Institutional audit

Royal Agricultural College

Annex to the report

FEBRUARY 2007

Contents

Annex to the report

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Royal Agricultural College (the College) from 19 to 23 February 2007 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 College offers.

Outcomes of the institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the Royal Agricultural College is that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's current management of the academic standards of its awards and the future management of the academic standards of its on-campus provision. There is limited confidence in the likely future management of the academic standards of the College's collaborative provision

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team considered that the College was clearly committed to enhancing the quality of learning opportunities and welcomed the adoption of its new strategic approach to quality enhancement. The team recognised that it would take some time for the benefits of the new approach to bear fruit, and therefore advised the College to make more systematic institutional-level use of the evidence emerging from existing quality assurance procedures to inform institutional strategies for quality enhancement.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

At the time of the audit, the College had a small number of research students, most of whom were registered students of Coventry University, as the formal awarding body. The audit found that the quality of learning opportunities provided by the College for postgraduate research students was appropriate.

Published information

The audit found that the information available to students, both before and during their courses of study, was accurate and helpful. The audit team concluded that the College had appropriate procedures for ensuring that published information was accurate.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

- the development of a bespoke student record and management system (tRACker) which is being used proactively to address issues of student progression and retention (paragraph 46)

- the establishment and use of School Advisory Councils which inform and enhance the development of the curriculum and student experience (paragraph 61)

- the selection, supervision and oversight of student placements on undergraduate programmes. (paragraph 74).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- to reconsider the role of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee to ensure that all validation decisions are fully informed and have appropriate externality (paragraphs 13, 31)

- the use made of external examiners, in particular the lack of external examiner input at the College Examination Committee (paragraph 24)

- to ensure all awards presented for validation adhere to the approved College validation process and reflect good practice in the sector (paragraphs 29, 30)

- to ensure that the emerging strategy for collaborative provision is underpinned by a framework that defines categories of partnership and sets out a clear management regime for each category (paragraph 108).

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- to introduce more systematic institutional-level consideration, oversight and action on themes emerging from existing quality assurance procedures (paragraphs 26, 52, 86)

- to reconsider how the College might achieve improved student representation and participation in institutional level committees (paragraph 62)

- to ensure that the strategic planning and management of learning resources are undertaken effectively by the responsible body (paragraph 70)

- to reconsider student learning support arrangement for international students whose first language is not English (paragraph 78).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   The College's mission is to 'provide leadership regionally, nationally and internationally, through education, research and consultancy, to industry and the professions in the rural economy and food chain'. In recent years, the College has diversified its curriculum away from sole reliance on agriculture to include the food industry and wider rural economy. The unifying theme in the College's programmes is business management, which is seen as the preferred destination for many of the College's graduates. Established in 1845, the College first began receiving public funding in 2001.

2   The College plans to expand on campus from its current 650 full-time equivalent students to 1,000 in 2015 - to include 150 Foundation Degree (FD) and 250 postgraduate students. There are currently fewer than 10 full-time equivalent students registered for postgraduate research degrees (MPhil/PhD) and they are registered with Coventry University. It is intended that the number of international students increase from the present 47 to 200.

3   The College manages a limited portfolio of collaborative programmes ranging from FDs to MBA awards, all of which are delivered in English. The programmes include FDs and an honours top-up degree delivered by local further education partner institutions, a distance-learning honours degree conversion programme and an MBA programme taught jointly with a European university. In addition, another MBA programme is offered where students commence their studies in one of two American universities and the College recognises the credits gained in these institutions and allows them to enrol for the College's MBA programmes in January each year.

The College's Sustainability Framework envisages that collaborative provision expansion will include 100 in-company MBA students (United Kingdom (UK) and international), as well as 200 FD students from the UK.

The information base for the audit

4   The College provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and access to a wide range of internal and published documents, many of which were available on the College intranet. The documents included prospectuses, the Corporate Plan, the Sustainability Framework, the Teaching and Learning Strategy, the Teaching Quality Handbook (TQH) and the minutes of a wide range of course and College committees. The College also provided the team with audit trails of two recent programme-level reviews, including all submitted documentation, the minutes of review meetings and consideration by relevant course and College committees and the resultant action plans.

5   The audit team was particularly grateful to representatives of the Students' Union who produced a student written submission.

Developments since the last audit

6   In its last institutional audit (2003) the audit team concluded that limited 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 College subsequently supplied QAA with an action plan in response to the findings of the audit. The present audit team saw considerable evidence that the recommendations contained in the 2003 institutional audit report (as quoted below) had been addressed by the College, as shown in the following paragraphs.

7   'To make explicit the criteria for the appointment of external members of validation and review panels and the procedures for ensuring that these procedures are applied in all circumstances.'

New guidelines for the appointment of members of the Validation and Review Board (VRB) who are external to the College have been introduced. These insist on prior experience of validation and review and no participation in the College's quality assurance activities for the previous five years, including as a staff member or external examiner. The Chair of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC), the parent body of the Board, has to approve all appointments. The audit team saw evidence that these measures were being implemented.

8   'To ensure that the scheduling of institutional arrangements for approval, monitoring and review is realistic and that there is compliance with agreed deadlines.'

The institution's Briefing Paper stated that the Academic Board had set a new deadline of Easter for the completion of programme validation approval by the AQSC for any programme starting in October. The audit team saw evidence that these measures were being implemented and monitored by the Academic Quality Enhancement Officer.

9   'To review the locus of responsibility for both strategic and executive decision making for quality and standards.'

The terms of reference of the Academic Board and the AQSC have been revised to give the Academic Board responsibility for strategic decisions and the AQSC responsibility for the operational aspects of quality assurance and enhancement. The establishment of a Head of Academic Quality and Development, who chairs the AQSC and is line managed in these duties by the Vice-Principal, is considered by the audit team to have facilitated this division of responsibility.

10   'To put in place authoritative college-wide quality systems that are explicitly aligned with the national academic infrastructure to both anticipate and respond to pressures for change and provide a robust system for QE [quality enhancement] and QA [quality assurance].'

The Briefing Paper stated that this had been done through the introduction of the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee (TLAC) which advises on quality enhancement and reports to the AQSC. Guidelines on procedures are given in the TQH which includes the Academic Infrastructure for both further and higher education. School deans are now expected to comment on the Programme Manager's Annual Report prior to submission to the AQSC. This is to encourage schools to consider quality assurance and enhancement matters within their complete activities. Through its reading of the AQSC minutes, the audit team saw considerable evidence that the recommendation had been responded to in an adequate way.

11 'To clarify and make explicit to staff at all levels their particular role in contributing to the security of standards of the College's awards.'

The Briefing Paper stated that this has been achieved principally by the development of a new TQH. The TQH is intended as a handbook for all academic staff to assist them in their academic duties, and gives the terms of reference for all academic committees and the duties of all staff in posts from programme and year managers to the chairs of major committees. Following discussions with staff and reading of course annual reports, the audit team concluded that the TQH was being used effectively as the foundation of course procedures and organisation and that it had been welcomed by staff.

12 'To improve procedures for the support and supervision of dissertation students at master's level and the qualifications and support of staff teaching at this level.'

The audit team read the revised guidance on the responsibilities of staff and students when undertaking dissertations, as well as the qualifications and necessary experience required for staff teaching and supervising at master's level. The team saw extensive evidence of research and scholarship, as well as professional practice, being used to inform teaching activities, both in the areas of dissertations and taught course modules.

13 'To clarify and amend procedures for the validation and review of courses, including those offered in collaboration with other educational institutions and confirm unambiguously the criteria and mechanisms for continuing approval and possible termination of courses.'

