Scottish Agricultural College

MAY 2005

Enhancement-led institutional review

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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 higher education institutions (HEIs) (universities and colleges of HE). In Scotland this process is known as Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR). The Agency operates equivalent but separate processes in Wales, England and Northern Ireland.

Enhancement-led approach

Over the period 2001 to 2003, QAA, the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council, Universities Scotland and representatives of the student body worked closely together on the development of the enhancement-led approach to quality in Scottish HE. This approach, which was implemented in academic year 2003-04, has five main elements:

- a comprehensive programme of review at the subject level, managed by the institutions
- improved forms of public information about quality, based on addressing the different needs of the users of that information including students and employers
- a greater voice for student representatives in institutional quality systems, supported by a national development service (known as the student participation in quality scotland - sparqs - service);
- a national programme of enhancement themes, aimed at developing and sharing good practice in learning and teaching in HE
- ELIR involving all of the Scottish HEIs over a four-year period, from 2003-04 to 2006-07. The ELIR method embraces a focus on: the strategic management of enhancement; the effectiveness of student learning; and student, employer and international perspectives.

QAA believes that this approach is distinctive in a number of respects: its balance between quality assurance and enhancement; the emphasis it places on the student experience; its focus on learning and not solely teaching; and the spirit of cooperation and partnership which has underpinned all these developments.

Nationally agreed reference points

ELIR includes a focus on institutions' use of a range of reference points, including those published by QAA:

- the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)
- 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 on preparing programme specifications*, which are descriptions of what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. Programme specifications 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 SCQF.

Conclusions and judgement within ELIR

ELIR results in a set of commentaries about the institutions being reviewed. These commentaries relate to:

- the ability of the institution's internal review systems to monitor and maintain quality and standards at the level of the programme or award. This commentary leads to a judgement on the level of confidence which can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The expression of this judgement provides a point of tangency between the ELIR method and other review methods operating in other parts of the UK. The judgement is expressed as one of: broad confidence, limited confidence or no confidence
- the institution's arrangements for ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair
- the effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting an effective learning experience for students
- the combined effect of the institution's policies and practices for ensuring improvement in the quality of teaching and learning
- the effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategy for quality enhancement.

The ELIR process

The ELIR process is carried out by teams comprising three academics, one student and one senior administrator drawn from the HE sector.

The main elements of ELIR are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution in advance of the review visit
- a Reflective Analysis document submitted by the institution three months in advance of the second part of the review visit
- a two-part review visit to the institution by the ELIR team; Part 1 taking place five weeks before Part 2, and Part 2 having a variable duration of between three and five days depending on the complexity of matters to be explored
- the publication of a report, 20 weeks after the Part 2 visit, detailing the commentaries agreed by the ELIR team.

The evidence for the ELIR

In order to gather the information on which its commentaries are based, the ELIR team carries out a number of activities including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, as well as the Reflective Analysis institutions prepare especially for ELIR
- asking questions and engaging in discussions with groups of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the national reference points.

Contents

Introduction

1   This is the report of an enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) of the Scottish Agricultural College (the College or SAC) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA is grateful to the College for the willing cooperation provided to the ELIR team.

2   The review followed a method agreed with Universities Scotland, student bodies and the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC), and informed by consultation with the Scottish higher education sector. The ELIR method focuses on the strategic management of enhancement; the effectiveness of student learning; and the use of a range of reference points. These reference points include the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF); the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*), published by QAA; subject benchmark information; and student, employer and international perspectives. Full detail on the method is set out in the *Handbook for enhancement-led institutional review: Scotland* which is available on QAA's website.

Style of reporting

3   ELIR reports are structured around three main sections: internal monitoring and review of quality and standards and public information; the student experience; and the effectiveness of the institution's strategy for quality enhancement. Each section contains a sequence of 'overviews' and 'commentaries' in which the ELIR team sets out its views. The first commentary in the first main section of the report leads to the single, formal judgement included within ELIR reports on the level of confidence which can be placed in the institution's management of quality and standards. The judgement is intended to provide a point of tangency with the methods of audit and review operating in other parts of the UK where similar judgements are reached. In the second and third main sections of the report, on the student experience, and the effectiveness of the institution's quality

enhancement strategy, there are no formal judgements, although a series of overviews and commentaries are provided. These are the sections of the ELIR report which are particularly enhancement focused. To reflect this, the style of reporting is intended to address the increased emphasis on exploration and dialogue which characterises the ELIR team's interaction with the institution on these matters. The reader may, therefore, detect a shift in the style of reporting in those sections, and this is intended to emphasise the enhancement-led nature of the method.

Method of review

4   The College submitted a Reflective Analysis (RA) which set out the College's strategy for quality enhancement, its approach to the management of quality and standards, and its view of the effectiveness of its approach. Other documents available to the ELIR team with the RA included the Institutional Profile at 18 February 2005; the College's Strategy for the Enhancement of Quality in Teaching, Learning and Assessment; the Education & Training Division Draft Strategic Business Plan 2005-08; Education Manual; Undergraduate Prospectus 2005; Postgraduate Prospectus; the Corporate Plan 2004-05; examples of information leaflets (Programmes and Careers in Organic Farming and Programmes and Careers in Business Management); the Higher Education Quality Council Quality Audit Report (October 1996); and three QAA subject review reports. The RA provided the focus for the review and was used to develop a programme of activities by the ELIR team to provide a representative illustration of the way the College approaches the management of quality, enhancement and academic standards.

5   The College submitted two case studies with its RA: 'Live Case Studies' and 'Flexible Learning at SAC'. The documentation stated that the Live Case Studies exemplified a number of the guiding principles or goals of the College's strategy for enhancing quality including designing 'programmes that combine vocational focus and generic/transferable skills

to maximise employability'. The second case study, 'Flexible Learning at SAC', illustrated the importance of flexible learning at the College, and that '...flexible learning is an essential part of the overall SAC strategy to continue widening access'.

6   The RA was prepared in initial draft form by the College's Academic Services Manager. This was developed with the involvement of the Education Management Group, the Education Executive Team and the College Principal. The draft RA was circulated for consultation to all staff in the Education & Training Division and to students. The RA was approved in its final form by the Education Executive Team.

7   The ELIR team visited the College on two occasions: the Part 1 visit took place on the 9 and 10 March 2005, and the Part 2 visit took place between 3 and 5 May 2005.

8   During the Part 1 visit, staff and students of the College gave presentations to the ELIR team on strategies and current developments within the College intended to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. These presentations included 'Quality from a student's perspective'; 'Education & Training Strategy'; and 'Quality Enhancement'. There were also presentations on the two case-studies. Following the presentations, the team met with a group of students that included both those with a representational role at programme and campus level, and students involved with recent QAA academic (subject) reviews. The team also met senior staff with responsibility for managing quality and enhancement activity across the institution. The team had a further meeting with a group of staff involved in recent internal and QAA academic (subject) reviews. These meetings enabled the team to explore a range of matters, many of which had been raised by the College in its RA.

9   During the Part 1 visit, the College made available a set of documentation which had been identified within the RA and a small amount of supplementary information identified during the course of the visit. This enabled the ELIR team to develop a programme of meetings and to identify a set of documentation for the Part 2 visit.

10   The ELIR team comprised Dr Alan Davidson, Dr Andrew Eadie, Ms Esther Hancock, Ms Jill Little (reviewers), and Mr Kevin Porter (review secretary). The review was coordinated on behalf of QAA by Dr Janice Ross, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland.

