QAA

Harper Adams University College

March 2010

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Harper Adams University College (the University College) from 8 to 12 March 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the institution makes under its own degree awarding powers.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of Harper Adams University 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 its awards

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

In the audit team's view, the institution's approach to quality enhancement is informed by strategic direction, with appropriate mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and dissemination. In delivering improvements to students' learning opportunities, it has taken forward the priorities of skills development, learner support and workplace and e-learning.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

In the audit team's view, the overall arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience, as reflected in positive student feedback. While the institution's procedures are sufficient to meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, the team has recommended revisions in relation to research students' training.

Published information

In the audit team's view, the institution has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. It meets the current national expectations for public information on teaching quality.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the active involvement of employers and other professional advisers in planning and developing the curriculum and in devising approaches for its effective delivery (paragraphs 24; 30; 33; 46)

- the enhancement of the quality and accessibility of a range of activities supporting the student learning experience through the implementation of special programmes under the collective name of *Aspire* (Advancing skills for professionals in the rural economy) (paragraphs 77; 62 to 63)

- the development by the University College of employer-linked provision through an approach that seeks to integrate this with its other collaborative provision in respect of quality assurance requirements (paragraph 100).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- to revise procedures relating to research students' training, clarifying the means of delivery and the expectations placed on students, in particular making explicit which aspects of the training are mandatory (paragraph 115).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- to reinforce the role of the personal tutor in fostering amongst undergraduate students a clear understanding of the purpose and importance of personal development planning and in supporting the process (paragraph 74)

- to strengthen the mechanisms for monitoring the completeness and accuracy of information relating to the University College on partner websites (paragraph 97).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   Harper Adams University College (the University College) has degree awarding powers for both taught degrees (granted 1996) and research degrees (granted 2006). It specialises in land-based subjects and is located in Shropshire with an associated working farm. Its origins date back to 1901 when it was established as Harper Adams Agricultural College. Its mission is to provide higher education for the delivery of a sustainable food chain and rural economies. Key aspects of its strategy to achieve this mission are industry links, knowledge transfer to the rural economy and raising the institution's profile internationally.

2   The University College is organised into five academic departments (Animals, Business Management and Marketing, Crops, Engineering, and Rural Affairs and Environment), each of which contribute modules to the integrated modular scheme for undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses, based on principles of credit accumulation. There are (in 2009-10) 118 academic staff, out of a total staff complement of 453.

3   In 2009-10, the University College has 1,739 undergraduate students, 166 taught postgraduate students and 29 postgraduate research students, giving a total of 1,934, analysed in the table below. Approximately 46 per cent of undergraduate students are on courses accredited by professional bodies and virtually all courses incorporate a work placement.

Course suite	Students
Veterinary Nursing	302
Agriculture	446
Business and Food	247
Engineering	226
Countryside, Environment, Leisure and Tourism	198
Rural Management	300
Studies by negotiation	20
Postgraduate taught	166
Postgraduate research	29
Total	**1,934**

4   In addition, there are 902 students at partner colleges, studying on courses of at least 60 credits that are accredited by the University College and lead to its awards. Of the five main collaborative partnerships, four are with further education colleges in the UK and one with a university college in China. Through its employer engagement programme, the University College also has links with a number of employers and professional bodies.

5   Harper Adams is one of two university colleges at the hub of the Rural Employer Engagement Development Network (REEDNet), which brings together all the land-based colleges in England and whose task is to stimulate and support the rural economy through an expansion of recognised work-based qualifications.

The information base for the audit

6   The institution 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 institution's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. The team had access to the documents referenced in the briefing paper as both electronic and printed copy.

7   The students provided a written submission, compiled by the President of the Harper Adams Students' Union, assisted by a team of writers comprising student officers and representatives. The submission sets out clearly and concisely the students' views on the utility and accuracy of student information, the experience of students as learners, their experience of assessment, and the effectiveness of student feedback and representation systems. It covers undergraduate, postgraduate taught and research students based at the University College drawing on the results of both internal and external surveys.

8   In addition, the audit team had access to:

- the previous Institutional audit report, QAA, June 2005

- the Mid-cycle follow-up report on the Institutional audit, October 2007

- Academic review and Integrated quality and enhancement review reports relating to partner further education colleges

- sample reports produced by professional bodies

- internal documents as requested by the audit team

- the notes of audit team meetings with staff and students.

Developments since the mid-cycle follow-up of the last audit

9   QAA's last Institutional audit of the University College, in June 2005, resulted in an overall judgement of broad confidence in the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The audit recommendations were subject to a mid-cycle follow-up by QAA in October 2007. Based on documentation provided by the institution this concluded that good progress had been made in addressing the recommendations. It also identified two areas as being of particular interest for the present audit: collaborative provision, given the recent expansion, and postgraduate research programmes, as the institution now awards its own research degrees.

10   In the context of collaborative provision, recent QAA reviews relating to the further education college partners of the University College have resulted in positive judgements. Since the last audit, the University College has taken a number of steps to strengthen its procedural framework. The present audit team recognises the benefits of such developments, but considered that further attention was required to strengthen the mechanisms for monitoring

the information relating to the University College published by its partners (see paragraph 97). There has been substantial growth in employer-linked provision, particularly since 2008 through the impact of the REEDNet project, which is co-funded by HEFCE and employers (see paragraphs 18; 89; 91 to 92). An increasing proportion of continuing professional development short-course activity is now being assessed for credit at higher education levels by this route.

11   Since obtaining research degree awarding powers in July 2006, the University College has introduced a number of initiatives to improve the integration between research and the taught curriculum (see paragraphs 57 to 59). With regard to institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students, the audit team considered that there was a need for clarification of procedures relating to training in the development of personal and professional skills (see paragraphs 111 to 115).

12   A new Principal has started in post, effective September 2009. The audit team noted that (as an internal appointment) he would be developing and expanding on the institutional strategies currently in place, having been closely involved in devising most of them.

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

13   The Academic Board has overall responsibility for the institution's learning and teaching strategy and the regulation of academic quality and standards, which it discharges through its standing committees. The principal strategy document (Learning and Teaching Strategy 2008-2013) contains substantial evaluative material as well as development plans and is updated annually. The terms of reference of committees and the regulations and guidance for quality assurance processes are specified fully in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual, whose upkeep is the responsibility of the Head of Educational Development and Quality Enhancement (HEDQE). It is subject to rolling review with input from all the relevant committees. It is available to staff and students on the intranet, with significant changes being communicated to staff in a weekly bulletin (Weekly Diary).

14   Implementing procedures for monitoring the quality and standards of taught courses is the responsibility of the Academic Standards Committee, supported in the case of collaborative provision, by the Collaborative Programmes Management Committee which has responsibility for the effectiveness of partnership arrangements. Both these committees report directly to the Academic Board. The Academic Board and Academic Standards Committee, but not the Collaborative Programmes Management Committee, have representatives from the student officers and from collaborative partners. The Research Degrees Standards Committee, which reports to the Academic Standards Committee, currently has responsibility for developing policy and procedures for research programmes and has an elected postgraduate research student representative. A third subcommittee of the Academic Board, the Academic Planning and Resources Committee, takes an overview of the resource implications, including staffing levels, of the course portfolio and considers resourcing issues arising from new course proposals and review processes. There is substantial cross-membership of all of these committees facilitating managerial coherence.