The Briefing Paper stated that the VRB had been established as a subcommittee of the AQSC. Relevant guidance to Programme Development Teams and the Validation and Review Board about proposed and existing programmes has been provided by the AQSC. On-campus programmes are validated for six-year periods with review after five years, while collaborative programmes are validated for three years with review after two years. This procedure was examined by the audit team and shown to be in place. However, examination of the AQSC minutes, confirmed by discussions with chairs of both the Validation and Review Board and the AQSC, showed that the AQSC had on occasion modified conditions on course approvals set by the VRB without referring back to the VRB (with its external members) for their comments.

14 'To clarify the position in relation to UK and international collaboration arrangements, putting in place specific measures to address the challenges of managing programmes at a distance, and identifying and supporting the learning needs of international students in the UK.'

The Briefing Paper stated that collaborative provision is now governed by Memoranda of Agreement which set out the responsibilities of the College and the partner institution with detailed requirements for the management, quality assurance and student support responsibilities of both institutions. Memoranda of Agreement have a finite, predetermined life. The audit team learnt that this constraint did not apply to two programmes which had started prior to the introduction of the VRB, although the College stated that this would be rectified when these courses came up for re-approval (see also Sections 2 and 5). Support for international students has been enhanced by additional English for Academic Purposes instruction as well as a presessional induction programme in the September before the session start in October.

Additional support, particularly in the first term of the course, is provided by the Student Access Officer and the Student International Society. The team considered the details of the programme and noted that it was voluntary and that some students arrived after its completion or, occasionally, after term had started. The team therefore formed the view that the approach to enhancement of international students' English language skills and to assisting students in acclimatising to English styles of teaching and learning was not as comprehensive as was claimed by the College.

15   Notwithstanding the final two points above, which are discussed elsewhere in this annex (see paragraphs 28 to 39 and 36 and 78), the audit team concluded that the College had given careful consideration to the findings of the previous audit.

Institutional framework for the management of academic standards and learning opportunities

16   The Academic Board has ultimate authority for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. In practice the AQSC exercises delegated operational authority for the management of academic standards. The AQSC is responsible for monitoring policies and procedures for programme validation and review. The AQSC has two subcommittees: VRB and TLAC. The VRB oversees the approval of new programmes, including those offered through collaborative arrangements, revalidation following periodic review and institutional review for collaborative provision. The TLAC is responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of assessment practices and for the development of future learning and teaching strategies.

17   There are three academic schools in the College, each managed by a dean, which submit annual reports produced by programme managers to the AQSC. Each school has an examination board where results are agreed in the presence of the external examiner(s) and recommendations are made to the College Examinations Committee.

18   The Briefing Paper stated that 'the [AQSC] and the [VRB took] an overarching view of learning opportunities provided by the three schools'. The VRB plays a pivotal role in the review of the Colleges taught provision. The TLAC is responsible for 'continually auditing and documenting existing good practice and further developing learning, teaching and assessment policies and procedures'. It reviews and evaluates the implementation of the Teaching and Learning Strategy, coordinates the funding and implementation of projects supported by the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund, and advises the AQSC accordingly. Its membership includes the Academic Quality Enhancement Officer and school representatives, and thus is intended to both inform, and be informed by current practice in the schools.

19   The procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review are largely the same regardless of whether it is on-campus or collaborative provision. Before provision can be approved for delivery in collaboration with a new partner institution, the VRB must conduct an audit of the proposed partner. The audit process invariably includes a visit to the proposed site for delivery; the audit report is submitted to the AQSC for consideration.

20   The focal point for the annual monitoring process is the programme managers, who produce an annual report for each course. The annual reports draw upon the records of programme committee meetings, external examiner reports, student progression data, internal student feedback from both module evaluation and the annual College-wide student experience survey, the National Student Survey and other indicators. The reports are produced to a standard template to aid comparison at institutional level; they evaluate the success of the previous year's action plan and propose a developmental action plan for the forthcoming year. The annual reports are considered by AQSC with particular attention being given to responses to feedback from students and external examiners. The AQSC may instruct programme managers to take additional action as necessary and responses are formally considered again in committee. The external examiner is routinely given sight of the annual report. Courses are subject to revalidation every six years, or three years in the case of collaborative arrangements.

21   The Briefing Paper placed considerable emphasis on the role of external examiners in assuring the academic standards of the College's taught awards. Specifically, it stated that external examiners were viewed as 'critical friends' whose role was to ensure that the awards made were of a comparable standard to those offered at other higher education institutions and that they met the expectations of the subject benchmark statements and other relevant national reference points. Each programme of study has at least one external examiner and programmes accredited by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) have two: one academic and one from the profession in accordance with the RICS accreditation regulations.

22   The College has approved a Learning and Teaching Strategy which gives direction to all academic developments. The Strategy has identified four key themes for the College: the development of academic staff; the development of learning teaching and assessment; the evolution of its academic provision; and the provision of student support mechanisms.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

External examiners

23   The role of external examiners is clearly set out in the Teaching Quality Handbook (TQH) and takes due regard of the precepts and guidance contained in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*) *Section 4: External examining*. External examiners are appointed by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC) according to strict criteria. They are generally encouraged to visit the College and meet with the relevant students at times other than for school examination boards. External examiners are required to attend school examination boards where they act as moderators and consultants. Through the reading of school examination board and College Examination Committee minutes the audit team learnt that external examiners' views are considered and minuted, and that they must sign off the final mark sheet which is sent to the College Examination Committee.

24   School examination boards make recommendations on progression and awards for each individual student to the College Examination Committee. The audit team learnt from its discussions and reading that the College Examination Committee broadly interpreted its functions to act as the ultimate authority on degree classification and as such to moderate and alter marks allocated by school examination boards whenever considered necessary. The College Examination Committee, a subcommittee of the AQSC chaired by the Vice-Principal, does not include any external examiners as members. As a result, there is no opportunity for any of the Colleges' external examiners to confirm mark lists should the College Examination Committee decide to amend the marks provided by school examination boards. The team carefully read the minutes of recent College Examination Committee meetings and found no evidence that the Committee had altered marks submitted to it by school examination boards. It was thus assured of the standard of recent degree classifications. However, the team advises the College to reconsider the use made of external examiners, in particular the lack of external examiner input at the College Examination Committee.

25   External examiners must submit an annual report to the Academic Registrar within six weeks of the school examination board. The Academic Registrar scrutinises each report on receipt, thus giving the opportunity to identify College-wide issues for immediate action, if necessary. The next available AQSC meeting scrutinises individual reports to identify issues that are raised by more than one external examiner or issues that can be addressed through its own decisions, or by the Academic Board. Those issues that can be dealt with collegiately, for example, involving learning resources or student support, are dealt with as early as possible in time for the start of the new academic year. Reports are also copied to the programme manager who is required to include responses in the annual report. As such, the audit team was satisfied that the College was responding appropriately and effectively to matters arising in individual examiners' reports.

26   The audit team noted that the AQSC does not receive a summary of common matters arising in external examiners' reports. The consideration of the reports by AQSC as and when they are received, mostly at its July and September meetings, and the lack of a summary of the contents of the reports, means that the College may be missing an opportunity to pick up on important trends contained in the reports, which may in turn put academic standards at risk. For example, a number of external examiners have reported that they had found errors in the draft examinations papers which were sent to them and had made comments on the drafts, but, that they did not see the final versions of the papers and did not sign them off. As part of a wider issue the team considers it desirable for the College to undertake more systematic institutional-level consideration and oversight to ensure themes emerging from external examiners' reports are identified and acted on (see also paragraph 53).

