

# **Dartington College of Arts**

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## **Preface**

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. QAA operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales.

## **The purpose of institutional audit**

The aims of institutional audit are to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

## **Judgements**

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

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

These judgements are expressed as either **broad confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

## **Nationally agreed standards**

Institutional audit uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, which include descriptions of different HE qualifications
- *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

## **The audit process**

Institutional audits are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of institutional audit are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the audit visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the audit visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the audit visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the audit team five weeks before the audit visit
- the audit visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the audit team's judgements and findings 20 weeks after the audit visit.

## **The evidence for the audit**

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the audit team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The audit team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work using 'audit trails'. These trails may focus on a particular programme or programmes offered at that institution, when they are known as a 'discipline audit trail'. In addition, the audit team may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality. This is known as a 'thematic enquiry'.

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*, published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

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## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Dartington College of Arts (the College) from 28 November to 2 December 2005 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the academic standards of the awards that the College offers in collaboration with the University of Plymouth.

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

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK.

'Academic quality' is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning resources are provided for them.

In institutional audit, both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

### Outcome of the audit

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

- broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of the academic programmes and the academic standards of the awards that it offers on behalf of the University of Plymouth.

### Features of good practice

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

- the successful efforts made, through briefing and feedback sessions, to engage external examiners in the wider aspects of their role, extending beyond their formal responsibilities in connection with assessment boards
- the ways in which the College engenders a commitment among staff and students to its particular ethos, specifically through the thoroughness of its processes for staff appointment and student admissions, including arrangements for induction
- the student academic support systems operating through academic advisers and research supervisors, which are successfully combined with informal channels of support developed through the good and productive relationships existing between staff and students
- the organisational and support arrangements underpinning the contextual enquiry project pursued off-campus (in the UK or overseas) by students at stage 3 of the undergraduate programme.

### Recommendations for action

The audit team also recommends that the College should consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality and standards of the awards it offers are maintained.

Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- to take the necessary steps to improve the level of participation by members of the Academic Standards and Development Committee, thereby enabling it to exercise its delegated responsibilities as the institution's principal quality assurance committee
- in developing the reporting potential of the new student information system, to give greater priority to analysing the College's performance relative to that of

other higher education institutions in order to identify benchmarks that might be used to inform institutional strategies.

Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to complete the rationalisation of the committee structure so that it is fit for purpose in terms of the size of the institution and operates effectively with clear lines of communication
- in the interests of demonstrating equity of treatment of students, to introduce procedures for ensuring that external examiners have full access to all relevant records of the criteria and calculations used by internal markers, and moderators, in establishing students' results
- to review the overall effectiveness of the 'map' used as a key mechanism for providing institutional oversight of the implementation of procedures, such that their consistency with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* can be clearly demonstrated
- to find means of creating the opportunity for staff inexperienced in teaching in higher education to take recognised courses or qualifications in teaching and learning as part of their personal and professional development
- to formulate a clear and documented policy for career education, information and guidance that is informed by data on graduate destinations.

### **Discipline audit trail**

The audit team also looked in some detail at individual programmes in the discipline area of Theatre to find out how well the College's systems and procedures were working at programme level. The College provided the team with documents, including student work, and members of the team spoke to staff and students from the discipline area. As well as its findings supporting the overall confidence statements given above, the team was able to state that the standard of student achievement

in the programmes was appropriate to the titles of the awards and their place within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), published by QAA. The team was also able to state that the quality of learning opportunities available to students was suitable for programmes of study leading to the awards.

### **National reference points**

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team also investigated the use made by the College of the Academic Infrastructure, which QAA has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The findings of the audit suggest that the College has responded appropriately to the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic standards in higher education*, the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements and programme specifications.

The audit process includes a check on the reliability of information about academic standards and quality published by institutions in a standard format, in line with the Higher Education Funding Council for England requirements for *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance (HEFCE 03/51)*. At the time of the audit, the College was making progress towards fulfilling its responsibilities in this area. The information it was publishing about the quality of programmes and the standards of awards that it offers was found to be reliable.

# Main report

## **Main report**

1 An institutional audit of Dartington College of Arts (the College) was undertaken from 28 November to 2 December 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the academic standards of the awards that the College offers in collaboration with the University of Plymouth.

2 The audit was carried out using a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and Universities UK (UUK), and has been endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills. For institutions in England, it replaces the previous processes of continuation audit, undertaken by QAA at the request of UUK and SCOP, and universal subject review, undertaken by QAA on behalf of HEFCE as part of the latter's statutory responsibility for assessing the quality of education that it funds.

3 The audit checked the effectiveness of the College's procedures for establishing and maintaining the standards of the academic awards it offers; for reviewing and enhancing the quality of the programmes of study leading to those awards; and for publishing reliable information. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, the audit included consideration of institutional processes at work at the level of the programme, through a discipline audit trail (DAT), together with examples of those processes operating at the level of the institution as a whole. The scope of the audit encompassed all of the College's provision offered through its collaborative arrangement with the University.

## **Section 1: Introduction: Dartington College of Arts**

### **The institution and its mission**

4 The College specialises in contemporary arts practices in performance, and developed out of the arts department of the Dartington Hall Trust in 1961. It continues to contribute to the work of the Trust and occupies premises within the Dartington Hall estate, which comprises some 850 acres near Totnes, Devon.

5 Formally designated as a higher education institution (HEI), the College has been an accredited partner college of the University of Plymouth since 1996; it offers taught degrees validated in partnership with the University and supervised research degrees approved by the University. Following a review of accreditation in 2003-04, the agreement governing the relationship was revised, taking into account 'the College's developing academic maturity and the University's confidence in the College's procedures for the assurance of quality and standards'. The College has the aspiration to obtain taught degree awarding powers in its own right.

6 Statistics for 2004-05 show the College had 585 students, of whom 478 were full-time undergraduates. Of the 107 postgraduates, 55 were on the taught master's programme (18 full-time and 37 part-time students), and 52 were registered for MPhil and PhD degrees; the majority, (49 students), on a part-time basis. The overall trend is a gradual increase in student numbers since 2001-02.

7 The College's academic structure is a matrix of six discipline-related fields - Arts and Cultural Management, Choreography, Music, Theatre, Visual Performance and Writing - with each field contributing to teaching, research, enterprise, participation and international development. The College maintains active connections with widening participation initiatives within the region and nationally, also placing considerable emphasis on its international connections, including the reciprocal exchange of students with institutions in Europe and the USA.

8 A new Chair of the Board of Governors was appointed in January 2004, followed by a new Principal in September 2004. More recent management appointments include an Academic Registrar in May 2005 and a Dean of Research in September 2005. The intention, as stated in the SED, is to develop a 'better-connected' line and team management structure.

9 The College's mission is to be a radical, innovative higher education learning community for contemporary arts practices in performance:

- building upon, sustaining and developing the distinctive Dartington legacy as a high-quality specialist learning community in the creative arts, at the leading edge of innovation in practice-based teaching, research, and professional development in contemporary arts practices in performance
- providing life-enhancing, or transformational experience in creative practice for all those capable of benefiting from the Dartington experience, and adding value to the social, cultural and economic life of our region
- nurturing and sustaining distinctive and dependable partnership, through strategic alliances and collaborative initiatives at regional, national and international levels, for the development of our mission within the rapidly-changing context of a global framework for higher education in contemporary arts practice.

10 In the context of this statement, a particular theme explored by the audit team was the contribution of the expanding portfolio of postgraduate programmes to enhancing the 'Dartington [student] experience'.

### **Collaborative provision**

11 The College has no collaborative provision.

### **Background information**

12 The published information available for this audit included:

- the information on the College's website

- the report of the quality audit of the College by the Higher Education Quality Council (one of QAA's precursor organisations), published in December 1996
- the reports of HEFCE and QAA reviews of provision at subject level.

13 The College provided QAA with the following documents:

- the self-evaluation document (SED)
- the discipline self-evaluation document (discipline SED) for the Theatre field, which was selected for a discipline audit trail (DAT).

14 The audit team was given ready access to the College's internal documents in hard copy or on the College website and to a range of documentation relating to the selected discipline audit trail, the latter including examples of student work.

### **The audit process**

15 Following the preliminary meeting at the College in August 2005, QAA confirmed that one DAT in Theatre would be conducted during the audit visit. QAA received the SED in September 2005 and the discipline SED in October 2005. The discipline SED was produced specifically for the audit.

16 The audit team visited the College from 18 to 20 October 2005 for the purpose of exploring with the Principal, senior members of staff and student representatives, matters relating to the management of quality and standards raised by the SED or other documentation provided for the team. During this briefing visit, the team signalled a number of themes for the audit and developed a programme of meetings for the audit visit, which was agreed with the College.

17 The students of the College were invited, through their Students' Union, to submit a separate document expressing views on the student experience at the College and identifying any matters of concern or commendation with respect to the quality of programmes and the standards of awards.

They were also invited to give their views on the level of representation afforded to them and on the extent to which their views were taken into account.

18 At the briefing visit for the audit, the College Students' Union presented a written submission (SWS) produced by a group of student officers and representatives on the basis of their collective view and experience. The students indicated that the document had been shared with appropriate College staff. There were no matters that the audit team was required to treat with any level of confidentiality greater than that normally applying to the audit process. The team is grateful to the students for preparing this document to support the audit.

19 The audit visit took place from 28 November to 2 December 2005 and involved further meetings with staff and students of the College both at institutional level and in relation to the selected DAT. The audit team comprised Professor A Dean; Professor S Hallam; Dr A Lyons; Dr T Phillips, auditors, and Ms W Appleby, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### **Developments since the previous academic quality audit**

20 The previous QAA quality audit was undertaken in March 1996. The report, published in December 1996, commended the following aspects of the College's practice:

- the care and detailed attention devoted to the admissions process
- the engagement of students in teaching and learning methods, in assessment, in College policy-making and in a variety of feedback mechanisms
- the quality of administrative and learning resources services provided to students
- the creative use in the College's work of a range of external peers, including professionals and practitioners in the performing arts

- the level of staff development activity
- the development of classification criteria and module descriptors, encouraging staff and students to reflect on the meaning of standards for individuals and programmes of study.

21 The audit also identified a number of points for further consideration. These included the necessity of:

- ensuring closer consideration of the resource aspects of academic developments and better timing in the allocation of resources for such developments
- providing opportunities for internal assessments of oral presentations and performances to be subject to subsequent internal and external verification.

Other points related to the advisability of ensuring that information was relayed back to students on action taken in response to matters that they raise formally, and the desirability of ensuring that part-time hourly-paid staff were able to contribute to internal debates about assessment processes and academic standards. The College was also requested to consider the potential disadvantages of permitting staff to choose their own appraiser, and improving careers guidance to students.

22 The SED for the present institutional audit outlined the ways in which the College had responded to the 1996 audit report: the current system for programme approval involves, as a first step, completion of a course proposal form, addressing resource requirements (see paragraph 36 below); and, assessment processes now require external examiners to sample recordings of performances and presentations, as well as written assignments (see paragraph 49 below). The revival of the College-wide Staff-Student Liaison Group (SSLG) was cited as an example of an effective mechanism for both soliciting students' advice and ensuring they obtained feedback on student-related issues, while the introduction of field committees from 2005-06 was presented as providing students with a more relevant forum for participation in quality

management than stage (level) meetings permit (see paragraph 61 below). Contractual arrangements for associate (hourly-paid) lecturers now include an allocation of additional hours for attending meetings or staff development activities (see paragraph 75 below), while staff appraisals are conducted by line managers (see paragraph 76 below). There was no evaluation of arrangements for careers advice for students, although the College is working towards full implementation of personal development planning (PDP), following a pilot conducted in 2003 (see paragraph 94 below).