Background information about the institution

11   The College originated in the form of three regional agricultural colleges, at Glasgow (1899), Edinburgh (1901) and Aberdeen (1904). In 1987, the Scottish Agricultural Colleges Company was formed to coordinate the Advisory and Veterinary Services of the three colleges. The College was established in its current form in 1990, with a formal merger of the East of Scotland College of Agriculture, the North of Scotland College of Agriculture and the West of Scotland Agricultural College with the Scottish Agricultural Colleges Company.

12   The College's educational activities are principally based at Aberdeen, Ayr and Edinburgh. Aberdeen and Ayr are rural campuses; the Craibstone Estate is about five miles from the centre of Aberdeen, and the Auchincruive Estate about three miles from Ayr. The Edinburgh Campus is based on the Science Campus of the University of Edinburgh, with facilities also on the Bush estate some seven miles away. In addition to the three campuses, there are five research and development farms, eight veterinary centres and 23 local farm business services offices.

13   The College is a distinctive specialist institution with three main activities: advanced education and training; research and development; and technology transfer through advice, consultancy and scientific and business services. These activities are directed towards the broad areas of agriculture and related sciences, rural business development and management, food chain quality and safety, and rural resource and environmental management. The College's mission is to 'enhance the sustainability of…land-based industries'. Its main funding body is the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department.

14   In recent years the College has been reviewing its organisation and activities, seeking to transform its business and estates to meet the needs of its stakeholders. This has informed the development of the College's Business Transformation Plan intended to ensure the financial health and competitiveness of the College. In April 2003, a fundamental change was made in the College's organisational structure. The previous matrix management system, in which staff with roles in education, research and development, and consultancy were grouped according to academic discipline, was replaced by three financially distinct divisions representing the three main functions of the College: Education & Training; Research & Development; and Consultancy Services. Within each of the three divisions staff are placed within subject groups. Thus, in the Education & Training Division there are three teaching groups: Environmental Sciences; Life Sciences; and Social Sciences. At the time of the review the College had a total of 764 undergraduate and taught postgraduate students. In addition to this the College had 37 postgraduate research students.

Institution's strategy for quality enhancement

15   The College's Strategy for the Enhancement of Quality in Teaching, Learning and Assessment was submitted with the RA. The RA stated that the aim of the strategy is to identify the means by which the effectiveness of the students' learning experience will be continuously improved. The strategy focuses on six elements of the academic environment that make a significant contribution to the learning experience: programme design; the quality assurance/quality enhancement environment; learning, teaching and assessment; student support; improved access to study/widening participation; and staff development. Within each of these broad focus areas, guiding principles or goals are defined, and these in turn give rise to specific enhancement activities. The strategy is presented in a way that emphasises its links both with the College's Education & Training Division's Strategic Business Plan and with external reference points, such as SHEFC's

vision of a high quality higher education sector, and the Scottish Executive's policy for tertiary education. In this way, it helps to provide staff with an understanding of how the specific enhancement activities, which are the outcomes of the strategy, are derived from the higher level strategy statements.

16   The RA further stated that a distinction is made between planned, deliberate enhancement, and improvements that might result from routine quality control and assurance activities, such as programme management and programme monitoring and review. The contribution that each of these approaches makes to the learning experience is acknowledged by the College, although it is recognised that enhancement resulting from the implementation of a defined strategy has particular advantages: 'in a small institution such as the College, it can be applied to all programmes relatively easily; it is likely to be the result of developments in the sector that have recognised benefits; it helps to control direction, at programme or College level, and is more likely to introduce larger scale improvements; and with appropriate discussion and ownership, it encourages a culture of thinking creatively about enhancement'.

Internal monitoring and review of quality and standards and public information

Overview of the institution's internal arrangements for assuring the quality of programmes and maintaining the standards of its academic awards and credit

17   The College's education programmes are validated by the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow for both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and by the Scottish Qualifications Authority in the case of Higher National awards. In the majority of undergraduate programmes, the first two years (SCQF levels 7 and 8) lead to the awards of HNC and HND from the Scottish

Qualifications Authority, with provision at SCQF levels 9, 10 and 11 leading to degree awards validated by one of the three universities.

18   The College is governed by a Board of Directors which comprises three executive and six non-executive directors. The three executive directors are the Chief Executive and Principal; the Finance and Corporate Affairs Director; and the Consultancy Services Director. The executive directors, the Head of Research & Development and the Vice-Principal (Education & Training) comprise the Executive Management Team. The Executive Management Team is a cross-divisional group and discusses predominantly management and business affairs.

19   The Education Executive Team is the most senior academic committee within the Education & Training Division. It is chaired by the Vice-Principal (Education & Training) and is composed of the three teaching group managers, the Academic Services Manager, the Student Recruitment and Admissions Manager, the Training Services Business Development Manager and the Flexible Learning Manager. Its remit includes all aspects of strategic and operational management of the Education & Training Division. The Education Executive Team formally reports to the Executive Management Team through the Vice-Principal (Education & Training) who also attends meetings of the Board of Directors for discussion of education matters. The Education Executive Team also has responsibility for reporting to the relevant committees of the College's validating partners. A teaching group manager is located on each of the three campuses and each has cross-College responsibility for a subject group.

20   Operational management of the undergraduate and taught postgraduate education is the responsibility of the Education Management Group. In its Education Manual the College states that the Education Management Group plays a key role in maintaining and enhancing the quality of its students' learning experiences. The Education Management Group has an opportunity to contribute to the strategic planning process by formally reporting to the Education Executive

Team. The Education Management Group is chaired by the Academic Services Manager and is composed of programme leaders representing the teaching groups, a programme leader representing taught postgraduate programmes, the Student Recruitment and Admissions Manager and the Training Services Business Development Manager. The operational management and administration of programmes is the responsibility of core management teams which comprise the programme leader, advisers of studies and module coordinators.

Internal approval, monitoring and review

Programme approval

21   With four partner validating bodies, the position at the College with respect to programme approval is potentially complex. However, all the partner bodies have agreed to a set of common programme design principles established when the College modularised its programmes in 2003. Approval of a new programme involves: approval in principle to develop a new programme is carried out by the Education Management Group and Education Executive Team; establishment of the programme development team, and preparation of validation documentation, including programme specification(s); a validation event, with external peers and representatives of the validating universities as panel members; and formal reporting of the outcomes and any follow up action required by the validating university and/or the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

Annual programme review

22   At the end of each academic year, programme management teams (known as 'core teams') conduct a monitoring and review process, referred to as annual programme review. The annual programme review process draws on standard information, such as minutes of programme management meetings, student progression and achievement data, student feedback, and external examiner and external moderators' reports. The programme leader produces a report, the key part of which is a critical appraisal of the performance of the

programme throughout the year. An annual programme review meeting provides an opportunity for all members of the teaching team to contribute to the process. Guidance is provided in the form of questions that might be asked in order to reflect critically on the programme's performance during the year under review.

23   The annual review reports of all the programmes are scrutinised by the Academic Services Manager who writes overview reports highlighting quality issues that are relevant both to individual programmes, and more generally within campuses or across the College. These are submitted to the Education Management Group, the Education Executive Team and the relevant committees of the validating universities. Feedback to the College is provided by a combination of committee minutes and joint committee/panel membership.