27   External examiners are not formally involved in minor changes to modules, but are consulted on significant changes to programmes, which may need to be put into place in between periodic reviews. Examples of such occurrences might be curriculum modifications to reflect rapidly changing science or current affairs, or new developments in assessment techniques driven by the Teaching Learning and assessment Committee (TLAC) and the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

28   The detailed aspects of programme approval, periodic review and the consideration of collaborative partnerships are carried out by the Validation and Review Board (VRB). The audit team heard how the establishment of the VRB since the last institutional audit had developed a core of staff with knowledge of the Academic Infrastructure and expertise in its application in the College. For programme approval events, VRB is assisted in its work by the temporary appointment of subject experts in the discipline of the programme being considered from external to the College and, if necessary, by alternates for the VRB members whenever they have been intimately involved in the development of the programme under consideration. The VRB makes recommendations to AQSC, where the final decision on approval is taken.

29   The audit team read documentation relating to the approval of one overseas collaborative programme which took place soon after the last institutional audit. The team was told that a hybrid process had operated in that the approval process used was the existing one and that the newly constituted VRB was asked to consider the proposal under its new procedures. The team considered that such a process indicated a lack of consistency in decision making and compromised the standing membership and procedures of the VRB. Although approval was given, the College was not aware of the overseas Government's requirement for UK higher education providers to hold a licence to operate in their country, and the programme has thus not yet been launched.

30   The audit team reviewed documentation relating to a postgraduate programme in which students undertake the first part of their studies at a partner institution overseas, and are admitted with advanced standing to the College using accreditation of prior learning (APL). The students may then complete the programme at the College. Following a review of the documentation, the team learnt that at the original validation no mapping of the underpinning part of the course delivered by the partner had taken place. At the revalidation event VRB subsequently asked for a mapping of this to be done. This was done by College staff and a credit value of 62.5 credits was allocated to this part of the programme. However, documentation reviewed by the team showed only 55 credits had actually been mapped. In addition, it was clear that students routinely return to the partner institution to complete the dissertation element of the programme (60 credits) and many also undertake a further project module (15 credits) based in the partner, supervised by the staff of the partner institution. The team discussed this programme with a number of College staff and was unclear as to whether this particular programme recruited students through an APL process (see paragraphs 35 to 39), whether the

students progressed via an articulation agreement, or indeed whether the programme was a jointly delivered degree. The team was concerned that the stated 62.5 credits for the initial part of the programme had not been clearly identified following the mapping such that the overall credit volume of 180 credits for the programme could be accounted for. Furthermore, students routinely studied over one-half of the credits for the programme in the partner institution taught or supervised by staff in the partner institution. The team noted that the College had no formalised, systematic procedures for the quality assurance of what is essentially joint delivery. This lack of clarity at validation, the approval of a master's award with less than 180 acknowledged credits, the lack of formal modules against which to recognise credit in an AP (experiential) L (APEL) process and lack of formal systems and processes for the management of the programme contributed to the team's concern about the College's plans for the expansion of collaborative provision. However, the team saw evidence of sufficient ongoing liaison between subject staff for it to have confidence in the current academic standards on the programme

31   In its reading of validation reports and committee papers, the audit team noted that AQSC, when making its final decision, in preference to referring the outcomes back to VRB, on occasion overturned VRB's conditions and recommendations to programme teams. Such decisions were made on the basis of the VRB report, but without access to the advice of the external panel member, the details in the proposal documentation or access to the proposing team. In discussions with staff the team learnt that in amending the conditions and recommendations for approval, the external panel member was neither consulted nor informed. The team also read of one collaborative programme which, following a rigorous and lengthy approval process for delivery in a further education college, was delivered instead on-campus. In contrast to the detailed scrutiny of resources at initial validation the VRB (and the relevant external panel member) did not formally consider whether the quality of learning opportunities would still be appropriate if the programme was delivered on-campus. The team considered that these examples demonstrated a lack of clarity in the distinct roles of the VRB and the AQSC and indicated a lack of confidence in the work of the subcommittee. The team advises the College to reconsider the role of the AQSC to ensure that all validation decisions are fully informed and have appropriate externality.

32   The audit team read a number of other reports of validation events leading to a range of outcomes; some were turned down, but most were approved with conditions and recommendations. In one case, the programme was approved but with a significant number of recommendations and conditions instead of reconsidering a revised proposal at a later date. In another case, a top-up degree providing a progression route for Foundation Degree (FD) graduates was turned down on the basis that students could progress direct to level 3 of an existing award. This decision, which would require the APL of two-thirds of an award, was outside the College's own APL regulations. In discussions with members of the VRB it became apparent to the team that the experience and knowledge held by the VRB is now significantly enhanced, and that such occurrences reflected the bedding down of the new validation processes introduced some two years ago.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

33   The Briefing Paper stated that in the light of recommendations in the last institutional audit report, the TQH had 'been developed to be explicit about the external references that have been used to inform policy, procedures and programme level content'. The audit team saw extensive evidence, especially in standard templates, that the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points are routinely considered at initial course validation, revalidation and within the annual report process. Scrutiny of documentation relating to the sample audit trail of a periodic review and revalidation revealed appropriate references to *The framework for higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and relevant subject benchmark statements within the programme specification and the course documentation. Documentation relating to a second audit trail was less well informed by reference to the Academic Infrastructure and the

documentation was less well developed. For example, the programme specification was limited in its exposition of the programme structure in terms of levels and credits and the programme assessment strategy and the links to learning outcomes. The team considered that the current requirements and processes have the capacity to ensure that appropriate academic standards are set at initial validation and revalidation. However, the current process is relatively new and there may still be need for further staff development to fully embed overt consideration of the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and fully developed programme specifications into all of the College's validation activity to ensure appropriate academic standards are articulated within the documentation.

34   The College is aware of the European Standards and Guidelines but has yet to commence a detailed consideration of their likely impact on its processes and procedures.

Admissions policy

35   From its reading of committee papers the audit team noted that both the AQSC and the Academic Board carefully consider matters related to admissions. For example, changes were introduced to the summer presessional programme for overseas students, regulations were amended to raise the progression threshold from FDs to top-up awards, and the Academic Board agreed an approach to increasing the College entry thresholds for undergraduate provision.

36   International students, whose first language is not English, are required to demonstrate competence in its use, typically by taking Test of English as a Foreign Language or International English Language Testing System assessments. The requirement for undergraduate courses is lower than that for taught postgraduate awards. The audit team noted, however, that undergraduate students from one overseas partner institution are able to enter directly into level 2 study, assessment of which contributed to degree classification without demonstrating English language competence. While these students (as did all international students) benefit from the summer pre-sessional course, this extended induction was in the team's opinion unlikely to have sufficient language content to make a significant difference to students' English language competence. The team also heard that the College would, on occasion, set its own English entrance examinations for prospective students and provided an ad hoc programme of language support for self-referring students during the early months of their course. The team read about language difficulties encountered by overseas students in their study and considered that, in light of the College's intention to grow their international recruitment, it was desirable to develop a more sophisticated consideration of prospective international students' competence in the English Language, and robust mechanisms to support them upon arrival and in their early months of study at the College.

37   The audit team, following its scrutiny of promotional material, noted that there was significant disparity between the entry requirements for taught postgraduate awards. In some cases, although many of the modules in the programmes are taught in common, a Higher National Diploma (HND) was quoted as appropriate, in others, a good honours degree was required. In meetings with staff, the team heard that, in common with much of the sector, the College would accept candidates with distinction level HNDs and significant cognate experience for postgraduate study. This was confirmed in the reading of a number of programme specifications.