23 In addition, the SED highlighted other developments since the previous audit, notably the introduction of a new undergraduate curriculum, with effect from 2003-04, and the expansion of the MA provision to include new award titles from 2005-06. In 2002, the College reviewed its Learning and Teaching strategy (first introduced in 1999) and this strategy is to be reviewed again in 2005-06. The SED also indicated that, following changes in senior staff and recent modifications to the organisation and structure of the College (see paragraphs 8 above and 28 below), which occurred in the context of a planned increase in student numbers, the College was now working towards a period of greater stability, although planning a number of initiatives to consolidate existing good practice and to make further improvements (see paragraph 33 below).

24 Since the 1996 audit, the College has participated in a QAA subject review in Dance, Drama and Cinematics (April 1997) and a developmental engagement (DE) in Music (March 2003). While the SED focused on the many strengths of the provision recognised in the respective reports, the audit team noted that some issues, which had been identified in the previous audit report, had also been raised by review teams at the subject-level, notably the need for development of more formal arrangements for careers advice and careers-related training.

25 The present audit team considered that the College had generally taken effective and timely action in response to issues arising from external audit and review, although certain areas continued, in the team's view, to require further attention. These included extending the information available to external examiners from internal moderation processes (see paragraph 53 below); making better use of statistical information (see paragraph 74 below); and formalising arrangements for career education, information and guidance, while ensuring appropriate institutional oversight of their consistency with the *Code of practice* (see paragraphs 56 and 102 below). The team also noted the College's continued good practice in relation to student admissions, which sets the tenor for its academic support arrangements (see paragraph 91 below).

## **Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes**

### **The institution's view as expressed in the SED**

26 The SED outlined the following principles and values guiding quality processes and systems at the College: quality assurance and enhancement should be a 'shared responsibility' relying on the 'personal professionalism of all staff' and there should be 'simplicity of systems' appropriate to the size of the institution and its academic structure, with relevant documentation for the guidance of staff and students. The SED further explained that central to quality assurance was evidence drawn from student statistics, student feedback and external examiner comment, while the use of this evidence to provoke and inform change was key to maintaining academic standards and to quality enhancement.

### **The institution's framework for managing quality and standards**

27 Academic Board has overall responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement, which

it exercises through its subcommittees for Academic Standards and Development (ASDC), Academic Regulations, Enterprise, Participation, and Research. Together, these committees represent the deliberative dimension of the College's policy and decision-making in relation to standards and academic quality. The remit of ASDC involves the monitoring and evaluation of both taught and research degree programmes. To support this work in relation to taught programmes, field committees reporting to ASDC have been established from 2005-06 to take an overview of standards and academic quality at subject level, while the Research Committee performs a parallel function in relation to research degree programmes. Engagement between the College and the University of Plymouth is formalised in the Accreditation Agreement, which gives the College representation on the University's Learning and Teaching and Graduate Committees. The Agreement also provides for College representation (through the Principal) on the University's Academic Board and University representation on the College's Academic Board.

28 The arrangements for chairing committees relate the deliberative structures to the executive structures of the College. The Principal chairs the Academic Board, the Deputy Principal chairs its subcommittees and the field directors chair their respective field committees. The Deputy Principal has a wide remit covering the totality of the College's academic work, including library and learning resources, and technical support. This brief is managed by delegation of responsibilities to a number of senior management roles, namely field directors, the Director of International Development the respective Deans of Information and Learning, and Research and the Academic Registrar. The newly appointed Dean of Research and Academic Registrar are respectively charged with the further development of a research strategy and driving the integration of the academic administration. Administrative support for quality assurance and enhancement is provided through the Academic Quality and Research Office.

29 Finance and resources are the responsibility of the Vice Principal, who oversees the functional areas of Finance, Estates, Personnel and Information Technology (IT) Services, as well as the Centre for Creative Enterprise and Participation (CCEP), which provides a focus in the College for knowledge transfer and widening participation projects. Strategic direction of these activities is within the remit of the Enterprise and Participation committees. Key postholders from both academic and functional areas make up the Senior Management Team (SMT). Other relevant management groups include those concerned with taught programmes (TPMG) and research, whose responsibilities relate to the implementation of policy, including the dissemination of good practice in their respective areas (see paragraph 34 below).

30 The Academic Framework documents the processes on which the College relies for assurance that responsibilities for maintaining and enhancing quality and for safeguarding academic standards are effectively communicated and carried out. According to the SED, the Academic Framework was developed with reference to, and continues to be informed by, the regulations of the University of Plymouth and the *Code of practice*. It explains the relationship with the University as awarding institution and details the College's arrangements for quality assurance. It also specifies the regulatory framework for taught programmes and contains information on assessment policies and procedures, including those for the organisation of assessment panels and boards. The latter include field assessment panels, operating at the subject level to agree students' marks across a range of modules, the Awards Assessment Board, responsible for making decisions on student progression and award, and the Assessment Standards Review Meeting, which provides a mechanism for reviewing cross-College standards (see paragraph 51 below). The Academic Regulations Committee is charged with keeping College regulations under review and recommending amendments to the Academic Board.

31 At the time of the audit, a review of the committee system was in process, looking specifically at the issue of overlap in the composition of committees, with recommendations from this review due to be considered by the Academic Board in July 2006. The audit team found the committee structure diagram in the SED not to be a reflection of the reporting arrangements described in the terms of reference of these committees, while the supplementary diagram, by giving no explanation of the information flows being represented, added little to the team's understanding of the operation of committees and their relationship to management groups, although these were clarified during meetings with staff. The SED referred to the 'burden of committees and meetings in general' and it appeared to the team that there was considerable enthusiasm among staff and students for change to the committee structure, particularly where this was seen to lead to greater relevance for committee members; the introduction of field committees providing an example. The team therefore considers it desirable for the College to complete the rationalisation of the committee structure so that it is fit for purpose for the size of institution and operates effectively with clear lines of communication.

32 The SED acknowledged that a 'key issue' was attendance at committee meetings and both staff and students in discussions with the team drew attention to clashes between meetings and teaching sessions, a problem which was being addressed, in part, through the introduction of a College calendar listing all meetings with dates. The audit team noted that iniquity had been a recurrent problem for the ASDC. Poor attendance also led to difficulties in having substantive items brought to the committee and the scheduling of some meetings outside normal teaching weeks, while helpful to staff, restricted student participation (see paragraph 63 below). The team considered these matters to be of particular concern given the wide brief of ASDC and its role in monitoring standards and academic quality in relation to work undertaken by other

subcommittees of the Academic Board. Even though the College implemented a number of measures to ensure that important business was progressed, either through correspondence or through referral to the Academic Board, the team considers it advisable for the College to take the necessary steps to improve the level of participation by members of ASDC, thereby enabling it to exercise its delegated responsibilities as the institution's principal quality assurance committee.

### **The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards**

33 Following a period of organisational change, the College is now working towards a period of greater stability. Therefore its plans for enhancement correspond to initiatives for consolidating good practice and taking forward existing developments. As examples, the SED cited the coordination of internet-based systems to provide coherent and comprehensive information and communications resources, and the further integration of the student record system with core activities such as enrolment and assessment. Specific improvements have been the introduction of remote access to the website through a single portal, the roll-out of the new student card, while the production of more informative student transcripts is planned for 2005-06.

34 Senior staff expressed the view that there was a culture of quality enhancement embedded within the College, which was associated with the nature of the practice-based curriculum in which currency and external influences were important. They maintained that there was a wide involvement among staff with quality enhancement, with ideas coming from all levels, which were supported by SMT, as a two-way process within the College. Subject staff gave examples of how improvements occurred at field level, although, in the audit team's view, these resulted more from informal exchanges than a systematic approach. The team noted that the 2005 Learning and Teaching Strategy (which is currently in draft) identifies TPMG and its

research counterpart as having an institution-level role in disseminating good practice, although the link with ASDC, which has a specific remit for quality enhancement and monitoring the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, was not explicit.

35 In summary, the audit team considered the College's development of its electronic communications and data systems as providing the management information base needed for the future development of a more strategic approach to quality enhancement. The team encourages the College to create a clearer focus for enhancement through its current review of the committee system.

### **Internal approval, monitoring and review processes**

#### **Programme approval**

36 Approval procedures for new courses and awards are set out in the Academic Framework. The process begins with the submission of a proposal to SMT from the relevant field director, based on a standard form. This outlines the course content, notes its relationship with the College Strategic Plan, presents evidence of market demand and track record on quality, and identifies staffing and resources requirements. The SMT bases its decision for approval in principle on academic grounds, and instigates a formal procedure whereby the Vice Principal (Finance and Resources) and the Dean of Information and Learning approve the availability of necessary resource provision, each signing off applicable sections of the form. The outcome is reported to the Academic Board and annually all proposals are listed in a schedule and notified to the University of Plymouth.

37 Proposals successful at the initial phase proceed to development and approval in detail, which comprises a two-stage process: Stage 1 involves a College Approval Panel (appointed by the Academic Board) whose role is to ensure that the planning and documentation meet criteria for progression to full approval; Stage 2 involves a Partnership Approval Panel (also appointed by Academic Board) with

participation from the University of Plymouth, and this recommends approval, or not, identifying any conditions that might need to be fulfilled before final approval can be granted. The outcome of the Stage 2 process is a validation report, which is submitted to the Academic Board for approval. There follows the production of definitive documentation (taking account of any conditions imposed or recommendations made), which is held by both the College and the University. There are separate procedures for making modifications to existing awards, also set out in the Academic Framework. These are based on a clear distinction between what constitutes a minor, relative to a major change, and entail approval by the Academic Board, on the respective recommendations of ASDC, or a College Approval Panel.

38 The SED gave further details, indicating that 'the main critical readership of [the College's] programme specifications [was] the initial approval panel'. The integrated structure of the undergraduate programme leading to major/minor as well as single honours awards had influenced the adoption, in 2003, of a single undergraduate programme specification, focusing on generic outcomes and integrative features across the various disciplines. However, the SED acknowledged that this did not 'fully address the special qualities of the minor awards', also stating the College's intention to produce a supplement to the programme specification during 2005-06. The specification for the taught master's programme has been recently developed following revalidation of the programme in 2005. Regarding the constitution of approval panels, the SED explained that College Approval panels included at least one member with substantial validation experience, who was therefore able to provide general advice and guidance to development teams on the use of reference points, while Partnership Approval panels involved participation of at least two external members, in addition to University of Plymouth staff, all of whom brought subject expertise.

39 In illustrating the approval process, the SED highlighted that a gap had been identified through the approval of the new Community Practices minor award, as this had been considered neither to merit a full validation nor to meet the definition of a modification. This led to the introduction of a variant to existing processes involving a single panel event with external participation. By way of contrast, the College explained that validation of the four-year Music degree, which also constituted approval of part of a course, had been conducted through the normal two-stage approval process, since the off-campus third year introduced the complexity of working with a range of partners.

40 From its review of validation reports and committee minutes, the audit team found that programme approval procedures were being adhered to and used effectively. Meetings with staff and students confirmed that there was appropriate consultation with external examiners and students to obtain their respective inputs, particularly in the case of modifications. The team also considered that the College displayed an intelligent use of variants to its normal processes where required, with a view to achieving a suitable balance between burden and rigour. In addition, the College was addressing appropriately the limitations it perceived in the undergraduate programme specification.

### **Annual monitoring**

41 A revised cycle for annual monitoring of the undergraduate programme has been implemented from 2005-06 and the schedule of events incorporated in the Academic Framework. This brings forward the focus of local monitoring to the start of the academic year, with the first output being field annual monitoring reports, containing action plans (previously termed field review reports), now completed for overview by the new field committees in October. These reports form the basis of a College overview report and action plan, which is reviewed by ASDC prior to consideration by the Academic Board in November and subsequent submission in

January to the University of Plymouth Learning and Teaching Committee. Any follow-up action required by the University is to be considered by ASDC in May. With appropriate adjustment to due dates, a similar cycle will apply to the taught master's programme, which has recently been brought inside the College's mainstream quality assurance system. The SED indicated that the impact of changes to the annual monitoring process would be monitored by ASDC during 2005-06.

