

University College Falmouth

JANUARY 2006

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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Main report

A report, in lieu of institutional audit, based on enquiries undertaken in academic year 2002-2003, in connection with the College's successful application for taught degree awarding powers

Following an application by the University College to the Privy Council seeking the grant of its own taught degree awarding powers, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was asked to advise the Privy Council as to whether such powers should be granted, based on the Government's criteria. A team of QAA assessors visited the University College in 2002-03 to review the institution's application. Following scrutiny of the institution's application and QAA's subsequent recommendation to the Privy Council, the University College was granted taught degree awarding powers in March 2004.

To arrive at its conclusions the team reviewed quality assurance procedures in operation, spoke to members of staff throughout the University College, to current students and it read a wide range of documents relating to the way the University College manages the academic aspects of its provision.

At the same time as the University College was undergoing QAA scrutiny, it was also due to be engaged in a QAA institutional audit. The purpose of audit is to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to student and on the academic standards of the awards it offers. Audit leads to a judgement of confidence in the management of the quality and standards of the awards being offered by the institution. However, when an application for taught degree awarding powers has been successful, it can also be concluded, on the basis of the evidence reviewed, that a judgement of broad confidence can be made on the management of quality and standards, therefore no further institutional audit visit is required.

Academic standards is a way of describing 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 opportunities are provided for them.

This report provides a summary of the findings of the assessors, focusing on those areas that are relevant to institutional audit. The report also highlights some matters that a future institutional audit team may wish to pursue.

Outcome

As a result of its enquiries, the view of the team of assessors is that:

- broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the University College's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards.

In due course, the institutional audit process will include a check on the reliability of the information set published by institutions in the format recommended in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance* (HEFCE 03/51). At the time of the taught degree-awarding powers scrutiny the University College was alert to the implications of the document HEFCE 03/51 and was moving in an appropriate manner to fulfil its responsibilities in this respect.

The structure of the University College

1 University College Falmouth offers programmes of study at postgraduate (taught and by research), undergraduate and foundation entry level in art, design, media and culture. Over the period 1987 to 2001 the University College achieved the steady growth envisaged in its Strategic Plan, expanding both its range of provision and student numbers. The University College's key strategic ambitions can be summarised as maintaining and enhancing quality, achieving taught degree-awarding powers and securing both continued growth in student numbers (from its current population of 1,800 full-time equivalents (FTEs) to some 3,000 FTEs by 2010) and, closely connected with this, continued financial stability.

2 Academically the University College is organised into two academic faculties, Art and Design (currently the larger of the two) and Media and Culture (scheduled for significant growth). The small size of the University College puts considerable responsibility on academic managers at faculty and programme levels, and deans and programme leaders play pivotal roles in promoting policy internally, ensuring that staff are informed about external developments and as conduits for communication between teaching staff and the Executive. In the view of assessors, deans and programme leaders fulfil these most effectively and are appropriately supported as academic leaders and managers by a range of staff development events.

3 Governance is the responsibility of the Board of Governors, a body which, in the view of the assessors, is clear as to its proper role and the statutory framework within which it operates and competent to discharge its responsibilities. For example, Governors have supported senior management in successfully overseeing the purchase of the Tremough Campus, a £3.9 million project funded by the HEFCE Poor Estates Initiative.

4 Senior management takes the form of the Strategic Management Executive (SME), comprising the Principal and Vice-Principal, the

two faculty deans, the Registrar, the Personnel Officer and the Directors of Academic Services, Estates and Finance. SME appears to assessors a strong and well-led body with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and competent to address strategic issues, notably the Tremough initiative, rigorously and constructively and with due regard to the proper management of risk.

5 The Tremough Campus will constitute the focal point for the ambitious Combined Universities of Cornwall initiative, with state-of-the-art media facilities, a newly equipped Design Centre operational by September 2003 and the Camborne School of Mines, operated by the University of Exeter, relocating to Tremough in 2004.

6 The University College's mission is 'to provide a distinctive and high quality learning and teaching environment for study, practice and research related to Art, Design, Media and Culture'. The University College claims that its student number projections can be achieved within this broad disciplinary envelope largely from increased participation from Cornwall itself. Assessors have reservations as to whether this is realistic, however, not least because the University College will need to develop new forms of delivery to encourage participation among less mobile elements of the Cornish population and it was not apparent to assessors that it had yet to address this matter fully. In addition, the University College itself acknowledges that significant development of undergraduate programmes will be a prerequisite for the success of this policy. Hence the University College's current Academic Plan envisages the progressive stretch of these subjects to include (inter alia) garden design, tourism, sustainability, creative writing and museum studies. With such developments in mind, the University College has established a Programme Innovation Team to evaluate the University College's existing portfolio and promote new ideas for curriculum development.