15   The resourcing and delivery of modules is the responsibility of academic departments. Course managers, assisted by senior tutors, chair course committees and are responsible for the operational management of cognate suites of courses, each of which will typically contain modules from at least three departments. The course manager and the senior tutor form the course team and are the core of the course committee. The Academic Standards Committee appoints a course monitor for each suite of courses who, together with the HEDQE, receives course committee minutes and raises matters of concern or of institution-wide importance with the Academic Standards Committee. Taught postgraduate courses have a separate course manager and monitor. A single course committee for short courses, the Employer Engagement Courses Committee, chaired by the REEDNet Centre Manager, reports additionally to the Employer Engagement Accreditation and Validation Committee (a subcommittee of the

Academic Standards Committee. An executive group, comprising course managers and senior tutors, meets to consider operational issues relating to the management of taught courses.

16   An ad hoc Quality Assurance Review Group was established in autumn 2009 to consider the scope for streamlining quality assurance processes, including the associated committee system, and was due to report in spring 2010. A brief interim report (treated as work-in-progress) was made available to the audit team.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

17   The standards of awards are established and subsequently maintained through approval, monitoring and review processes that also deal with the learning opportunities of students. A brief description of the processes is given below (see paragraphs 19 to 23). Within the context of the modular scheme, areas most closely identified with standards - curriculum development, assessment and student achievement - are dealt with through consideration of individual modules, or of modules grouped together into subjects. On the other hand, learning opportunities are dealt with through consideration of sets of modules brought together into courses.

18   For the purposes of credit accumulation, each module has assigned to it a certain level and amount of credit. Courses leading to an award at a particular level must comprise a complement of modules at levels appropriate to the level of the award which, taken together, make up the required amount of credit for that award. It is the level of credit associated with a course and its constituent modules that is of most interest to processes concerned with the standards of awards, whereas processes concerned with learning opportunities centre on how the amount of credit comprising a course (made up of its constituent modules) can be delivered and what resources are required to do it. The University College's credit-rating system also forms the basis of the accreditation service it offers through REEDNet.

19   Approval of courses is a two-stage process, followed by a validation event. The first stage is outline submission to the Academic Planning and Resources Committee. The second stage includes a submission of the full documentation to the Academic Standards Committee. The validation event is conducted by an appropriately constituted panel that includes external membership and has full access to the prospective course team. The panel reports its conclusions and any recommendations or approval conditions back to the Academic Standards Committee, which follows up on necessary responses from the course team. The panel report, together with the approved programme specification, constitute the definitive course documents. The process applies equally to courses offered through collaborative arrangements, both with colleges and employers. However, for short-course proposals of 80 credits or less, developed with or for employers, a variant process is adopted involving approval by the Employer Engagement Accreditation and Validation Committee.

20   Annual monitoring requires the course team to complete an annual course report. This is drafted by the course manager for discussion at an annual course monitoring meeting of the course committee, attended by both student representatives and the member of the Academic Standards Committee designated as the course monitor. The course monitor produces a summary of the effectiveness and completeness of the annual course monitoring process and makes specific recommendations for appropriate action to be considered by the Academic Standards Committee. Credit-rated short courses of up to 80 credits that lead to an award are monitored using the same report template through the Employer Engagement Courses Committee.

21   Through a parallel process, heads of department prepare an annual subject review report for submission to the Academic Standards Committee, to course managers (for information in preparing annual course reports) and to the Head of Educational Development and Quality Enhancement (HEDQE). These reports deal with the modules offered within a specific subject

area; they have a focus on standards issues arising from assessment boards and are particularly informed by external examiner comment (see paragraph 26).

22   Both course and subject review reports form an input to the Academic Overview Report, prepared by the HEDQE for consideration by the Academic Standards Committee at its annual monitoring meeting. This comprehensive document also draws directly on information from validation events, assessment boards, external examiner reports and student surveys. A separate report for courses delivered at partner colleges is also considered annually, but there is not yet an equivalent summary produced for employer-linked provision (see paragraph 98).

23   Periodic review is on a six-year cycle leading to revalidation, with cognate courses being covered, in the main, through successive events in the same year (most recently 2008-09), leading to a synchronised move to a modified set of courses a year later. The review process follows the same route as for the approval of new courses, namely through the Academic Planning and Resources Committee, the Academic Standards Committee and a validation panel event. The relevant documentation prepared by course teams comprises a combined annual monitoring and critical appraisal report (fuller and more self-reflective than the annual course report) and revised programme specifications. Again the process applies equally to courses offered through collaborative arrangements, with a variant adopted for short courses (80 credits or less) developed with or for employers, involving the Employer Engagement Accreditation and Validation Committee.

24   The approval and review processes represent the result of streamlining and strengthening earlier processes in place at the time of the previous audit. The audit team noted the introduction of detailed guidance and templates to facilitate consistency and saw various reports indicating that the new procedures had been implemented effectively. Externality continues to be a strong feature, with approval panels normally including three external members having relevant subject expertise, experience of commerce, industry, or the professions; and, where appropriate, panels have professional body representation. The audit team identifies as good practice the active involvement of employers and other professional advisers in planning and developing the curriculum and in devising approaches for its effective delivery. This is amply supported in the use made of external reference points in curriculum development (see paragraph 33) and of external examiners and advisers in assessment processes (see paragraphs 30; 46).

25   In the context of the annual monitoring process, the audit team noted that there had been some problems in keeping the various strands on track such that reports at one level fed into the next at the appropriate time and that there were plans to scale back the dataset requirements for employer-linked provision. The team itself encountered some duplication between annual course reports and subject review reports and considered it appropriate that the University College should be looking further at ways of streamlining its monitoring processes through the work of the Academic Quality Assurance Review Group.

External examiners

26   In its procedures, the University College defines the role of external examiner as to audit and moderate the standards of its awards against those set in other higher education institutions. In discharging this role, external examiners take responsibility for modules, courses and overall awards, and are designated respectively as subject, course or taught board examiners (although individually they may perform more than one function). The system is structured so that a subset of external examiners from the subject level operates at the course level and a separate set operates at institutional level across all courses. This reflects the structure of assessment boards (see paragraph 39), whose membership includes the relevant external examiners. The boards see that judgements about student performance are passed from subject to course level, while parity is maintained across courses. Different arrangements operate for research degrees (see paragraph 118).

27   The responsibilities of each type of external examiner are described in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual, which also details procedures for nomination and appointment, briefing and support, reporting requirements and mechanisms for responding to reports. Additional training is offered to inexperienced external examiners. The same arrangements apply to collaborative courses as to in-house courses, except that briefing may be undertaken by partner staff. All external examiners use a standard template for their reports, completing sections relevant to the terms of their appointment. In addition they are asked to comment on whether issues arising from their reports have been dealt with satisfactorily and whether there are ways in which they might be further assisted in their role. These comments provided evidence that external examiners were well supported in discharging their duties.