38   The College has a clearly defined APL/APEL policy, requiring students to make a 'special application' and submit an appropriate portfolio of evidence for assessment. The procedures are well-defined and the application forms are readily available on the College intranet. Where APEL processes are of particular importance, the definitive course documentation considered at validation carefully detail the processes. Within the College, staff are aware of practice elsewhere in the sector, and are piloting the use of procedures promulgated via the Western Lifelong Learning Network in order to inform future College developments. The audit team saw examples of successful individual APL applications; each was supported by the relevant

programme manager, and finalised with the approval of the appropriate dean (see paragraphs 40 to 43). In another example, however, the College had undertaken a detailed mapping of curricula between the College and an overseas university, to ascertain the appropriateness of a more general progression or direct entry route to study at the College (see paragraphs 28 to 30). The team heard varying views from College staff as to whether this was an APL admissions process, or the development of an articulation agreement between institutions. The team believe that while the APL/APEL regulations appear generally appropriate, the College may wish to clarify its framework for entry and progression arrangements from partner institutions to distinguish between APL and articulation.

39   Widening participation is considered central to the College's plans to expand student numbers, and the College has recently appointed a new member of staff in order to bring focus to both retention and widening participation. The audit team read that the approach to widening participation was not in any way to compromise entry standards, but rather to broaden recruitment beyond the traditional rural communities, and to attract students from urban areas. This approach was addressed through recruitment and promotional activities, and also by broadening the range of courses on offer.

Assessment policies and regulations

40   The College describes its approach and policies regarding assessment within the TQH. The TQH describes both assessment frameworks, procedures for the production of assessment instruments, marking criteria, engagement with external examiners and the final consideration of results at examination boards. The audit team heard how, in collaborative partnerships, the link tutor has a key role in providing an additional moderation/verification step within the assessment process.

41   The College has developed generic marking criteria for both dissertations and other written work. It has recently revised the latter to separate those for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes to better articulate the intellectual challenge within master's study. The criteria are widely available on the College intranet. External examiners have commented upon them positively, although remarking on the need to develop greater consistency in their use.

42   In their scrutiny of module reference sheets and programme specifications, the audit team noted reliance on relatively traditional forms of assessment. The College's participation in the Change Academy had highlighted the need to address the place of assessment within the students' learning experience, and the College has extended parts of this work, with Higher Education Academy support, to encourage staff to develop a range of alternative assessment activities to reflect upon their use of various types of assessment, its appropriateness and efficacy. The team saw interim reports from this work, and shared the College's enthusiasm for the direction and momentum it was giving to change. The team also read in Academic Board papers of the strategic debate the College had been undertaking regarding assessment, and noted the commitment to encouraging and facilitating such development.

43   In its reading and discussions with staff, the audit team recognised the important place that APL/APEL has in the admission of students. It noted that the deans of school signed off APL/APEL decisions on behalf of the College (see paragraphs 35 to 39), but was concerned that these de facto assessment outcomes and decisions were not being formally reported to school examination boards. The examination boards are not therefore able to reflect upon the performance of the full cohort. More importantly, these assessment decisions are not exposed to the scrutiny of the relevant external examiner. The team considered this to be particularly important in the case of the postgraduate programme considered above (see paragraph 30) where approximately one third of the master's level credit would not be known to examination board members. The team would encourage the College to reflect upon whether this practice reflected the *Code of practice: Section 10: Recruitment and admissions*, and whether it may be appropriate to enhance their assessment processes to address this.

Management information (including progression and completion statistics)

44   The College has for many years had its own bespoke student record system (tRACker). This system is regularly updated, and has developed significantly since the last institutional audit. The audit team learnt from a variety of sources about the system's capabilities and observed the variety of data available from it. The system accepts the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service application data for each candidate, and creates the original record for all students, enabling students' declarations of disability, language skills and similar matters to be brought to the attention of staff at the appropriate time. It also holds all module assessment data, and cross-links such data to student records, enabling clear and concise broadsheets to be prepared for school examination boards.

45   The opportunity for staff to interrogate the record system, to produce module and cohort data, enables early and informed discussion of student performance. Similarly, personal tutors are able to closely monitor their tutees' success, and are able to intervene in an appropriately sensitive, supportive and timely manner whenever necessary. College staff with a broader retention responsibility are likewise able to identify early trends of concern, and follow up with module tutors or personal tutors as appropriate.

46   The audit team considered the development of tRACker to be an example of good practice which enabled good communication, the collation of informative data and the production of timely management information (see paragraphs 57 and 58). Programme success and progression data are considered formally by the Academic Board, and the team noted the data was sufficiently helpful and that the Academic Board was able to identify matters of concern and debate appropriate remedial action.

Other modes of study

47   Due to financial and human resource considerations the College does not offer in-house programmes through distance-learning methods at present. Nevertheless, the College has validated a distance-learning BSc top-up degree at a UK partner institution, although to date no students have progressed to this award.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

External examiners

48   Through its reading of a number of external examiners' reports the audit team saw evidence of their input into the management of the quality of learning opportunities including preparation of students for assessment. External examiners are also encouraged to meet with students either at the time of school examination board or at other times when they may visit the College and provide the College with an interim report. The team saw some evidence of this occurring but also read in some reports that the external examiner had not been invited to meet students.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

49   The annual monitoring process is clearly described in the Teaching Quality Handbook (TQH). The audit team read a number of programme managers' annual reports and considered them to be thorough and detailed, drawing appropriately upon evidence from student feedback, performance statistics from tRACker, programme team meetings, staff-student meetings and external examiners' reports. Individual annual reports and associated action plans are considered in detail at school meetings and by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC) enabling institutional action to be initiated if required. The team also heard that deans are able to bring resource issues to the attention of senior management from the school meetings.

50   The panel heard and read that for periodic reviews of programmes the Validation and Review Board (VRB) operated in a similar manner as for initial approval. The final report to AQSC differs insofar that, whilst both would propose conditions and recommendations for approval, a periodic review should draw attention to the academic health of the existing provision, whereas a new approval would have addressed matters concerning rationale and market.

51   The audit team read copies of various memoranda of understanding and memoranda of agreement with partner institutions. It noted that a number of partnerships, for which there had not been a recent periodic review, had agreements which were open-ended rather than time-limited. The team understood that these would be reviewed and updated during routine periodic reviews to reflect the *Code of practice.*

52   The audit team learnt that AQSC makes an annual report on its operation and any matters thereby arising to Academic Board. The team was able to read only one such report that reflected the changes made since the last institutional audit and considered that it was descriptive and lacked reflection and evaluation. The Academic Board also receives reports from other sources, including summaries of student success and retention. The team considered this somewhat piecemeal receipt of information by AQSC and the Academic Board meant that the College was not enabling itself to exploit the opportunities to reflect critically upon themes and trends emerging from the wealth of data available from reviews, validations, annual monitoring and student performance. The team concluded that the College was potentially putting at risk the security of the academic standards of its awards by not preparing and carefully considering evaluative overview reports of, for example, approval, review, validation, student performance, retention, admissions and collaborative activities which would enable the Academic Board to take a more proactive forward looking view to the development of the College's academic portfolio.

53   Professional body reports are received by the relevant school and copied to the Academic Registrar and Principal. The report is considered by the Academic Board and any actions required undertaken by the school or College are signed off by the Academic Board. The audit team considered that this ensures effective institutional oversight of external accrediting body reports on the College provision.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

54   The TQH and relevant templates that set out the requirements for validation documentation ensure that appropriate consideration is given to subject benchmark statements and the curriculum content and learning outcomes set down by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS). A review of validation documentation demonstrated that subject benchmarks statements are referred to in the documentation and raised as discussion points at validation meetings. Consideration of course documentation as part of the RICS reaccreditation shows a scrutiny of curriculum content and learning outcomes to ensure close articulation with the RICS requirements.

