QAA

Institutional audit

Royal Veterinary College

February 2009

Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland, to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). It was revised in 2006, following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework, established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's (UK) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard, at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner

- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications

- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

Institutional audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes

- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply, unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students

- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences

- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) undertook an Institutional audit of the Royal Veterinary College, University of London (the College) as part of a year-long scrutiny of the College's application for taught and research degree awarding powers, which commenced in 2008. The final round of meetings with College representatives took place on 19 February 2009. 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 College offers.

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

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment of students.

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The College's approach to quality enhancement is intended to be 'embedded' rather than being the subject of a formal policy or a set of defined procedures. The College has some way to go in making all staff aware of its approach to enhancement and their explicit responsibilities in this area. The dissemination of good and innovative practice in teaching and learning occurs primarily through informal contacts. The College makes extensive use of opportunities for enhancement and exploits the information and resources available to it. The audit team concluded that instances of enhancement activity are occurring, albeit in the absence of a clear policy. The College's approach to enhancement is reactive rather than proactive. To assist the exploitation of enhancement opportunities, procedures for the collection, dissemination, integration and exploitation of feedback data, and management information, should be placed on a more consistent footing. When this has been achieved, it is likely that more effective and efficient use will be made of key information sources and College-wide enhancement activities will be better informed.

Postgraduate research students

The College has a strong research ethos and the quality of its research is recognised both nationally and internationally. The College participated in the HEFCE/QAA Review of research degree programmes, in 2006. The judgement of that review was that '…the institution's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its research degree programme provision is appropriate and satisfactory…'. The aspects of assessment and the security of award standards considered by the audit team led it to the same conclusion as the Review, namely that '…institutional arrangements for the assessment of research students are appropriate and satisfactory…'. In particular, the audit team concluded that the research degree student

monitoring and appraisal process is soundly constructed, securely organised and responsive to the needs of individual students and commends the management and monitoring of the supervision, and the training and support provided for, postgraduate research students. The audit team found that the University's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision for postgraduate research programmes meet the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

Published information

The audit team found that, overall, reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards, but felt that more could be done to improve the consistency and completeness of school handbooks.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following features of good practice:

- the rigour of the external examiner nomination process for both taught and research degree provision; the thorough induction and briefing provided by the College for its external examiners, and the well-informed annual External Examiners Forum

- the strengthening of the College's quality assurance processes through the rigorous operation of the external examiner system and the involvement of independent external participants at institutional and course-level committees

- the arrangements for ensuring that the student body is represented on key committees within the College; the opportunities for the student voice to be heard and acted upon to the benefit of the College and the enhancement of the student experience, and the commitment of the student body to these arrangements

- the leadership and administrative support provided by the Graduate School for all postgraduate students

- the management and monitoring of the supervision, and the training and support provided for, postgraduate research students.

Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the College to:

- ensure that the implementation of the College's mechanisms for establishing, securing and maintaining the standards of awards becomes demonstrably equivalent for all taught programmes and that the recorded evidence relating to standards set, their monitoring, review and attainment is made more consistent and explicit

- ensure that where inconsistencies at course level in regulatory and other areas are identified, clear institutional action is taken to ensure they are resolved

- ensure that its arrangements for engaging with external reference points relating to standards are applied consistently across the College, and are clearly articulated in its quality assurance processes

- review its programme monitoring and review processes, to ensure that the effectiveness of their operation, including appropriate actions, is evaluated at institutional level

- clarify further the respective functions of the Academic Board, Teaching Quality Committee and Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee, with regard to the strategic oversight of its arrangements for assuring the standard of awards and enhancing learning opportunities, and that it ensures that members of these committees understand clearly their roles and responsibilities

- continue to prioritise and expedite the development of the integrated College-wide approach to the systematic collection, analysis, evaluation and use of management information at course and institutional level; and that, as part of this approach, the College moves rapidly towards a consistent and regulated approach to the identification, dating, attribution and registration of all relevant documents

- review its current definition of collaborative provision, to encompass more accurately the range of activities involve external providers

- review its collaborative provision procedures, to clarify the evidence required from its collaborative partners, to give the College assurance that the standards and quality of the provision are fully met.

It would be desirable for the College to:

- ensure that its arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the College's Learning and Teaching Strategy review the impact of the Strategy's initiatives on the quality of learning opportunities

- manage actively the identification and exploitation of opportunities for enhancement to ensure that its intention of making enhancement integral to its quality management processes is translated into action.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice*

- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

The audit team saw widespread evidence that the College's own quality assurance arrangements and regulations are fully informed by the FHEQ, the *Code of practice* and subject benchmark statements.

Report

1   An Institutional audit of the Royal Veterinary College, University of London (the College) was undertaken as part of a year-long scrutiny of the College's application for taught and research degree awarding powers, which commenced in 2008. The final round of meetings with College representatives took place on 19 February 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information the University's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2   The audit team was Professor A Cryer, Mrs C Penna, Associate Professor M R Luck, auditors, and Mrs C Cobbett, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr D Parry, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   The Royal Veterinary College was founded in 1791 and became a constituent college of the University of London in 1949. Its mission is to be the premier veterinary school in the UK and among the best in the world.

4   The majority of the College's teaching provision is focused on a five-year course leading to the professional degree of BVetMed. This accounted for 55 per cent of the College's student headcount in 2006-07 and 84 per cent of HEFCE teaching income in that year. In October 2008, the College had a total of 1,903 students of which 76.6 per cent were undergraduates and 23.4 per cent were postgraduate; 87 per cent were full-time and 13 per cent part-time (including distance learning); 91 per cent were home/European Union and 9 per cent were overseas; and 77 per cent were female and 23 per cent male. There were 347 academic, research and academic-related staff in 2008-09 and 363 technical, clerical and other staff.

5   The College is one of 19 colleges that comprise the federal University of London, although it is funded directly by HEFCE. University of London Ordinances authorise individual colleges to award taught degrees of the University of London. Research degree examinations continue to take place centrally under the auspices of the University of London.

6   The last audit in 2003 found that broad confidence could be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The present audit team found that the College had addressed the recommendations from that audit, although aspects of the use of statistical information and of the College's arrangements and procedures for collaborative provision remain matters of concern. The College was also the subject of a QAA Review of research degree programmes in 2006 which concluded that, overall, the College's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its research degree programmes was appropriate and satisfactory.