42 The audit team learned that the annual monitoring process relating to 2003-04 had not kept on schedule and that the overview report had missed its target date for consideration by the Academic Board. While the SED described the timing of events in the previous cycle as 'unhelpful', from ASDC minutes it was clear that there had been more fundamental concerns about the nature of the field review process. It also became apparent to the team that the College's review of annual monitoring covered more than changing the timing of its component events. The specification of inputs to field review has been tightened and includes statistical data at field and module level, reports from module managers, student feedback, including that obtained from the student perception questionnaire (SPQ), recommendations from validation reports, and external examiner comment. The pro forma for field reporting continue to be refined, for example this year, the evaluation and commentary on student feedback and external examiner reports have been separated out into discrete appendices.

43 It was too soon for the audit team to comment on the effectiveness of recent revisions, other than to note that this year the process was on track and the overview report on annual monitoring had already been prepared in draft. At the time of the audit, annual monitoring of the master's programme had not yet been conducted under standard procedures and previous monitoring reports were not made available to the team. Through the DAT, there was evidence from reports at undergraduate level that issues identified in

annual monitoring led to effective action, although the team was of the view that there was scope for improvement in the analysis and interpretation of statistical data (see paragraphs 73-74 below).

### **Periodic review**

44 All academic awards are subject to progress review and approval at six or seven-year intervals, unless conditions of initial validation prescribe otherwise. Progress review is essentially revalidation and the procedure mirrors the two-stage 'in detail' process for programme approval outlined above. Instead of a proposal there is a critical review, guidance on the form and content of which is given in the Academic Framework. Essentially the critical review should address issues highlighted by student statistics and performance indicators, feedback from students and external contributors (specifically external examiners) and explain changes to the programme or nature of the student intake since the last validation or review, with details of how any previous recommendations have been taken forward. The Stage 2 panel comprises at least two external members, in addition to participation by the University of Plymouth, and, in the course of the review, meets relevant members of teaching and support staff, a representative group of students and, where appropriate, employers and graduates.

45 The audit team was able to follow the process, using the progress review of the undergraduate programme (2002-03) as a case study. This review led to a substantial restructuring of the curriculum, including the introduction of new award titles and utilised an extensive group of external advisers. College staff at all levels expressed confidence in the rigour of progress review and the team concluded that the procedures were operating well.

### **External participation in internal review processes**

46 There is a range of external input to course approval and progress review procedures. In course development there is discussion with external peers and consultation

with external examiners, while Stage 2 panels all include independent external members, as well as participation from University of Plymouth.

47 Although the College did not explicitly comment in the SED on the effectiveness of external participation, it provided examples demonstrating its value. In the approval of the four-year Music degree, it was external panel members who had steered the College towards the use of the award title BA (Hons) Music, with relevant suffixes, a model that is likely to be adopted by other fields. In the progress review of the undergraduate programme, where the critical review had involved contributions from such a large proportion of College staff, a panel member from the University of Plymouth was asked to take on the role of chair, normally a College responsibility, in order to ensure appropriate critical distance.

48 The audit team recognised that the College's relationship with the University of Plymouth implied that an external dimension was naturally built in to its internal procedures. However, the team also found that the College used external advice constructively in programme approval and review and that externality in its processes was strong and scrupulous, supporting the judgement of broad confidence in the College's management of quality and standards.

### **External examiners and their reports**

49 External examiners operate within the College's two-tier system of field assessment panels and award assessment boards. A subject external examiner is appointed to each field assessment panel, where the scope of the role is to review the standard of student work and of marking, and to provide advice accordingly. This involves reviewing recordings of performances as well as written assignments and, while for the undergraduate programme the focus is at stage 3, there is the expectation that external examiners will also cover work at stage 2 contributing to the final award. The awards external examiner is appointed from among the group of subject external examiners and the role is to give impartial advice to the

Awards Assessment Board of which he/she is a member. The respective responsibilities of subject and awards external examiners, which include the requirement to submit an annual report, are set out in detail in the Academic Framework, along with the appointments procedure. External examiners are appointed by the University of Plymouth, on the recommendation of the College's Academic Board. Within the College, the Academic Quality and Research Office deals with the administration of the appointment and replacement of external examiners, the issue of appropriate documentation and the receipt and distribution of their reports, also monitoring follow-up action in response to recommendations made therein.

50 The College has implemented a report template for external examiners who are required to comment on assessment tasks and processes, standards and areas of strength or weakness. They are asked specifically to address the comparability of standards with national expectations, enabling the College to produce the requisite summaries for publication on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website (see paragraph 121 below). External examiner reports go first to the Deputy Principal and copies are distributed to the Principal, the Academic Registrar, the relevant field director and the Academic Quality and Research Officer; they are also forwarded to the Academic Registrar at the University of Plymouth. Within annual monitoring, external examiner comment is a key input to field review and, following ASDC's review of field reports, an overview is sent to external examiners by way of a progress report on how all of their recommendations are being addressed.

51 The SED indicated that the College encouraged engagement of external examiners with institutional assessment policies. Two such examples were the annual briefing and the Assessment Standards Review meeting. The briefing serves the purpose of updating external examiners on changes to regulations, on progress relating to their recommendations and on new developments, while also facilitating

group discussion of assessment practice across the institutions represented. The review meeting focuses on feedback from external examiners on the comparability of standards both across the institution and between fields, and highlights common themes and good practice in assessment.

52 The audit team studied a number of external examiner reports and tracked, through documentation, the use made of them within the College. Reports were generally positive about the assessment regime, the standards achieved by students and the quality of the programmes provided. There were particularly favourable comments concerning the clarity of written briefs and assessment criteria and the quality of feedback on student work. Through the DAT, the team saw evidence that external examiner reports were used constructively, with issues raised leading to appropriate action. The team considered that the Assessment Standards Review, which produced succinct summaries of oral reports from external examiners covering all fields, provided the College with a valuable additional mechanism for institutional oversight of standards, particularly since full attendance had been achieved at this meeting since its inception in 2004. The team identifies as a feature of good practice, the successful efforts made through briefing and feedback sessions to engage external examiners in the wider aspects of their role, extending beyond their formal responsibilities in connection with assessment boards.

53 In the particular area of assessment policy on internal moderation of marking, the audit team noted that the College was drawing up guidance on recording the process as well as the result. The team also noted that moderation of marks had been a matter of report from both the 2004 and 2005 Assessment Standards Review meetings and that there had been a specific comment about the importance of evidencing marking processes (see paragraph 111 below). To reinforce the external examiner's view on this point, the team considers it desirable, in the interests of demonstrating equity of treatment of students, for the College to introduce

procedures for ensuring that external examiners have full access to all relevant records of the criteria and calculations used by internal markers and moderators in establishing students' results. Notwithstanding this recommendation, overall, the team found the College's use of external examiners in summative assessment to be strong and scrupulous, thus supporting the judgement of broad confidence in the University's management of quality and standards.

### **External reference points**

54 According to the SED, the approach to the *Code of practice* initially adopted by Academic Board was to undertake an analysis of each section as it was published and assess how far the precepts were being met by the College's practice. Since then a 'Code of practice map' has been compiled with a separate schedule for each section outlining how the precepts have been implemented. The schedules assign responsibilities for the various sections of the *Code* to appropriate management roles and draw links between particular precepts and associated College procedures, also referencing the source document.

55 The College's approach to the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements has been to incorporate their use in course development and management. The levels of awards offered at the College correspond to the levels of the FHEQ and generic descriptions of each level are given in the Academic Framework. The SED explained that subject benchmark statements were used to inform curriculum development, although a range of statements sometimes had to be used, given the integrated structure of the undergraduate programme.

56 With regard to the 'Code of practice map', the audit team observed that there was considerable variability between different schedules, both in the detail of the linkages drawn and the clarity of the mechanisms for checking that practice remained consistent with the *Code of practice* over time. As a general comment, the team found the mechanisms for institutional oversight to be less explicit for sections of the *Code* covering student services

than for those relating to core quality assurance processes. In the specific case of career education, information and guidance, the schedule gave no information on how responsibility was being discharged or monitored by the College (see paragraphs 101-102 below), although the team understood that CCEP had organised staff training on working with students with disabilities and on the introduction of PDP.

57 The audit team noted that ASDC had initiated the necessary action for implementing any changes to procedures in the light of sections of the *Code of practice* revised in 2004. While the relevant schedules had been thoroughly updated, there had not been a subsequent report to ASDC to this effect, nor any follow-up by ASDC, and the team was unable to trace any mechanism for routinely checking the currency of the 'Code of practice map'. The team therefore considers it desirable for the College to review the overall effectiveness of the 'Code of practice map' as a mechanism for providing institutional oversight of the implementation of procedures such that their consistency with the *Code* can be clearly demonstrated. Nevertheless, the team recognises that, in general, the College's practice is documented in procedures and guidelines that are informed by the *Code* and other elements of the Academic Infrastructure, notably within the Academic Framework and student handbooks.

### **Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies**

58 Since the last audit, the College has participated in a subject review of Dance Drama and Cinematics in April 1997, which resulted in approval of the quality of education in the subject area. Aspects of provision were found to be making a full, or in the case of student progression and achievement, a substantial contribution to the attainment of stated aims and objectives. There has also been a DE with the Music field in March 2003. None of the College's courses is subject to accreditation or exemption arrangements with

professional, statutory, or regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The College's provision was re-accredited by the University of Plymouth in October 2003, resulting in an increase in the level of authority delegated to the College. Reports on external reviews are considered by the Academic Board and actions put in train.

59 A number of themes arising from external reviews were identified throughout the SED. These included the need to improve statistical information, to develop systems for obtaining and acting on student feedback and to strengthen assessment procedures, particularly in relation to arrangements for the moderation of marking and the support of part-time staff.

60 The audit team considered that, in certain areas, progress had been rather slow. The development and utilisation of student statistics was an obvious case in point (see paragraph 73 below), since fairly high rates of student non-completion and graduate unemployment had been identified in the 1997 subject review. The provision of careers support for students is another issue which has persisted over time and the team would have expected to see a more systematic monitoring and analysis of employment destinations, with a view to devising appropriate policy measures (see paragraph 102 below). From meetings with staff, the team formed the view that their approach to some of the recommendations was inhibited by their belief in the specialist nature of the College's provision. For instance, they drew little distinction between career support for students and opportunities for them to network with visiting artists (see paragraph 101 below), or between formal peer observation of teaching (identified as variable in the review of accreditation) and group teaching activities, which were common practice across the integrated taught programmes (see paragraph 83 below). However, the team recognised that the Academic Board was monitoring progress made with actions that had been recommended in the various external reviews, through use of a rolling action plan, noting that several were due to be completed in 2005-06; the team encourages the College to bring outstanding issues to a positive conclusion.

## **Student representation at operational and institutional level**

61 Students are members of all central academic committees; the three student officers (the President, Vice President and Welfare Officer) sit on the Academic Board, while the Student President is an ex officio member of ASDC, whose membership also includes students representing the various programme levels. From 2005-06, field committees have superseded stage (level) meetings as the key mechanism for student participation in the quality management of their programmes, although stage meetings may continue to be held as required. As part of the student feedback system, there are also student-led field meetings, from which issues requiring action at institutional level are collated and taken forward to the ASDC. In addition, SSLG provides a cross-College forum where staff and student representatives discuss student-related issues and share ideas.