28   Responses to external examiner reports are channelled upwards from subject to course level and are ultimately collated at institutional level by the Head of Educational Development and Quality Enhancement, who presents salient points to the Academic Standards Committee, as part of the annual Academic Overview Report. As an illustration of the process, external examiner reports proved instrumental in focusing attention on a declining level of performance of students on Foundation Degree courses. The issue was crystallised in the overview report, leading to measures being taken in the latest review and revalidation of the curriculum and to the appointment of an academic guidance tutor to work alongside Foundation Degree students identified as being in need of additional support.

29   With regard to responses to external examiners themselves, the audit team was unable to establish the precise mechanism for formulating the response they received to their individual report and whether they would necessarily receive the relevant extract from the Academic Overview Report. There was no suggestion from the sample reports reviewed by the team that comments made by external examiners were not being thoroughly addressed; nevertheless responsibilities for responding to external examiners on their reports might usefully be clarified in written procedures.

30   In addition to external examiners, professional advisers with appropriate industrial experience are appointed to undergraduate courses. The focus of their reports is on preparatory modules for the work placement, the placement itself and modules delivered in the workplace, and they play an important role in REEDNet courses. The audit team considered that the respective roles of external examiner and professional adviser, while having similar status, were being kept appropriately distinct. Thus professional advisers were a useful adjunct and provided a particular perspective on the maintenance of standards and improvements in the quality of the student experience, lending support to the feature of good practice identified in this area (see paragraph 24).

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

31   The University College requires its awards to be correctly positioned according to level within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The FHEQ, as revised in 2008, and *The higher education credit framework for England* have evidently informed the credit values (based on level and amount) assigned to the institution's qualifications under the regulations of its modular scheme. The timing of these publications meant that they could be utilised in the recent round of periodic review and revalidation of the curriculum.

32   Programme specifications follow a common template, which requires staff to reference qualification and subject benchmark statements and any other benchmarks used to establish standards. The designated key skills for each award are articulated in generic outcomes common to all awards at that level, as prescribed by the modular scheme, and in course-specific outcomes, as prescribed by each programme specification.

33   Where relevant, courses are developed to meet requirements for accreditation by professional bodies. These vary according to the professional body concerned and may extend to its direct involvement in approval and assessment processes. The audit team found that the University College made good use of its strong links with professional bodies in curriculum development. Accreditation reports are received by the Academic Standards Committee and recommendations are addressed in annual course monitoring, thus enabling central oversight and identification of common issues. Employer need plays an increasingly important influence on curriculum development, as borne out by the burgeoning employer engagement programme. These factors support the feature of good practice identified in this area (see paragraph 24).

34   The audit team saw evidence that the University College routinely took account of QAA publications in developing policy and strategy (the procedure for accreditation of prior learning being one example). It also keeps abreast of revisions to the *Code of practice* (see paragraph 42) and developments within the European Higher Education Area (which includes the UK). In order to facilitate mutual recognition of qualifications within Europe, the institution first issued detailed transcripts (diploma supplements) to students in 2009.

Assessment policies and regulations

35   The determination of assessment policies and regulations for taught courses is the responsibility of the Academic Standards Committee; the equivalent responsibility for research degrees rests with the Research Degrees Standards Committee (see paragraph 103). Assessment regulations are standard across the modular scheme and apply equally to collaborative provision. Additional modifying regulations meet the specific requirements of professional bodies. Assessment regulations are reviewed annually by the Academic Standards Committee, involving consultation with the Students' Academic Group, a forum for briefing students and sounding out their views on policy developments (see paragraph 55). There was evidence that students' views were taken into account, for example, in differentiating individual performance in the assessment of group work and in the scheduling of assessment tasks.

36   Assessment regulations and procedures are documented in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual and made available to all interested parties - staff, students, employers and placement providers, external examiners and professional advisers. They are also published for students in course handbooks, which include details of special arrangements for students with particular needs, and are periodically reinforced through oral briefings (see paragraphs 124 and 125). Programme specifications explain the relationship between curriculum and assessment, while module descriptors clearly indicate the distribution of marks between different assessment tasks (coursework assignments and examinations).

37   The assessment process is supported by a range of templates, detailed operational guidance and examples of good practice, all intended to achieve consistent standards within a scheme where individual modules may contribute to several courses. Roles and responsibilities for each stage of the process are clearly designated. Considerable emphasis is given to moderation of assessment tasks and subsequent moderation of students' results. For instance, there are standardised coursework briefing sheets and moderation prompts, as well as generic marking criteria for examinations, coursework and the major project associated with the students' work placement. Anonymous marking operates for both examinations and coursework and samples of marked and double-marked assessments are made available for external examiner scrutiny.

38   Students, both in the written submission and in discussion with the audit team, confirmed that assignment briefs and assessment criteria were clear and issued with accompanying guidance from staff. In general, the students were positive about the information they received on assessment through course handbooks, while module schemes of work assisted in workload planning and time management, this being seen as particularly important given the common submission deadline for coursework currently in place (the so-called Wednesday deadline). The team noted that staggered submission dates were to be introduced, effective from

September 2010. There were inevitably comments made by students about variability in the quality and speed of feedback on assessment, but also general acknowledgement that improvements were being made; for example, the institution is piloting a new fast feedback system providing marks after two weeks and full feedback after four weeks.

39 There are two levels of assessment boards. Subject assessment boards, normally based in departments, deal with student performance and academic standards at module level. Course assessment boards are responsible for awards and progression. In addition, there is a recently established REEDNet Assessment Board, which deals with candidates on REEDNet courses, where there are no existing arrangements. Assessment boards are supported by data from the student management system and there have been iterative improvements to the presentation of data as a result of feedback from both subject and course assessment boards with associated external examiner input. The way that assessment boards conduct their business is monitored through the reports of taught board external examiners, a small team especially appointed to see that procedures and regulations are applied consistently across course assessment boards through attendance at these boards. The audit team noted that their comments were overwhelmingly positive.

Management information - statistics

40 According to the Briefing paper, the quality of data has improved since the introduction of a networked student management system in 2002-03. The audit team noted the wide variety of data used in annual course monitoring and periodic review, and particularly in the annual academic overview reports. Overall, the team found that the University College was making good use of statistical information at subject, course and institutional levels, enabling it to make comparisons and highlight trends in student performance and progression data, as a basis for operational and strategic decision-making.

Overall conclusion

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

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

42 In reviewing its policies and procedures, the University College seeks to verify their continued alignment with the *Code of practice*. During 2009-10, admissions policy and arrangements for learner support, career education and, most recently, employer-linked provision have been checked against the *Code*, sometimes triggered by updates to the relevant sections.

43 Qualification and subject benchmark statements are referenced in the initial design and review of courses in the context of learning opportunities, as well as the standards of awards. The use of professional advisers and employer representatives in assessment and review processes is particularly well-embedded (see paragraphs 24; 46; 67), as is interaction with professional bodies. Annual course and critical appraisal reports (on which periodic review is based) give consideration to professional body requirements and the way these are being met.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

44 The processes of course approval, monitoring and review are described above (see paragraphs 19 to 23). This section highlights points of particular relevance to the learning opportunities of students (teaching, learning resources and student support).