7   Since the last audit, the College has seen a significant increase in student and staff numbers. It has added a 'Year Zero' entry level to its five-year BVetMed, established a Foundation Degree in Veterinary Nursing and approved new MSc and postgraduate (PgDip) courses. The Senior Management Group has been strengthened; academic and support departments have been restructured; the boundaries between central and departmental responsibilities have been redefined; and there has been a major revision of the College's committee structure.

8   The College awards degrees of the University of London in accordance with the University's Ordinances. In order to exercise these powers, colleges of the University are required to have established their own regulations, within the broad framework set down in the Ordinances, and to have lodged a copy of their quality assurance procedures with the Vice-Chancellor of the University of London. Within this framework, the College has full powers over, inter alia, its regulations, the approval of new programmes, examination boards, examination arrangements and external examiners and their reports. The University of London retains the right to approve the establishment of degrees offered jointly with other institutions, aspects of research degree

examinations including the formal appointment of external examiners, the awarding function for distance-learning degrees, including the relevant regulations, and examination offences.

9   The College's academic regulations are comprehensive and are set out in the College's Quality Assurance (QA) Handbook. The College's Academic Registrar is the custodian of its academic regulatory framework. Ultimate responsibility for academic matters lies with Academic Board, chaired by the College Principal. Under this overarching responsibility, the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee develops, and oversees, the provision of taught courses, and the Teaching Quality Committee assures the quality of courses and the standard of the College's awards. The Research Degrees Committee is responsible for assuring the quality and standards of research degrees and for making recommendations on their award. Regulations for the management and delivery of degrees offered jointly with partner organisations are defined in memoranda of cooperation approved by Academic Board, and each partner has a clearly defined role and set of responsibilities.

10   The audit team found that a relatively light-touch oversight of issues/trends relating to award standards is exercised by college-level committees. Moreover, the observation of, and documentation arising from, meetings of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee and Teaching Quality Committee, illustrated a variability in the quality of record-keeping from course management committees across the College, which has the potential to introduce inconsistencies into the exercise of this accountability.

11   The audit team concluded that further clarity is required between Academic Board, the Teaching Quality Committee and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee with regard to responsibilities for quality and standards, and in their responsibilities for strategy, oversight and action. In particular, the team detected uncertainty about the extent to which the Teaching Quality Committee should be discussing the detail of the information it receives, rather than concentrating on oversight of College and course-level responses. The audit team formed the view that the new committee structure still has some way to go before it reaches maturity, and encourages the College to continue to review the operation and effectiveness of its committees.

12   The audit team also found that a large number of documents it examined including, policies, statements of procedure, summaries of management information and feedback reports, some of which had been presented to College committees for discussion or note, were undated and/or unattributed.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

13   Academic standards are defined initially through reference to the College's regulatory framework. This specifies criteria for each degree that parallel those set out in the FHEQ. Requirements for approval set out in the QA Handbook require proposals to include mapping to subject benchmarks and the FHEQ, and to include draft programme specifications. A particular objective of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee's consideration of a new programme is the definition and appropriateness of standards, in accordance with the level and title of the award.

14   The audit team scrutinised documentation relating to the validation of two new courses that had been approved recently, one at undergraduate and one at postgraduate level. The documentation available to the team varied in the extent to which it explained how the process confirmed engagement with internal and external reference points relevant to the establishment of award standards. However, the involvement of external members provided independent comment on, if not explicit, endorsement of award standards.

15   The audit team also scrutinised documentation relating to a number of module reviews and course annual reports. These reports are considered by the appropriate course management committee, before being submitted to the Teaching Quality Committee. The team concluded that the module review and annual review reports were operationally focused, with an implicit

consideration of award standards. A more explicit consideration of issues relating to award standards was, in the view of the team, hampered by the lack of comprehensive and integrated academic management information, including evidenced analyses of performance and comparisons.

16   The College's stated aim for the quinquennial review process is to confirm that awards are of an appropriate standard. The audit team scrutinised three sets of documents relating to different quinquennial reviews and, in one instance observed the panel proceedings. Standards-related matters were addressed in the documentation presented to each review panel in the examples seen by the team, and although the involvement of external members could be taken to imply the independent endorsement of standards, there was little explicit confirmation of the standards claimed. The team concluded, therefore, that the review process demonstrated an implicit rather than explicit endorsement of standards. Although the involvement of external members could be taken to imply the independent endorsement of standards, as noted above, the documentation available to the team did not make this clear.

17   In relation to the handling of the outcomes of the College's approval, monitoring and review processes, the audit team formed the view that the Teaching Quality Committee's formal handling of reports and related information is less than fully effective. In particular, the reports arising from these processes did not indicate whether any trends were emerging that were of importance at institutional, rather than merely at course level. Further, although the approval, monitoring and review processes operated by the College are sound in themselves, their objectives and the outcomes recorded as arising from them are not always linked.

18   The approval, monitoring and review processes, in combination with a scrupulous and rigorous use of external examiners (see below) are able to address matters relevant to the standards of awards of individual courses, all of which exhibit threshold standards. However, the variability in the quality of engagement with these processes, demonstrated by the documentation available, did not allow the audit team to form an unambiguous view of the consistency and comparability of award standards across the College's taught provision. In view of this, the team considers it advisable that the implementation of the College's mechanisms for establishing, securing and maintaining the standards of awards becomes demonstrably equivalent for all taught programmes, and that the recorded evidence relating to standards set, their monitoring, review and attainment is made more consistent and explicit.

19   In its Application the College advances its view that '… external examiners play a vital role in assuring standards …'. The College listed the roles and responsibilities of its external examiners in its Application and in a document entitled, Instructions for the Conduct of Examinations and Assessments. Reports made available to the team demonstrated the conscientious and thorough way in which examiners were fulfilling these roles and responsibilities.

20   The audit team concluded that the scrutiny of external examiner nominations afforded by the Teaching Quality Committee is rigorous and its oversight represents a particular strength of the College's external examiner system. The scrutiny of nominations by the Teaching Quality Committee is complemented by Academic Board which also gives rigorous consideration to external examiner nominations at that level, demonstrating a further strength of the appointment process. The Research Degrees Committee carries out a similar, thorough consideration of nominees for research degree external examiners.

21   A day-long Examiners Induction (Forum), to which all external examiners and internal examiners are invited, has been in place since 2001. It emphasises the Code of practice, the FHEQ, other appropriate external reference points and the College's regulations. The Forum and other related evidence demonstrates the strong use made of external examiners to monitor the reliability of assessment. The audit team found that the external examiners who attended the Forum were well briefed and well informed, and they were invited to contribute actively to the development and enhancement of the College's assessment processes.