62 The SED stated that the student representation system had been in place for many years and worked well, while acknowledging that students were not always able to attend their designated committees. In briefing the audit team, student representatives clarified that this was due to the conflicting demands of their courses, resulting in the weight of responsibility for student participation on central committees falling onto the three student officers, in particular the Student President, as the sole sabbatical officer. The students also indicated that sometimes they were not notified of meetings in sufficient time, commenting in the SWS (within a broader context of 'meetings, deadlines and messages'), that 'for an institution this size you would expect communication to be less of an issue'. However, in general, they expressed satisfaction with the arrangements for student representation and were accepting of the practice of holding regular meetings in July and September, since the Student President was able to attend. In addition, they highlighted the importance of informal channels of communication, which the College's size assisted, emphasising the approachability of staff.

63 The audit team noted that recent committee minutes showed relatively low levels of student attendance, especially at ASDC, which had experienced problems reaching quoracy. The team also noted that the annual designation of student representatives to committees was a rather slow process in that elections this year had not taken place by November. However, from the DAT, there were early indications that the new Theatre field committee was achieving some success in engaging student interest, although there were no stage 3 representatives, as the relevant student group was undertaking project work outside the College.

64 In separate discussions with staff and students, the audit team learned of measures to encourage and support student participation. These included the emphasis placed by SSLG on representatives canvassing the views of their constituents, the production of a handbook for field representatives, and the introduction, earlier this year, of a training course for student representatives, although attendance had been patchy. Senior staff expressed the view that, as well as encouraging students to speak up about their concerns, training increased their appreciation of the value of formal representation systems for putting forward the student perspective on quality management, while students provided examples of contributions they had made to recent course developments, such as the Choreography field and the four-year BA Music award.

65 Overall, the audit team concluded that the College provides opportunities for student representation at operational and institutional levels. The importance of training for student representatives (an issue raised in the previous audit) was recognised by senior staff, but the incomplete take-up of training opportunities by students is a matter the College will no doubt wish to keep under review. In the team's view, the College's commitment to student participation was further exemplified by involvement of students in the appointment process for academic and academic-related staff, where students' views form an input to the selection panel's decision (see paragraph 75 below).

### **Feedback from students, graduates and employers**

66 The main mechanisms for obtaining feedback from students consist of module evaluation questionnaires; the annual SPQ, for which there are three years' data; specific questionnaire surveys; and the range of meetings involving student representation, which are supplemented by informal contacts with students. An additional source of feedback is provided by anonymised summaries of academic appeals and student complaints, together with their outcomes or status, which are presented annually to the Academic Board.

67 Feedback from graduates is obtained from those who return to the College to give performances or professional advice to students. There is also a website for the use of the Graduates' Association and the team learned of plans to develop a more methodical approach to the collection and analysis of data from this resource. Similarly, there are informal arrangements for eliciting feedback from employers; the location of the College on the Dartington Hall estate affords opportunities for it to develop links with professional artists, as well as with the cultural industries of the south-west through the regional role of CCEP.

68 With respect to feedback mechanisms, the SED acknowledged that response rates for the SPQ were initially poor, although pointed to a 'substantial' improvement last year, which was explained in terms of more active support for the survey from both ASDC and SSLG. For instance, ASDC had picked up on the 'high approval rating for the Library and the poor rating given to the provision of IT', and this had led to action targeted at improving the latter (see paragraph 90 below). The SED particularly highlighted the value of SSLG as a forum for feedback, given its focus on student-related issues and relative success in involving student representatives. Students meeting the audit team provided examples of how their feedback had led to change - revisions to the registration and induction processes for 2005-06 being a case in point.

69 The audit team was interested to explore the ways in which students were kept informed about action in response to their feedback, since both the previous audit and the last subject review had raised this as an issue. Staff drew attention to the opportunities for formal communication provided by the newly established field committees, while students emphasised the existence of informal channels of communication between staff and students. Through the DAT, the team was able to verify that students were routinely asked to complete module evaluation questionnaires and ascertained that they additionally provided much face-to-face feedback to staff regarding teaching, practical arrangements and learning resources.

70 In summary, the audit team concluded that the College was 'making the most of informal contacts', as stated in the SED (in the context of student feedback). However, while exploiting the sense of community to the benefit of facilitating frank discussion about the student learning experience, there was also evidence that the College appreciated the value of routinely obtaining students' views by other means. The team would support the development of a similar approach to feedback from graduates and employers.

### **Progression and completion statistics**

71 Statistical management information is identified in the Academic Framework as one of the key elements upon which the College's quality processes and systems are based. The scrutiny of statistics relating to admission, progression and awards is an integral part of annual programme monitoring, while progression and award data are reviewed each year by both the Academic Board and the Board of Governors. The SED gave further examples, including the use of 'information on recruitment and admissions...throughout the Clearing process, and subsequently through induction and enrolment', adding that 'student numbers necessarily drive both planning and finance'.

72 The College has recently implemented a new student information system to provide a single data source for the production of

progression and completion statistics. According to the SED, 'the new student system has helped directly to improve the transparency of the presentation of statistics' and there is an expectation that it will also facilitate plans 'to improve the analysis of trends'. With respect to external comparators, statistics produced by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) were of use in some areas, but in terms of the quantitative data supplied by HESA to the TQI website, the College has insufficient student numbers within the defined subject categories for meaningful comparisons to be made (see paragraph 121 below).

73 Although the SED contained no commentary on recent or current progression and completion statistics, in studying documentation the audit team saw some analysis of these data, in both the annual report to Academic Board and field annual monitoring reports. However, it considered the statistical analysis on which these reports were based to be insufficiently comprehensive, having been undertaken at a relatively broad level, certainly not representing the full picture that cohort analysis would provide. Senior staff who met the team acknowledged the need to 'make statistics work harder' in the monitoring of progression and achievement, and had already identified the priority of providing development for staff to help them use statistics more effectively. The team would support this position.

74 The audit team understood that the College intended to overcome the impact of its small size on the utility of the TQI website as a source of quantitative information by making progression, award and destination data publicly available on its own website. However, in addition to focusing on the implications of its size, the College regards its provision as being highly distinctive. This, in the team's view, makes the College disinclined to attempt comparisons with other institutions, thereby reducing its capacity to contextualise the interpretation of statistical information. In developing the reporting potential of the new student information system, the team considers it advisable for the College, to give greater

priority to analysing the College's performance relative to that of other HEIs in order to identify benchmarks that might be used to inform institutional strategies.

### **Assurance of the quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward**

75 The appointment process for teaching staff, as outlined in the SED, consists of a panel interview, discussions with staff and students, and a practical demonstration of approach through a teaching or workshop session involving students whose feedback contributes to the final decision. The process takes two days for full-time staff and one day for part-time staff. Hourly-paid staff and musical instrument tutors are appointed through less formal arrangements, often through local contacts, while associate lecturers are recruited through internal advertisements and interview. Following appointment, there is a mandatory induction process for new staff. For permanent teaching staff this is a two-day event comprising an introduction to the collegiate community, followed by specific induction to the learning, teaching and research context of the institution. Associate lecturers are inducted to their role at field level and their contractual arrangements make provision for participation in field meetings and relevant staff development. For new teaching staff the probationary period is one year.

76 The College operates an annual appraisal system for all staff, which is fully described in the Staff Appraisal Scheme document produced by the Personnel function. The line manager acts as the appraiser and training for both appraisers and appraisees is provided by the University of Plymouth. A personal action plan is agreed, supported by development and training needs, and a mid-year review determines progress. Only the outcomes of the appraisal are sent to the Personnel function for the purpose of tracking training needs.

77 The SED indicated that in candidates for academic roles the College was looking for engagement with current developments in

research, scholarship and pedagogy, but was also seeking 'to ensure a good match with the ethos, values and culture of the College'. This accounted for the attention paid to briefing candidates during the appointment process to give them a real sense of the learning environment within the context of the wider Dartington community. With regard to appraisal, the SED admitted that the College had fallen short of targets in its Human Resources (HR) Strategy, but that work was in progress to ensure that all staff had an appraisal and that the necessary documentation was completed.

78 Given the recent investment in new staff at all levels, the audit team had the opportunity to discuss the appointment process with staff who had first-hand experience and also with students who had participated. All confirmed the rigour of the process and the seriousness with which the College sought to ensure that its appointments would be successful. Students were convinced that their views were genuinely taken into consideration. There was a clear appreciation among both staff and students that the geographic situation of the College would not suit everyone and that it was important to be as transparent as possible for the benefit of prospective staff (or students, in the case of admissions) as to what the Dartington experience might entail. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the ways in which the College engenders a commitment among staff and students to its particular ethos, specifically through the thoroughness of its processes for staff appointment and student admissions, including arrangements for induction (see paragraph 91 below).

79 In the light of the difficulties with the operation of the appraisal system, which were attributed to conflicting demands on staff time, the audit team was reassured to find that the staff whom it met were fully engaged with and supportive of the process. From its discussions on promotion and reward, it appeared to the team that even senior field staff viewed reward rather narrowly in terms of opportunities to pursue research and personal development, or the potential to receive an honorarium.

However, the team learned that the College had recently produced a draft Reward Strategy, although, at the time of the audit, this had only been reviewed by the Board of Governors, whose initial approval is required under the Articles of Government. The team encourages the College to develop and formalise this document in order to meet the objectives of its HR Strategy.

80 Overall, the audit team considered the SED to be an accurate description of the procedures in place for the appointment, appraisal and reward of teaching staff. These are appropriately recorded in a series of policy documents, although some are still being developed or refined in the process of collating the full range of staffing policies on the Personnel intranet site.

### **Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development**

81 The Staff Development Policy Statement guides both the timing and the substance of the College's staff development provision. Induction is supplemented by in-house training on relevant administrative systems, the use of technology or on specific topics, such as widening participation or the introduction of PDP (see paragraph 94 below). Restructuring provided a specific trigger for staff development, resulting in a number of 'away-days' to support the 'change process', covering issues such as teamwork and communication. The main opportunities for continuing professional development include attendance at conferences and short courses, in-service training, exchange visits and professional work. The budgets for these activities have been devolved to field directors, with the expectation that they will ensure appropriate alignment of local opportunities with the institutional goals set out in the HR strategy.

82 The SED stated that, 'a particular issue for the College [was] to provide both opportunity and time for academic staff to engage with development through their own subject associations and through the Higher Education

Academy (HEA)'. It clarified that, while staff registration with HEA had not been progressed as a priority, Information and Learning Services was to take on relevant responsibilities for this area, providing a focus for the pedagogic development of staff. The SED also indicated the College's intention of achieving greater integration of staff development with its Learning and Teaching Strategy, which was in the process of revision.

83 From its discussions with various groups of staff, the audit team noted that College staff, such as those involved in research supervision, were able to undertake training through the University of Plymouth. There was also the opportunity for postgraduate research students with teaching duties to complete HEA-accredited training at the University, although this was not mandatory, and such students were able to take on teaching duties on the basis of briefing by the module manager. One member of staff had pursued the MA Learning and Teaching in HE at the University and this was perceived by both the individual and the field team to have been advantageous. However, senior staff explained that, as a general rule, the College could not afford to release new academic staff one day a week to attend the HEA-accredited programme at Plymouth, so modules from that programme had been developed for delivery at the College. The team also learned that the College scheme for peer observation of teaching, commended in the 1997 subject review, was not operating uniformly across fields, with some relying on group teaching to provide informal feedback to staff.

84 The audit team was of the view that there was insufficient encouragement given to staff to develop pedagogical skills and in particular, considers it desirable for the College to find means of creating the opportunity for staff inexperienced in teaching in HE to take recognised courses or qualifications in teaching and learning as part of their personal, professional development. It also considered that the value of feedback on teaching as an input to staff development discussions was being compromised by the inconsistent operation of the peer observation scheme.

Nevertheless, the team recognised that the College was now taking a more strategic view of its staff development provision and encourages it to build on the various examples signifying this shift in focus in moving towards a more coordinated approach.