45   Consideration of staffing and learning resources is an important part of the approval process for new courses. In the outline submission to the Academic Planning and Resources Committee, details of staff expertise and capacity and the likely usage of equipment, library and software are required. Criteria for approval used by the validation panel include the forecast demand for the course, the appropriateness of resource provision, including staff support and specialist facilities, and the quality and suitability of the staff as demonstrated by their qualifications, scholarship, research, outreach activity, short-course teaching and staff development.

46   Examples of annual course reports seen by the audit team were thoroughly completed and contained effective reviews of the resources and learning opportunities available to the students taking the courses, together with recommendations for enhancements, based on information from students, staff, external professional advisers and employers. While focusing on standards issues, subject review reports may also deal with matters relating to learning opportunities raised by external examiners/professional advisers, such as teaching resources, the professional relevance of the curriculum, and skills development (numerical, English language, teamwork and so on). These factors contribute to the feature of good practice identified in this area (see paragraph 24).

47   The template for the critical appraisal report for periodic review requires an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the learning experience from the perspectives of staff, students, employers and professional bodies. Examples of the reports seen by the audit team were considered to be comprehensive and suitably evaluative. The team found that panel reports similarly dealt extensively with the quality of learning opportunities for students and that a summary of resources issues arising from periodic review had been considered by the Academic Planning and Resources Committee.

48   Following the periodic review of taught postgraduate courses, completed in autumn 2008, a number of changes were introduced, including enhanced support for personal and professional development. The opening of the new Postgraduate and Professional Development Centre in autumn 2009 provides learning and social spaces for students who hitherto had not had a base; it was much appreciated by those who met the audit team.

Management information - feedback from students

49   The University College carries out a number of surveys to obtain student feedback, in particular an annual survey of student opinion. This substantial questionnaire (known as the course survey) is distributed by senior tutors to the students on their courses and analysed centrally before being returned to heads of department and course managers to inform their subject and course review reports. The views collected cover wide-ranging aspects of course organisation and management, as well as central library and student services.

50   At module level, the annual survey asks students only to rate each module on a single scale from very poor to excellent, with space for a narrative comment on the module. While the survey in itself provided little specific diagnostic information about individuals' delivery of modules, particularly if they were team-taught, this was compensated for by the requirement to investigate and report on particularly low, or high, scoring modules in annual subject review. The audit team confirmed from the reports it saw that this process was generally effective, noting that module leaders were encouraged to collect more specific information themselves (using a template from the Academic Quality Assurance Manual), although this was not an explicit requirement. Taught postgraduates normally have blocks of teaching with evaluation at the end of each block.

51   The annual survey also includes a section for final-year students to give an overall view of their course, providing a supplementary source of information to the National Student Survey (NSS). The University College recognises the value of being able to draw comparisons with other institutions through the NSS, though some of its smaller courses do not feature in the published

data, since the number of responses they generate is insufficient. Research students are surveyed using the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) (see paragraph 116).

52   A further source of feedback is the student placement feedback form, which is a very detailed questionnaire on students' experience during their placement year; again administration is the responsibility of the senior tutor. Returns are analysed centrally and results passed to the Placement Coordinator and placement managers (see paragraph 60), as well as to the course managers for consideration in annual course reports. In addition, there is a survey of new students, which gathers feedback on admissions, induction, published information, and the support services and social activities organised for 'freshers'.

53   Survey results for taught courses are drawn together in the annual Academic Overview Report, which the audit team found to be thorough in its interpretation of them and detailed in its account of resultant action. The team concluded that there was extensive and effective use made of management information collected from students in maintaining the quality of learning opportunities.

Role of students in quality assurance

54   Student representation is a feature of the committee system at all levels. Minutes of course committees indicated a good balance of staff and student members, with the students taking a full part in meetings, and particularly in the annual course monitoring meetings, which approve annual course reports. Student representatives on course committees also see external examiner reports and are involved in deciding the action taken in response to them. Course committee minutes demonstrated that there were effective responses to issues raised by the students. The students' written submission suggested that feedback on progress with student issues was not always effectively communicated to the wider student body, but that both students and staff were working on ways of improving this.

55   Students do not currently sit on review panels for validation and revalidation, but they are involved, through course committees, in preparing the documentation for them and the panels obtain information on student views from annual course surveys and from student meetings in periodic review. Students also sit on the Academic Standards Committee, which approves the decisions of review panels. They are briefed on the views of course representatives concerning agenda items for the Academic Standards Committee through the Students' Academic Group, although the role of this group is broader, as a forum for discussing institution-level issues. It is also being consulted on the reforms under consideration by the Academic Quality Assurance Review Group (see paragraph 16) which does not itself have direct student representation.

56   Training for student representatives is limited to a short briefing session and associated written guidance, but the evidence the audit team saw from documents and meetings suggested that this was not inhibiting the effective input of students into quality assurance. Audit team meetings with both staff and students revealed that there were also very good informal channels of communication between these groups, facilitated by the institution's small size.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

57   Strengthening the relationship between staff research and scholarship and the course curriculum is an objective of both the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the recently approved Research and Knowledge Transfer Strategy. One measure for tracking progress is the percentage of modules that draw on staff research, scholarship or outreach activity, either through publication or other forms of scholarly or professional practice. The institution's analysis of its 2008-09 statistics for level 6 (final-year honours) and level 7 (master's) showed that 96 per cent of modules were underpinned by staff publications and 88 per cent by other relevant staff activities. A recent development is the creation of a new post of Research Coordinator, with overall responsibility for the implementation of the Research and Knowledge Transfer Strategy.

One of the specific responsibilities of this role is to coordinate with curriculum developers and course teams, giving advice on research that can underpin the curriculum.

58   The linkage between research and teaching is verified through course validation, while annual monitoring assures that it is maintained or developed. The sampling trails provided evidence of thorough probing by review panels in this area, including recommendations in reports about the need for research and teaching to complement one another better. The audit team found that annual subject review reports were meticulous in mapping publications to modules. There is support for staff to further their research and scholarship where there is a demonstrable connection between this and their teaching (see paragraphs 82 and 83).

59   Students have the opportunity to develop their own research skills through level-specific preparatory modules for their project work, in the case of undergraduate students this being the major project associated with their work placement. Research projects form a substantive part of the assessment for postgraduate taught courses and obviously for research degrees. The postgraduate students (particularly the international students) who met the team commented on how useful the research skills module had been in encouraging them to try out different research methodologies.

Other modes of study

60   A work placement (typically one-year) is an integral part of all undergraduate courses and is regarded by the University College as central to the employability of its graduates. A comprehensive code of practice for work placements documents policy and procedures for staff and placement providers. This references the corresponding section of the *Code of practice*. Operational arrangements are overseen by a (part-time) Placement Coordinator, supported by nine placement managers and an administrative team. All academic staff operate as placement tutors, thereby maintaining links with the workplace. Thus the placement is firmly embedded within the institution's support structures. Students receive a course-based placement handbook that conforms to a common template.

61   In the 2008-09 annual survey 80 per cent of respondents rated the placement experience as good or excellent and fewer than 5 per cent found it less than acceptable. This view was borne out by the students who met the audit team and they commented positively on the support they received from placement managers in finding a suitable placement and from their tutors during the placement period. They indicated that their placement handbook provided a firm basis for the experience, but they valued in greater measure the availability of one-to-one contact with their tutors and with support staff. From their perspective, there was generally a quick response to resolve any operational difficulties. Only one aspect met with any criticism (from a small number of students) and that was whether the University College could be more supportive in assessing the suitability of placements that students found for themselves.