22   External examiners are required to report annually, using a common format report form for all taught provision. The audit team considers that the record of the proceedings of the Teaching Quality Committee illustrates a thorough scrutiny of the reports of external examiners. The Teaching Quality Committee also receives an annual overview of external examiner summaries. The summaries seen by the team recorded external examiners unanimous endorsement of the comparability of standards but added little to the existing annual monitoring reports considered by the College.

23   In addition to considering all reports, the Teaching Quality Committee is responsible for ensuring that action is taken on those reports by chairs of boards of examiners and course management committees. Summaries of external examiners' reports and the College's agreed responses are submitted to Academic Board, which also receives an annual summary of recurring and generic issues noted in external examiner reports. The 2006 summary added little to the critical evaluation of the College's position with respect to its assessment and examination practices. The team also felt that Academic Board concentrated on operational matters relating to individual programmes and was less able to identify cross-cutting principles with potential significance at institutional level.

24   The external examiner reports (with responses) received by the Teaching Quality Committee are detailed and thoughtful. The Committee exercises appropriate oversight of external examiner appointments, as does the Research Degrees Committee, being the equivalent body with responsibility for postgraduate research degree appointments. The College provides students with access to external examiner reports through their membership of course management committees, the Teaching Quality Committee and the Research Degrees Committee.

25   The rigour of the external examiner nomination process for both taught and research degree provision, the thorough induction and briefing provided by the College for its external examiners and the well-informed annual External Examiners Forum are considered by the audit team to represent good practice.

26   The College's external examiner system is central to the assurance of award standards. The views of examiners are taken seriously and acted upon. Its effectiveness, however, remains at the level of individual programmes: cross-institutional evaluation is less well developed. The links between the external examiner system and annual monitoring, where they exist, largely reflect the small size of the institution. The successful operation of the external examiner system in confirming standards contrasts with the more implicit standards-related outcomes from the College's other quality assurance processes. Taken together, however, the evidence available, outlined in this and other sections of this report, allowed the team to express confidence in the capacity of the College to manage the current and future security of the standard of its awards.

27   The Teaching Quality Committee is responsible for ensuring that the College addresses the expectations of the *Code of practice*. The audit team formed the view that, in general, engagement with the *Code* is appropriate and is particularly strong in respect of those sections dealing with external examiners and with the assessment of students. New course proposals and quinquennial reviews are required to meet the expectations of the FHEQ. The audit team verified the implementation of these provisions.

28   Programme specifications are central to the process of new course approval and are available to students. The College's Programme Specification template makes links between the stated learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment strategy. Strengthening these links is considered a key aspect of maintaining standards. Course management committees now review and approve programme specifications annually. The template that has been adopted, and the programme specifications seen by the audit team, demonstrates that these links are appropriately made. There is also ample evidence that programme specifications are seen and approved by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee, thus maintaining an overview by the College.

29   College courses that lead to vocational/professional awards are subject to periodic inspection and approval by professional bodies including the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE), and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). Programme specifications are set by course management committees in the light of external reference points and are reviewed annually. The College holds the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies in high regard and considers it essential that the expectations of the relevant bodies are fully satisfied. Although alignment with the requirements of these bodies is a key part of the College's culture, it was difficult for the audit team to discover what specific evidence or procedure supported its claim that the expectations of these bodies '…establishes a point of reference against which the standards for all our courses are calibrated…'.

30   The inclusion of a person external to the College in the membership of the Teaching Quality Committee is a significant aspect of externality noted by the audit team in relation to the security of award standards. External stakeholders, often with relevant professional affiliations, also form part of the membership of course management committees and bring important additional perspectives to bear on the discussions of these committees. The audit team concluded that the College has a particularly strong engagement, with well qualified, independent external persons in a wide range of College activities relevant to the security of award standards.

31   The external reference points used by the College are clearly signalled in its procedures. However, explicit demonstration of due consideration to these external reference points in output documents is often lacking. As a result, demonstration of real engagement with the reference points is sometimes less than clear. The College has recognised some of these issues. Nevertheless, the strengthening of the College's quality assurance processes through the rigorous operation of the external examiner system, to which reference has already been made, and the involvement of independent external participants at institutional and course-level committees is considered by the audit team to represent a feature of good practice.

32   A new Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy was approved by Academic Board in May 2008. The College also has a Student Assessment Policy that has been integrated into the new Strategy. The Student Assessment Policy consists of a series of statements, but does not relate these to potential actions or indicate how the aspirations contained in the document might be realised. However, the new Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy is currently being considered by a working group to identify actions to be taken and those responsible for them. The audit team recognises that the College is now taking steps formally to manage the implementation of this Strategy. The College is, nevertheless, relying on course management committees to consider the provisions of the Strategy and identify local priorities, rather than promoting institutionally determined priorities.

33   Checks on academic standards are in place primarily through the activities of boards of examiners and external examiners. The audit team concluded that collective decisions and judgements on the performance of students are taken appropriately, but that consideration of standards for awards is often implicit rather than explicit, with formal confirmation of awards sometimes being absent from meetings and records. The team concluded that the conduct of boards of examiners is satisfactory, a particular strength being the role played in them by external examiners.

34   The College's Academic Regulations provide a framework covering standards in which these are related to the FHEQ level descriptors. Each course (and in the case of BVetMed, each examination) has a marking scheme, approved annually by Academic Board. Marking schemes are included in all course handbooks; are disseminated additionally via the internet and the College's virtual learning environment; and form part of the programme specifications provided to students at the start of each session. Marking schemes are seen and approved by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee and considered in detail by course management

committees. The student written submission confirmed the general availability, through student handbooks or their equivalent, of assessment information for students.

35   In May 2007, Academic Board approved the detailed requirements for project marking and requirements for the sampling of examination scripts for moderation. This confirmed that undergraduate and taught postgraduate project work should be double-marked and also indicated that final year, summative module assessments should be blind double-marked, with other assessments being sampled by experienced markers in prescribed ratios. Notwithstanding such contributions to consistency of practice, the Teaching Quality Committee identified anomalies in resit policies between courses, a fact that was also commented upon in external examiner reports. However, the Committee was unable to resolve the matter. The audit team advises, therefore, that where inconsistencies at course level in regulatory and other areas are identified clear institutional action is taken to ensure they are resolved.

