Enhancement-led institutional review

Scottish Agricultural College

APRIL 2010

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Introduction

1   This is the report of an Enhancement-led institutional review (ELIR) of the Scottish Agricultural College (the College) 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.

ELIR method and report

2   The ELIR method was revised during 2007-08 following extensive consultation with the Scottish higher education sector. Full detail on the method is set out in the *Enhancement-led institutional review handbook: Scotland (second edition)* 2008, which is available on QAA's website.

3   ELIR reports are structured around three main sections: the management of the student learning experience; institution-led monitoring and review of quality and academic standards; and the strategic approach to quality enhancement. Each of these three sections leads to a 'commentary' in which the views of the ELIR team are set out. The three commentaries, in turn, lead to the overarching judgement on the level of confidence which can be placed in the institution's management of academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. A summary report is also available in printed form (from QAA) and from QAA's website.

Method of review

4   The College submitted a Reflective Analysis (RA), which provided the focus for the review. The RA was supported by a number of accompanying documents, including a case study on 'Adding value to the learning experience'. The ELIR team also received the report of the College's previous ELIR which took place in 2005.

5   The RA was drafted by the College's Learning Division Management Team, which acted as the core team for the preparation of the RA. The Manager of Research Postgraduate Studies, senior tutors and the Staff Development Manager also contributed to the RA's drafting. The College's Executive Management Team commented on drafts of the RA, and an advanced draft was also made available to students for comment.

6   The ELIR team visited the College on two occasions: the Part 1 visit took place on 10 and 11 March 2010, and the Part 2 visit took place in the week beginning 26 April 2010.

7   The ELIR team comprised Mr Pat Devlin, Mr Rio Floreza, Mr Chris McIntyre, Ms Rowena Pelik, Mr Paul Probyn and Professor Dr Wim Heijman.The review was managed on behalf of QAA by Dr Janice Ross, Assistant Director, QAA Scotland.

Background information about the institution

8   The College was formally designated as a higher education institution in 2008 and is a small specialist institution. The College's mission is 'to enhance the rural economy and environment', supported by the vision 'to be a leader of innovation and sustainable development in the rural sector'. The College's activities are organised and delivered through three functional divisions: Research, Consulting and Learning. Within the Learning Division (which is responsible for the delivery of the College's higher education provision), there is a particular emphasis on agriculture and related sciences; rural business development and management; horticulture; and rural resource and environmental management.

9   The College's main learning and research activities are delivered from three campuses at Aberdeen, Ayr and Edinburgh. Aberdeen and Ayr are rural campuses, and the Edinburgh campus is located on the University of Edinburgh's science campus, situated within the city of Edinburgh.

10   The College does not have its own degree awarding powers. Most of the College's taught degree programmes are validated by the University of Glasgow under an accreditation agreement. In addition, the University of Edinburgh currently validates three taught degree programmes. The College's postgraduate research degrees are validated by the Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. The College has a collaborative agreement with the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, for the joint delivery of its BSc Horticulture with Plantsmanship programme. A significant proportion of the College's students are studying for the Scottish Qualifications Authority's (SQA) Higher National Certificate (HNC) or Diploma (HND) awards.

Institution's strategy for quality enhancement

11   The College's Strategy for the Enhancement of Quality in Learning, Teaching and Assessment aims to define a learning and teaching environment which embodies the key principles of an effective quality system: high-quality learning; student engagement; and a quality culture.

Management of the student learning experience

Key features of the student population and the effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing information about its student population

12   The College has a relatively small student population. Between 2005-06 and 2009-10, the College's full-time equivalent (FTE) student numbers grew from 669 students to 891 students, with undergraduate part-time student numbers increasing from 22 to 59. Over the same period, registrations for undergraduate degrees rose from 42 per cent to 52 per cent of the total student population, and there has been a corresponding decrease from 48 per cent to 44 per cent of the student population registering for SQA Higher National awards. In 2005-06, taught postgraduate student numbers represented 7 per cent of the student population, and by 2009-10 this had decreased to 2 per cent of the total student population. The College currently has 53 postgraduate research students, of whom 44 are European Union nationals and nine are overseas students. Of these students, the majority are PhD students and four are MSc or MPhil students. Over the period, the percentage of Scottish students has decreased from 94 per cent to 90 per cent and students from the rest of the UK increased from 4 per cent to 6 per cent. In 2005-06 European Union students represented 2 per cent of the overall cohort and this increased to 3 per cent in 2009-10. International student registrations have grown slightly from less than 0.5 per cent to 1 per cent overall.

