly registered with the University, their assessment is governed by the University's Higher Degree Regulations. The University provides guidelines for students on the assessment process.

143 Students are encouraged to discuss any difficulties with their supervisor at an early stage, or with the Research Co-ordinator if the difficulty relates to a supervisor. Issues can also be raised at PRSSBs, although the presence of the supervisor on the PRSSB may limit the issues that a student may feel able to raise in this forum. If these mechanisms do not lead to a resolution of problems, students can use the appeals procedure in the University's Code of Practice or the College's Complaints Procedure.

144 Academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are managed by the University within its standards and quality framework. This framework appeared to the audit team to make appropriate use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points.

145 The Research Co-ordinator produces an annual report for the University. In the past, this report has been sent directly to the University without first being approved by the College's Research Committee. The audit team was advised that this practice will be amended in future.

146 The University carried out a periodic review of the College's PGR provision in March 2009. The report of this review contained several commendations and some recommendations. In response to the report, an action plan was developed by the Research Co-ordinator and the HE Quality Systems Manager. Action on the plan has been regularly monitored by the ASC. The Research Committee's minutes for May 2009 note receipt of the periodic review report and a list of its recommendations, but record no discussion of the issues. There is no further reference to the report and subsequent action plan in the Committee's minutes until October 2010.

147 The College currently relies primarily on informal mechanisms for receiving feedback from PGR students. Students have been encouraged to participate in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), but as their results were aggregated with students at the University, this limited its usefulness for the College.

148 A recommendation contained in the March 2009 periodic review was that a student staff liaison committee, or equivalent forum for student feedback, be established. Progress in response to this has been slow. The 2010 cohort of students has, however, been proactive in creating its own forum (including an online presence). The audit team would encourage the College to respond positively to this development.

149 The constitution of the Research Committee includes an elected representative of PGR students and this provides an opportunity for students formally to raise issues relating to the PGR community. Participation by the student representative has generally been good, although the minutes sometimes simply list the issues raised without assigning actions to deal with them or otherwise making a response. On other occasions, the minutes assign action but no follow-up is recorded at subsequent meetings.

150 In view of the issues recorded in paragraphs 137, 138 and 150, the audit team concluded that it is desirable that the minutes of the Research Committee should give a fuller account of matters discussed at meetings and record clearly the status of decisions taken and the follow-up to action points at the subsequent meeting.

151 Both schools run internal research seminar programmes and PGR students are encouraged to present their work at these events. The College provides funding for students to present papers at external conferences, and the 2009 postgraduate review (see paragraphs 132 and 146) commended the generosity of this funding.

152 Four graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are currently funded by the College. GTAs are recruited at the start of their PhD studies and undertake up to six hours of teaching duties per week. The teaching duties can range from demonstrating, through small group tutorials to large group lectures. To equip GTAs for this role, they are required to attend the first module of the PG CHEP at the University. Some current GTAs were not given any training or induction to teaching prior to the PG CHEP, which may not take place until their second year. By this time, they may have undertaken a considerable amount of teaching. During this period there may be no formal observation of their teaching and they may receive no formal feedback.

153 The audit team considers it advisable that GTAs are given appropriate induction and training for their teaching role prior to starting their duties and receive regular formal feedback thereafter.

154 Before a student commences a research project, an assessment is made of the resources likely to be required. From this, a 'bench fee' is determined, which students or their funders must pay. This funding is used to purchase the particular resources required for a student's research project. Students are supported in seeking external funding to cover the bench fee, however if they are not successful in securing funding it may have an impact on the amount of practical work that can be undertaken. It became clear to the audit team during its visit that the issue of the timely provision of computer facilities for PGR students is a recurring one and the team would urge the College to resolve this quickly.

155 One of the Research Co-ordinator's responsibilities is to support staff in the development of their research programmes and this seems to be effective. Several staff are new to PhD supervision and, as noted above, attendance at an initial training course is mandatory. However, the evidence suggests that not all supervisors are aware of their responsibilities, particularly in terms of the paperwork required around the PRSSB process (see paragraphs 138 and 139).

156 The College is going through a transition period, building up its research activity (particularly in terms of postgraduate research students) from a low base in a short period of time. The College has been particularly successful in supporting its staff and creating a dynamic research culture (as noted in paragraph 132) and this was commended by the March 2009 postgraduate research review. However, this rapid growth has brought with it some difficulties and it appeared to the audit team that in places the College infrastructure has not kept pace with developments. The College has been slow in responding to some of

the recommendations of the 2009 review, which included improving the induction process for PGR students, reviewing the training and support of GTAs, and establishing a Student Staff Liaison Committee.

157 Although cognisant of the considerable progress made in the area of postgraduate research, in view of the matters identified in paragraphs 136, 141, 156 and 157, the audit team concluded that it is advisable that the College ensures that comprehensive induction for all new PGR students and training for new PhD supervisors is delivered in a timely manner.

Section 7: Published information

158 Published information is monitored by the College's Marketing Department, with final sign-off from the University of Essex. Material is published using guidelines identified in the College's Student Recruitment Publications Approval Policy. This Policy is applied to undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses and other materials for circulation and to web-based material. There is a clear categorisation by level of editorial control, ensuring that the appropriate authority is consulted prior to publication.

159 Handbooks for students entering higher education and course schemes are readily available and are comprehensive in their coverage of academic and practical matters. This material is disseminated widely and is accessible in both hard and electronic format. Students commented favourably on the level of information provided in the handbooks. The College consults the student body when reviewing the material as observed in minutes of Course Scheme Review Committee.

160 The website and online learning facilities are comprehensive, containing a range of information for staff and students. Students commented that Moodle is used variably by tutors, but provides a useful interface for document exchange particularly lecture notes.

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

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