36   Collaborative partners are represented on relevant course management committees and staff from partner institutions may be appointed to boards of examiners. This puts the management of programmes with collaborative elements firmly within the College's quality assurance framework (see also Section 5).

37   Research student administration, including assessment has, in fact, been devolved to the College by the University of London, with the relevant regulations aligned to FHEQ and the *Code of practice*. The College's Graduate School provides a central structure for the management of postgraduate provision. The College reviewed its framework for the management of postgraduate students and their assessment as part of the 2006 HEFCE Review of research degree provision. The audit team formed the view that the practice of assessment for postgraduate research students is robust.

38   The audit team requested a range of academic management information as part of the documentation for its visit in October 2008. The document produced, entitled Management information covering admission, progression and completion statistics, contained information on courses at foundation, undergraduate and postgraduate taught level. The data provided did not cover the academic year 2007-2008 and was not user-friendly, particularly with respect to its potential use in quality assurance monitoring and review processes. In some cases, progression and completion data was absent. In general, the data was considered by the team to be inadequate in terms of currency, completeness and focus, to support effectively the College's quality assurance processes.

39   There appears to be little central organisation of management information. The general impression gained by the audit team was of little college-wide use of academic management information, particularly student data. Additionally, the statistical evidence available to the Research Degrees Committee was inadequate as evidence upon which to base the overall monitoring of quality and standards for postgraduate students. The College's Application conceded that it could better use examination statistics. Although boards of examiners receive data on means, medians and standard deviations in relation to performance outcomes by each student cohort, little time appeared to be made available for its consideration at examination board meetings.

40   The College uses SITS as its student information management system, but acknowledges that the management of information could be more robust and comprehensive, particularly in relation to student progression. The audit team also formed the view that sharing management information with collaborative partners was not strong. Improvements in data provision and analysis are, however, expected, although they were not in place at the time of the audit.

41   Progress in the production of relevant and integrated academic management information of value to the maintenance of standards and the development of learning opportunities has been limited since the situation was commented upon in the previous audit report. Although some progress is in train with respect to the production of student statistical data, this has still

to be approved formally by the relevant committee. There was little evidence that this data is to be integrated into a broader approach to the provision of academic management information that would encompass other evidence arising from diverse sources including, for example, student surveys.

42   Overall, the audit team found that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

43   The College defines its approach to the management of quality in a Quality Assurance Strategy (under review at the time of the audit) and an interim Strategy Statement. Responsibility for the assurance of quality is delegated by Academic Board to the Teaching Quality Committee.

44   Other elements of the College's quality management structure include: course management committees; the Campus Services Committee; student representation on Academic Board and its subcommittees; and staff, student and other stakeholder representation, including external advisers, on all College committees and working groups where appropriate. The Teaching Quality Committee also has an external expert among its membership.

45   The latest version of the College's Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2008-2013, aims to deliver '…excellent education through the best methods and progressive practice…'. The Strategy sets out a number of initiatives for quality enhancement, and references other College strategies such as human resources, information technology, information, research, e-learning, student support and guidance and estates as supporting this.

46   The current Strategy takes into account the changes in the College's academic portfolio, in particular diversification away from BVetMed, and the establishment of the Lifelong and Independent Veterinary Education (LIVE) Centre. The Corporate Plan for 2009-2013, published at the end of the audit, contains specific references to the delivery of the Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy and how this will help realise the Plan's strategic aims. Staff who met with the audit team confirmed that an action plan to operationalise the Strategy's objectives was being drafted. The team would encourage the College to ensure that its arrangements for monitoring the implementation of its Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy review the impact of the Strategy's initiatives on the quality of learning opportunities.

47   The Teaching Quality Committee is responsible for ensuring that the requirements of the *Code of practice* and *European Standards and Guidelines* are addressed and embedded in College policies and practices. It is also responsible for ensuring their continued, effective implementation, including within the quinquennial review process. Matters relating to research students are referred to the Research Degrees Committee. The audit team concluded that, while securing initial alignment is being conducted diligently through the various committees, ongoing alignment is not specifically referred to in, for example, reports of quinquennial reviews.

48   Staff who met with the audit team indicated that any issues raised at professional and statutory body accreditation visits and requiring responses are considered by course management committees in the first instance, and then reported to the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee or Academic Board. Formal responses to professional bodies are authorised by the Principal. While responses to external accreditations have clearly been made, the team was not able to establish, partly due to the College's practice of not attributing documents, how this process operated, or how actions taken and their impact on the quality of the learning opportunities are monitored at the institutional level. The team advises the College to ensure that its arrangements for engaging with external reference points relating to standards are applied consistently across the College and are clearly articulated in its quality assurance processes.

49   The College has made a point of ensuring that there is external input into its quality assurance processes. A particular and distinctive feature is the inclusion of external members on course management committees, and those committees reporting to Academic Board. Such members are full members of the committees on which they sit and are not always subject specialists. The audit team was able to confirm the value of this process in providing an independent, objective and wider view of the management of learning opportunities, and an approach to pedagogy through external members' annual reports and input to the meetings.

50   New course developments involve a two-stage process, requiring initial approval in principle by Academic Board (on recommendation of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee for taught courses and the Research Degrees Committee for research-based courses) of the academic aspects of a course. The Senior Management Group then gives approval from a business plan/resources perspective before proceeding with the detailed validation second-stage.

51   A validation panel is a joint panel of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee and Teaching Quality Committee, introducing a potential confusion, in responsibility and authority, between the two committees. It seemed to the audit team that the respective role of each committee, where the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee assures the quality and standards, and the Teaching Quality Committee monitors the implementation of the process, was not appreciated by all committee members, or being fully operated.

52   Course management committees consider annual review reports and their associated action plans. The audit team found that there was no comparative, longitudinal analysis of data to enable course management committees or the Teaching Quality Committee to evaluate trends or verify the attainment of learning opportunities. It seemed to the audit team that the lack of any overview or summary of the outcomes of annual reviews and actions meant that the Teaching Quality Committee could not easily monitor the effectiveness of the process, or be assured of consistency in the management of the quality of learning opportunities across the College.

53   From its examination of the quinquennial review process, the audit team formed the view that the review documentation would have benefited from prior analysis and synthesis of the evidence, more use of statistical data, the identification of trends and more critical reflection to support the conduct of a fully reflective and evidence-based evaluation and assessment. There was no specific reference in the review reports to the objectives of the review or confirmation that they had been checked and satisfied. The team was not, therefore, able to verify the completeness of the process in ensuring the continuing quality of the learning opportunities.