7 There is evidence that the College's strategic planning processes are transparent, involving staff at all levels. Briefing and consultative mechanisms for promoting the

collection and transmission of strategic planning information exist, and planning processes are subject to regular monitoring and review, including the formal annual review of the Annual Operating Statement. A range of academic and non-academic staff who met the assessors appeared enthusiastic and committed, confirming that they had opportunities to contribute to institutional strategies. While a minority of staff appeared less well informed about strategic issues, the College has responded to a perceived need to improve internal and external communication by creating a new post, Head of Communications, designed to strengthen both.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

8 The University College's quality assurance policies and procedures have been developed in consultation with the University of Plymouth. The University College claims, and the assessors confirm, that both parties regard this relationship extremely positively, with the University increasingly assuming the role of 'critical friend'. Since 1992 the University College has been an Accredited Partner Institution of the University and all its programmes of study lead to University of Plymouth awards. The University has increasingly devolved powers to the University College, culminating thus far in the transfer of responsibility for charring validation events for taught master's programmes in 2002. The sum of this devolution is such that the College is already, in the assessors' judgement, in practice exercising degree-awarding responsibilities in virtually all matters of significance.

9 The University College has an extensive committee structure, which for the most part is sound both in relation to accountability and communication, and the quality assurance framework in particular has well-established procedures for validating new programmes, annual and periodic review, and for appointing and monitoring external examiners. Nonetheless, while the assessors acknowledge

both the University College's legitimate concern that its committee structure should be sufficient to support a substantially expanded two-campus institution and that the framework has been commended in three QAA subject review reports, it does appear to them over-elaborate for a small specialist institution, and tending to impose a disproportionate burden on some members of the small complement of teaching staff.

10 The University College's Critical Self-Analysis acknowledges the primacy of the Academic Board in respect of academic standards and quality, and, in the view of the assessors, this Board discharges its responsibilities carefully and thoroughly. Nonetheless, on some occasions the assessors note that over-long agendas enable it to afford only limited attention to the implications of, and proper institutional responses to, significant internal and external issues.

11 In the view of the assessors, both faculty boards and programme committees are generally well organised and clearly structured, with business followed up efficiently by management. The University College is itself aware that, at programme and faculty levels, instances exist of both limited awareness of institutional policies on the part of academic staff and of variability in the quality of committee minutes. The University College has responded to the first of these concerns by producing a helpful College Charter for Committee Members, and to the second by considering how best to achieve greater consistency of quality.

12 The University College's quality assurance policies and procedures are brought together in what the assessors consider a clear and concise Quality Handbook. In order to promote stability the University College has chosen not to embark on regular revisions of the Handbook. While acknowledging the rationale for this, the assessors noted that the Handbook does not map current practice against the requirements of the *Code of practice for the assurance of quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA, in particular,

with resulting delays in the full implementation of the *Code*. We return to this point later.

13 Responsibility for quality assurance is largely devolved to programme level, with the stated intention of encouraging academic staff to engage actively in review and enhancement. The University College places particular stress on programme monitoring, which involves annual reports being submitted to faculty boards, with agreed action plans emerging. In the view of the assessors, programme committee meetings are generally well-structured, competently chaired and facilitate reasonably open discussion. Close attention is paid to action lists from the previous evaluation round; student feedback is emphasised and it is evident that staff listen carefully to students' views and encourage them to engage in constructive debate. Overall, the assessors were impressed by programme teams' commitment to enhancing the quality of student learning.

14 In particular, while the assessors consider that faculty boards have yet to develop the optimal *modus operandi* for dealing with annual programme evaluation reports, there is evidence of an encouraging trajectory. Notably the Faculty of Art and Design, responding to critical comment, is moving towards a more streamlined and analytical approach, and the Academic Quality Committee has requested the preparation of a report *pro forma* intended to secure greater commonality of purpose in the exercise. Overall, the assessors are satisfied that faculty level monitoring processes are thorough, and that programme leaders are engaging with the quality agenda in a competent and professional manner.

15 The University College stresses the importance of self-evaluation, and claims to have made significant progress in the provision of timely and accurate statistical information. The assessors confirm that the University College is in the relatively early stages of producing increasingly sophisticated statistical data, and in particular is moving towards the use of comparative data as a means of benchmarking its position within the sector as a whole. While the deployment of such data in programme

monitoring remains limited, the assessors are of the view that recent improvements will enable more consistent usage to be made of them in programme evaluation.

16 The University College assumed responsibility for the periodic review of undergraduate programmes and the validation of undergraduate and postgraduate diploma programmes in 1998. Clearly the rigorous exercise of these responsibilities is especially important given the University College's expansion plans. In the view of the assessors, the management of periodic review is marked by clarity of structure and adherence to the University College's quality framework, and is likely to culminate in appropriately rigorous judgements.