13   The College has plans to increase the student population to a target of 1,037 FTE students by 2012-13, and this is expected to come, in part, from increased taught postgraduate and international undergraduate enrolments; the College also plans to increase the proportion of degree registrations. This planned growth represents a 2 per cent student population annual growth rate and, within this, a 3.5 per cent annual growth for degree registrations, reflecting the College's aspiration to develop a student profile which better reflects its higher education institution status.

14   As part of a widening participation initiative, the College has recently made available individual modules as short courses, and in the first term of 2009-10 59 students undertook 133 modules. These student numbers are anticipated to increase as students apply to undertake short courses in subsequent terms.

15   Planning for student number targets is carried out through the Learning Division's Divisional Plan following consideration of appropriate management information. There is evidence of the effective planning of student numbers for all campuses.

Arrangements for managing information about the student population

16   The College currently uses a commercial management information system (MIS) customised for its own purposes for taught student records, managed by staff within the Learning Division. A recognised shortcoming of the MIS is the time required to customise data inputting processes and produce management information for internal purposes. The Learning Division and the Information Systems Group are investigating a replacement for the MIS for implementation in 2011-12. As part of this process, the inclusion of postgraduate research student records will be considered (see paragraph 19).

17   The Education Office at each campus enrols full-time students and passes information to Education Support Services for data entry. Part time, distance learning, and short-course students are enrolled by the Education Office and the adviser of studies or the module leader. The College acknowledges that these arrangements have sometimes led to confusion, and the forthcoming student support services review (see paragraph 51) will consider how best to manage information flow.

18   Programme leaders use standard pro forma to record students' progression, and assessment results are inputted to the MIS by module leaders directly to ensure a timely turnaround of end of year results. An interface with the SQA and with the University of Glasgow has been developed for the secure transmission of results. At the end of the academic year, the College also produces a data set which includes student completion and achievement data. This is used by programme leaders for annual programme review (paragraphs 96-97). Student enrolment, completion, and achievement information is also considered by the Divisional Management Team, and key performance indicators are set for completion and achievement rates and reported to the College's Board annually.

19   The 2005 ELIR report identified that the College could not readily provide information on research student completion rates. Information on such completion rates is now held on the postgraduate database and is managed by the Postgraduate Office and published on the College's intranet.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to engaging and supporting students in their learning

Student representation

20   The College states that the views of undergraduate and taught postgraduate students about their programmes are routinely sought through module evaluation questionnaires (see paragraph 29), and through a system of programme-level Student Liaison Groups (SLGs).

21   The SLGs, which meet termly, comprise student representatives from each year of the programme and members of the staff core team. From SLG meetings, programme leaders refer matters that are not programme-specific onwards to the Education Management Group, and the Academic Services Manager receives minutes of SLG meetings.

22   Advice to students on how they should raise issues, including through the SLGs, is provided through programme handbooks. Senior tutors also provide guidance to student representatives on SLGs to help them perform their role effectively, and this is supplemented by the training and support produced by the Student Participation in Quality Scotland (sparqs) service. Staff and students confirm the effectiveness of the SLGs, indicating that this is enhanced by the small class sizes and the close working relationship between students and staff.

23   Since the 2005 ELIR there have been a number of changes in student representation on committees at the cross-programme level. The University of Glasgow/Scottish Agricultural College Liaison Committee now includes a student member, and student membership of the College's Research Degrees Committee has increased from one to four student members. The University of Edinburgh/Scottish Agricultural College Subject Panel does not currently have student members,

but the College intends to address this with the University during 2010-11. To date, the College has not been successful in attracting student representatives to the College's Education Management Group and considers that this is a result both of effective student engagement at programme level and students' unwillingness to commit to further termly meetings. Nevertheless, the College considers that the Education Management Group makes decisions on a wide range of matters that have a direct impact on the student experience, and that it would benefit from a student voice. Accordingly, the College intends to reconsider how to promote student membership of the Education Management Group with the planned two new posts of Students' Association Development Officer and Sabbatical Officer (see paragraph 26).

24   The 2005 ELIR report asked the College to reflect on the benefits of strengthening student representation at senior levels of its committee structure. At that time, student input to discussion of strategic matters was through participation in the Student Liaison Committees (SLCs), which operate at each campus and act as a forum for the discussion of major issues affecting education at the College. Since 2005, the College has taken a number of steps to strengthen student representation at the senior level. In 2006, the Education and Skills Committee was established as a committee of the College's Board, with a remit for the strategic development of education at the College. Membership of the Education and Skills Committee includes student representatives from each campus, and the SLCs are now subcommittees of the Education and Skills Committee.