Assessment policies

55   The College has developed generic marking criteria for both dissertations and other written work. It has recently revised the latter to separate those for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes to better articulate the intellectual challenge within master's study. The criteria are widely available to support students in preparing their assignments via the College intranet; and external examiners have commented upon them positively, although remarking on the need to develop greater consistency in their use.

56   The audit team noted the relatively traditional forms of assessment used throughout the College, but also recognised that the College's participation in the Change Academy had highlighted the need to address the place of assessment within the students' learning experience, and the College had extended parts of this work, with Higher Education Academy support,

to encourage staff to reflect upon the learning process, the various types of assessment, its appropriateness and efficacy within students' learning, with the view of developing a range of alternative assessment activities. The team saw interim reports from this work, and shared the College's enthusiasm for the direction and momentum it was giving to change. The team also read in the Academic Board papers of the strategic debate the College had been having regarding assessment, and noted the commitment to encouraging and facilitating such development.

Management information (including completion and progression statistics)

57 The College's bespoke student record system (tRACker) provides the opportunity for staff to interrogate the system to produce module and cohort data, enabling early and informed discussion of student performance. Similarly, personal tutors are able to closely monitor their tutees' progress, and are able to intervene in an appropriately sensitive, supportive and timely manner whenever necessary. The system produces accurate module and student assessment data for use at school examination boards.

58 In addition to producing data for assessment boards, summary programme success and progression data are considered formally by the Academic Board. The audit team noted that the data was sufficiently helpful to enable the Academic Board to identify matters of concern and debate appropriate remedial action.

Management information (including student feedback and National Student Survey outcomes)

59 The AQSC considers the results of the National Student Survey and considers also the student feedback forms at both module (Student Perception About Modules (SPAM)) and at programme level (Student Perception of Course and College (SPOCC)). The feedback is also considered by the dean and features in the annual reports that are received by the AQSC.

Role of students in quality assurance and quality enhancement

60 The introduction of formalised SPAMs indicates the success of enhancement initiatives within the College. The results from the annual questionnaires are made available to module tutors, who complete a formal review of their modules on a College template. Results from SPAMs and SPOCCs are similarly made available to programme managers to inform their annual reports. Through its reading of a number of annual reports, the audit team noted the effective way in which some module and programme managers have made use of student feedback provided in questionnaires. SPAM and SPOCCs are also considered in periodic review.

61 There are student representatives on all programme committees. The audit team read the minutes of a number of programme committees and concluded that the student representatives contribute effectively to quality assurance processes at programme level. Each school has a School Advisory Council which students may be invited to attend. The membership of the three School Advisory Councils comprises senior College and school staff, senior members of the appropriate agriculture, business, land management and property communities, alumni and students, thus providing useful feedback to the School on the relevance and usefulness of programmes in preparing students for available graduate positions in the rural sector. Proposals for the development of courses, research and consultancy are shown to the School Advisory Councils for comment. The team found that these broad and proactive groups provide strategic advice on the market needs, and the employability of College graduates (see also paragraph 87). The team concluded that the establishment and use of School Advisory Councils to enhance and inform development of the curriculum and student experience was a feature of good practice.

62 At college level there is one undergraduate and one postgraduate student representative on the Academic Board and one student representative on the AQSC. This requirement is specified within the terms of reference of the Academic Board contained in the TQH. Currently there is no

student representation on the Teaching and Learning Assessment Committee (TLAC) or the Research Committee. Above programme level the team considered student representation to be less effective. The team heard that this may partly be due to the absence of any sabbatical officers of the Students' Union but also due to the holding of some meetings outside undergraduate term times and the length of meetings which, the team heard, makes attendance for students very difficult. Study of the AQSC minutes also indicated that there was no concerted effort in trying to gain an overview of issues and features of good practice that are common to more than one course.

63   The terms of reference of the Research Committee include stimulating and facilitating research activities, as well as encouraging and assisting with the registration of PhD students. The audit team learnt that the Academic Board has proposed that a research student should sit on the Research Committee and is intending to divide the agenda into open and reserved business sections for this to operate successfully.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

64   The College has an expectation that all staff will participate in continuing professional development through individual membership of relevant professional bodies, attendance at and participation in research conferences, and research activity in an appropriate subject area, including regular publication of research material. The College organises an annual Cirencester Conference and hosts/organises other research events. The Briefing Paper stated that these activities are intended to 'stimulate research discussions and provide opportunities for research students to present their work and undergraduates to benefit'.

65   The audit team heard from research active staff how they made use of their research experience in their teaching, both in dissertations and taught course modules. For the majority of other staff the team saw extensive evidence of professional practice and consultancy informing their teaching activities, especially in dissertations and placements.

Other modes of study

66   The Briefing Paper stated that the College does not yet have a virtual learning environment (VLE) which can be used by all staff and students. However, the College is currently undergoing an evaluation exercise to determine which VLE environment will best suit the needs of the academic community.

Resources for learning

67   The Briefing Paper stated that the College 'considers itself to be well equipped with learning resources in most areas and is continuing to invest in new teaching facilities'. It was frank in recognising that the 'challenge for the College will arise as student numbers continue to increase'.

68   The main way in which the College learns of students' views of the quality of learning resources is through SPAM and SPOCCs. In reading a sample of survey reports, the audit team learnt that students were generally pleased with the resources to support their study. Satisfaction was lowest with regard to support for computing amongst the postgraduate community. The College also secures student views through periodic programme committee meetings which are scheduled twice each year, student representation on Learning and Information Services Committee (LISC) and at fortnightly Student Management Committee meetings.

69   The LISC, which replaced the Library and Computer Resources Committees, is charged with aiding the College in developing its resource infrastructure. Specifically, it is responsible for creating a strategic College plan for the management of information and learning resources, to monitor and advise on the implementation of the plan, to engage with staff through appropriate working groups, and to report annually to the Academic Board.

70   The audit team was provided with little evidence of the work of LISC over the past 18 months. The individual library and computing services appear to be operating without strategic guidance and advice from the academic community. The team considered that such advice would be particularly important as the College implemented its growth strategy, and has to support students learning in off-campus locations, both in the UK and overseas. The team concluded that although a cross-College Information Technology Strategy Group has been established it was desirable for the College to ensure that the strategic planning and management of learning resources are undertaken effectively by the responsible body.

71   Despite the lack of guidance from LISC, the College has been taking resource developments forward. The College is aware of the increasing demands upon library provision, and commissioned an external study of its library service. The resultant report was generally positive, and highlighted areas for development which have been earmarked for action by the College.

72   The audit team heard and read that students appreciated the quality of the library and information services, and it was noted that the library had already responded to the few issues that students had highlighted in their written submission. The library is planning to take a regular satisfaction survey of its users.

73   As a specialist institution, the College relies upon its farms to 'generate relevant, up-to-date and varied information…day-to-day best practice…[and] to illustrate practical farming technique…to students'. The audit team heard from both staff and students that the farms brought immense advantage to the students' learning, and in addition provided industrial placement opportunities within easy travelling distance of the College.

74   All undergraduate programmes in the Schools of Agriculture and Business include a 20-week sandwich placement. Each programme has a designated placement officer who provides student guidance and support in identifying appropriate placements, liaises with employers and monitors student progress through a placement visit and regular communication. All students are visited on placement irrespective of where in the world they are placed. The College has a range of strategies for ensuring this including engaging appropriate academic staff from universities of the country in question to visit students on behalf of the College. In its reading of evidence from the student community including the students' written submission (SWS), the audit team found that the placement experience was extremely well-regarded, and that it played a positive role in preparing students for future employment. The team concluded that the selection, supervision and oversight of student placements on undergraduate programmes was a feature of good practice.