17 The University College's two-stage validation system comprises a paper exercise conducted by an internal panel, normally chaired by the Dean of Faculty, and a meeting between a panel of four external members, including two from the University of Plymouth, and the programme team and relevant others. The assessors consider this system to be fit for purpose, permitting as it does an in-depth examination of programme proposals. The assessors also note, however, that the system is variably implemented, and that evidence exists of problems which include deficiencies in documentation, insufficiently rigorous challenge by external members and nervous chairing. This indicates that issues have yet to be fully addressed about the logistics of the event, the preparation of external panel members and the support and development of chairs. Nonetheless, the assessors believe that, overall, the University College's validation systems are sound, albeit that further consideration should be given to their application where unconventional academic developments are under consideration.

18 In the light of an accreditation review undertaken by the University of Plymouth in 2001, the University College has revised its mechanisms for authorising and tracking programme modifications, with the result that the Vice-Principal is responsible for determining

whether a proposed programme modification constitutes a major or minor change. The assessors note that, somewhat belatedly, work has commenced on defining clear criteria for defining programme modifications; but this has yet to be completed.

19 Overall, the assessors have confidence that the University College's quality framework constitutes a suitable mechanism for ensuring and, to some extent, enhancing the quality of programme provision and the overall educational experience of its students.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the standards of awards

20 Under the terms of its accreditation agreement, the University College is required to comply with the University of Plymouth's procedures for nominating and appointing external examiners. The University retains ultimate authority for their appointment, although since 1995 only two out of 57 nominations have been rejected. While some difficulties have been experienced in appointing suitable individuals in what the University College describes as 'cutting-edge' areas, the assessors consider that, overall, the University College's external examiner selection processes are rigorous.

21 Minutes of University College committees indicate that comments made by external examiners are taken particularly seriously. Although the assessors note that a small minority of such examiners have queried whether their recommendations have been appropriately addressed, the University College has recently introduced a detailed analysis of external examiner reports, an initiative designed to track follow-up action. Overall, the assessors are satisfied that the University College gives due attention to the role of external examiners in maintaining and enhancing academic standards.

22 In the view of the assessors there is scope for enhancing the clarity and consistency of assessment criteria and the adequacy of the

feedback given to students on assessed work. The University College is aware of this, however, and is undertaking a review of assessment practices, albeit some two years after such an initiative was identified as necessary.

23 The assessors found that, notwithstanding uncertainties concerning a small number of residual questions concerning the treatment of borderline cases where key discussions appear to have taken place prior to board meetings themselves, assessment boards were well chaired and operated with clarity and consistency. In this they were aided by the Quality Handbook and a new University College-wide spreadsheet for the consideration of module results. External examiners engaged fully with the process, and their oral reports were generally well considered.

24 The assessors concluded that, while the College would benefit from revisiting and tightening up aspects of its assessment regulations and their application, sufficient safeguards exist to ensure the equitable treatment of students. This view was supported by external examiners, who consistently asserted that the strong support provided by the University College enabled students to produce work, sometimes reflecting a diversity of style and interest, entirely consistent with national standards.

25 In spite of a number of slight reservations, overall, the assessors have confidence that the University College's strategies provide a suitable mechanism for setting and maintaining appropriate standards for its awards and in communicating them to students.

The University College's use of the Academic Infrastructure

26 The assessors note that the University College's professional development programme has been effective in promoting staff awareness of the Academic Infrastructure, including the *Code of practice* and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The University College has a strategy for ensuring adherence to the

Code and FHEQ and has completed the initial drafting of programme specifications for all academic awards. Academic staff are certainly aware that programme content should be mapped on to subject benchmark statements, and, overall, the assessors believe that the University College is making acceptable progress towards implementing the totality of the developing national infrastructure.

27 Within the infrastructure as a whole, the *Code of practice* has presented the greatest challenge to the University College, and work on sections dealing with postgraduate research, collaborative provision and student assessment, which should have been completed some time ago, is still in progress. Thus far consideration of the *Code* has been mainly confined to the Registry and central officers with little input by academic staff.

28 In recognition of this, the section of the *Code of practice* dealing with student assessment is in future to be re-visited by Learning and Teaching Committee, while staff development events for programme leaders have emphasised the importance of engaging academic staff more fully with the *Code* and contributing directly to the institutional response to it.

29 The University College has increased its efforts to develop programme specifications informed by benchmark statements. Institution-wide implementation has been rescheduled for December 2003, a year later than scheduled, in part because the two faculties had initially been permitted to approach the process in very different ways. Problems arising from this devolution, however, led to a University College requirement in March 2003 that both faculties should follow an agreed institutional procedure. Overall, the assessors take the view that the University College has successfully ensured that senior and middle managers are aware of the importance of updating programme specifications and integrating them into the University College's overall quality framework.