Periodic review

24   In the past a quinquennial review process has preceded the revalidation of programmes. The process examined the performance of programmes and proposed any necessary changes. This was last undertaken by the College in 2002-03. For practical purposes, periodic review during 2003 and 2004 was in the form of engagement with QAA academic (subject) review, covering the bulk of the College's taught provision. The RA stated that the College is now considering how to move forward with periodic review, adapting the present processes in line with the SHEFC guidance on internal subject review. Proposals will be discussed by the Education Management Group and an agreed plan put to the Education Executive Team and the validating universities for approval.

External examining

25   External examiners for the provision validated by the three universities are nominated by the College and appointed by the validating university. External examiners are appointed to oversee programmes and each examiner is also responsible for a number of modules relevant to their expertise. External examiners submit their reports to the College

and the validating university. The programme leaders respond to the external examiners directly with a copy sent to the Academic Services Manager, who produces annual overview reports which are considered by the College and by the validating universities as part of the annual programme review process (see above, paragraphs 22-23).

Research degrees

26   The College's postgraduate research degrees are managed by the Research & Development Division. The Postgraduate Degrees Committee is responsible for monitoring the research student experience, with a membership which comprises the Postgraduate Programme Manager, a representative of each of the four research groups, the Research Manager and a postgraduate research student.

27   The RA outlined the College's arrangements for monitoring research degree programmes, referring to its Research Postgraduate Handbook. An annual report form is completed by the student and the principal supervisor, covering the frequency of supervision, quality of supervision and quality of student performance, progress with the work and problems encountered in conducting the work. This is submitted, by the College's Postgraduate Programme Manager, to the postgraduate coordinator/administrator in the appropriate school or faculty of the university with which the student is registered.
In addition, at the end of year one, students are required to submit a detailed report which includes a review of relevant literature, an account of the work already carried out and its significance, and an outline of the work planned for the remainder of the period of study. The report is submitted to two independent referees and is followed by an oral examination. The referees report to the appropriate university by means of the College's Postgraduate Programme Manager.

28   Research students are required to lead a seminar on their work and, at least once during their registration period, deliver a presentation to the College's annual postgraduate conference.

The College's whole research programme is externally monitored and reviewed every four years by a visiting group in a manner analogous to the Research Assessment Exercise.

29   Discussion with students, and study of documentation during the ELIR visits highlighted weaknesses in the implementation of the College's procedures. The College's Postgraduate Degrees Committee did not meet between September 2002 and April 2005, and the College could not readily provide information on research student completion rates. The minutes of the meeting of the April 2005 Postgraduate Degrees Committee acknowledge that supervisor training is not taking place in a systematic fashion, and that skills training for students is not formally recorded. The College acknowledged the need to formally identify and act upon the skills development needs of postgraduate students, and is encouraged to develop this area as part of its work to align its policies and practices with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Use made of external reference points for assuring quality and standards

30   The College's programmes conform to the principles of the SCQF including in relation to the entry and exit flexibility of Higher National qualifications. Modules in taught programmes are credit rated at SCQF levels 7 to 11, that is, from undergraduate year one through to master's level. The learning outcomes and approaches to assessment are specified in module descriptors and the modules are assigned credit points as a measure of the volume of learning. In particular, the College's undergraduate programmes embody two of the main principles of the SCQF, in that transition from Scottish Qualifications Authority study to degree level study is seamless, and that no additional barriers are placed on the ability to progress between levels other than the successful completion of modules.

31   Programmes revalidated in 2003 were developed with reference to the appropriate QAA subject benchmark statements that had then been published or were available in draft form. External examiners are asked in their reports whether the standards set for the award are appropriate by reference to these benchmarks.

32   The alignment of the College's processes and procedures with the *Code of practice,* published by QAA, led to considerable revision of the Education Manual. In particular, the policies and procedures relating to academic appeals, student complaints and assessment have been revised. The RA noted that some further work is required to align the College's procedures with sections 3 and 8 of the *Code* on students with disabilities and careers education information and guidance. The *Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning* produced by QAA were used as a reference point in the development of provision in that area.

33   During 2002-03 and 2003-04 the College participated in three QAA academic (subject) reviews covering hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism; earth, environmental sciences and environmental studies; agriculture, forestry and agriculture and food sciences/biosciences. In each of the three reviews, confidence was expressed in the academic standards of the programmes and the quality of learning opportunities was found to be generally commendable, with the exception of only two of the programmes where 'student progression' was judged to be approved. The evidence considered by the ELIR team showed that the College engaged effectively in these reviews. The College has also used the experience gained during its preparation for these reviews to enhance its quality management systems, for example, the use of flowchart analysis to monitor student progression from Higher National to degree programmes.

Programme specifications

34   Programme Specifications were produced for all College programmes during the revalidation process in 2003. The production of a specification is now a requirement for all new programmes.

Progress files

35   Progress files have not yet been implemented at the College. The intention is

that Personal Development Planning will be introduced during academic session 2006-07. Transcripts are issued on demand currently and the College intends to produce transcripts for all students, to include the European Diploma Supplement, by June 2006.

Professional and statutory bodies and employers

36   Contact with employers and industry is maintained, and is embedded in programme design and review processes at a variety of levels (see below, paragraphs 69 to 71).

37   At present no College programmes are formally accredited by professional bodies although there is some informal recognition of College programmes, for example, the Food Science and Technology programme is recognised by the Institute of Food Science and Technology as a route to membership of the Institute. The College is considering seeking accreditation from professional bodies in the future, in particular the possibilities of accreditation by the Institute of Management for the Rural Business Management programme, and by the Institution of Environmental Sciences for the Environmental Protection and Rural Resource Management programmes.

Commentary on the ability of the institution's internal review systems to monitor and maintain quality and standards

38   In relation to internal monitoring and review of quality and standards of taught provision, the College has effective quality assurance procedures, and these encompass a focus on the enhancement of the student learning experience.

39   The College has validation agreements with four separate bodies. The effective and efficient management of these arrangements is a particular strength of the College.

40   The College has made good use of external reference points in the design and delivery of its programmes, including the SCQF, subject benchmark statements, programme

specifications, the *Code of practice* published by QAA, and QAA academic (subject) review. The College acknowledges the need for further consideration of the *Code* in relation to postgraduate research provision, careers education, information and guidance.

41   To date the College has operated a two stage system of periodic review at the programme level, in which a quinquennial review of a programme precedes the revalidation process. The College recognises that this process does not yet match the expectations of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework and in particular the SHEFC guidance with respect to internal review at the subject level. The College intends to develop a system of internal periodic review at the subject level, utilising the SHEFC guidance, to be in place for academic session 2005-06. The College is encouraged to pursue this.

42   The College is strongly encouraged to take early steps to reflect on and strengthen its institutional-level management of the quality of learning opportunities for postgraduate research students. In particular, steps should be taken to ensure that the progress of research students is monitored effectively and that students are able to take full benefit from the research environment of the College. Research student supervisors should have the opportunity, particularly at the outset of their supervisory careers, to engage with appropriate training for their supervisory role. The College should also take steps to ensure that information is available on a College-wide basis on the completion rates, and the time taken to completion, of research students. This information, which is collected as a matter of course in other higher education institutions, would assist the College in taking an overview of the effectiveness of its supervisory arrangements.

43   On the basis of these findings, there can be broad confidence in the College's current, and likely future, management of the quality of its provision and the academic standards of the awards it offers on behalf of its validating institutions.

Overview of the institution's approach to ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of provision is complete, accurate and fair

44   Publicity material on the educational provision within the College is the responsibility of the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office, both for web and paper-based materials. Prospectus entries, which are updated annually, are produced initially by the relevant programme leader and checked by the appropriate teaching group manager before being passed to the Student Recruitment and Admissions Manager for final approval. A similar process is undertaken for information placed on the College's website.