54   The audit team also noted that it seems to have been the practice for the Chair of the Teaching Quality Committee to chair quinquennial reviews. The Teaching Quality Committee is also responsible for approving the review report. Given this, the team queried, without in any way questioning the integrity or competence of the individuals concerned, whether this practice might represent a possible conflict of interest and undermine the independence of the review process. While recognising that the College has a limited number of staff to draw on, the team's view was that it could be beneficial to consider appointing other members of staff, properly trained, as internal members, including as chairs, of review panels.

55   Overall, the audit team considered that the College's established procedures for the approval, monitoring and review of programmes were operating robustly at course level, albeit that the consistency and comprehensiveness of the reports could be improved, as the College has itself acknowledged. However, the failure to identify and reflect on the outcomes of annual monitoring at the institutional level means that an overview of College trends and actions does not emerge. The lack of analysis of a considerable amount of data and relevant academic management information is limiting the College's ability effectively to manage the quality of learning opportunities. The College is advised to review its programme monitoring and review processes, to ensure that the effectiveness of their operation, including appropriate actions, is evaluated at institutional level.

56   The College may also wish to review the roles of the Teaching Quality Committee and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee in these processes. The College stated in its application that the Teaching Quality Committee should be less directly involved in the operation of quality assurance procedures and perform more of an auditing role. Because of the Teaching Quality Committee's involvement in the validation and quinquennial review processes, it seemed to the audit team that this is not happening. The College is therefore advised to clarify further the respective functions of Academic Board, the Teaching Quality Committee and Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee with regard to the strategic oversight of its arrangements for assuring the standard of awards and enhancing learning opportunities; and ensure that the members of these committees understand clearly their respective roles and responsibilities.

57   Feedback from students is routed to a number of committees. The audit team was able to observe how this information is used to support the ongoing development and enhancement of courses. The Teaching Quality Committee's approach to the large volume of data available to it is to prioritise a number of significant issues for follow-up and action each year. It considered the Annual Report on Student Feedback 2007-2008 for example. However, this report contained considerable raw data with only a superficial, descriptive evaluation. This made effective analysis by the Teaching Quality Committee difficult. A similar situation arose with National Student Survey data, leaving the audit team uncertain as to whether this was the most appropriate forum for a detailed consideration of such issues and how the responses of those examining the data would be translated into action. Members of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee itself who met with the team confirmed the absence of a systematic approach to the analysis of data and the identification of college-wide issues.

58   The College acknowledged in its Application that the system for supplying and integrating academic management information, and for responding to student issues, needed revision. The audit team noted that developing the use of statistical information at course level in evaluating quality had been recommended in the 2003 QAA Institutional audit report and was pleased to learn that an integrated management information system was now beginning to be used. This should facilitate the production of an institutional overview of trends and of the student experience. The team formed the view that the College does not yet possess a mature system for the evaluation and appropriate summarisation of feedback and academic management information. Against this background, the audit team advises that the College continues to prioritise and expedite the development of a comprehensive and efficient system for the collation, integration and evaluation of feedback and academic management information at course and College level to support arrangements for assuring effectively the standards of awards and enhancing learning opportunities.

59   The audit team found that students are consulted at all levels of the College's operation and management, and that the student view is used effectively in managing the College's learning opportunities. It considered that: the arrangements for ensuring that the student body is represented on key committees within the College and for facilitating their attendance; the opportunities for the student voice to be heard and acted upon to the benefit of the College; the enhancement of the student experience, and the commitment of the student body to these arrangements, are all features of good practice.

60   The College has a strong research ethos and the quality of its research is nationally and internationally recognised. The latest version of the College's Research Strategy aims to ensure that the outputs of research ultimately inform clinical veterinary and medical practice thus underpinning and providing the practical/clinical experience necessary for teaching. This is also articulated in the Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy. All staff are expected to contribute actively to teaching, to demonstrate to students how research feeds into the knowledge base of the subject.

61   Taught degree students who met with the audit team were enthusiastic in their comments on the currency of the curriculum, as evidenced by up-to-date referencing and by their perception that staff are active researchers and practitioners who bring their experience to the classroom. Research degree students reported that the facilities and infrastructure provided for their research were excellent. The audit team saw evidence not only of subject-based research activities and results, but also that a number of academic staff at the College had studied relevant pedagogical literature and were able to advise other colleagues about current pedagogical matters in an authoritative manner.

62   On the basis of the evidence available, the audit team was satisfied that scholarship and research appropriately informs programme content.

63   The College runs two postgraduate distance-learning courses, the PgDip and MSc in Veterinary Epidemiology and Public Health, and the PgDip and MSc in Livestock Health and Production. As well as supporting distance-learning courses, including providing tutor support, the Bloomsbury Learning Environment is used to support courses taught on-campus, lifelong learning and a number of e-continuing professional development courses for veterinarians in practice. The audit team concluded that the College was operating its distance-learning provision effectively.

64   The College continues to develop the facilities necessary for learning, through investment in a range of refurbishment and new-build projects. Notable among these are the replacement of the Hawkshead Clinical Skills Centre by the LIVE Centre in late 2006. The LIVE Centre is the flagship element of the College's independent veterinary education programme and a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning. It aims to develop students' independent learning skills and equip them to be effective lifelong learners throughout their careers. The Centre is the result of a major capital investment, incorporating clinical-skills laboratories and a communication-skills suite. In addition, the clinical areas in the Queen Mother Hospital doubled in size in 2008.

65   The audit team formed the view that the College directs considerable effort and investment to the support of learning by the College, in a manner that ensures that students are appropriately equipped to undertake their studies. The team shares the College's confidence that, as its planning function develops, increasing integration between academic and resource planning will be realised.

66   The College has an institutional admissions policy that is disseminated through the web. Selection and admissions decisions are addressed conscientiously, with relevant training given to selectors and the inclusion, in some interview panels, of experts external to the College. In the case of courses where collaborative partner institutions are involved, partner staff have the opportunity to see applications and contribute to selection decisions. Postgraduate taught course applications are channelled through the Graduate School, which acts as a source of advice in relation to admissions.

67   The College has recognised that, because of its veterinary focus, it faces particular challenges with respect to achieving a balanced intake to its range of courses, which attract applicants across a wide range of qualification levels. In general, awareness among staff is raised by the requirement for them to complete a web-based equal opportunities course, and for admissions staff to be paired with experienced staff as part of their induction into the process.