### **Assurance of the quality of teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods**

85 The College currently has no provision leading to an award delivered through distributed or distance methods.

### **Learning support resources**

86 The SED stressed the significance for student learning of the particular environment provided by the College's location on the Dartington Hall estate and the integration of its work with the arts and educational activities of the Trust. Teaching space was described as 'well matched to the College's specialist needs'. However, despite recent expansion of studio provision through 'new build' and conversion projects, it was recognised that space was becoming 'a major issue', and the College and Trust were working together on plans for the next phase of campus development, which will include additional student accommodation. As part of its recent incorporation into Information and Learning Services there has been a major reorganisation of the Library, which included establishing links between the library catalogue and the student record system, allowing greater efficiency in the book circulation system.

87 The SED also emphasised the range of learning support services involved in practice-based courses. Some subject-specific skills are developed within individual courses, while others are acquired through training from the technical support units (for example, video editing, lighting and sound) within Performance Services. The generic learning needs of all students are supported by Library Services, comprising the Library and Student IT Support, while assistance is also available from a dedicated unit for students who need advice and guidance on study skills. Library Services

and Performance Services are the responsibility of the Dean of Information and Learning, whose management brief also covers Web Services (see paragraph 118 below). Within the committee structure, the ASDC has the remit for evaluation and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, resources and environment. In this context, the ASDC routinely receives a range of reports to which student feedback is an input, as well as minutes from SSLG and other groups with student representation. In this way it is kept informed and is able to initiate action in response to learning resources issues raised by students.

88 The SWS confirmed the priority being given to building new student accommodation, which was due to be completed by 2006. However, it also raised certain resources issues, linking these to the imbalance of student numbers towards first-years; pressure on space for the new Choreography field being one such example. The SWS pointed to improvements in the book circulation system and students meeting the audit team were generally satisfied with the availability of books, although they were more critical of the availability of computers in the Library.

89 Apart from campus redevelopment, the audit team saw other evidence that the College was managing space strategically. For example, the handbook for postgraduate students encourages them to plan and stagger their demands for studio time and in meetings with the team they expressed satisfaction with the availability of space. There also appeared to be a general willingness among fields to extend the use of dedicated space and equipment to students from other fields.

90 In relation to learning resources, the team learned that there had been a report to ASDC in February 2005 addressing feedback from both the SPQ and SSLG, which had revealed a significant disparity between the student perception of library and IT resources. In the team's view, this report, which had been produced by the Dean of Information and Learning, also provided a particularly useful overview of issues to be considered in the

strategic development of learning resources, although it did not constitute a formal strategy document. Nevertheless, the team would encourage the College to formalise this type of planning and reporting document in its procedures for quality management. Overall, the team concluded that the approach adopted by the College to ensuring an appropriate provision of resources combined an awareness of relevant strategic issues with a willingness to respond to feedback from students.

### **Academic guidance, support and supervision**

91 As stated in the SED, the College aims 'to provide clear information, support and guidance to students from the beginning'. As part of the admissions process, prospective students attend selection days and a key purpose of these is to ensure that they gain sufficient understanding of the College's approach to learning and teaching to assess whether the Dartington experience is for them. Admission is followed by induction, which has a generic component on studying and living at Dartington, supplemented by information and advice targeted at specific student groups, including guidance on initial assessment and arrangements for learning support.

92 Once students start their courses, responsibility for their academic support and guidance rests primarily with their field. One-to-one feedback through individual tutorials is a regular feature of the taught programmes and in addition, undergraduate students are each allocated an academic adviser whose role is to take an overview of the student's performance, assist in interpreting feedback on assessment and give guidance on future direction through an appropriate choice of modules. The main supervisor and the supervisory team provide equivalent functions for postgraduate research students.

93 In the SED, the College recognised the importance of continuing support in reinforcing students' understanding of the opportunities available through their programmes. By way of illustration, taught students are assisted in

choosing their electives (options) or minor fields through an options fair organised during the second semester, while in addition to their normal supervisory arrangements, postgraduate research students are guided in developing their research proposals by a series of research training workshops and seminars during the first year of study.

94 The SED highlighted the integral nature of reflective student learning to the institutional Learning and Teaching strategy and indicated that, following a pilot conducted through the BA Arts and Cultural Management course, PDP was being implemented for stage 1 students across all fields during the current academic year, enabling them to make more effective use of academic guidance in compiling professional development portfolios. The SED also explained that, in the light of revision to the relevant section of the *Code of practice* and guidance issued by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, a more comprehensive research training programme was being introduced from 2005-06, with a view to helping students enhance their individual skills logs.

95 According to the SWS, 'the support network...outside of immediate academic tutor contact, has been a problem in the past', but that 'in the last 12 months Dartington has become far more user-friendly'. The difference was attributed to the amalgamation of student administration and support functions in the same central location, which had made institution-wide arrangements more transparent and accessible to students, although 'positive changes in the students' union' were also cited as a factor. In briefing the audit team, student representatives clarified that they were now more actively involved in helping students settle in on arrival at the College.

96 It became evident to the audit team that staff placed high value on giving constructive and developmental feedback to students as a means of encouraging reflective approaches to learning. In discussions with the team, they emphasised how the sense of College community encouraged a straightforward exchange of views with students, while

students were highly positive about the good relations they had with staff and the level of informal support provided to them throughout their studies. There was general consensus among staff and students that the academic adviser system worked very well and the team noted that it was underpinned by staff training and systematic record keeping, with procedures for changing advisers, if necessary. Postgraduate research students were similarly satisfied with the arrangements for allocating supervisors and with the support they received. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the student academic support systems operating through academic advisers and research supervisors, which are successfully combined with informal channels of support developed through the good and productive relationships existing between staff and students.

97 However, the linkage between specific responsibilities for student support and the Learning and Teaching Strategy was not so apparent to the audit team; a revised strategy was in preparation, but the team met senior field staff who were unaware of the draft document. The team also considered that a more strategic approach to student support would be beneficial in areas affected by the changing student profile. For instance, the College may wish to manage expectations about the level of support it can reasonably offer to postgraduate research students as numbers increase in this developing area and, given the increasing proportion of international students, keep under review the suitability of arrangements for specialised English language support, which is available to postgraduate research students only at the University of Plymouth.

98 Overall, the audit team concurred with the views expressed by College staff and students that the arrangements for academic guidance, support and supervision were working well. Specifically, in relation to the contextual enquiry project (CEP), pursued off-campus (in the UK or overseas) by students at stage 3 of the undergraduate programme, the team noted that relevant guidelines drew on the section of

the *Code of practice* on placement learning. Through the DAT, the team also learned that students were required to design a project proposal for approval which had to include arrangements for maintaining regular contact with the project supervisor. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the organisational and support arrangements underpinning the CEP.

### **Personal support and guidance**

99 The College makes available a range of personal welfare services to its students. On campus there is specialist provision of one-to-one dyslexia support, professional counselling and medical services, including a College nurse. The SED pointed to measures for improving the coordination of both practical assistance and advice to students, such as the recent consolidation of student administrative and support services, which had made more accessible 'first line' advice on financial issues. Another example is the bringing together of service providers through the Student Support and Guidance Network (SSGN). This comprises relevant staff from the advice and guidance services, study skills and learning support tutors, IT professionals and student officers, and deals with matters of general concern, raising policy issues where necessary. The SSGN also serves as a forum for sharing concerns about individual students.

100 The SWS concluded with the view that 'Dartington becomes a very inspiring place for the individual artist and the group ... ; the general level of support for learning, guidance and social support is good'. This view was reinforced to the audit team by every student group it met and several students drew on their personal experience of dyslexia support or counselling to back up their positive opinion of these services.

101 The audit team was interested to explore formal arrangements for career education, since recommendations for improvements in this area had been made in previous external audit and review reports. There was no follow-up of these recommendations in the SED for the present audit, where the only explicit reference to

careers was to the opportunities provided through the work of CCEP for students on graduation, although the team understood that careers information and guidance was now within the remit of the Enterprise Committee. In discussions, staff gave emphasis to the College's involvement with the breadth of activities on the Dartington Hall estate, which facilitated student interaction with a range of arts professionals, including former students of the College. Students expressed the view that 'Futures Week', which was specifically aimed at career information and advice, came too late in the programme, after they had already chosen their options, although the team learned that it was now open to stage 2 as well as stage 3 students.

102 The audit team noted that the pilot for the PDP scheme included among its aims the improvement of career management skills and featured a session on career options involving staff from CCEP, while the associated guide for students stressed the importance of general 'transferable' skills and the need within a practice-based course to build up a curriculum vitae. However, the team formed the view that the College's approach, while giving encouragement to students to reflect on their academic and skills development in the context of their career aspirations, did not sufficiently address the parallel need for the College to coordinate practical opportunities for them to gain knowledge or experience of possible career openings. Specifically, there appeared to be a lack of recognition of the fact that students would not necessarily achieve or sustain a career in the arts, which analysis of graduate employment surveys would doubtless reveal. The team considers it desirable for the College to formulate a clear and documented policy for career education, information and guidance which is informed by data on graduate destinations. This point notwithstanding, the team found that other aspects of personal support and guidance were operating satisfactorily with improved coordination of services reflecting greater institutional focus.

### Collaborative provision

103 The College has no collaborative provision.

## Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trail

### Discipline audit trail

104 In the selected DAT, appropriate members of the audit team met staff and students to discuss the programmes and also studied a sample of assessed student work, annual programme monitoring reports, including external examiner reports, and annual and periodic review documentation relating to the programmes. Their findings are as follows.

#### Theatre

105 The scope of the DAT covered the following programmes which together comprise the Theatre subject field:

- BA (Hons) Theatre
- BA (Hons) Theatre (major award)
- BA (Hons) Theatre Practices (minor award)
- MA Devised Theatre
- MPhil and PhD research degrees.

106 Within this field there are 168 full-time undergraduate students, 10 part-time postgraduate taught students and 12 students registered for research degrees.

107 The basis of the DAT was a discipline SED, prepared by the field team specifically for the purpose of the audit; programme specifications for the undergraduate and taught master's programmes were also provided.

108 Programme specifications were related to the qualifications descriptors of the FHEQ, while the undergraduate specification was also informed by relevant subject benchmark statements. Both specifications are published in the Academic Framework and also incorporated in programme handbooks.

109 The discipline SED provided no comparison of progression, retention and

completion rates over time, although there were some generally positive comments on these matters in relation to 2004-05. The College has implemented a new student information system which is able to provide the fields with a variety of useful data sets, including detailed information on student progression and completion, for evaluation during the annual monitoring process. While there was evidence in the latest annual monitoring report of some analysis of the available data in terms of progression and retention, there was little evidence of systematic benchmarking against comparator departments, in terms of completion and award outcomes, and no systematic record of student destinations.

110 The key internal monitoring process at field level is annual monitoring and the process described in the discipline SED was in line with the requirements of the Academic Framework. Within the field, each module manager prepares a report that incorporates matters arising from the student evaluation. Issues from module reports are fed into the monitoring process for the field as a whole. The annual monitoring report is produced by the Field Director and, together with matters identified through module evaluation, it collates statistical information, issues raised at staff and student meetings, and feedback from the external examiner, to form the basis of an action plan for the subsequent year. The audit team studied the latest annual monitoring report for Theatre and found it to contain clear action points. During discussions, the team also heard about changes that had been made by the Theatre field as a result of the monitoring and review process. The most recent progress review was the revalidation of the undergraduate programme in 2003, which was conducted at institutional level.

111 The external examiner reports seen by the audit team confirmed that the academic standards of programmes were comparable with those of other UK HEIs. Where reports had raised issues, these were clearly delineated in the annual monitoring report and the team was able to track the way in which a variety of

matters raised by the external examiner had been responded to through the cycle of annual monitoring in an appropriate and timely manner. In reviewing examples of student work, the team learned that current practice did not include the presentation of a clear evidence trail of the internal moderation of double-marking to the external examiner, who had also recently commented on this point. The team supports the view of the external examiner on the importance of transparency in the internal assessment and moderation process.