45   Programme handbooks are compiled as distillations of the definitive programme documentation produced for the approval process and include information on procedures, practices and regulations. In addition, the handbooks contain information specific to the campus at which the student will be based. Module descriptors are placed on the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) and in the programme handbooks. The accuracy of programme handbooks and module descriptors is the responsibility of the programme leaders. During both visits, students who met the ELIR team confirmed that the pre-entry information provided by the prospectus and website was adequate and accurate. In the main they were also satisfied with the information provided on their programmes and modules.

Commentary on the institution's arrangements for ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair

46   The College is acting appropriately to ensure that the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair.

The student experience

Overview of the institution's approach to engaging students in the assurance and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning

Student representation structures

47   The College seeks to engage students in the assurance and enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning in a number of ways. At programme level, representation is enabled through student membership of the student liaison groups, alongside members of the core teaching team for the programme. Matters raised at the student liaison groups will either be resolved at the meeting or referred to the programme core team for further consideration. Programme core team meetings are held shortly after student liaison group meetings to ensure action is taken in a timely manner. Where issues raised in a student liaison group have relevance beyond the individual programme, the programme leader will bring the issues to the Education Management Group. Staff encourage students to identify their own representatives, and explain the important role of the student liaison groups to students at induction. Staff support student representatives by allotting class time for student liaison group representatives to seek student views prior to meetings.

48   Above the programme level, student views are sought through the Student Liaison Committee which acts as the forum for interaction between the College Board and the student community. The Student Liaison Committee meets at each campus at least twice during the academic year. The Student Liaison Committee focuses primarily on key strategic issues affecting education and training at the College. In discussion, some students expressed a view that representation worked well on matters relating to education, but less well for strategic management issues.

49   The membership of the College Postgraduate Degrees Committee includes a research postgraduate student. Otherwise there is currently no formal student representation in the membership of senior College committees, although the Student Liaison Committee is a subcommittee of the Board, and student membership on the Education Management Group and on the University of Glasgow/SAC Liaison Committee is planned for 2005-06. The College should reflect on the benefits of strengthening student representation at senior levels of its committee structure.

Student feedback questionnaires

50   Student views are also sought through questionnaires. A survey of the opinions of all students new to the College is undertaken part way through the first term. There is a further survey for all students at the end of the academic year. In addition, students are asked to complete module evaluation questionnaires.

51   Action resulting from these evaluations occurs in a number of ways. Module leaders are responsible for any matters arising from their module evaluation surveys, liaising with appropriate teachers and reporting back to the programme leaders. Programme specific issues are dealt with by the core teams, who report any actions and discussion to the student liaison groups. General issues are dealt with by the senior tutors, especially those campus specific issues, resolving them with individuals or through the Education Management Group. The Academic Services Manager takes a cross campus overview, and through the overview reports, brings issues to the Education Management Group for discussion of further action. In discussion, some students questioned the effectiveness of questionnaires indicating that the extent of feedback they received varied considerably. Both students and staff commented on the effectiveness of informal communications, fostered by the small size of the College.

52   The College's approach to engaging postgraduate research students in quality assurance and enhancement activities includes an expectation that students should complete a questionnaire at the end of each year. Discussion with a sample of research students indicated that this process has not been taking place routinely in recent years, but that students had received such a questionnaire in November 2004. There would be benefit in the College maintaining this improvement in its implementation of processes to engage research postgraduate students in quality enhancement.

Internal review processes

53   Quinquennial review and revalidation processes (see above, paragraphs 21-24) involve students in a number of ways. Graduates and former students are involved in the process of review through a survey form that enquires about topics such as the importance of professional skills and the success of the programme in helping them to acquire those skills, the importance of different parts of the curriculum and how well the programme dealt with them, together with open questions about their preferences and an overall rating. Current students contribute to revalidation events by giving their views on the current and proposed programme at a meeting with the panel. The College has plans to introduce student membership on internal subject review and revalidation panels, from 2005-06 onwards. The College plans to seek support for this from the student information service Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) in the form of guidance and training for student representatives.

Overview of the institution's approach to the promotion of effective student learning

Programme design

54   The College's taught programmes are all structured on learning outcomes, building on the College's long relationship with the Scottish Qualifications Authority on Higher National programmes. This approach emphasises the importance of aligning assessment with the achievement of learning outcomes, along with the progressive development of skills and knowledge between one level and the next. These design principles were reflected in the

programme revalidations of 2003 in addition to engagement with relevant subject benchmarks.

Teaching, learning and assessment

55   Programmes employ a range of teaching and learning methods including workshops, seminars, field practicals, laboratory practicals, industrial visits, study tours, group discussions, student presentations, video conferences, guest lectures, case studies, simulation and role play. Students value these as a means of linking knowledge with practice.

56   Programme leaders, working with their group managers, ensure the appropriate allocation of teaching duties to members of staff. Staff from outside the Education & Training Division contribute, and a significant amount of teaching is carried out by staff from the Research & Development and the Consultancy Services Divisions, who teach mainly, but not exclusively, at years three and four and postgraduate level. Postgraduate programmes are taught largely, and sometimes solely, by the Research & Development and Consultancy Services Divisions staff. Students are enthusiastic about the involvement of staff from outwith the Education & Training Division. The commitment and effectiveness of staff working relationships across the divisions was emphasised by students who commented that they did not recognise any differences in approach to teaching between staff from the different Divisions (see below, paragraph 91). Staff from outwith the Education & Training Division maintain currency with pedagogic developments within the College through the teacher liaison groups and the annual Education Conference.

57   Modularisation of programmes led to a restructured timetable based on two three and a half-hour teaching blocks each day, with modules allocated to the same period each week. This was intended to increase opportunities for part-time study, and also to foster a student-centred learning approach and encourage staff and students to make increased use of blended learning. Students consider that the teaching time within the blocks is divided effectively between different activities. However,

some have a concern that if they miss one session then they will have missed a much larger block of learning than would previously have been the case.

58   The College's overall approach to assessment recognises that there should be a range of different forms of assessment within programmes in order to accommodate different learning styles and to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to best effect. Continuous assessment is used in years one and two and a balanced mix of coursework and examinations in years three and four. The College has developed an assessment strategy which is aligned with the *Code of practice, Section 6: Assessment of students,* published by QAA. In order to deal with a concern about over-assessment, a College-wide survey of assessment load was initiated in April 2004. As a result of this, programme leaders are now asked to consider, as part of annual programme review, whether the assessment load is acceptable, and module evaluation forms were amended for 2004-05 to include a question on the volume of assessment. This type of information will help to quantify the problem and identify where improvements need to be made. A range of formative assessment practices is used currently, and the College is using the national enhancement theme on assessment as a resource to guide further development of formative assessment.

59   Feedback on assessed work is provided to students in a range of formats. For coursework assessments in all years of programmes, comments are normally provided on the scripts or on separate feedback sheets completed for individual students. For year one and two, individual or class remediation sessions are provided for those students requiring second attempts. Previously, year three and four students did not normally see detailed comments on examination scripts or dissertations. However, following modularisation and the introduction of two examination diets, feedback on examinations is now provided, typically by making the annotated scripts available to students at a feedback session in class. This example of good practice is frequently highlighted by the Colleges' external examiners.