30 The capacity of academic staff as a whole

to operate with an informed knowledge of the wider sector is, in the assessors' view, somewhat variable. Collectively, the senior academic staff possess valuable experience of other academic institutions, national bodies and the world of work, within and beyond the visual arts, design and media, but among more junior staff the picture is less clear. The external experience of academic staff is unevenly spread and somewhat limited in the specific area of external examining. While the University College claims that 22 per cent of staff have experience of external examining overall, an analysis of available data demonstrates that recent external examining experience is lower than this.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

31 The College has 63 FTE staff, 42 in the Faculty of Art and Design and 21 in the Faculty of Media and Culture. It is noticeable that fractional staff play a full role in the University College's academic management as well as teaching, taking responsibility for taught units and, in some cases, for programme leadership. The large numbers of fractional and hourly paid staff hired enhances the University College's links with current practitioners, thereby increasing the credibility of provision and contributing to the success of its graduates in securing suitable employment.

32 The assessors noted that not all personnel data on teaching staff are comprehensive or current, so current research and professional activities are not always known, seemingly because no formal process exists for recording such information. The University College claims that 77 per cent of teaching staff possess higher degrees, 65 per cent have professional experience directly relevant to their teaching and 11 per cent are members of the Institute for Learning and Teaching, with further applications pending. Overall, the profile of academic staff appears appropriate for the academic programmes offered.

33 The assessors believe the University College's claim to provide generous

opportunities for staff development is justified. In 1997 the University College was one of the first higher education institutions to achieve Investors in People (IiP) status, and the 2001 IiP re-recognition report notes that the University College's staff development strategy 'has reinforced people's belief in a genuine commitment to their development.' Fractional and visiting staff have many of the same professional development opportunities as their full-time counterparts, being, for example, supported financially to attend development activities and committee meetings. There is a comprehensive induction programme, the value of which was confirmed by staff who had undergone it. The University College also allocates five days annually for all academic staff to enhance their learning and teaching skills.

34 Both the administrative and technical support staff who met the assessors had a sound understanding of the student community and the University College's academic programmes. They appeared integrated into mainstream University College activities, to enjoy generally good working relationships with their line managers and to perceive their contributions as valued. Nevertheless, continued expansion, in particular the Tremough development, will inevitably call into question the sufficiency of the informal communication structures currently so central to the University College's administrative procedures, leading to an increased degree of formalisation. While this will bring challenges, the assessors have no reason to doubt the University College's capacity to meet them.

35 In the view of the assessors, students are given ample opportunities to express their views and make suggestions about improving the learning environment, and a number cited instances where their comments had effected change. Nonetheless, the assessors also noted occasions where the response to problems with the quality of learning facilities appeared unsatisfactory. Students claimed that charges for materials were determined at programme level and that this led to inequity. In addition, programme committee business illustrated that routine equipment maintenance is not always

effective, with demarcation disputes between faculties and programme teams contributing to occasional tardiness in resolving minor but irritating problems. However, the students met by the assessors considered that, overall, the University College offered a supportive learning environment, the library, which, like the Information Technology service, conducts user surveys and encourages student feedback, receiving particular commendation.

Conclusions

36 Falmouth College of Arts is, in the view of the assessors, a well-managed institution with a strong sense of academic identity and community. Students emphasised the value they placed on the supportive environment provided for them, stressing that staff engage collaboratively with students in addressing matters of concern, and commending the helpfulness and availability of staff, their responsiveness to criticism, and the overall quality of the teaching and support provided. Staff at all levels were, in the assessors' view, willing to engage in open and searching debate, and demonstrated a strong commitment to the institution's vision and mission.

37 The committee system is, in the view of the assessors, generally effective in discharging its duties, notably in respect of the quality assurance framework, the details of which form the content of the clear and concise Quality Handbook. In respect of the standard of the awards, though this remains the formal responsibility of the University of Plymouth, increased delegation of responsibility means that the University College's annual monitoring and periodic programme review procedures are crucial, and they appear robust and fit for purpose. In addition, the assessors believe that procedures for the appointment, support and monitoring of external examiners are rigorous, and that the expertise and independence of such examiners are appropriately exploited by the University College.

38 While there is every reason for general satisfaction with the quality of learning

opportunities available to students and the standard of the awards, there are a number of issues to which future institutional auditors may wish to give consideration. These relate to the efficiency of the University College's deliberative committee structures, the ways in which staff are encouraged to contribute to discussion and debate and the quality of minutes, the University College's capacity to achieve its goal of significantly increased student numbers by 2010 and the extent of the involvement of teaching staff in national discussions on matters of academic quality and standards.

39 In addition, institutional auditors may wish to consider whether the institution's use of information systems might be further enhanced, and to examine the effectiveness of the University College's programme validation mechanisms in relation to new and innovative academic developments, and its current assessment regulations and their application.