68   Data available to the College suggested that its student admissions process does not discriminate against any particular groups; however, the College also recognises that, given the small numbers available for analysis, firm conclusions are difficult to draw. The audit team was informed that the College was in the process of preparing attainment profiles of applicants and entrants, to provide course management committees with further evidence relevant to their admissions activity. This work had received special grant funding and was described as work in progress.

69   The team formed the view that the processes in place for the admission of students to the College are adequate and operate satisfactorily.

70   The College has recently established a Student Support Committee the purpose of which is to develop and monitor student support. The Committee encompasses a large group of student-facing services and support structures, and works within the context of the College's Student Support and Guidance Strategy. The attention given to student support is further illustrated by reference to it in the College's Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy. Students, in their student written submission and in meetings with the audit team, were generally content with the support available to them from both departmental and central staff.

71   Initially, students are supported through structured induction sessions, separately targeted at undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and postgraduate research students. Academic support for undergraduate students is mainly through contact with relevant teaching staff, including module leaders and course directors, with small-group teaching a feature of most provision. Students indicated that they are content with the availability and adequacy of such support. Students on placement are supported by a College placement coordinator and by mentors at each placement venue.

72   Postgraduate taught students receive support from a diversity of staff, but particularly and formally from course director(s). Postgraduate research students receive academic support from their supervisors and through the annual appraisal process. They impressed on the audit team the effectiveness of this support and confirmed that it aligned wholly with the commitments made by the College.

73   The College provides pastoral support for students from a combination of in-house and bought-in expertise. This is in addition to the primary support available through academic staff who are, according to students, approachable and available if needs arise. Students were fully supportive of the services available to them and confirmed their effectiveness.

74   Postgraduate research students have both primary and secondary supervisors and appraisers who, if the need arises, can offer support additionally or alternatively to supervisors. These mechanisms of support are supplemented by those provided through the Graduate School. The School provides administrative support to students within the College and monitors the implementation of the College's postgraduate research student Code of Practice. It also supports the students' log and a full programme of skills training.

75   The College has developed personal development planning as a key feature of its academic support provision. Having been introduced to first-year students in 2005 and rolled out to all undergraduate students in 2006, it is expected to take time to be fully embedded, and to reflect appropriately the College's academic disciplines and the needs of its students. Feedback on personal development planning was reported by the College to have been mixed, but the College remains committed to its development as a key element in its strategy to support students' growth as reflective, self-critical lifelong learners.

76   The audit team formed the view that the academic and personal support available to students was appropriate across the full range of provision, and was delivered effectively in an accessible and sensitive fashion.

77   The College has a Human Resources Strategy that incorporates its staff development policy. As part of the implementation of the policy the College adopted the HEFCE People Management Self Assessment Tool in 2006 and is currently progressing towards an assessment for the award of Investors in People. The support for newly appointed staff begins with a three-stage induction process, involving administrative, departmental and institutional elements. New academic staff members are required to undertake a Higher Education Academy-accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice offered by King's College London and must also undertake an in-house communication skills facilitation course.

78   Training for specific academic roles is often a requirement and staff are encouraged to investigate new teaching and assessment approaches through association with the LIVE Centre, where specialist staff are able to provide support and advice. Staff also have the benefit of regular curriculum review away days where views can be exchanged with colleagues and external experts.

79   There is an annual appraisal scheme for all staff. Peer observation of teaching has recently been relaunched as a formal requirement, the output from which will, in future, be incorporated into the evidence base for probation, appraisal and promotion.

80   Support staff members are also subject to annual appraisal, with the outcomes in terms of the identification of developmental needs feeding into the professional development programme operated by the College. In addition, the College supports the attendance of support staff at relevant external professional activities.

81   The audit team formed the view that the College is serious in its commitment to the support and development of its staff and the structures and policies in place, and the activity arising within and from them, contribute positively to the development of the learning environment offered to students.

82   Overall, the audit team found that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

83   The College's approach to quality enhancement is intended to be 'embedded' rather than being the subject of a formal policy or a set of defined procedures. The audit team's observation of the work of course management committees suggests that this is the case in some, but not all, instances and that there may be further opportunities for the detection, dissemination and exploitation of good and innovative practice across the College.

84   The College identifies a number of processes as adopting a self-critical approach, with follow-up action as a key element. These include course design and approval, annual monitoring and quinquennial course review and its processes for responding to the reports of external scrutiny. In addition, the College identifies a number of projects as specific quality enhancement initiatives, including the LIVE Centre.

85   The audit team recognised the value of these initiatives in promoting the quality of educational provision across the College, but from its discussions with staff, it also formed the view that there was some way to go in making all staff aware of the College's approach to enhancement and their explicit responsibilities in this area. Given this, the College may wish to manage actively the identification and exploitation of opportunities for enhancement, to ensure that its intention of making enhancement integral to its quality management processes is translated into action.

86   The Teaching Quality Committee is diligent in considering the adequacy of course team responses to external examiner reports, but the Committee could be more effective in its oversight of the annual report on external examining to the University of London.

87   In its Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy, the College acknowledges that the dissemination of good and innovative practice in teaching and learning occurs primarily through informal contacts supplemented by team teaching, the module review process, and internal contributions to staff development workshops. Staff from the LIVE Centre provide a reference point for pedagogical information and expertise. They advise other academic staff on, for example, assessment methods, and advise course designers and management teams on pedagogical aspects of e-learning. A number of academic staff at the College had studied areas of the pedagogical literature in depth and were able to advise other colleagues about current pedagogical matters in an authoritative manner. The College's e-media unit and library assist in

the development of electronic and paper-based resources for teaching and learning. The College has developed its virtual learning environment, in association with the Bloomsbury Learning Environment consortium.

88   The College makes extensive use of opportunities for enhancement and exploits the information and resources available to it. Such activity is intended by the College to be embedded in all aspects of its work and, indeed, this appears largely to be the case. The audit team concluded, nevertheless, that instances of enhancement activity are occurring in the absence of a clear policy. There appears to be limited awareness on the part of staff of the enhancement potential of much of their work and a lack of discourse related to the acknowledgement of enhancement opportunities at course level.

89   Given this, the audit team concluded that the College's approach to enhancement is reactive rather than proactive. To assist the exploitation of enhancement opportunities, procedures for the collection, dissemination, integration and exploitation of feedback data and management information should be placed on a more consistent footing. When this has been achieved, it is likely that more effective and efficient use will be made of key information sources and college-wide enhancement activities will be better informed.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

90   The College defines the term collaborative provision '…to encompass any course the delivery of which involves a partnership, either formal of informal, with an organisation external to the College…'. The College does not currently engage in validation, franchising, accreditation or articulation arrangements.