Student support

75   The College provides extensive personal and pastoral support to its students including the introduction of a personal development plan and personal tutors. The audit team learnt from students of their high regard for the support they receive. Student feedback obtained through SPAMs and the annual report process showed that students appreciate the support they are given by staff at the College. This was confirmed by the SWS and in meetings with students during the audit visit.

76   The College recently decided to continue funding a major institutional level project, Catalyst, building on a Change Academy Project, with the aim of reviewing and redeveloping the College's strategic approach to student support. One of the early changes signalled by Catalyst was the introduction of a new induction programme for all new students entering in 2006 and a new presessional four-week induction course for postgraduate international students using external cultural and language specialists, and staff from Cirencester College, a partner institution, to deliver bespoke study skills sessions on an open drop-in basis.

77   Students acknowledge that the relatively small size of the College provides them with opportunities to gain ready access to a range of staff on an informal basis. Students told the audit team that they were very satisfied with the support they receive and stated that staff 'go out of their way to help students'. The SWS was positive about the availability of tutors and the support they provide to students. This has meant that the formal system of personal tutors is not always well used by students. The team found that the adoption of personal development planning files for students has been patchy.

78   The audit team learnt that the College is aware that a growing number of overseas students with English as a second language pose problems for student support. Support for international students has been enhanced by additional English for Academic Purposes instruction as well as a pre-sessional induction programme in the September before the session start in October. Additional support, particularly in the first term, is provided by the Student Access Officer and the student International Society. The team considered the details of the programme and noted its voluntary nature and the fact that some students arrived after its completion or, occasionally, after term had started. This suggested to the team that the enhancement of international students' English language skills, as well as their acclimatisation to the English academic approach, was not as great as that claimed by the College. Ongoing English language support is available free of charge for international students. Nonetheless, the team considers it desirable for the College to reconsider student learning support arrangement for international students whose first language is not English.

Staff support, development and reward

79   The Briefing Paper stated that a systematic process is in place to identify annual staff development needs through appraisals. Academic support staff are also appraised and able to access internal and external staff development activities to support and develop them in their roles. A proposal is currently being considered to require deans and heads of service to set targets for staff development in relation to subject-specific/professional skills and to report on these biannually to AQSC. Staff told the audit team that they value the appraisal process and are able to work with the dean or head of service to identify appropriate development activities which include short courses, continued professional development - related to professional practice and conference attendance. In addition, the team learnt that SPOCC and SPAM outcomes are considered as part of annual reports and are discussed at School meetings, enabling the dissemination of good practice. The Academic Quality Enhancement Officer also follows up SPOCC and SPAM outcomes and uses them to inform the College's staff development programme.

80   Working with TLAC, the Academic Quality Enhancement Officer is responsible for implementing a peer observation of teaching system, and for reviewing and updating this system accordingly. The system was piloted in 2005-06. From October 2006, the nine members of staff currently undertaking the Postgraduate Certificate of Higher Education (PGCHE) will be observed by two recent College PGCHE graduates. From October 2007, the 11 expected PGCHE graduates will roll out the peer observation of teaching system across the College to include all members of staff and will include cross school observations. It is intended that the peer observation scheme will enhance the quality of the student learning experience, encourage staff to reflect upon their practice, foster discussion and dissemination of best practice and help to inform staff development planning.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

Brief description of the institution's processes for managing quality enhancement

81   The College's approach to quality enhancement is to have 'an institutional level process of implementing, planned, deliberate measures to bring about continuous improvement, advancement and innovation, based on self-evaluation and building upon what already exists' to improve the quality of learning opportunities.

82   The Teaching Learning and assessment Committee (TLAC), reporting to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC), is responsible for the regular auditing, documenting and dissemination of existing good practice. Members of the TLAC are drawn from across the College to ensure the discovery, discussion and dissemination of good practice College-wide. In addition, the TLAC is responsible for the oversight of the implementation of the College's Learning and Teaching Strategy which is designed to support activities that identify and develop good practice. Good practice is also identified in the annual reports which are considered by AQSC. Outputs from this process are incorporated into guidance notes on relevant issues for wider dissemination. In addition, each school is required to hold regular School Meetings to enable inter and intraschool issues to be identified and addressed and to facilitate the sharing of good practice, for example, recognition between schools of different approaches to work-based learning and Foundation Degree development.

83   The College currently has two major institutional-wide projects to enhance existing provision as well as to draw on good practice to inform future institutional policy and practice. These are the Catalyst Project for Student Support and the Higher Education Academy Project on Assessment Practice.

84   The Academic Quality Enhancement Officer facilitates the communication of any new initiatives or examples of good practice already in existence or emerging within the College, for example arising from the peer observation of teaching. Staff are actively encouraged to inform the Academic Quality Enhancement Officer of examples of good practice gained from attending external events. The Academic Quality Enhancement Officeris required to ensure that good practice can then be published on the College intranet.

External examiners

85   The Briefing Paper highlighted to the audit team deliberate measures to enhance the College's marking guide in direct response to comments received from external examiners. In addition, all external examiners are now asked to comment on features of good practice within the programme, the details of which are identified by AQSC during its consideration, and if appropriate then disseminated to staff across the institution via the good practice section of the intranet.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards and programmes

86   The Academic Board receives individual reports from a number of sources on student success and retention reviews, validations and annual monitoring. In its discussions with College staff, the audit team came to the view that it would be difficult for the Academic Board to identify trends emerging from the existing presentation of such data, and that the Academic Board was not exploiting the opportunities to reflect critically upon themes and trends emerging from the wealth of data available from these sources. The team concluded that to do so would enable the Academic Board to take a more proactive forward looking view to the development of the College's academic portfolio.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

87   In the last institutional audit report the College was advised to 'put in place authoritative college-wide quality systems that are explicitly aligned with the Academic Infrastructure to both anticipate and respond to pressures for change and provides a robust system for QE [quality enhancement] and QA [quality assurance]'. The audit team learnt that the College had addressed this through revising its policy. The work produced by the Higher Education Academy Project on assessment will further enhance policy and practice relating to assessment of students in terms of matching assessment to learning outcomes and further informing marking procedures. In addition, the involvement of the School Advisory Councils provide current links to the main employment sectors of direct relevance to the College's academic provision. The team considered that such involvement may lead to an enhancement of curriculum development and the student experience.

Assessment policies

88   The College's participation in the Change Academy project has highlighted the need to address the place of assessment within the students' learning experience, and the College has extended parts of this work, with the Higher Education Academy's support, to encourage staff to reflect upon the types of assessment used, its appropriateness and efficacy, with the view to developing a range of alternative assessment activities. The audit team read interim reports of this work, and shared the College's enthusiasm for the direction and momentum it was giving to change. Through reading the Academic Board papers, the team also learnt of strategic debate within the College regarding assessment, and noted the commitment to encouraging and facilitating such development.

Management information (including completion and progression statistics)

89   The College's student record system tRACker, provides a robust database of module, programme and individual student success. As such, it is a rich source of consolidated data to enable a sophisticated analysis of performance, and hence a window through which the College can identify aspects for development and enhancement. The audit team observed that staff appreciated these aspects of the system, and noted early benefits accruing in the identification of at-risk students. Senior staff acknowledged that the identification of other enhancement opportunities would be possible in due course, and that programme and module leaders would be able to use reports from tRACker to compare cross-College student performance, and to identify discipline areas for support and development.

Management information (including student feedback and National Student Survey outcomes)

90   The Briefing Paper highlighted the establishment of a research group to investigate the enhancement of student feedback in direct response to the National Student Survey outcomes. Furthermore, Student Perception of Course and College and Student Perception About Module results are reviewed by the relevant module leader and/or programme manager, and steps taken to address any issues raised. Thus the audit team saw evidence of a process of continual enhancement underpinning the annual programme review process.