60   In general, students are content with their assessment load but would like faster return of results and feedback. The College recognises this concern and has revised assessment practices regarding internal moderation of assessment. Rather than double-marking the work blind, the internal moderator checks the appropriateness of the assessor's marks with reference to the outcomes being assessed, the marking scheme/outline answers and the written comments of the assessor. The College intends to review the effectiveness of these revised procedures at the end of 2004-05. A minority of students highlighted that they had received little or no feedback on some assessed work. In discussion, this appeared to relate to one campus only. The College should consider this apparent disparity of student experience between campuses in its review of assessment at the end of 2004-05.

Libraries, IT and e-learning

61   Each campus has its own library, with reading rooms providing areas for private study or for students engaged in group exercises. The collection can be accessed using the on-line library catalogue, and students can request material from any campus library, or from other external library collections including the British Library. All subscribed electronic databases can be accessed both on and off-campus and an increasing number of journal titles can also be accessed off-campus. Students consider the library facilities to be adequate, although they would like to see more copies of key texts and off-campus access to e-journals.

62   Students consider that they have good access to PCs and associated hardware and software, although some students expressed the view that it would be useful for more PCs to be sited in quiet study rooms.

63   The College began delivery of elements of its taught postgraduate programmes by web-based distance learning in 2002. A virtual learning environment (VLE) is used, together with other e-learning platforms, to facilitate real-time tutorials. The VLE is used in the undergraduate programmes, with its use being extended beyond being a repository for lecture notes into more interactive teaching methods. A VLE 'buddy' system, (whereby staff with experience and expertise with the software assist novices) started this year, and has increased uptake by staff. The College considers the increased use of the VLE as being important in improving efficiency and dealing with the complex delivery of their programmes over three campuses. Ultimately, the aim is to expand the number of courses available by distance learning and to recruit more part-time students. Such increased use of a VLE should additionally provide greater flexibility for full-time students.

64   All new students receive training in the use of the VLE as part of their induction during the first week of the academic year. In discussion, students commented that they had no difficulties accessing the VLE and that effective guidance and technical support is provided, on-line and from lecturers and IT staff. Students reported some concerns about the differences in use of the VLE by staff, including apparently different approaches on different campuses.

Induction and student support

65   New first-year students on taught programmes have induction sessions fitted into their timetable during the first two weeks. These cover basic study skills, the learning resources available, the teaching staff and the facilities. Induction is also provided at the start of year three to support the transition from Higher National to degree studies. Induction for postgraduate students on distance-learning programmes is included in the first residential study weekend, and students commented on the high quality of this. In discussion, postgraduate research students stated that they had not been offered induction sessions and that they had not received induction documentation until they had been studying for two months.

66   The College does not have a centralised support service. Instead, all members of the teaching staff are expected to play a part in student support, with formal responsibilities to taught students defined for advisers of studies and senior tutors. The obligations and expectations of

both staff and students are formalised in a Student Charter. The adviser of studies role includes academic and pastoral responsibility for all students in one or more years of a programme. In the pastoral role, the College is aware that the adviser of studies may not have the knowledge, experience or expertise to deal with individual cases and can refer students to an external individual or agency for help from a trained professional. Students are aware of the formal pastoral role that some staff have but commented that, in practice, they were likely to approach those lecturers who are most available and helpful. The environment and relatively small size of the College is seen by students and staff as benefits, facilitating individual attention.

67   Postgraduate research students commented that their first port of call for support and advice is their supervisory team, but that levels of support varied considerably depending upon their supervisor and location. The College should consider the effectiveness of its processes for promoting and supporting an effective experience for all of its research students.

68   The College does not have specialised disability support staff, and senior tutors are responsible for supporting the needs of students with disabilities. All students are encouraged to identify their support needs, preferably during the application process so that an early assessment can be made and, where possible, provision made to meet these needs before enrolment. The College is aware of the current limitations on the physical accessibility on some campuses, particularly to older buildings, and is working to adhere fully to relevant expectations and legislation. The College's current approach to responding to the needs of students with disabilities could be described as reactive rather than proactive.

Overview of the institution's approach to the promotion of employability of its students

69   Currently, the College does not have a formal strategy for enhancing employability, and intends to develop such a strategy in 2005-06. To inform the development of an

employability strategy, the College has actively engaged with the national employability enhancement theme, and contributes to the work of a group of institutional contacts established through the theme. In addition, the College plans to undertake an audit of all programmes in order to identify, and disseminate, good practice in employability activities.

Employability through the curriculum

70   The College's taught programmes are vocational in nature. They are designed to help support, sustain and develop the land-based sector, and employability is a key part of this. Employability is promoted in three broad ways. First, through the design of programmes that are vocational in the sense that they are directed at particular career areas and foster the development of appropriate transferable skills and personal attributes. Secondly, through an awareness at programme level of current and future employment needs, arising from the College's role as a knowledge transfer organisation with close links to the land-based industries. Thirdly, through approaches to learning and teaching that encourage independent learning and facilitate interaction between students and representatives of appropriate industries, for example, by means of 'live' case studies, visits and guest lectures.

71   Transferable skills, which the College refers to as 'core skills', are an established feature of the College's programmes, predominantly in the first two years of the curriculum which are based on Scottish Qualifications Authority Higher National programmes. Employability is also promoted by the nature of the specialist modules included in each programme, and meeting employer needs is a key component of programme design. This is achieved in a number of ways: programmes are required to demonstrate a demand from industry as part of the validation, review and revalidation processes; the validation panel includes a representative of industry; members of the teaching team maintain regular contact with industry and, for some programmes, there is formal interaction through industry liaison groups; programmes are recognised by appropriate industry bodies; and a review of the

external 'environment' is now part of the annual programme review process.

72   Additionally, students on many programmes are given the opportunity to extend their skills through training events and practical work (usually with voluntary organisations). These opportunities are offered in addition to the formal curriculum.

73   First destination statistics across all programmes reveal that about 90 per cent of graduating students enter employment or continue their education, either at the College or elsewhere.

Careers guidance

74   The College does not have a central careers guidance service. Help and advice are given on a programme basis through the programme management teams, with a member of each team designated as being responsible for industry liaison and careers advice.

Commentary on the effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting an effective learning experience for students

75   Students consider that their voice is heard, and that in the main any problems raised are dealt with. There are good informal communications between staff and students, fostered by the small size of the institution. This informal communication is supplemented by the largely effective formal representation of students on educational matters through student liaison groups that operate at programme level, and the Student Liaison Committee which meet on each campus. Some students expressed a view that representation and liaison work well on educational matters, but have been less effective on strategic management issues. Currently, there is no student representation on the most senior College committees, although student membership on the Education Management Group and the University of Glasgow/SAC Liaison Committee is planned for 2005-06. The College should reflect on the benefits of strengthening student representation at senior levels of its committee structure.

76   The College makes extensive use of questionnaires to seek feedback from taught students. These are reported through staff management structures, but some students expressed a view that the effectiveness of responses, and the extent to which students received information about actions taken, could be variable. The College has plans to enhance student involvement in its internal review processes. Currently, students and recent graduates contribute to revalidation events by providing their views on the current and proposed programme at a meeting with the panel. The College plans to introduce student membership on review and revalidation panels, starting in 2005-06, and supported by Student Participation in Quality Scotland. This is a positive step for the College and illustrates its commitment to ensuring effective student representation throughout the internal review processes.

77   Students on taught programmes benefit from effective contributions by staff from the Research & Development and the Consultancy Divisions of the College. A wide range of teaching, learning and assessment methods is employed and are greatly valued by students.