62   Placement learning is one of the development themes of the Aspire (Advancing skills for professionals in the rural economy) programme, which secured HEFCE funding through a scheme to establish centres for excellence in teaching and learning (CETL). Two Aspire fellowships have been established to develop placement learning and disseminate good practice internally and externally.

63   Both e-learning and work-based learning are also Aspire development themes. There has been a significant expansion in e-learning facilitated by the virtual learning environment (VLE), first introduced in September 2006 and overseen by a small central e-learning team led by a Development Coordinator. Internal reporting shows that, despite some early technical problems, use of the VLE has steadily increased and there is an expectation that all courses will provide online resources. Indeed, 90 per cent of modules have material on the VLE, use of which is growing in sophistication. Good practice has been encouraged through an informal user group of teaching staff and disseminated through a targeted programme of staff development,

supported by handbooks, published under the Aspire brand. The students met by the audit team confirmed that the VLE was an effective and well-used facility.

64   The audit team considered that the institution was taking a measured, step-by-step approach to the development of e-learning, having set realistic targets for increased use of the VLE as the delivery platform, which it was monitoring through its executive structure. The team noted that usage of the VLE was being integrated into employer-linked provision, while staff from partner colleges had access to its resources. In this context, the team would encourage the University College to ensure that its quality assurance systems keep pace, so as to enable it to oversee effectively the increasing use of web-based technology by its partners, including in work-based settings.

65   Distance learning is confined to a single employer-linked course, for which there are paper-based and online manuals to support individual modules. There are no current plans to extend this type of provision and, on this basis, the institution has no separate policy or procedures for distance learning.

Resources for learning

66   Within the executive structure different senior managers oversee particular learning resources: the library, information systems, laboratories and workshops, and the estate, including teaching rooms and equipment. The coordination of learning resources across courses is the responsibility of the Academic Planning and Resources Committee, which considers the resourcing implications of new course proposals and the continuation of existing courses within the parameters of the overall portfolio. The Committee also responds to specific requests for additional resources from course managers or heads of department, arising, for example, from annual monitoring.

67   The National Student Survey and internal surveys consistently show student satisfaction levels with learning resources in excess of 90 per cent. This view was echoed in the students' written submission and in meetings between the audit team and students, who were especially positive about the laboratory and farm facilities provided. It was also evident (from both meetings and documentation) that the institution was developing its resources effectively and responding to students and external advisers in order to enhance learning opportunities. Examples included the development of the VLE and the introduction of the 'virtual farm', with live webcam transmissions, together with a regular Farm Manager's Forum to increase students' access to the working farm. It was also clear that in planning the newly opened Postgraduate and Professional Development Centre great care had been taken to identify and meet student need.

Admissions policy

68   The institution's current admissions policy was approved by the Academic Board in November 2009, and takes account of revisions to the *Code of practice* regarding disabled students and latest advice from the UK Borders Agency regarding international students. The policy covers admissions to undergraduate, postgraduate taught and research programmes and its guiding principles are based on the recommendations for 'fair admissions' emanating from the *Admissions to Higher Education Review, 2003*. It is published on the University College website, together with details of admissions requirements (see paragraph 122), which include English language qualifications for applicants from outside the UK. Prospective students are normally required to attend for interview.

69   Strategies for widening participation have been informed by the institution's involvement in projects focusing on rural access to higher education and its objective to improve the impact of knowledge transfer on rural businesses. In this regard, the University College offers extended foundation degrees, providing access to higher education courses for students without the minimum entry requirements and has in place arrangements for accreditation of both certificated and experiential prior learning.

70   The admissions process and responsibilities for it are clearly stated in the admissions policy. These include responsibilities for admissions to collaborative provision where there are some variations according to the partner organisation (college or employer). Admissions to taught programmes are administered centrally by the Registry on the basis of decisions taken by course teams and course leaders in accordance with institutional guidelines; professional support is available from the Liaison and Marketing Unit and the Learner Support Team. The audit team saw details of a rolling programme of staff development for those involved in the admissions process, which is overseen by the Academic Registrar. There are separate admissions arrangements for research degrees (see paragraphs 106).

71   The operation of policy and process is monitored through the collation and analysis of admissions data in a report to the Academic Board. This draws on information from student surveys, with the New Student Survey being of particular relevance, as it includes students' views on their experience of the admissions process pre-entry. The audit team found that the University College had implemented a comprehensive admissions policy covering the totality of its provision and was taking appropriate steps to monitor its effectiveness.

Student support

72   There is an integrated approach to student support, which links the support provided at course and departmental level with that provided by central services, in particular the learner support team. Two institutional policies deal with learner support, one covering all students (Learner Support Policy) and the other targeted at students with learning disabilities (Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy for students with disabilities). The latter incorporates advice to staff, students and applicants to the University College on reasonable adjustments that can be made to arrangements for teaching, learning and assessment to accommodate specific learner needs. New entrants are screened to identify whether they might benefit from learner support and, if so, its nature and type. Disability awareness training is mandatory for all staff.

73   The students (in their written submission and in meetings with the audit team) were highly complimentary about the information and guidance they received from course managers and senior tutors, who conducted regular meetings, both with course groups and in one-to-one sessions. The students particularly valued the open-door policy of staff, which meant that most difficulties could be resolved before they became significant problems. This view was supported by the 2009 National Student Survey, in which 89 per cent of respondents indicated that good advice was available when they needed to make study choices. As mentioned above (see paragraph 61), the students saw their course placement manager and individual placement tutor as key to the success of their work experience.

74   However, there was one area were the students were hesitant about the support available and that was personal development planning, in particular the involvement of the personal tutor. The staff who met the audit team appeared also to be unclear about the role of the personal tutor in this process and in the professional scholarship programme for undergraduate students (which provides training in communication, information technology, numeracy, research methods and personal skills, such as teamwork and time management in preparation for the placement). The team found the programme to be well described in course handbooks and the students confirmed that they had taken skills modules and preparatory sessions for their placement. Even so, the team drew a distinction between the acquisition of skills through training and the process of reflection on skills attained or skills required that constitutes personal development planning. The team therefore considers it desirable for the University College to reinforce the role of the personal tutor in fostering amongst undergraduate students a clear understanding of the purpose and importance of personal development planning and in supporting the process.

75   It became apparent to the audit team that the Aspire programme with its overlapping themes of learner support, professional skills development, work placement, work-based learning and e-learning was highly instrumental in strengthening the links between the various strands of student support. In meetings with the team, both staff and students consistently referred to the role played by Aspire in bringing together support services, including (in the resources area) career information, and in raising the profile of student support across the institution and its collaborative partnerships. Examples of Aspire projects are the introduction of text-to-speech and mind-mapping software, and the development of case studies on support strategies, such as those used by students with dyslexia.