Role of students in quality assurance and quality enhancement

91   Other than plans to widen student representation onto the Research Committee the audit team was not made aware of any planned, deliberate measures by the College to bring about continuous improvement, advancement and innovation in the role of students in quality assurance and enhancement.

Links between research and scholarly activity and the enhancement of learning opportunities

92   The audit team was not made aware of any planned, deliberate measures by the College to bring about continuous improvement, advancement and innovation of links between research and scholarly activity.

Other modes of study

93   The audit team learnt that the College is currently investigating the development of a virtual learning environment (VLE).

Resources for learning

94   The audit team learnt that it is library's intention to undertake regular user satisfaction surveys (see paragraph 72), is developing online module information through use of its intranet and is currently investigating appropriate VLEs for introduction. The team also noted that the College library was audited by the Library and Information Statistics Information Unit.

Student support

95   The Colleges recognises the need to embrace the changing nature of its student population and a major institutional level project, Catalyst, building on a Change Academy Project, has begun to review and redevelop the College's strategic approach to student support. One of the early changes signalled by Catalyst was the introduction of a new Induction Programme for all new students entering in 2006, and a new pre-sessional four-week induction course for postgraduate international students using external cultural and language specialists, and staff from Cirencester College, a collaborative partner, deliver bespoke study skills sessions on an open drop-in basis.

Dissemination of good practice

96   The audit team learnt that the College uses its intranet to disseminate aspects of good practice in teaching and learning activities. The College also disseminates good practice through staff workshops, details of which are available on the intranet, and through an annual staff development conference.

Staff support, development and reward

97   The audit team learnt that from October 2007, there will be 11 PGCHE graduates to roll out a peer observation of teaching system across the College to include all members of staff and will include cross-school observations.

Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students

98   Other than the decision to pilot the Higher Education Academy Postgraduate Research Experience Survey internally to provide further feedback opportunities the audit team was not made aware of any planned, deliberate measures by the College to bring about continuous improvement, advancement and innovation in the selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

Brief description of the institution's processes for managing collaborative provision

99   A description of the College's collaborative provision is contained in paragraph 3 above. The framework for managing the academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities of collaborative provision are the same as for on-campus provision except for the following: initial programme approval is given for three rather than six years. In revising the quality assurance procedures for collaborative provision the College stated that it has taken account of the revised of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

100   The Sustainability Framework sets out the College's intention to increase its collaborative provision activity over the period 2005 to 15. The Sustainability Framework envisages that collaborative provision expansion will include 100 in-company MBA students based in the UK and overseas partner institutions, as well as 200 students studying for a Foundation Degree in UK partner institutions.

101   Central to the management of collaborative provision is the signing of a Memoranda of Agreement (MoA) with each partner institution. MoAs set out the roles and responsibilities of each partner and how these are to be monitored. The management of a collaborative programme is coordinated by a member of College staff who is either a specially appointed Link Tutor, where the programme is delivered entirely at the partner institution, or as overall Programme Manager, where the programme is delivered jointly by the College and partner institution. In both cases, responsibilities for quality assurance should be detailed within the signed MoA.

External examiners in collaborative provision

102   The arrangements for the appointment of external examiners for collaborative provision are the same as those for on-campus provision.

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards and collaborative programmes

103   The detailed aspects of programme approval, periodic review and the consideration of collaborative partnerships are carried out by the Validation and Review Board (VRB). The audit team learnt that, before programmes can be approved with a new collaborative partner, VRB must conduct an audit of the proposed partner. The audit invariably includes a visit to the proposed partner institution, and the audit report to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC) draws attention to matters that might be of concern in accordance with the *Code of practice*.

104   In its reading, the audit team was able to scrutinise copies of various memorandum of understanding (MoU) and MoAs with partner institutions. The team noted that two partnerships, for which there had not been a recent periodic review, still had an open-ended agreement. The team was told that these will be reviewed and updated as part of the process of periodic review.

105   In the case of collaborative provision, the audit team learnt that link tutors worked with the programme team in the partner institution to produce the annual report. The audit team saw evidence that individual annual reports and action plans were considered in detail at school meetings and by AQSC enabling institutional action to be initiated if required.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

106   In its last institutional audit, the College was advised to clarify the College's position 'in relation to UK and international collaboration arrangements, putting in place specific measures to address the challenges of managing programmes at a distance'. The audit team was told that since 2003 the College has reviewed the management of its against the revised *Code of practice, Section 2*. The College's formal approach to the quality assurance of collaborative provision is set out in the Teaching Quality Handbook (TQH). This includes the need to approve a prospective partner institution, agree a MoU and to prepare validation documents in line with the requirements of the College. It also sets out the roles of the link tutors involved with the management and review of collaborative provision.

107   A review by the audit team of the validation and revalidation of a programme run in collaboration with an overseas partner institution revealed a lack of clarity in terms of the exact nature of the collaborative arrangement entered into (see paragraph 30). The audit team was variously told that it was an accreditation of prior learning (APL) arrangement, articulation agreement or a matter of joint delivery. In the case of the first part of this programme, and the dissertation element delivered by the partner, there is no evidence that the College assured itself of the academic standards and the appropriateness of the learning opportunities which would be offered to students. In addition, the approval of a partnership with a Malaysian partner was unsuccessful, as although all academic requirements were completed satisfactorily it was subsequently discovered that the College was not recognised by the legislative framework of the Malaysian authorities and the programme could not be delivered.

108   Neither the TQH (nor any other College documentation seen by the audit team) sets out a clear typology of collaborative provision or indicates the different quality assurance arrangements that may apply. This lack of clarity, along with an absence of specified quality assurance procedures for the different types of collaborative provision currently running or envisaged, despite the recommendations in the last Institutional audit report, led the team to doubt the College's ability to manage the standards of its proposed collaborative provision into the future. The team therefore advises the College to ensure that the emerging strategy for collaborative provision is underpinned by a framework that defines categories of partnership and sets out a clear management regime for each category.

Assessment policies and regulations

109   The TQH describes the College's approach and policies regarding assessment. It contains both assessment frameworks, procedures for the production of assessment instruments, marking criteria, engagement with external examiners and the final consideration of results at examination boards. The audit team heard how, in collaborative partnerships, the partnership link tutor plays a key role in providing an additional moderation/ verification step within the assessment process.

110   The audit team, in its reading and discussions with staff, recognised the important place that APL/AP (Experiental) L has in the admission of some collaborative provision students. The team noted that the school deans are required to sign off APL/APEL decisions on behalf of the College (see paragraphs 35 to 39 and 40 to 43), but was concerned that these de facto assessment outcomes and decisions were not being formally reported to school examination boards. The boards therefore are not able to reflect upon the performance of the full cohort. Furthermore, such assessment decisions are not exposed to the scrutiny of the relevant external examiner. The audit team considered this to be particularly important in the case of one postgraduate programme where approximately one third of the master's level credit would not be known to the external examiner. The team would encourage the College to reflect upon this practice in light of the *Code of practice, Section 10: Recruitment and admissions*, and the *Guidelines on the accreditation of prior learning*, published by QAA, and whether it may be appropriate to enhance their assessment processes to address this.

Management information (including completion and progression statistics)

111   The features of tRACker described elsewhere in this report (see paragraph 57) are all available to staff in partner institutions, for whom a web-enabled interface is available. The audit team learnt that the College is thus able to maintain close scrutiny of the performance of students in collaborative provision.