112 According to the discipline SED, the Theatre field is 'particularly concerned with models of assessment which offer opportunities for students to articulate their practice through performance, critical self-reflection and various modes of documentation'. In the audit team's view, the assessment methodologies employed were appropriately designed and applied so as to measure objectively student achievement against the learning outcomes of the module or programme and provide a reliable and consistent basis for recommendation of the appropriate award. The assessment processes are clearly set out within programme and module handbooks and articulate with the overarching assessment policies of the College, as contained in the Academic Framework. The generic grade descriptors for assessment are presented in module handbooks, but are not included in the handbooks for the overall undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes. The team considered that student understanding of the assessment process could be further enhanced through the wider presentation and availability of assessment instruments.

113 The audit team studied a range of undergraduate and postgraduate work, including written coursework assessments, contextual enquiry projects, dissertations and recordings of student presentations. Assessment practices across the field were consistent with College policies and with the section of the Code of practice on assessment of students. From its review, the team was able to confirm that assessed work was marked against clearly defined learning outcomes and assessment

criteria, which were published within individual module handbooks and consistent with relevant statements in the programme specifications. Students who met the team commented that they were happy with the information they received regarding assessment, which included a briefing seminar on assessment at the start of each module. They also expressed their satisfaction with the way in which assessment was applied to individual achievement in the context of collaborative and group activities; they recognised the difficulties of this process but felt that they were dealt with fairly by the internal markers.

114 Separate student handbooks are produced for undergraduate and postgraduate study and these are supplemented by handbooks for each module. The handbooks reviewed by the audit team were clearly written, well laid out and contained useful information about the field as a whole and individual modules. Students confirmed that they found these handbooks very helpful, enabling them to orientate themselves successfully within their studies and providing them with clear information about what was expected of them at every stage.

115 The discipline SED stated that within recent years there had been a major investment by the College in building or refurbishing most of the studio spaces available to Theatre. Students recognised that such resources were necessarily limited, but felt that a fair system was in place to ensure that all students had reasonable opportunity to gain access to them. They reported that they were actively encouraged to book spaces outside of formal teaching sessions to develop and prepare their work for assessment. However, staff expressed a concern that the resource needs of undergraduate students, including access to networked IT facilities, did impact upon the availability of such resources to postgraduate students. Students were very appreciative of the interaction with professional practitioners, facilitated by the field, including the contacts they were able to establish via individual members of staff, many of whom maintained a profile of creative practice or whose research or

consultancy was fed back into course curricula. Learning resource and learning support issues are identified through module evaluation and field committee meetings and monitored through the annual monitoring process.

116 Student views are formally sought through field committees, module evaluations and the SPQ. Students who met with the audit team emphasised the value they placed on the opportunity for informal feedback to staff, in addition to the formal mechanisms. They confirmed that their feedback was usually acted upon by staff and were able to cite examples, such as the revised delivery of the minor award which had been put in place for the current academic year. With respect to the new field committee, the team learned that some student representatives had not received induction into their role, also noting that stage 3 students were as yet unrepresented since they were undertaking their CEP. However, staff and students commented positively on the first meeting and the students clarified that they were encouraged to reflect on the positive aspects of their experience, as well as identifying matters for improvement.

117 Overall, the audit team was satisfied that:

- the standard of student achievement in the programmes covered by the DAT is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ
- the quality of the learning opportunities is suitable for the programmes of study in Theatre, leading to the named awards.

## **Section 4: The audit investigations: published information**

### **The students' experience of published information and other information available to them**

118 Information about the College is accessible to students from a variety of sources. These include the prospectus and the booklet entitled 'Dartington College of Arts - Information and

Contacts' (which are updated annually), a leaflet about CCEP, as well as both the College's own website and the TQI website (see paragraph 121 below). There is also more focused information available to students within programme handbooks, the Academic Framework, and through the developing intranet portal. The Academic Framework contains details of the College's regulations and procedures, including those relating to appeals, complaints, late submissions of coursework, extenuating circumstances, special needs and plagiarism. The audit team discussed available information with both undergraduate and postgraduate students in institutional meetings and with the students participating in the DAT.

119 The SED did not give any indication as to how the quality of the College's published information is assured; nor did the SWS touch on the accuracy of published information. However, student representatives informed the audit team that there were no concerns relating to the content of programme specifications within the programme handbooks, although the team understood that the presentation of these was to be revised during 2005-06 with an emphasis on a student readership. During the DAT, students told the team that their experience at the College had matched their expectations from the promotional materials they had seen, namely the prospectus and the website. They also confirmed that programme and module handbooks were clear and helpful to them at every stage of their studies. While there was an awareness among the students of information on complaints and appeals procedures (available in handbooks and in the Academic Framework), none of those whom the team met had had any cause to use either process. From the DAT, it appeared to the team that students were not yet aware of the extent of material available through the portal, which they used mainly for booking rooms and sharing information between themselves.

120 From its discussions with students, the audit team was able to conclude that the information currently available to students was appropriate and accurate in its description of

the multidisciplinary nature of the programmes and the learning environment derived from the College's location on the Dartington Hall estate. The team learned that the content of the prospectus relating to individual courses was provided by the relevant field teams and that ultimate responsibility for the College's promotional material lay with the Principal, but it remained unclear as to the mechanism for ensuring the continuing accuracy of such information following the recent revision to management structures.

### **Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information**

121 The College's entry on the TQI website includes information within the three subject categories of Art and Design, Performing Arts and Other Creative Arts. In accordance with *HEFCE 03/51*, the College has posted summaries under the requisite headings. Under the subject reports heading, there are separate subject external examiner reports for Visual Performance (Art and Design), Music and Theatre (Performing Arts), and Performance Writing and Arts Management (Other Creative Arts), together with an overview from the awards external examiner. To date, no internal reviews have been published. Under the institution information heading, there is a summary of the Learning and Teaching Strategy and a separate commentary on employer needs and trends, as well as links to the QAA website for external review reports and to the College's own website for further information. In respect the quantitative information provided by HESA and the results of the National Student Survey, due to the College's small size in terms of student numbers, the data is in many cases statistically non-significant, or unhelpful because of rounding - both these factors being outside the College's control.

122 From its study of source material, the audit team was able to verify that the summaries of external examiner reports and the Learning and Teaching strategy were consistent with the original documents. In the interests of

completeness of public information, the team encourages the College to post summaries from the latest internal reviews of the undergraduate and master's programmes. Completion of the revised presentation of programme specifications would also provide an opportunity to establish a link to these documents from the TQI website. Given the College's intention to present statistical information on its own website to compensate for the limitations of the HESA summaries, it will no doubt wish to establish clearly where the responsibility lies within the College for quality assurance of the information it publishes and its consistency with that appearing on the TQI website.

123 The audit team concluded that the College was making progress towards fulfilling its responsibilities in relation to the provision of public information on the TQI website. The information it was publishing about the quality of programmes and the standards of awards that it offers (on behalf of the University of Plymouth) was found to be reliable.

## **Findings**

## Findings

124 An institutional audit of Dartington College of Arts (the College) was undertaken by a team of auditors from the QAA during the week 28 November to 2 December 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the academic standards of the awards that the College offers in collaboration with the University of Plymouth. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Standing Conference of Principals and Universities UK, one discipline audit trial (DAT) was selected for scrutiny. This section of the report summarises the findings of the audit. It concludes by identifying features of good practice that emerged from the audit, and by making recommendations to the College for improving on current practice.

### **The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes**

#### **The quality assurance framework**

125 The Academic Framework explains that the College is responsible for the academic management of its programmes of study leading to University of Plymouth awards and details the College's arrangements for quality assurance and enhancement. At the time of the audit, a review of the committee system was in progress, looking specifically at overlap in the composition of committees. It appeared to the audit team that there was considerable enthusiasm among staff and students for change to the committee structure, particularly where this was seen to lead to greater relevance for committee members; the introduction of field committees providing an example (see paragraph 178 i below).

126 A key issue for the College is attendance at committee meetings and both staff and students drew attention to clashes between meetings and teaching sessions, a problem which was being addressed, in part, through

the introduction of a College calendar listing all meetings with dates. Inquoracy has been a recurrent problem for Academic Standards and Development Committee (ASDC), which has a remit for the monitoring and evaluation of both taught and research degree programmes. Poor attendance has led to difficulties in having substantive items brought to the committee and the scheduling of some meetings outside normal teaching weeks, while potentially helpful to staff, has restricted student participation. Even though the College has implemented a number of measures to ensure that important business can still be progressed, the team considered these matters to be of particular concern, given the wide brief of ASDC and its role in monitoring standards and academic quality in relation to work undertaken by other subcommittees of the Academic Board, which has overall responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement (see paragraph 177 i below).

#### **Programme approval**

127 Approval procedures for new courses and awards entail approval 'in principle' on academic and resources grounds, followed by approval 'in detail' comprising a two-stage process. Stage 1 involves a panel internal to the College and stage 2 a panel including independent external members and participation from the University of Plymouth. The outcome of the process is a validation report, submitted to the Academic Board for approval. There follows the production of definitive documentation (taking account of any conditions imposed or recommendations made), which is held by both the College and the University. There are separate procedures for making modifications to existing awards, which entail approval by the Academic Board and are based on a clear distinction between what constitutes a minor, relative to a major change.

128 According to the self-evaluation document (SED), the initial approval panel was the 'the main critical readership' for programme specifications, which consist of separate generic specifications for the undergraduate and taught master's programmes. The SED acknowledged

that the undergraduate specification did not fully address the special qualities of the minor awards, also stating the College's intention to produce a supplement to the programme specification during 2005-06.

129 The audit team found that programme approval procedures were being adhered to and used effectively. The team also considered that the College displayed an intelligent use of variants to its normal processes where required, with a view to achieving a suitable balance between burden and rigour. In addition, the College was addressing appropriately the limitations it perceived in the undergraduate programme specification.

#### **Annual monitoring**

130 A revised cycle for annual monitoring of the undergraduate programme has been implemented from 2005-06. This brings forward the focus of local monitoring to the start of the academic year in response to the experience of the previous year when the process had not kept on schedule and key target dates had been missed. With appropriate adjustment to due dates, a similar cycle will apply to the taught master's programme, which has recently been brought inside the College's mainstream quality assurance system. The SED indicated that the impact of changes to the annual monitoring process would be monitored by ASDC.

131 It became apparent to the audit team that the College's review of annual monitoring covered more than changing the timing of its component events. The specification of inputs to field review has been tightened and the pro forma for field reporting continues to be refined. It was too soon for the team to comment on the effectiveness of recent revisions, other than to note that this year the process was on track. At the time of the audit, annual monitoring of the master's programme had not yet been conducted under standard procedures. There was evidence from previous reports at undergraduate level that issues identified in annual monitoring led to effective action, although the team was of the view that there was scope for improvement in the analysis and interpretation of statistical data.

#### **Periodic review**

132 All academic awards are subject to progress review and approval at six or seven-year intervals, unless conditions of initial validation prescribe otherwise. Progress review is essentially revalidation and the procedure mirrors the two-stage 'in-detail' process for programme approval, although instead of a proposal there is a critical review. The stage 2 panel comprises at least two external members, in addition to participation by the University of Plymouth, and, in the course of the review, meets relevant members of teaching and support staff, a representative group of students and, where appropriate, employers and graduates. The audit team was able to follow the process, using the progress review of the undergraduate programme (2002-03) as a case-study and concluded that the procedures were operating well.