76   Special support is available for international students, including a two-week orientation programme, chiefly aimed at students from the partner college in China, joining Harper Adams for their final year of study. These students are also expected to take an English language tuition programme, and the audit team noted that the English Language tutor had attended module lectures in subjects where international students faced difficulties, to ensure the programme gave appropriate support. Another example of special support arrangements, this time in the context of foundation degree students, is the appointment of an academic guidance tutor to support their transition to higher education. The team was told that this support was being extended to other students identified as needing it.

77   Overall, the audit team concluded that student support arrangements were comprehensive and well integrated, noting that the new Student Services Centre (due to open later in 2010) would house a 'one-stop-shop' for students. The team identifies as good practice the enhancement of the quality and accessibility of a range of activities supporting the student learning experience through the implementation of special programmes under the collective name of Aspire. Contributing to this good practice are the Aspire programmes (see paragraphs 62 and 63) relating to placement, work-based and e-learning.

Staff support (including staff development)

78   New academic staff appointments are required to become fellows of the Higher Education Academy within three years. Those with no prior experience in higher education or no qualification accredited by the Academy must study towards a qualification in order to gain fellowship. There is an Academic Staff Handbook, which deals comprehensively with human resources policies and procedures applicable to academic staff.

79   The University College relies on its arrangements for induction, mentoring and training to develop the pedagogic skills of staff. Induction for new staff incorporates sessions on teaching, learning and assessment, which are organised annually by the Head of Educational Development and Quality Enhancement. Under the mentoring scheme, staff are assigned a mentor for their first two years; guidance is issued which covers the respective responsibilities in the mentor/ mentee relationship. The same induction and mentoring arrangements are also open to research students. Formal training in teaching is provided through a course, accredited by the Higher Education Academy, run by Keele University (Postgraduate Certificate in teaching, learning and higher education practice). Established staff are also encouraged to become Academy members and participate in its activities. At the time of the audit, membership was running at 62 per cent of academic staff.

80   From discussions with staff, the audit team gained the clear impression that induction and mentoring were appreciated by new staff; mentors provided extensive support with lecture preparation, techniques and delivery. Staff who had recently completed the postgraduate certificate had found the course rewarding; they welcomed the opportunity to build links with Keele University and to share experience with its staff.

81   As part of their further development, academic staff engage in peer-to-peer teaching observations organised at departmental level. The expectation is that experienced staff will be observed once a year and inexperienced staff up to three times. There is published guidance and a template for structuring and recording comments, which are used as a basis for action points. The mechanism for determining who observes whom varies, with some pairings being assigned by heads of department and others being selected by the individuals concerned. The process is developmental, its purpose being to assist staff to reflect on their individual development needs in preparation for their performance and development review (see paragraph 82). However, there is provision for a line manager to seek agreement from a member of staff to undertake additional sessions, as observer or observed, if there is evidence of poor teaching performance.

82   All staff undergo an annual performance and development review, which results in agreed action points that take into account individual development needs. The review process is supported by standard paperwork and monitored centrally by the personnel team. It has recently been linked to a 'contribution-related' pay scheme, effective October 2009. The outcomes of the reviews inform the annual planning process, which includes the use of an institution-wide staff workload model. The completion of individual performance and development reviews also helps to determine generic staff development priorities. Examples are a management development programme, run in conjunction with a neighbouring University (Staffordshire) and a skills development programme (known as 'Espresso') consisting of sessions delivered by external facilitators. These have recently included project management, conflict resolution and customer satisfaction.

83   Since 2005, the Aspire programme has sponsored award schemes for staff, based on peer and student nomination, which recognise and reward staff, including partner staff, who make a significant contribution to teaching, learner support, or to the wider student experience. Award winners share their good practice, through, for example, the Learning and Teaching Forum. Four days each year are set aside for forum workshops, which include internal and external contributions, and these provide another staff development opportunity.

Overall conclusion

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

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

85   The Learning and Teaching Strategy sets out the parameters that academic departments and services must use in planning their activities for the coming year, with the object of improving the quality of the student learning experience. Responsibility for delivering the specific objectives of annual plans is assigned to senior managers whose performance is reviewed through executive structures. Progress against the Learning and Teaching Strategy is measured using performance indicators and reviewed annually by the Academic Board, which is keen to see that the indicators point to quality improvements.

86   The University College seeks to deliver quality enhancement by driving continuous improvement through quality assurance processes that identify opportunities for building on strengths, by developing the pedagogic skills of staff and disseminating good practice, and by implementing special initiatives. The Aspire programme has been an important catalyst, in particular, through the fellowship scheme and associated projects, as described above (see paragraphs 62; 63; 75). The evaluation reports on Aspire reviewed by the audit team showed a wide range of activity with detailed progress monitoring using performance indicators. The outcomes of Aspire projects have been well publicised internally and externally through numerous events, which have served, in the team's view, to make Aspire a valued brand.

87   Recent institutional initiatives have been concerned with developing the organisational structures to support part-time and work-based learners, given the increase in their number brought about through REEDNet. In this context, the audit team noted the ongoing investment in infrastructure projects, such as the purpose-built student centres (see paragraphs 48 and 77) and the continued expansion of the virtual learning environment (see paragraphs 63 and 64).

88   In the audit team's view, the institution's approach to quality enhancement is informed by strategic direction, with mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and dissemination. In delivering improvements to students' learning opportunities, it has taken forward the priorities of skills development, learner support, and workplace and e-learning.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

89   One aspect of collaboration between the University College and its further education college partners is centred on the delivery of undergraduate courses, which it validates as appropriate to lead to its awards. Another aspect is the relationship with these same colleges as its REEDNet partners, developing courses for and with employers that are accredited by the University College.

90   The majority of the award-bearing courses are foundation degrees whose progression routes are to 'top-up' honours degrees at either the partner college or Harper Adams. There is a single overseas partnership involving course delivery, with an agricultural college in China, whereby students complete the first two years of their course in China, transferring to Harper Adams for their final year. In addition, there is an articulation agreement with a veterinary college in China under which students from stipulated courses may be considered for entry to the final year of the degree course at Harper Adams.

91   Collaboration between the University College and its employer partners (that is where the employer has some involvement in the delivery or assessment of a course) is centred on courses that lead to the award of credit, which may translate into a recognised higher education award. Partnerships involved in providing such courses are included in the institutional register of collaborative provision along with partnerships with educational institutions. This register is now available on the University College website.

92   The institution draws a distinction in its procedures between employer-linked courses of up to 80 credits and courses in excess of 80 credits, with only the latter being subject to supplementary quality assurance procedures that deal with the establishment and operation of the partnership, as distinct from the courses, to which mainstream procedures apply (see paragraph 19). The audit team considered this definition to be a reasonable interpretation of the *Code of practice* on collaborative provision. The supplementary procedures were amended (during the audit process) to make explicit that they were applicable to partnerships with employers, as well as to those with educational institutions.

93   The process of establishing a partnership comprises several stages. Informal contacts with the partner lead to an outline proposal being put forward for approval in principle. Due diligence is undertaken, including a risk assessment of the partner and a financial risk assessment of the proposal. A panel conducts a preliminary partnership review, which may include a visit to the partner, leading to a recommendation to the Academic Board, whose approval paves the way for a course validation event at the partner's premises. A streamlined version of this process may be applied to partnerships with employers, bringing together partnership review and course validation in a single event. The audit team noted that guidance on due diligence enquiries was currently under review to ensure that it reflected best practice.