Other modes of study

112   Although the College does not offer in-house programmes through distance-learning methods at present, as noted elsewhere in this report (see paragraph 47), it has validated a distance-learning programme run by a partner institution. The audit team was told that no special or particular arrangements exist at validation or within the review process to address quality assurance issues that may be raised in the context of flexible and distributed learning provision. Although to date no students have progressed onto this award, the team considered that the College may wish to review its arrangements for the approval and ongoing review of flexible and distributed learning provision in light of the precepts of Part B of the *Code of practice, Section 2* to assure itself that its arrangements are comprehensive and sound.

Resources for learning

113   The College's collaborative provision approval procedures require an initial audit of a new partner institution, and this includes careful consideration of the partners' learning resources. The subsequent programme approval also requires detailed consideration of the learning resources that will be available to students on the programme. The audit team read a number of reports from the approval of collaborative provision, and were able to confirm that this was indeed the case, setting conditions on minimum resourcing requirements where necessary.

Admissions policy

114   It was clear to the audit team that the College considered entry requirements an important feature in assuring the standards achieved in programmes of study. The team noted that admissions matters received scrutiny at validation of proposed collaborative provision and that subsequently requirements were generally clearly articulated in the programme specification and the appropriate prospectus (see paragraphs 35 to 39 and 40 to 43).

Student support

115   The audit team saw evidence that the arrangements for student support for academic and pastoral purposes in collaborative provision is explored during the validation process. The College satisfies itself that appropriate facilities are in place for specialist student support as well as academic and personal tutorial support.

Dissemination of good practice

116   The audit team learnt that link tutors are responsible for the dissemination of good practice to partner institutions and that the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee has a role in coordinating this.

Staff support, development and reward

117   The curricula vitae of all staff involved in the delivery of the course at the partner institution are available to the validation panel and are scrutinised at validation to ensure that the course team has appropriate experience and subject expertise. Staffing issues are raised through the Link Tutor and reported in annual reports. At periodic review/revalidation, resource and staffing matters are again revisited. The VRB and its associated review processes are relatively immature, and the team was not able to scrutinise these processes in action.

Section 6:   Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

Brief description of the institutional arrangements and the research environment

118   The Briefing Paper stated that the College had eight full-time and four part-time research students registered. While in the past research students have been registered with other institutions, and this could occur now, all current PhD and MPhil students are governed by the Coventry University regulations for postgraduate research programmes. This means that the procedures of admission, progression, review and examination of current postgraduate research students at the College are those of Coventry University. Supervisory teams are required to have the same amount of supervisory experience (at least three research degrees successfully supervised) as teams at Coventry University.

119   There is a College Research Committee whose task is to stimulate and facilitate research activities, as well as to encourage and assist the registration of PhD students. In order to maintain consistency of procedure the Chair of the College Research Committee acts as the only authorised conduit of communication between the College and Coventry University Registry.

120   The College has an expectation that all staff will participate in continuing professional development through individual membership of relevant professional bodies, attendance at and participation in research conferences, and research activity in an appropriate subject area, including regular publication of research material. At the time of the audit the College expected eight staff to participate in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise. The College organises an annual Cirencester Conference and hosts/organises other research events. The Briefing Paper stated that these activities 'stimulate research discussions and provide opportunities for research students to present their work and undergraduates to benefit'.

Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students

121   Potential research students either apply to the College with their own research ideas or apply for advertised research studentships. They register as research students and take an initial research methods module.

122   Supervision is by a team, consisting of a Director of Studies (principal supervisor) and other members, usually including one member external to Coventry University. The supervisory team is selected from appropriate College staff, but the team have to be named on the relevant form and approved by Coventry University.

123   Through its reading of the Research Committee minutes the audit team formed the view that these procedures were being followed. It was also clear that research students were only being accepted to carry out projects in areas where the College could provide suitable facilities and appropriate supervision.

Progress and review arrangements

124   The first review of a postgraduate student's progress occurs after a period not exceeding six months for full-time students. This is to register the project as one that is likely, with suitable supervision, to produce a thesis of the required standard using a sound research methodology.

125   Transfer to a PhD usually occurs during the second year of the programme and involves the submission of a formal report which is considered by the Research Degrees Sub-Committee of the relevant faculty at Coventry University. A panel member external to Coventry University or an internal University expert independent of the supervisory team participates in this review. In addition to the principal reviews outlined above there is an annual review of progress. All these reviews are monitored by the College Research Committee before being submitted to Coventry University. Through its reading of the Research Committee minutes the audit team formed the view that these procedures were being carefully followed.

Feedback arrangements

126   Postgraduate research students are not invited to complete Student Perception of Course and College or Student Perception of Modules feedback forms. However, they have the opportunity to provide feedback during the annual review process.

127   The audit team heard that the College has recently decided to pilot the Higher Education Academy Postgraduate Research Experience Survey internally to provide further feedback opportunities.

128   The audit team learnt that there is currently no formal representation of research students on the Research Committee and no splitting of the Committee's agenda in such a way as to allow student representation. The team also learnt that the Academic Board has proposed that a postgraduate research student should sit on the Research Committee.

Assessment of research students

129   Appointment of examiners is undertaken by the University's Research Degrees Committee, acting on nominations made by Coventry University's faculty or school Research Degrees Committee. For postgraduate research students registered at the College nominations are made by the supervisory team and passed through the chair of the College's Research Committee to the appropriate University Research Degrees Committee.

Representations, complaints and appeals arrangements for research students

130   Coventry University's procedures apply to any representations, complaints and appeals made by postgraduate research students. Thus, any student wishing to complain about their College supervisor would have the complaint considered by a panel of College academic staff in the first instance. If not satisfied the student has the right to take the complaint to higher levels and ultimately to the Vice-Chancellor of Coventry University.

Section 7: Published information

Brief description of the institution's processes for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of published information

131   The Briefing Paper stated that '[a]ll information, whether published in hard copy or in electronic format, requires formal approval by specified individuals or responsible bodies within the College prior to final publication' including the Senior Management Group, Academic Board, the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and the Academic Registry. Publicity and marketing material is reviewed by the Academic Registrar to ensure accuracy and alignment with academic policies and procedures. Information published by collaborative partners requires approval by the Academic Registrar prior to publication. The Academic Registrar and Academic Quality Enhancement Officer are responsible for approving all material on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website. The audit team learnt that the College is in the process of producing a revised publications policy covering a wide range of existing and publishable material.

Accuracy and completeness of published information, including Teaching Quality Information

132   The audit team had access to a wide range of information published by the College including prospectuses, module and programme specifications and student handbooks. The team also had access to the College internet and intranet, where a large body of corporate publications and academic regulations are available. TQI information is available but National Student Survey data are necessarily compromised by the combining of postgraduate and undergraduate returns into subject areas. The audit team concluded that the published information it saw is largely accurate and complete although there were some cases of inconsistency in the material seen. For example, there was inconsistency between module reference sheets and module handbooks.

133   In light of the decision to close the TQI website the College is intending to publish required qualitative data on the College website. The Learning and Teaching Strategy, periodic review reports and summaries of external examiner reports for 2005-06 will likely be published within the quality management section of the College intranet.

Students' experience of published information and other information available to them

134   In 2006-07 new students received a Universal Serial Bus Flash Drive which contained electronic versions of the Student Handbook, academic regulations and admissions information. Other relevant information is provided in both hard copy or via the intranet.

135   The student written submission (SWS) stated that for the recruitment of both undergraduate and postgraduate students the importance of the College website was increasing. The SWS stated that the current College website was much more user-friendly. For example, the material, such as module handbooks and module reference sheets, provided through the College intranet was valuable to them throughout their programmes of study. Students who met the audit team stated that the information that they were given, both before and during their course of study, is accurate and appropriate. This was confirmed by the audit team's consideration of the published information.

RG 324a 08/07