78   The College is developing its use of new technology and flexible learning. Its strategy for development concentrated initially on postgraduate distance-learning provision. This has been effective in supporting distinctive programmes that enable students at a distance to benefit from the cutting edge knowledge base of the College. This provision, and the academic support provided by staff is greatly valued by the students. The College is now extending its use of new technology, in particular, through using a VLE in its undergraduate provision.

79   There is some variation in approaches to learning, teaching, assessment and student support across the three campuses which can lead to differential opportunities for students. The College should consider how it can promote parity of opportunity and experience for all its students.

80   Implementation of the College's processes to promote an effective experience for its research

postgraduate students has been less systematic than for taught students. Recent re-activation of the Postgraduate Research Committee and the use of questionnaires are positive signs of the College's recognition of this, and of its commitment to improve its management of the experience of research students.

81   Student support is provided primarily by academic staff, including designated advisers and senior tutors. Staff with support roles are committed to helping their students, and to giving them individual attention, helped by the relatively small size of the College. The College should review its essentially reactive approach to supporting students with disabilities.

82   Employability is effectively promoted through programme content and approaches to learning and teaching that are informed by the College's knowledge transfer activities, with close links to the land-based industries. Employability concerns are embedded within programme approval and review processes. The College's plans to enhance employability include developing an employability strategy, undertaking an audit of all programmes for activities that enhance employability; and developing an approach to personal development planning for students.

Effectiveness of the institution's strategy for quality enhancement

Overview of the institution's approach to managing improvement in the quality of teaching and learning

The College's quality enhancement strategy

83   The College's Strategy for the Enhancement of Quality in Teaching, Learning and Assessment is recent, having been approved in 2003. It builds on a number of existing elements of College policy, and reflects the nature and context of the College.

84   The Strategy reflects the College's divisional structure, implemented in 2003, and the streamlined committee structure and the roles of the Education Executive Team and the Education Management Group (see above, paragraphs 19-20). The Strategy recognises 'top-down' implementation of the Education & Training Division strategy, emphasising links to the higher level Divisional Strategic Business Plan and the external reference points of SHEFC and the Scottish Executive. It links this higher level strategy with a set of activities that staff can readily relate to, intended to both guide staff activity, and to capture and disseminate 'bottom-up' initiatives.

85   In discussion, College staff demonstrate a clear sense of their ownership of the Strategy, and their roles in its implementation. In particular, the Education Executive Team and Education Management Group confidently explained achievements to date, together with ongoing and planned implementation actions.

86   The Strategy is linked to the College's Business Transformation Plan, and teaching group managers are involved in planning and operational decisions affecting each campus. They advised that this linkage was helping to address previous concerns about uncertainties regarding future activities on each campus.

Implementation of the strategy for quality enhancement

87   The College submitted two case-studies demonstrating aspects of implementing the strategy for quality enhancement (see above, paragraph 5). The first described the use of live case-studies within the curriculum, involving students solving problems and/or developing proposals in relation to real-life businesses. Live case-studies had been used on an ad hoc basis in the past, and are now embedded in a range of programmes across the College. They illustrate one means of achieving a number of the guiding principles or goals within the strategy, including to 'design programmes that combine vocational focus and generic/transferable skills to maximise employability; facilitate learning through student-centred approaches, within a range of teaching methods; ensure that appropriate use is made of staff in all College divisions and from external organisations/institutions; and support

the development of staff through...the establishment of external links that lead to enrichment of the students' learning experience'.

88   From discussions and documentation provided during the ELIR, there was clear evidence of the extent of the use of the live case-studies, the effectiveness and benefits of the approach, and the value attached to it by all participants.

89   The second case-study described the College's development of flexible learning as an example of a strategic approach to enhancing quality, which also promotes activities contributing to the achievement of a number of the guiding principles or goals within the strategy for quality enhancement, including those to 'facilitate access to study…by using blended learning and by making appropriate programmes available by distance learning; make appropriate use of new technologies, including e-learning; and support the development of staff at subject level, in approaches to learning, teaching and assessment'.

90   The case-study explained the approach to focusing flexible provision initially, at least, on taught postgraduate (SCQF Level 11) provision for a number of reasons: 'as a response to declining numbers of students able to commit the time and money to full-time study; as a response to demand from industry; and recognising that at this level, students are self-motivated and more disciplined in their studies'.

91   The College presented a specific example of a taught postgraduate programme, the MSc in Organic Farming, provided in flexible mode, by means of distance learning supported by e-learning approaches. The general approach was explored in more detail through discussion with staff and with students from a variety of distance learning, postgraduate programmes provided in flexible mode. These discussions highlighted a number of strengths, illustrating the effective implementation of aspects of the strategy for quality enhancement, including the guiding principle 'that appropriate use is made of staff in all the College Divisions'. The MSc in Organic Farming is delivered predominantly by staff from

the Research & Development and Consultancy Services Divisions. The staff demonstrated real enthusiasm and commitment to providing a postgraduate programme that draws on cutting-edge knowledge and which is relevant to the needs of the students. They recognised the commitments required by flexible delivery, including on-line communication with students, and occasional weekend face-to-face sessions with students. Staff valued these as opportunities to be in communication with students and to receive feedback from students on ways of enhancing the programme for the future. Students were very enthusiastic about their experience, both in relation to the programme content and the flexible delivery format.

National enhancement themes

92   The strategy for quality enhancement refers to the national enhancement themes, and the College explained that these sector-wide activities are both a stimulus for enhancement activity within the College, and a development resource that is particularly valuable to a small institution. College staff are engaging effectively with the themes as institutional contacts, and the strategy includes activities to align internal staff development with the work of the themes. This has included inviting representatives and experts from the themes to lead workshops at the College Education Conferences in 2004 and 2005. In particular, the College is drawing on expertise and ideas from the assessment theme in its enhancement of the effectiveness and efficiency of assessment (see above, paragraph 58), and from the employability theme (see above, paragraph 69).

Overview of the linkage between the institution's arrangements for internal quality assurance and its enhancement activity

93   The College views quality assurance and quality enhancement as a continuum in which enhancement will frequently result from the programme management component of quality assurance activities. Recent examples of this include the College's recent combined

modularisation and revalidation exercise, which has improved quality, through revised curricula and standardised procedures and regulations. Additionally, this new curricular and regulatory structure will make it easier to share further improvements across programmes and campuses.

94   Both internal and external subject review activities give direction to enhancement activities. Following reviews, action plans are devised, with the programme leader responsible for implementing these plans and for reporting progress upwards within the College structure. Information provided, in particular that relating to the annual programme review (see above, paragraphs 22-23), in discussions with staff, confirmed the general effectiveness of the linkages between quality assurance and quality enhancement for taught provision. The College's existing commitment to quality and quality assurance processes have informed the strategy for quality enhancement; similarly, quality assurance processes are being used to drive the implementation of the strategy.

Overview of the institution's approach to recognising, rewarding and implementing good practice in the context of its strategy for quality enhancement

Education & Training Division management structure

95   The structure and operation of the Education & Training Division promote the recognition and dissemination of good practice in a range of ways, both formal and informal. At divisional level, the Education Executive Team has overall strategic responsibility, working with Education Management Group on operational aspects. One teaching group manager is located on each campus and this promotes effective cross-campus communication and interaction. Programme management teams have responsibilities for individual programmes and component modules. Formal recording and reporting of good practice is embedded in the annual programme review process.