#### **Feedback from students, graduates, employers and other stakeholders**

133 The main mechanisms for obtaining feedback from students consist of module evaluation questionnaires; the annual student perception questionnaire (SPQ); specific questionnaire surveys; and the range of meetings involving student representation, which are supplemented by informal contacts with students.

134 The audit team noted the relatively low levels of student attendance at academic committees, while also learning of measures to encourage and support student participation. These included training for student representatives, although the take-up of training opportunities by students is a matter the College will no doubt wish to keep under review. Early indications are that the new field committees, now the key mechanism for student participation in the quality management of their programmes, are achieving some success in engaging student interest, while the Staff-Student Liaison Group (SSLG) provides a valuable cross-College forum for feedback and is relatively successful in involving student representatives.

135 Student feedback is an essential input to both annual monitoring and progress review, and the audit team was able to verify that students were routinely asked to complete module evaluation questionnaires, while ascertaining that they additionally provided much face-to-face feedback to staff regarding teaching, practical arrangements and learning resources. Response rates for the SPQ were initially poor, although the SED pointed to a 'substantial' improvement last year, which it explained in terms of more active support for the survey from both ASDC and SSLG.

136 Feedback from graduates is obtained from those who return to the College to give performances or professional advice to students. There is also a website for the use of the Graduates' Association and there are plans to develop a more methodical approach to the collection and analysis of data from this resource. Similarly, there are informal arrangements for eliciting feedback from employers. The location of the College on the Dartington Hall estate affords opportunities for it to develop links with professional artists, as well as with the cultural industries of the south-west through the regional role of CCEP.

137 The audit team concluded that the College, while making the most of informal contacts and facilitating frank discussion about the student learning experience, also appreciated the value of routinely obtaining students' views by other means. The team would support the development of a similar approach to feedback from graduates and employers. In respect of programme-level review, feedback to the College has been largely positive, although in some cases where recommendations for improvement were made, the team considered that progress had been rather slow. The team encourages the College to bring outstanding issues to a positive conclusion, noting that the Academic Board was monitoring progress through a rolling action plan.

### **Conclusion**

138 The audit team recognised that the College's relationship with the University of Plymouth implied that an external dimension was naturally built into its internal procedures.

In general, the team found that the College had in place effective arrangements for academic management, using external advice constructively, such that externality in its processes was strong and scrupulous; as a result, broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes.

### **The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards**

#### **Assessment policies**

139 The Academic Framework specifies the regulatory framework for taught programmes and contains information on assessment policies and procedures, including those for the organisation of field assessment panels and award assessment boards. In addition, the Assessment Standards Review Meeting, involving all external examiners, provides a mechanism for reviewing cross-College standards. From the DAT, the audit team found assessment practices across the Theatre field to be consistent with College policies and the assessment processes set out in course and module handbooks to articulate with those contained in the Academic Framework.

140 In the particular area of assessment policy on internal moderation of marking, the College was drawing up guidance on recording the process as well as the result. The moderation of marks had been a matter of report from both the 2004 and 2005 Assessment Standards Review meetings and there had been a specific comment about the importance of evidencing marking processes. The audit team would reinforce the external examiner's view on this point, particularly in relation to the internal moderation of double-marking (see paragraph 178 ii below).

#### **Use of statistical data**

141 The scrutiny of statistics relating to admission, progression and awards is an integral part of annual programme monitoring, while progression and award data are reviewed

each year by both the Academic Board and the Board of Governors. The College has recently implemented a new student information system to provide a single data source for the production of progression and completion statistics and plans to improve the analysis of trends. The audit team considered the statistical analysis on which annual monitoring and reporting was based to be insufficiently comprehensive, having been undertaken at a relatively broad level. Senior staff had already identified the priority of providing development for staff to help them use statistics more effectively and the team would support this position.

142 In terms of the quantitative data supplied by Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website, the College has insufficient student numbers within the defined subject categories for meaningful comparisons to be made. Therefore it intends to make progression, award and destination data publicly available on its own website. However, in addition to focusing on the implications of its size, the College regards its provision as being highly distinctive and this, in the audit team's view, makes the College disinclined to attempt comparisons with other institutions, thereby reducing its capacity to contextualise the interpretation of statistical information (see paragraph 177 ii below).

#### **External examiners and their reports**

143 External examiners operate within the two-tier system of field assessment panels and award assessment boards. The respective responsibilities of subject and awards external examiners, which include the requirement to submit an annual report, are set out in detail in the Academic Framework, along with the appointment procedure. External examiners are appointed by the University of Plymouth on the recommendation of the College's Academic Board. The College has implemented a report template for external examiners who are required to comment on assessment tasks and processes, standards and areas of strength or weakness. They are asked specifically to address the comparability of standards with national expectations, enabling the College to produce

the requisite summaries for publication on the TQI website.

144 External examiner reports are distributed to the Principal, the Deputy Principal, the Academic Registrar, the relevant field director and the Academic Quality Officer; they are also forwarded to the University of Plymouth. Within annual monitoring, external examiner comment is a key input to field review and, following ASDC's review of field reports, an overview is sent to all external examiners by way of a progress report on how their respective recommendations are being addressed. The audit team was able to track the use made of external examiner reports within the College, and there was evidence from the DAT of issues raised in external examiner reports leading to appropriate action.

145 The SED indicated that the College encouraged engagement of external examiners with institutional assessment policies. Two such examples were the annual briefing, which, inter alia, facilitated group discussion of assessment practice across the institutions represented, and the Assessment Standards Review meeting. The latter, which produced succinct summaries of oral reports from external examiners covering all fields, provides the College with a valuable additional mechanism for institutional oversight of standards (see paragraph 176 i below).

#### **Conclusion**

146 Overall, the audit team found the College's use of external examiners in summative assessment to be strong and scrupulous; as a result, broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards it offers (on behalf of the University of Plymouth).

### **The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning**

#### **Learning support resources**

147 The generic learning needs of all students are supported by Library Services, comprising

the Library and Student IT Support, while assistance is also available from a dedicated unit for students who need advice and guidance on study skills. Library Services and Performance Services (supporting specific technical areas) are the responsibility of the Dean of Information and Learning, whose management brief also covers Web Services. ASDC has the remit for evaluation and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities, resources and environment, and routinely receives a range of reports to which student feedback is an input, thus enabling it to initiate appropriate action in response to issues raised.

148 In the SED it was recognised that, despite recent expansion of studio provision through 'new build' and conversion projects, space was becoming 'a major issue', and the College and Trust are working together on plans for the next phase of campus development, which will include additional student accommodation. Apart from campus redevelopment, the audit team saw other evidence that the College was managing space strategically (for instance through demand management of scarce studio resources) and found there to be a general willingness among fields to extend the use of dedicated space and equipment to students from other fields. Overall, the team concluded that the approach adopted by the College to ensuring an appropriate provision of resources combined an awareness of relevant strategic issues with a willingness to respond to feedback from students, although there was no formal strategy document.

#### **Academic guidance, support and supervision**

149 A key purpose of the admissions process is to ensure that prospective students gain sufficient understanding of the College's approach to learning and teaching to assess whether the Dartington experience is for them. Student induction also contains a generic component on studying and living at Dartington (see paragraph 176 ii below). Once students start their courses, responsibility for academic support and guidance rests primarily with their field. One-to-one feedback through individual tutorials is a regular feature of the

taught programmes and, in addition, undergraduate students are each allocated an academic advisor whose role is to take an overview of the student's performance, assist in interpreting feedback on assessment and give guidance on future direction through an appropriate choice of modules. The main supervisor and the supervisory team provide equivalent functions for postgraduate research students.

150 In the SED, the College recognised the importance of continuing support in reinforcing students' understanding of the opportunities available through their programmes. By way of illustration, taught students are assisted in choosing their options or minor fields through an options fair, while postgraduate research students are guided in developing their research proposals by a series of research training workshops and seminars. Also highlighted was the integral nature of reflective student learning to the Learning and Teaching Strategy; during the current academic year, Personal Development Planning (PDP) was being implemented for stage 1 and taught postgraduate students across all fields, and a more comprehensive research training programme was being introduced to help students enhance their individual skills logs.

151 Staff emphasised how the sense of College community encouraged a straightforward exchange of views with students, while students were highly positive about the good relations they had with staff and the level of informal support provided to them throughout their studies. There was general consensus among staff and students that the academic adviser system worked very well and the audit team noted that it was underpinned by staff training and systematic record keeping. Postgraduate research students were similarly satisfied with the arrangements for allocating supervisors and with the support they received (see paragraph 176 iii below). However, the linkage between specific responsibilities for student support and the Learning and Teaching Strategy was not so apparent, and the team considered that a more strategic approach to

student support would also be beneficial in areas affected by the changing student profile, for example, the increasing number of international students.

152 Overall, the audit team concurred with the views expressed by College staff and students that the arrangements for academic guidance, support and supervision were working well. In relation to the contextual enquiry project which students pursue off-campus (in the UK or overseas), arrangements take account of the section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* on placement learning and include provision for students to maintain regular contact with their project supervisor (see paragraph 176 iv below).

#### **Personal support and guidance**

153 The College makes available a range of personal welfare services to its students and the SED pointed to measures for improving the coordination of both practical assistance and advice to students, such as the recent consolidation of student administrative and support services, and the bringing together of service providers through the Student Support and Guidance Network. The students' written submission (SWS) concluded with the view that 'the general level of support for learning, guidance and social support is good' and this view was reinforced to the audit team by every student group it met.

154 Recommendations for improvements in the area of career education had been made in previous external audit and review reports, but there was no follow-up of these in the SED for the present audit. From its discussions with staff and students, the audit team formed the view that the College's approach, while giving encouragement to students to reflect on their academic and skills development in the context of their career aspirations, did not sufficiently address the parallel need for the College to coordinate practical opportunities for them to gain knowledge or experience of possible career openings. Specifically, there appeared to be a lack of recognition of the fact that students would not necessarily achieve or

sustain a career in the arts, which analysis of graduate employment surveys would doubtless reveal (see paragraph 178 v below). This point notwithstanding, the team found that other aspects of personal support and guidance were operating satisfactorily, with improved coordination of services reflecting greater institutional focus.

#### **Assurance of the quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward**

155 The SED indicated that in candidates for academic roles the College was looking for engagement with current developments in research, scholarship and pedagogy, but was also seeking 'to ensure a good match with the ethos, values and culture of the College'. During the appointments process, candidates demonstrate their approach through a teaching or workshop session involving students whose feedback contributes to the final decision, while the College pays special attention to briefing candidates so that they are given a real sense of the learning environment at Dartington. Following appointment, there is a mandatory induction process introducing staff to the collegiate community, followed by specific induction to the learning, teaching and research context of the institution (see paragraph 176 ii below). Less formal arrangements apply to the appointment of hourly-paid staff, musical instrument tutors and associate lecturers. The latter are inducted to their role at field level and their contractual arrangements make provision for participation in field meetings and relevant staff development.

156 The College operates an annual appraisal system for all staff. However, in this regard, the SED admitted that the College had fallen short of targets in its Human Resources (HR) Strategy, but that work was in progress to ensure that all staff had an appraisal and that the necessary documentation was completed. In the light of these difficulties, the audit team was reassured to find that the staff whom it met were fully engaged with and supportive of the process. From its discussions on promotion and reward,

it appeared to the team that even senior field staff viewed reward rather narrowly. Therefore the team encourages the College to develop and formalise its recently drafted Reward Strategy, in order to meet the objectives of the HR Strategy.

157 Overall, the audit team considered the SED to be an accurate description of the procedures in place for the appointment, appraisal and reward of teaching staff. These are appropriately recorded in a series of policy documents, although some are still being developed or refined.