94   A contractual agreement, covering a set period, governs the operation of each partnership, with responsibilities clearly identified. The audit team looked at several examples, which seemed to be comprehensive, were consistent with guidance set out in the *Code of practice*, and were duly

signed by respective parties. The University College has identified a need to standardise the form and content of its employer agreements, based on the experience it has already accumulated, and the team saw a draft of the agreement to be used for higher education courses of 80 credits or less, which are within the remit of the Employer Engagement Accreditation and Validation Committee.

95   Monitoring the 'day-to-day' operation of a partnership is the responsibility of a partnership coordinator appointed by the University College, whose role also encompasses liaison and advice. The audit team saw examples of effective monitoring, in one case extending to peer observation of teaching by visiting Harper Adams' staff. There is currently no requirement to report routinely on staff visits, which the team considered to be a missed opportunity, particularly since there was evidence that reports were prepared in some instances. Partner staff are encouraged to participate in various professional development opportunities made available by Harper Adams and, in some cases, bespoke programmes have been provided. Partnership coordinators are also instrumental in identifying the particular needs of partners.

96   The main mechanism for monitoring partnerships is partnership review, which for educational partnerships occurs annually and for employer partnerships according to specifically agreed arrangements. The partnership review is carried out in addition to the annual course monitoring process (see paragraph 20) and its purpose is to review quality assurance arrangements, resolving any issues requiring attention by either the University College or the partner, and to establish an action plan for the next year. The reports on partnership reviews seen by the audit team were positive in tone, but also suitably analytic.

97   The audit team understood that publicity and marketing materials produced by the partner relating to the collaboration were subject to regular monitoring through the annual partnership review, as well as to ad hoc checks during the year. Based on its own review of online information, which uncovered certain shortcomings, the team considers it desirable for the University College to strengthen the mechanisms for monitoring the completeness and accuracy of information relating to the University College on partner websites.

98   Mainstream procedures for annual course monitoring and periodic review and revalidation (see paragraphs 21 to 23), apply equally to partners. The audit team was able to verify that issues relating to collaborative provision featured prominently in annual reporting processes at module, course and institutional level, with issues identified in course monitoring feeding through into overview reports. The first partnership with an employer has recently undergone periodic review and revalidation of its courses based on a combined annual monitoring and critical appraisal report presented by the course team. The team was informed that the University College intended to build on this experience by extending its annual overview reports on collaborative provision to include employer-linked provision.

99   Mainstream arrangements for assessment and external examining (see paragraphs 35; 39; 26) are applied in partner colleges. In the case of the courses at the agricultural college in China, the team of external examiners included an examiner with firsthand knowledge of China, whose reports have commented on cultural differences and issues relevant to studying at a distance, such as access to electronic resources. Students' assessment results are processed through the University College database and used to produce the relevant transcript for each student. These show the University College as the awarding institution and name the partner as a teaching institution. The transcripts for students from employer-linked courses currently take the same form, although consideration is being given to whether 'teaching institution' is the most suitable terminology.

100   The University College characterises its current position as one of consolidation, in which it continues to adapt and review its processes, particularly in relation to its relatively new employer-related initiatives, so as to build on the institution's own best practice and that elsewhere in the higher education sector. The audit team identifies as good practice the development by the University College of employer-linked provision through an approach that seeks to integrate this with its other collaborative provision in respect of quality assurance requirements.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

Research environment

101   The number of research students is relatively small (29) and concentrated in two departments, Crops and Animals. It was clarified to the audit team that only modest expansion was envisaged, but that staff were encouraged to complete research degrees, which would enable the institution to take on research students in a wider range of subjects.

102   In relation to research, the University College sees its role as providing a strong presence in applied research, with the capacity to translate research into practice. Overall responsibility for the management and quality assurance of research is the remit of the Vice Principal, assisted by the Research Coordinator. At the time of the audit, the post of Vice Principal was vacant and the Principal was overseeing the area until an appointment was made. Heads of department have responsibilities for the research activities of their staff and students. The audit team was told that within departments research students were effectively treated as staff members; those who met the team saw this as important in facilitating interaction with academic colleagues.

103   Since 2006 (when the institution was granted research-degree awarding powers), the Research Degrees Standards Committee, which reports to the Academic Standards Committee, has been responsible for developing policies and procedures in support of research degree programmes, with reference to the relevant section of the *Code of practice*. The intention at the outset was that, on completing this task, the Committee's remit would be absorbed by the Academic Standards Committee and a decision on this is to be made in summer 2010.

104   The management and quality assurance procedures for both staff research and postgraduate research students are contained in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual. The Postgraduate Research Students Handbook gives further details, while a handbook for supervisors is in draft.

105   Regular monitoring of arrangements for research degrees is through an annual report produced for consideration by the Research Degrees Standards Committee and onward transmission to the Academic Standards Committee and the Academic Board. The format of the report combines a review of the previous year's activity, which draws on national benchmarks, and an action plan for the coming year. The audit team found these reports to be comprehensive with clear recommendations and action points. It also noted the improvement in thesis submission rates since the University College had begun awarding its own research degrees.

Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students

106   Selection and entrance requirements for research degree programmes are set out in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual. All prospective research students are interviewed by the Research Coordinator and potential supervisor. Induction is carried out on an individual basis by the Research Office and all students receive a copy of the Postgraduate Research Students Handbook. Students who met the audit team were complimentary about admissions and induction processes.

107   The Research Coordinator, in conjunction with the relevant head of department, is responsible for ensuring the nomination and appointment of a supervisory team for each research student, comprising a main supervisor (termed director of studies) and at least one secondary supervisor. In addition, 'advisers' may be appointed who provide technical advice but have no direct responsibility for supervision. The duties of each type of supervisor are clearly stated in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual. Proposals for research projects and the suitability of supervisors must be approved by the Research Degrees Awarding Board (a subcommittee of the Research Degrees Standards Committee). The students who met the

audit team were clear about the respective roles of members of their supervisory team and valued the accessibility of their director of studies.

108   The audit team understood that the supervisors' handbook (in draft) would enlarge on procedural requirements in relation to admissions and supervisors' workloads and responsibilities so as to take full account of certain precepts of the *Code of practice*. The team considered that there had been undue delay in implementing the relevant procedures, the matter having been raised at the Research Degrees Standards Committee in July 2009 whereas publication of the supervisors' handbook was not expected until September 2010.

Progress and review arrangements

109   Research students are required to attend a series of formal supervisory meetings of which records are kept on standard report forms. These are in addition to the regular, but more informal, progress meetings, which are expected to be at least fortnightly in the early stages of the project, reducing to monthly after the first four months. Progress at the end of the first year is based on a significant piece of work by the student and an oral examination conducted by the Research Coordinator and another member of academic staff, independent of the supervisory team. These lead to a first-year assessment report from the supervisory team and a recommendation for the student to be registered for either MPhil or PhD (such recommendations being subject to approval by the Research Degrees Awarding Board).