96   These formal structures are complemented by teacher liaison groups at each campus. They are open to members of staff active in teaching or externally contracted teachers of College programmes. The groups elect their own officers and are free to consider any matters affecting education. The groups operate outside the formal education committee structure, but they are recognised and encouraged as a sounding board for new ideas and a means by which comments and observations may be communicated into the formal system.

97   Discussion with groups of staff confirmed the general effectiveness of the Education & Training Divisional management structure in promoting dissemination and supporting implementation of good practice in taught provision.

Whole College dissemination events

98   The College emphasises the importance of whole College dissemination events as a means of integration and promoting knowledge transfer across the three campuses and the three divisions and areas of activity (Education & Training, Research & Development, and Consultancy Services). These events play a significant role in recognising and promoting the implementation of good practice. An annual Education Conference, with workshops run by the College and external facilitators provides exemplars of good practice in teaching, learning and assessment, and supports development and implementation.

99   Staff within the Education & Training Division are encouraged to participate in knowledge transfer activities across the College to help them keep up-to-date with developments in research and development, and within industry. The College's Knowledge Transfer Week, involving cross-sector workshops, is intended to help support this and, more generally, helps to ensure the effective interaction between the campuses and division by promoting cross-College synergies. These are also encouraged by allocation of a specific budget to support knowledge transfer activities. Additionally, sector coordinators,

focusing on key areas within the agricultural/land-based sector, have a role to facilitate cross-divisional communication.

100 The programmes of activities for the Education Conferences and Knowledge Transfer Week demonstrate their significance in promoting good practice, and College staff confirmed their value in promoting and supporting enhancement and their personal development.

Staff grading structures and rewards

101 The College has recently introduced a new grading and pay structure for all staff, and it is currently considering the feasibility of a performance-related payment system. The College is considering criteria for recognising and rewarding excellence in learning and teaching and in performance in furthering the strategy for quality enhancement.

Staff development

102 Staff development is one of the areas of focus within the strategy for quality enhancement. The management of staff development reflects the College's organisational structure, with responsibilities defined and resources allocated at College, division and teaching group levels. All College staff are expected to complete personal development plans as a part of the annual staff appraisal process. These link training and development priorities to divisional/group and personal role objectives, leading to proposed actions and intended outcomes. Discussion with staff confirmed that they found the personal development planning process to be useful, and that adequate resources are made available to support their development activities, both within and outwith the College.

103 New members of teaching staff take part in a two-day induction programme and are expected to gain a teaching qualification, currently the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Learning and Teaching offered by The Robert Gordon University. The majority of experienced teachers are members of the Institute for Learning and Teaching/Higher

Education Academy, with registration and annual membership paid by the College.

104 A staff development manager was appointed from within the Education & Training Division in 2003, and an education staff development strategy was developed with funds earmarked for staff development within the teaching groups' budgets. There are plans to augment support for staff development by appointing 'champions' from within the Education & Training Division who will have responsibility for particular themes or parts of themes.

105 The College's plans for the development of flexible learning include a progressive increase of expertise in e-learning, and the integration of e-learning into undergraduate programmes delivered on-campus, intended to enrich the learning experience through more student-centred, blended learning approaches. Linking to this, the strategy for quality enhancement includes goals to encourage more student centred approaches and to make appropriate use of new technologies, including e-learning. The College's case-study, supporting presentation and discussion of postgraduate provision, provided evidence of effective developments in these approaches for postgraduate provision.

106 Discussion with executive staff at division level indicated an awareness of the potential to use e-learning approaches to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of provision across the three campuses. Discussion with staff in staff development roles suggested that, in general, conceptions of how e-learning approaches might be used were rather limited. There would be benefit in the College developing more explicit conceptions of the range of meanings of student-centred and blended learning approaches. These could be used to help focus staff development and support in ways that exploit the potential opportunities of these approaches in the context of the College's organisational structure, strategies and plans.

Commentary on the combined effect of the institution's policies and practices for ensuring improvement in the quality of teaching and learning

107 The College has a well-established commitment to quality assurance, working effectively with the processes of four validating organisations. It has also recently completed a series of QAA academic (subject) reviews and associated internal reviews and revalidations, all with positive outcomes. The College views assurance and enhancement of quality as a continuum. Quality assurance activities to date have informed and supported enhancement. Quality assurance processes, in particular Annual Programme Review, have been further developed to emphasise enhancement.

108 The College's organisational structure is effective in promoting both assurance and enhancement of taught provision in ways that recognise and work with the College's distinctive context. These formal structures are supported by effective informal communication. Cooperation and knowledge transfer across the divisions are effective in enabling and supporting taught provision.

109 The whole-College dissemination events, the annual Education Conference, and Knowledge Transfer Week are a strength. They reflect an awareness of the College's distinctive mission and organisation structure, as well as promoting improvement of teaching and learning.

110 The College is encouraged to view the development of a new staff grading and pay structure, and performance-related pay, as opportunities to demonstrate the importance attached to students and their learning, and to develop and implement criteria that genuinely encourage, recognise and reward good practice in teaching and student support.

Commentary on the effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategy for quality enhancement

111 The strategy for quality enhancement is fit for purpose and for context, reflecting the distinctive nature and structure of the College. Roles and responsibilities for implementation and monitoring the strategy are clearly defined, and there is effective ownership by the College's Education Executive Team and the Education Management Group.

112 The strategy for quality enhancement and related policy for flexible learning include plans for the further development of student-centred approaches and the use of new technologies, including blended learning within undergraduate provision. There would be benefit in the College developing more explicit conceptions of the range of meanings of student-centred and blended learning approaches. These definitions could be used to help focus staff development.

113 The strategy for quality enhancement relates to taught provision only. The College should consider the potential benefits of developing an explicit strategy for the enhancement of the experience of research degree students.

Summary

Background to the institution and ELIR method

The College

114 The College originated in the form of three regional agricultural colleges, at Glasgow (1899), Edinburgh (1901) and Aberdeen (1904). In 1987, the Scottish Agricultural Colleges Company was formed to coordinate the Advisory and Veterinary Services of the three colleges. The College was established in its current form in 1990, with a formal merger of the East of Scotland College of Agriculture, the North of Scotland College of Agriculture and the West of Scotland Agricultural College with the Scottish Agricultural Colleges Company. The College's educational activities are principally based on three campuses at Aberdeen, Ayr and Edinburgh.

115 The College is a specialist institution with three main activities: advanced education and training; research and development; and technology transfer through advice, consultancy and scientific and business services. These activities are directed towards the broad areas of agriculture and related sciences, rural business development and management, food chain quality and safety, and rural resource and environmental management. The College's mission is 'to enhance the sustainability of…land-based industries'. The major funding body for the College is the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department.

116 The College does not have degree awarding powers. Each of its degree programmes is validated by one of the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and its HNC/D awards are validated by the Scottish Qualifications Authority.

117 In recent years the College has been reviewing its organisation and activities, seeking to transform its business and estates to meet the needs of its stakeholders. This has informed the development of the College's Business Transformation Plan intended to ensure the financial health and competitiveness of the College. In 2003 the College made a fundamental change to its organisational structure, and grouped itself into three financially distinct divisions representing the main functions of the College: Education & Training; Research & Development; and Consultancy Services.