91   A meeting with representatives of collaborating institutions illustrated a shared knowledge of the process of approval required by the College, including the distinction between consideration and approval of a business case on the one hand, and academic approval on the other. In general, the College appears to be fully aware of its responsibility for quality and standards in the area of collaborative activity.

92   Degrees which are offered jointly with other institutions have their own special arrangements. A formal memorandum of cooperation, approved by Academic Board, specifies clearly the responsibilities of each partner in respect of regulatory matters and other aspects of the course's management and delivery. Those seen by the audit team had been prepared over a period of time. They had evolved in line with more recent requirements and the latest versions were more overtly designed to meet the expectations of the relevant section of the *Code of practice.*

93   The process of bringing all collaborative arrangements into line with its stated requirements is one which the team believes should be addressed systematically by the College, so as to ensure that its register of collaborative activity is accurate and complete. In doing so, the opportunity could be taken to ensure that all memoranda address the principles set out in the College's current documentation and the precepts contained in the relevant section of the *Code of practice.*

94   Each collaborative course is dealt with as a whole and does not distinguish between the contributions made by the two institutions. This strengthened the view that a single course management committee with joint course directors encouraged an integrated view of such activities. This approach did not, however, appear to provide the College with sufficient assurance of the quality and standards of those specific parts of the course delivered by the collaborative partner as part of a College award. This potential lack of explicit and independent evaluation of evidence relating specifically to such inputs has been identified by the College as one of the outcomes of a recent quinquennial review.

95   Collaborating institutions recognise the mutual benefit for their respective institutions of involvement with the College and are generally aware of the agreements supporting these collaborations. They have a clear understanding of the roles of each institution and of the individuals involved, and a clear recognition of the College's responsibility for award standards. Although College staff confirmed that award standards were protected by the relevant course management committee, it was also clear to the audit team that statistical and other monitoring data/information is not synthesised effectively.

96   Student cohorts in partner institutions are considered in exactly the same way as College-based students. As members of course management committees, students have a direct input into the consideration of quality assurance documentation. Their membership of these committees, the Teaching Quality Committee and Academic Board also provides them with the opportunity to see and comment on external examiner reports.

97   The audit team concluded that students following courses in collaborating institutions were not compromised with respect to access to facilities and to support and guidance, which was at a level similar to that available to students following courses on the College's campuses. In general, although some minor issues of course management were raised, students on collaborative courses seen by the team were satisfied with their experience and particularly valued the unique nature of some of the provision available to them.

98   In the view of the audit team, the framework that the College has put in place with respect to collaborative provision is appropriate to the current range, scale and nature of this activity. Monitoring and review of collaborative provision uses standard College procedures, including external examiners and, as such, deals with the courses involved in a holistic fashion. This is consistent with a partnership approach, but does not always allow the College to demonstrate explicitly its assurance of partner input.

99   Having considered the procedures and requirements currently in place in the College in respect of its oversight of collaborative provision, the audit team concluded that, although progress has been made, the College is still seeking to respond to some aspects of the recommendations contained in the previous audit report dealing with collaborative provision. As it continues to respond to those recommendations it would be advisable for the College to review its current definition of collaborative provision to encompass more accurately the range of activities that involve external providers. It would also be advisable to review its collaborative provision procedures, to clarify the evidence required from its partners to provide the College with assurance that the standards and quality of the provision are fully met.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

100   The College has a strong research ethos and the quality of its research is recognised both nationally and internationally. The College participated in the HEFCE/QAA Review of research degree programmes in 2006. The judgement of that review was that '…the institution's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its research degree programme provision is appropriate and satisfactory …'. The aspects of assessment and the security of award standards considered by the audit team led it to the same conclusion as the Review, namely that '…institutional arrangements for the assessment of research students are appropriate and satisfactory…'

101   Research degrees are formally administered, examined and awarded by the University of London under the aegis of the College's Research Degrees Committee and the requirements of the University's Senate. The Senate delegates certain responsibilities to the College, but monitors the College's quality assurance procedures and the outcomes of examinations and appeals. The College formulates its research degree framework in accordance with the FHEQ and the *Code of practice* and also takes account of the requirements of other stakeholders, including HEFCE, the research councils and relevant professional bodies as appropriate. Academic responsibility for

the quality and standard of the College's research degrees, for the recommendation of strategy and for the oversight of the research degree environment, rests with the Research Degrees Committee.

102   The Graduate School provides a comprehensive programme of training in generic research skills augmented by the College's Human Resources Department, which offers training in wider employability/career skills. The Graduate School monitors the uptake of training courses. All postgraduate students are members of the Postgraduate Society, which provides the main forum for discussion as well as identifying representatives to sit on College committees. These representatives are the main route for making views known, or for asking for action to be taken. Students reported to the audit team that they felt that their views are genuinely sought and listened to, and that they often see evidence of responses to matters that they have raised.

103   The College's research degrees are administered and managed by the Graduate School. Supervisors, other academic staff and administrative staff find the Graduate School to be robust and purposeful, and value the support it provides at all levels of postgraduate research activity. The audit team noted the strong support and secure guidance on postgraduate matters provided by the Graduate School. It also noted the close attention paid at an administrative level to the progress and requirements of individual students. The team commends the leadership and administrative support provided by the Graduate School for all postgraduate students as a feature of good practice.

104   The College has a standard procedure for interviewing prospective PhD students, and guidance on conduct, suitable questions and appointment criteria is given to those taking part in the process. Each research student has a supervisor and co-supervisor, and some may also have external supervisors. Probationary, and other staff new to supervision, receive mentoring support from more experienced colleagues as part of their overall training programme.

105   Students reported to the audit team that the facilities and infrastructure provided for their research were in their view excellent. Support services, including those for career development, are also regarded as excellent. Students felt that all facilities were equally shared throughout the College.

106   All students receive an annual appraisal as part of the ongoing monitoring of their progress, which is also used to identify students in difficulty. It involves a written report, an interview and a subjective review of research progress, training and skill development. The Head of the Graduate School and the Research Degrees Committee receive appraisal reports. The progress of individual students is noted and those with potential support needs are identified. Appraisal reports are used, together with examiners' reports, completion statistics and the results of feedback surveys, as a means of monitoring overall research student progress and assessing the effectiveness and appropriateness of the provisions of the College's research training environment.