110   The audit team heard from students that there was a lot of support available to them in writing-up progress reports; that there were opportunities to resubmit their first-year assessment, if it was initially failed; and that almost all students progressed at this stage. The team considered the first-year assessment to be a transparent process, supported by published assessment criteria and detailed feedback, enabling students to obtain a realistic view of progress achieved. A similar process occurs at the end of the second year, this time based on submission by the student of a refereed or conference paper.

Development of research and other skills

111   The University College recognises that research students, as well as developing research skills, need to develop a broader set of personal and professional skills. In its procedures it differentiates between individual training to be provided by the supervisory team and more generic training to be provided centrally, and assigns responsibility for making students aware of training opportunities to their director of studies. Even though these general principles may seem to be clear, the detail following from them is much less so.

112   The Academic Quality Assurance Manual states that research students will, early on in their programme, undertake a postgraduate research methodology module. This module, now known as Research and Information Skills, is offered as one of four modules comprising the Postgraduate Certificate in Skills for Researchers. It is envisaged (as stated in the Postgraduate Research Students Handbook) that all research students will take the Postgraduate Certificate, unless they already hold an equivalent qualification. There is also provision for students to gain exemption (on the basis of accredited prior learning), for example students with a master's degree may not be required to take the Research and Information Skills module.

113   On the other hand, the audit team was told by staff that the Postgraduate Certificate in Skills for Researchers was not compulsory and that its appropriateness for every student was under review, with the definition of formal training being left for supervisors to agree with students. The lack of clarity concerning requirements was underlined by the confusion experienced by some students following the introduction of an online module (Leadership and Professional Development) to replace the personal development planning portfolio.

114   The Postgraduate Research Students Handbook refers to students' having access to a range of other support sessions; however, the Handbook is not clear how these sessions relate to the Postgraduate Certificate, how these will be delivered and which elements, if any, are mandatory. In practice, some of the listed session objectives would be served by the annual development programme organised (each Easter) by the Research Office; however there is no mention of this programme in the Handbook. The exact status of the annual researchers' colloquium in the context of the Postgraduate Certificate, or general requirements placed on research students, is similarly unclear (for example, whether participation is required every year, or just once during each student's research programme). With respect to the training of research students as teaching assistants, currently the only information that exists is in a draft regulation that is part of the (as yet unpublished) handbook for supervisors of postgraduate research students.

115   There was evidence that students were broadly satisfied with the effectiveness of the training programmes arranged for them, for example from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). Nevertheless, on the basis of more detailed analysis of PRES data, the area of professional development has been identified in the current year's action plan as requiring further attention. The audit team considers it advisable for the University College to revise procedures relating to research students' training, clarifying the means of delivery and the expectations placed on students, in particular making explicit which aspects of the training are mandatory (unless exemption is permitted through prior qualification).

Feedback arrangements

116   Student feedback is one of the inputs to the annual monitoring report for research degrees (see paragraph 105). Formal feedback mechanisms include student representation on the Research Degrees Standards Committee and, from 2009, the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), which replaced the in-house surveys of previous years. Overall survey results have been positive, but the University College also responds to specific comments, for example the limited opportunities to become involved in teaching, which it plans to consider as part of the professional development of research students (see paragraph 115). Since PRES is conducted every two years, there are plans to revamp an internal survey, based on PRES, to cover the intermediate year.

117   Research students (in the students' written submission and meetings with the audit team) stated that the institution responded quickly and positively to their comments and feedback. They expressed the view that the University College was keen to improve its research profile and that engaging with students' views was integral to its approach.

Assessment of research students

118   Final assessment of research students entails submission of a thesis followed by an oral examination. Two or more examiners are appointed, including at least one external examiner; appointment criteria and procedures are published in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual. The audit team saw evidence of thorough consideration by the Research Degrees Standards Committee of the suitability of examiners, including requests for further information on those proposed. The roles of examiners and others who may be present at the oral examination are clearly defined; for instance, the student's director of studies may attend as an observer. In 2008, independent chairs for oral examinations were introduced as a pilot, to be reviewed in 2010.

119   There are generic assessment criteria (derived from the qualification descriptors for research master's and doctoral degrees in the FHEQ) and these are employed in the standard examination report forms. The examiners prepare independent reports before the oral examination and a joint report after it, clearly indicating whether or not the student has satisfied the criteria for the award. The reports and the examiners' recommendation are considered by the Research Degrees Awarding Board, which ratifies the decision.

Representation, complaints and appeals arrangements for research students

120   Procedures for complaints and appeals are detailed in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual and the Postgraduate Research Students Handbook refers students to the relevant sections. The audit team found the route to information on appeals rather complicated to navigate, involving referral from the Handbook to procedures in the Manual via the intranet, then on to annexes containing regulations or procedures. The team suggests it would be more straightforward for students if procedures for complaints and appeals were fully explained in one place.

Overall conclusion

121   In the audit team's view, the overall arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience, as reflected in positive student feedback. While the institution's procedures are sufficient to meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, the team has recommended revisions in relation to research students' training.

Section 7: Published information

122   The University College publishes information on its website and in print, including prospectuses, policy documents and guidance. Overall responsibility for published information is due to be transferred to the Director of Communications once this newly created post has been filled. Until then, the Academic Registrar retains responsibility, supported, for web-based information, by a number of 'gatekeepers' responsible for specific areas of the website. For collaborative provision, partnership agreements set out responsibilities for ensuring that promotional materials prepared by partners are accurate and kept up-to-date.

123   Prospectuses are produced by the central Liaison and Marketing Unit in collaboration with course teams. The students' written submission indicated that 80 per cent of respondents to the 2009 New Students Survey had found that the prospectus contained all the information needed to help them make their decision. The students who met the audit team considered that the pre-entry information about the University College, including that obtained through open days and interview, reflected accurately what they experienced when they arrived.

124   The University College student handbook is supplemented by bespoke handbooks for undergraduate, postgraduate taught and research students respectively. The undergraduate handbooks are tailored according to course, but are produced to a standard format. Additionally, for undergraduates, there are placement and project handbooks and module schemes of work. Handbooks for collaborative courses are approved at validation and updated by the course team in liaison with the partnership coordinator. Students indicated to the audit team that handbooks and course information were comprehensive.

125   The audit team reviewed a range of handbooks, concluding that templates for course handbooks were being utilised to bring consistency to the information provided. However, the team noted some variations in the case of handbooks for collaborative courses, including the omission of important items, such as assessment, in one case. Course handbooks contain an abridged version of programme specifications and direct students to where the full specification can be obtained (course manager or intranet). They make appropriate reference to the Academic Quality Assurance Manual for further details on regulations and procedures, though the undergraduates whom the team met had not used the Manual in this way, since they were able to discuss such matters through regular group meetings with their senior tutor.

126   The University College meets national expectations for public information on teaching quality (as set out in the *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: phase two outcomes, HEFCE 06/45*). The prescribed statistics, National Student Survey results and links to QAA reports may be accessed by the public from the Unistats website. In terms of the items of suggested public

interest relating to the quality and standards of courses, few are published on the University College website; instead they are available on request by application to the Academic Registrar. Students have access to external examiner reports through their representatives on course committees (see paragraph 54).

127   In the audit team's view, the institution has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. It meets the current national expectations for public information on teaching quality.