The ELIR method

118 In line with the enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) method, the institution submitted a Reflective Analysis (RA) in advance of the review. The RA set out the institution's strategy for quality enhancement, its approach to the management of quality and standards and its view of the effectiveness of its approach. The informative and well-structured nature of the RA greatly assisted the review. The RA provided a focus for the review and was used to develop a programme of activities by the ELIR team to provide a representative illustration of the way the College approaches the management of quality enhancement and academic standards.

119 The College submitted two case-studies demonstrating aspects of implementation of its strategy for quality enhancement. The first described the use of live case-studies within the curriculum, involving students problem solving and/or developing proposals in relation to real-life businesses. The second case-study described the College's development of flexible learning as an example of a strategic approach to enhancing quality.

Overview of the matters raised by the review

120 The particular themes pursued in the review included the management of standards and quality in the new organisation structure, in particular, working within the Education & Training Division, cross-division working and cross-campus relationships; student representation and feedback systems; academic and pastoral student support systems; staff development, in particular, support for wider implementation of student-centred, and e-learning approaches; and the College's relationships with its validating organisations.

Commentary on the ability of the institution's internal review systems to monitor and maintain quality and standards

121 The College has four validating partners. Each of its degree programmes is validated by one of the universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow, and its HNC/D awards are validated by the Scottish Qualifications Authority. The way in which these potentially complex arrangements are managed effectively and efficiently is a particular strength of the College.

122 The College reviews its taught provision annually and periodically. Annual programme review is informed by a comprehensive set of information, and requires a critical appraisal of effectiveness, plans for future change and actions to enhance quality. The College has to date operated a two-stage system of periodic review of taught programmes, in which a quinquennial review of a programme precedes the revalidation process. The College intends to develop a revised system of internal periodic review at the subject level, utilising the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council's guidance and plans to introduce this in academic session 2005-06.

123 The College makes good use of external reference points in the design and delivery of its programmes including the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework*, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications, the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education,* published by QAA, and QAA academic (subject) review. Good use is also made of extensive links with industry at a range of levels, reflecting the College's mission, and its knowledge transfer activities. The College acknowledges the need for further consideration of the *Code* in relation to postgraduate research provision, and careers education, information and guidance.

124 The College's postgraduate research provision is the responsibility of the Research & Development Division. The College's processes to promote an effective experience for its research postgraduate students, and to monitor this, have not been implemented systematically

or effectively of late. Recent re-activation of the Postgraduate Research Committee is a positive sign. The College is strongly encouraged to take early steps to reflect on, and strengthen, institutional-level management of the quality of learning opportunities for postgraduate research students.

125 On the basis of the findings there can be broad confidence in the College's current, and likely future, management of the quality of its provision and the academic standards of the awards it offers on behalf of its validating institutions.

Commentary on the institution's arrangements for ensuring that the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair

126 Publicity material on the educational provision within the College is the responsibility of the Student Recruitment and Admissions Office, both for web and paper-based materials. The relevant academic managers ensure the accuracy of information describing educational provision including prospectus entries and programme handbooks. The College is acting appropriately to ensure that the information it publishes about the quality of its provision is complete, accurate and fair.

Commentary on the effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting an effective learning experience for students

127 Students consider that their voice is both welcomed and heard on educational issues. There are good, informal communications between staff and students, fostered by the small size of the institution. This informal communication is in addition to largely effective formal student representation at the programme and campus levels. Student representatives are not currently included as members on the most senior committees of the College, including the Board, and communication is primarily by means of the Student Liaison Committee. The College is

encouraged to consider the benefits of increasing student engagement in strategic management issues.

128 The learning experience of students benefits from well-informed staff, and positive working relations between staff and students, facilitated by the College environment. Students on taught programmes benefit from effective contributions by staff from the Research & Development and Consultancy Services Divisions of the College. A wide range of teaching, learning and assessment methods is employed. These include field trips, industry visits and case-studies, all of which are greatly valued by students.

129 The College is developing its use of new technology and flexible learning. Its strategy for development concentrated initially on postgraduate distance-learning provision. This has been effective in supporting distinctive programmes that enable students at a distance to benefit from the cutting-edge knowledge base of the College. The College is now extending the use of new technology, in particular, the VLE into undergraduate provision.

130 There is some variation in approaches to learning, teaching, assessment and student support across the three campuses, which can lead to differential quality of opportunities and experiences for students. The College should consider how it can promote parity of opportunity and experience for all its students.

131 Student support is provided primarily by academic staff, including designated advisers and senior tutors. Staff with support roles are committed to helping their students, and to give them individual attention, helped by the environment and relatively small size of the College. The College should review its essentially reactive approach to supporting students with disabilities.

132 The College's taught programmes are vocational in nature; they are designed to help support, sustain and develop the land-based sector. Employability is promoted effectively through programme content and approaches to learning and teaching that are informed by the College's extensive knowledge transfer activities

with close links to the land-based industries. The College has plans to enhance employability, including implementation of personal development planning for students, and development of a formal employability strategy.

Commentary on the combined effect of the institution's policies and practices for ensuring improvement in the quality of teaching and learning

133 The College has a well-established commitment to quality assurance, working effectively with the processes of four validating organisations. It has also recently completed a series of external QAA academic (subject) reviews and associated internal reviews and revalidations, all with positive outcomes. The College views assurance and enhancement of quality as a continuum. Quality assurance activities to date have informed and supported enhancement, and have been further developed to emphasise enhancement.

134 The College's organisational structure is effective in promoting both assurance and enhancement of taught provision in ways that recognise and work with the College's distinctive context. Within the Education & Training Division, staff with executive roles on the Education Executive Team and the Education Management Group are committed to their responsibilities and discharge them effectively through teaching groups and programmes. These formal structures are supported by effective informal communication and working among executive staff themselves, and teacher liaison groups operating on each of the three campuses. Cooperation and knowledge transfer across the divisions are effective in enabling and supporting taught provision.

135 Whole College dissemination events, the annual Education Conference, and Knowledge Transfer Week are a strength. They reflect an awareness of the College's distinctive mission and organisation structure, as well as promoting improvement of teaching and learning, through identification and dissemination of good practice in education, and through sharing developments in subject knowledge.

136 Recent reorganisation and change within the College has included the development of a new staff grading and pay structure, and the College is in the process of considering performance-related pay. The College is encouraged to view this as an opportunity to demonstrate the importance attached to students and their learning, and to develop and implement criteria that genuinely encourage, recognise and reward good practice in teaching and student support.

Commentary on the effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategy for quality enhancement

137 The College has recently formalised its approach to the enhancement of taught provision through the development of an explicit strategy for quality enhancement. This builds on existing practice and culture. The strategy for quality enhancement is fit for purpose and for context, reflecting the distinctive nature and structure of the College. It effectively links 'top-down' strategy and 'bottom-up' practice with a set of activities that staff can readily relate to. It is informed by, and relates to, external quality enhancement policy and initiatives. Roles and responsibilities for implementation and monitoring are clearly defined, and there is effective ownership by the College's Education Executive Team and Education Management Group.

138 The College recognises the importance of aligning staff development activities with the strategy for quality enhancement. The strategy and related policy for flexible learning include plans for further development of student-centred approaches and the use of new technologies, including blended learning within undergraduate provision. There would be benefit in the College developing more explicit conceptions of the range of meanings of student-centred and blended learning approaches. These definitions could be used to help focus staff development.

139 The strategy for quality enhancement relates to taught provision. The College should consider the potential benefits of developing an explicit strategy for the enhancement of the experience of research degree students, informed and encouraged by the effective progress to date in developing and implementing the strategy for quality enhancement for taught provision.