107   The audit team concluded that the research degree student monitoring and appraisal process is soundly constructed, securely organised and responsive to the needs of individual students.

108   Research degree examiners are appointed by the University of London based on nominations made by the College to the Higher Degrees Advisory Committee (HDAC) of the Veterinary Subject Panel. The external examiner will be from outside the University whereas the internal examiner will be from another college of the University, or from the College itself, depending on the specific expertise required.

109   The audit team noted, in particular, the quality and depth of the supervision, monitoring, training and support provided for research degree students. The progress of individual students is carefully managed, and students appear to be well supported in their studies. The team

commends the management and monitoring of the supervision, and the training and support provided for, postgraduate research students.

110   Overall, the audit team formed the view that the arrangements for postgraduate research students were appropriate and satisfactory and met the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

111   The undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses published annually are viewed by the College as sources of clear and objective information for students, rather than as marketing tools. They provide a comprehensive introduction to the College, student life and student support, together with information about the programmes and methods of study. Students who met with the audit team confirmed the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the prospectus and other pre-entry information, and indeed all the information given about the College and their programmes of study before, and on arrival, at the College. This view was confirmed in the student written submission, which also referred to the frequent updates to course material.

112   The latest version of the College's memorandum of cooperation for partnership with a collaborating institution makes it clear that College approval is required for external publicity relating to a course of study developed jointly with the partner organisation. The audit team was able to verify that this is being implemented.

113   The Academic Registrar is responsible for assuring the integrity of the statistical returns that underpin the externally published statistics about student data and teaching quality information. The College also makes external examiner reports accessible to all staff and students through its committee system. The College has clear guidance for staff and students that is available on its website on information compliance, and since writing its Application has drafted a Disability Equality Scheme.

114   The audit team found that, overall, 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 its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

115   The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the rigour of the external examiner nomination process for both taught and research degree provision; the thorough induction and briefing provided by the College for its external examiners; and the well-informed annual External Examiners Forum (paragraph 25)

- the strengthening of the College's quality assurance processes through the rigorous operation of the external examiner system and the involvement of independent external participants at institutional and course-level committees (paragraph 31)

- the arrangements for ensuring that the student body is represented on key committees within the College; the opportunities for the student voice to be heard and acted upon to the benefit of the College and the enhancement of the student experience; and the commitment of the student body to these arrangements (paragraph 59)

- the leadership and administrative support provided by the Graduate School for all postgraduate students (paragraph 103)

- the management and monitoring of the supervision, and the training and support provided for, postgraduate research students (paragraph 109).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- that the implementation of the College's mechanisms for establishing, securing and maintaining the standards of awards becomes demonstrably equivalent for all taught programmes and that the recorded evidence relating to standards set, their monitoring, review and attainment is made more consistent and explicit (paragraph 18)

- that where inconsistencies at course level in regulatory and other areas are identified, clear institutional action is taken to ensure they are resolved (paragraph 35)

- that the College ensures that its arrangements for engaging with external reference points relating to standards are applied consistently across the College and are clearly articulated in its quality assurance processes (paragraph 48)

- that the College reviews its programme monitoring and review processes, to ensure that the effectiveness of their operation, including appropriate actions, is evaluated at institutional level (paragraph 55)

- that the College clarifies further the respective functions of the Academic Board, Teaching Quality Committee and Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee with regard to the strategic oversight of its arrangements for assuring the standard of awards and enhancing learning opportunities, and that it ensures that members of these committees understand clearly their roles and responsibilities (paragraph 56)

- that the College continues to prioritise and expedite the development of the integrated College-wide approach to the systematic collection, analysis, evaluation and use of management information at course and institutional level, and that, as part of this approach, the College moves rapidly towards a consistent and regulated approach to the identification, dating, attribution and registration of all relevant documents (paragraph 58)

- that the College reviews its current definition of collaborative provision to encompass more accurately the range of activities which involve external providers (paragraph 99)

- that the College reviews its collaborative provision procedures to clarify the evidence required from its collaborative partners, to give the College assurance that the standards and quality of the provision are fully met (paragraph 99).

Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- that the College ensures that its arrangements for monitoring the implementation of the College's Learning and Teaching Strategy review the impact of the Strategy's initiatives on the quality of learning opportunities (paragraph 46)

- that the College manages actively the identification and exploitation of opportunities for enhancement, to ensure that its intention of making enhancement integral to its quality management processes is translated into action (paragraph 85).

Appendix

The Royal Veterinary College's response to the Institutional audit report

The College welcomes the report of its QAA Institutional audit. The audit was conducted courteously and sensitively, and the report demonstrates that the team achieved a commendable understanding of the College and the ways in which we manage the quality of our courses and the standards of our awards.

We welcome, in particular, the recognition of features of good practice, in particular:

- the rigour of the external examiner nomination process, the thorough induction and briefing and well informed annual External Examiners' Forum;

- the involvement of independent external participants at institutional and course level committees

- the arrangements for ensuring that the student body is represented on key committees and the commitment of the student body to these arrangements

- the leadership and support provided by the Graduate School for all postgraduate students and the training and support for postgraduate research students.

We will continue to build on these strengths, while addressing vigorously areas in which the team identified scope for improvement as set out in the following paragraphs.

Approval, monitoring and review process: we acknowledge that the outcomes of programme monitoring and review might be more effectively evaluated at institutional level. We will undertake a full review of the programme approval, monitoring and review processes, including reviewing the mechanisms and documentation relating to these processes to ensure the recorded evidence is more consistent and explicit.

Regulatory inconsistencies: the College agrees that where inconsistencies at course level in regulatory and other areas are identified, clear institutional action must be taken to ensure they are resolved. We have already made considerable progress in this respect, but will continue to address areas where concerns remain.

Engaging with external reference points: we will ensure that arrangements for engaging with external reference points relating to standards are applied consistently and clearly articulated in the quality assurance processes. The Quality Assurance Handbook will be revised to reflect this.

Functions of Academic Board, TQC [the Teaching Quality Committee] and LTAC [the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee]: the functions and effectiveness of the new committee structure is under continuing review. Further clarification of the respective functions of each committee and the roles and responsibilities of committee members will be included in the review.

Management information: the TQC has defined criteria for the collection, analysis and use of data to enable monitoring of quality and standards across all courses. The Committee Handbook has been revised to include instructions for the dating, attributing and identification of documents which will be implemented College-wide.

Collaborative provision: as it develops its collaborative provision, the College will continue to review its procedures to ensure that standards and quality are fully consistent with those for in-house courses.