### **Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development**

158 The Staff Development Policy Statement guides both the timing and the substance of the College's staff development provision. Induction is supplemented by in-house training on specific topics, while the main opportunities for continuing professional development include attendance at conferences and short courses, in-service training, exchange visits and professional work, for which budgets have been devolved to field directors. The SED indicated the College's intention of achieving greater integration of staff development with its Learning and Teaching Strategy and explained that, while staff registration with Higher Education Academy (HEA) had not been progressed as a priority, Information and Learning Services was to take on relevant responsibilities for this area, providing a focus for the pedagogic development of staff.

159 College staff (including postgraduate research students with teaching duties) are able to undertake HEA-accredited courses, or other training, through the University of Plymouth. However, senior staff explained that, as a general rule, the College could not afford to release new academic staff one day a week to attend the HEA-accredited programme at Plymouth, so modules from that programme had been developed for delivery at the College. Overall, the audit team was of the view that there was insufficient encouragement given to

staff to develop pedagogical skills through recognised courses or qualifications (see paragraph 178 iv below). The team also found that the College scheme for peer observation of teaching was not operating uniformly across fields, with some relying on group teaching to provide informal feedback to staff and it considered that this was compromising the value of feedback on teaching as an input to staff development discussions. Nevertheless, the team recognised that the College was now taking a more strategic view of its staff development provision and encourages it to continue its moves towards a more coordinated approach.

### **Outcomes of the discipline audit trail**

#### **Theatre**

160 The audit team looked in some detail at programmes in the Theatre field to find out how well the College's systems and procedures were working at programme level.

161 Programme specifications for the undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes focus on generic outcomes, linking these to teaching, learning and assessment, with reference made to relevant subject benchmark statements. The programme specifications are incorporated in corresponding programme handbooks, as are details of assessment processes, which articulate with the overarching assessment policies of the College contained in the Academic Framework. From its study of the assessed work, the audit team found the standard of student achievement to be appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). External examiner reports verified that the academic standards of programmes were comparable with those of other UK higher education institutions.

162 Student evaluation of the provision has been generally positive and students are satisfied with the information provided to them about their programmes, the nature and extent of support they receive from staff and the learning resources placed at their disposal.

Students who met with the audit team confirmed that their feedback was usually acted upon by staff and were able to cite examples. The student handbooks reviewed by the team were clearly written, well laid out and contained useful information about the field as a whole and individual modules.

163 The audit team found the quality of learning opportunities available to students to be suitable for the programmes of study leading to the awards covered by the DAT.

### **The use made by the institution of the Academic Infrastructure**

#### *The Code of practice*

164 The College has compiled a 'map', with a separate schedule for each section of the *Code of practice*, outlining how the precepts have been implemented. The schedules assign responsibilities for the various sections of the *Code* to appropriate management roles and draw links between particular precepts and associated College procedures, also referencing the source document.

165 There was considerable variability between the different schedules, both in the detail of the linkages drawn and the clarity of the mechanisms for checking that practice remained consistent with the *Code of practice* over time. In the case of career education, information and guidance, the schedule gave no information on how responsibility was being discharged or monitored by the College (see paragraph 154 above). ASDC had initiated the necessary action for implementing any changes to procedures in the light of sections of the *Code* revised in 2004. While the relevant schedules had been thoroughly updated, there had not been a subsequent report to ASDC to this effect, nor any follow-up by ASDC, and the audit team was unable to trace any mechanism for routinely checking the currency of the 'Code of practice map' (see paragraph 178 iii below).

#### **The FHEQ**

166 The College's approach to the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements has been to incorporate their use in course development

and management. The levels of awards offered at the College correspond to the levels of the FHEQ and generic descriptions of each level are given in the Academic Framework. The SED explained that a range of subject benchmark statements were used to inform curriculum development, given the integrated structure of the undergraduate programme, which had also influenced the adoption of a single programme specification. Similarly, there is a single, but separate, programme specification for the master's programme.

167 In general, the audit team found the College's practice to be documented in procedures and guidelines that were informed by the Academic Infrastructure.

### **The utility of the SED as an illustration of the institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to act on these to enhance quality and standards**

168 The SED provided an introduction to the key principles and underlying values guiding the College's quality processes and systems. It also described the recent organisational changes at the College, aimed at developing 'a better-connected line and team management structure'. Given the extent of change, the audit team found that the SED was not always fully accurate or up to date concerning the current situation. Also, although the SED covered most areas in the scope of the audit, there were gaps, particularly relating to follow-up action from issues raised in previous external audits or reviews. However, in discussion with staff and students, the team was able to clarify points as necessary. While not fully focused on the effectiveness of internal processes, the SED gave many helpful examples illustrating the operation of these processes, thereby providing the team with a useful basis for further enquiry.

### **Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards**

169 Following reorganisation, the College is working towards a period of greater stability.

Therefore its plans for enhancement correspond to initiatives for consolidating good practice and taking forward existing developments. As examples, the SED cited the coordination of internet-based systems and the further integration of the student record system with core activities.

170 Senior staff maintained that there was a wide involvement among staff with quality enhancement, with ideas coming from all levels, supported by SMT. The 2005 Learning and Teaching Strategy (which is currently in draft) identifies the Taught Programmes Management Group and its research counterpart as having an institution-level role in disseminating good practice, although the link with ASDC, which has a specific remit for quality enhancement and monitoring the implementation of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, was not explicit.

171 In summary, the audit team considered the College's development of its electronic communications and data systems as providing the management information base needed for the future development of a more strategic approach to quality enhancement. The team encourages the College to create a clearer focus for enhancement through its current review of the committee system.

### **Reliability of information**

172 Information about the College is accessible to students from a variety of sources, including the prospectus, booklets and leaflets, as well as both the College's own website and the TQI website. More focused information is available within programme handbooks, the Academic Framework, and through the developing intranet portal.

173 The SED did not give any indication as to how the quality of the College's published information is assured; nor did the SWS touch on the accuracy of published information. However, student representatives informed the audit team that there were no concerns relating to the content of programme specifications, although the team understood that the

presentation of these was to be revised with an emphasis on a student readership. From its wider discussions with students, the team was able to verify that their experience at the College had matched their expectations based on the prospectus and website, and that the information currently available to them was appropriate, helpful and accurate. However, the team remained unclear as to the locus of responsibility for ensuring the continuing accuracy of promotional material within the recently revised management structures.

174 With regard to the College's entry on the TQI website, the audit team was able to verify that the summaries of external examiner reports were consistent with the original documents. At the time of the audit, no internal reviews had been published, and the team encourages the College to post summaries from the latest internal reviews of the undergraduate and master's programmes. There is a summary of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, which is consistent with the full document, and a separate commentary on employer needs and trends, as well as links to the QAA website for external review reports and to the College's own website for further information. Given the College's intention to present statistical information on its website to compensate for the limitations of the HESA summaries (see paragraph 142 above), it will no doubt wish to establish clearly where the responsibility lies within the College for quality assurance of the information it publishes and its consistency with that appearing on the TQI website.

175 The audit team concluded that the College was making progress towards fulfilling its responsibilities in relation to the provision of public information on the TQI website. The information it was publishing about the quality of programmes and the standards of awards that it offers (on behalf of the University of Plymouth) was found to be reliable.

## Features of good practice

176 The following features of good practice were noted:

- i the successful efforts made, through briefing and feedback sessions, to engage external examiners in the wider aspects of their role, extending beyond their formal responsibilities in connection with assessment boards (paragraph 52)
- ii the ways in which the College engenders a commitment among staff and students to its particular ethos, specifically through the thoroughness of its processes for staff appointment and student admissions, including arrangements for induction (paragraphs 78 and 91)
- iii the student academic support systems operating through academic advisers and research supervisors which are successfully combined with informal channels of support developed through the good and productive relationships existing between staff and students (paragraph 96)
- iv the organisational and support arrangements underpinning the contextual enquiry project pursued off-campus (in the UK or overseas) by students at stage 3 of the undergraduate programme (paragraph 98).

## Recommendations for action

177 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- i to take the necessary steps to improve the level of participation by members of the Academic Standards and Development Committee, thereby enabling it to exercise its delegated responsibilities as the institution's principal quality assurance committee (paragraph 32)
- ii in developing the reporting potential of the new student information system, to give greater priority to analysing the College's performance relative to that of other higher education institutions in order to identify benchmarks that might

be used to inform institutional strategies (paragraph 74).

178 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- i to complete the rationalisation of the committee structure so that it is fit for purpose in terms of the size of the institution and operates effectively with clear lines of communication (paragraph 31)
- ii in the interests of demonstrating equity of treatment of students, to introduce procedures for ensuring that external examiners have full access to all relevant records of the criteria and calculations used by internal markers and moderators in establishing students' results (paragraph 53)
- iii to review the overall effectiveness of the 'map' used as a key mechanism for providing institutional oversight of the implementation of procedures such that their consistency with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* can be clearly demonstrated (paragraph 57)
- iv to find means of creating the opportunity for staff inexperienced in teaching in higher education to take recognised courses or qualifications in teaching and learning as part of their personal, professional development (paragraph 84)
- v to formulate a clear and documented policy for career education, information and guidance which is informed by data on graduate destinations (paragraph 102).

## Appendix

### Dartington College of Arts' response to the audit report

Dartington College of Arts welcomes the judgement of the QAAHE audit team that '**broad confidence** can be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of the academic programmes and the academic standards of the awards', and that the 'information it was publishing about the quality of programmes and the standards of awards...was found to be **reliable**'. We also welcome the positive outcome of the single discipline audit trail undertaken- in Theatre -which recognises the high and appropriate standard of student achievement and quality of learning opportunities available to students. We will continue to work on the areas of good practice highlighted by the team - in particular the 'good and productive relationships existing between staff and students', including the support systems operating through academic advisors, research supervisors and for site-specific projects both in the UK and overseas- and other areas, as part of our commitment to enhancing the quality of the student experience.

The audit itself took place in a timescale much shorter than is usual, with only 15 weeks between notification from the QAAHE and the briefing visit. Despite causing pressure in particular areas, such as the preparation of the student written submission during the summer period when few undergraduate students were available to support the activity, we feel that the process provided a more realistic reflection of the institution than is often the case. The audit also followed a longer gap than is usual in QAAHE engagements at the institutional level (although we note that the very positive subject review in 1997 did cover the entire educational provision of the institution, and there was also a successful Developmental Engagement in Music in 2003). We would hope and expect that institutional engagements in the future are more closely aligned with the norms of the sector.

We note the two advisable points and the five desirable points. As described in the audit report, we had already taken action on 177(i) by reserving two two-week periods in the academic calendar in which to hold a series of meetings: in July - to complete the reviews of the academic year just ending - and in September, to finalise the plans for the forthcoming year. We will continue to monitor the effectiveness of this approach. The student information system (177(ii)) is in only its second year of operation and we are already using the information it provides in comparisons with other institutions.

Whilst we agree with the team that we can adopt a more systematised approach to quality enhancement, particularly with the likely increased emphasis on this in future institutional audits in England and Northern Ireland, we do not believe that this needs to be achieved through the committee structure, particular in an institution of this size.

Of the four remaining 'desirable' points, all had already been identified before the audit as needing attention, as the team acknowledged. The fourth (178(iv)) will require careful planning: the small scale of the institution precludes us from offering an in-house HEA-accredited programme for new staff, but we will continue to work towards a solution, through discussions with external agencies including the HEA. We would also like to draw readers' attention to the careful wording of 178(ii): our external examiners and the audit team recognised that rigorous double marking and moderation continue to take place, that assessment criteria are both available and used appropriately as an integral part of the process, and that this information is already made available to and used by our examiners. We will make available the full written record of the moderation process, which exists already, if that is helpful to those involved.

Finally, we would like to thank the audit team for the very professional, thorough and courteous manner in which the audit was conducted, taking into account the distinctive nature of the academic community and its specialist disciplines. It was a most welcome opportunity to examine and confirm the standards of our awards and our management of the quality of our academic programmes.