25   Additionally, two new committees, the Academic Advisory Committee and the Consulting Advisory Committee, have been established with the aim of providing a more strategic approach to these specific functions. The Academic Advisory Committee considers the overall strategic direction of research and education across the College, and includes in its membership one undergraduate student and one postgraduate research student.

26   The College believes that these committees provide a strong voice for the student body at the most senior level, but also recognises that students need to be aware of the role of these committees and of the relevance of their work for the student learning experience. The College highlights that it has never had a Students' Association Sabbatical Officer, and that the students' associations at the three campuses have operated largely as separate bodies. During 2007-08, the College worked with sparqs to explore the advantages and practicalities of establishing a Sabbatical Officer post. Arising from this work, the College has decided to establish a student Sabbatical Officer post and, additionally, to create a (fixed-term) Students' Association Development Officer post. At the time of the ELIR, the Development Officer was shortly to be appointed, and planning for the Sabbatical Officer post was ongoing. The details of the Sabbatical Officer post will be determined by the existing students' associations at each campus, working primarily with the senior tutors and the Students' Association Development Officer. It is anticipated by the College that a full-time Sabbatical Officer, working initially with the Development Officer, will be able to develop more effective mechanisms for representing students' views on strategic matters and, in turn, for communicating the College's actions to the student body.

27   Students are aware of and understand both formal and informal representation mechanisms, but there is a limited level of student engagement with the formal mechanisms. Students understand the operation of the programme-level Student Liaison Groups but many prefer to use the informal approaches which seem to characterise the interaction between the College and its students (see paragraph 30). Students believe that their views have an impact on their programmes and their learning experience and give examples of curriculum changes arising from their feedback. Many students indicate little appetite for participation in senior quality committees and this perhaps reflects the successful operation of informal and formal feedback mechanisms at the programme level.

28   The College's proposals to strengthen student representation and engagement at senior

and strategic levels, through the creation of a Students' Association Development Officer post and a Sabbatical Officer post, is to be encouraged. The College is also encouraged to communicate clearly to students and staff its aspirations for these posts.

Arrangements for gathering (and responding to) student feedback

29   The College uses standardised module evaluation questionnaires to capture students' views about their programmes. Module evaluation questionnaires record the level of student satisfaction with the quality of teaching and assessment, and this information forms part of the evidence base for Annual Programme Review (see paragraphs 96-97). The College also conducts an annual survey of new students' opinions and an end of year students' opinions survey, which seek students' opinions on a range of academic, domestic, welfare and recreational matters.

30   The College places significant value on its close campus communities and the good relationships between staff and students, and considers that informal feedback from students is an effective supplement to formal information gathering. Many of the staff to whom students routinely go to raise issues are members of core programme teams, and this underpins the value of these informal mechanisms. Programme leaders and the senior tutors are members of the Education Management Group so, in this way, informal feedback can be considered through formal mechanisms. Whilst valuing informal feedback, the College also recognises the need to ensure that representative students' views are formally gathered, and indicates plans to use student focus groups to give an insight into how to develop this as part of its work for the Graduates for the 21st Century national Enhancement Theme (see paragraph 44).

31   The 2005 ELIR report noted that some students questioned the effectiveness of module questionnaires, indicating that the extent of feedback they received in response to their views varied considerably. The College has sought to improve the effectiveness of questionnaires by taking steps both to increase the response rate and to improve feedback to students. Traditionally, the College has used paper-based survey forms, and module tutors were asked to issue these in the final timetabled class for that module. The College identified that module response rates were lower than desirable, with little consistency in the response rate within programmes from year to year. In response, and informed by new approaches in the Scottish higher education sector, in 2008-09 the College moved to an online system for module evaluation. In that year, 64 per cent of undergraduate modules were evaluated, which the College considers to be a reasonable outcome in the first year of these new arrangements. The College acknowledges that there remains scope for further improvement, but also identifies clear benefits with the online system, and has initiatives in place to increase response rates further. For example, students are now sent text messages reminding them to complete their module evaluations, module leaders send their students an email at the end of each module giving a URL link to the survey site, and there is a message on the front page of the College's virtual learning environment giving a direct link to the survey site.

32   The College acknowledges the potential connection between a lack of willingness on students' part to complete module evaluations and students' perception that there is a lack of feedback from staff about what has been done in response to issues raised. This 'feedback loop' has been discussed by the Education Management Group, which considered it to be important that students are formally made aware of responses to their feedback. Student liaison groups (see paragraphs 20-22) are considered to be the best forum for providing such feedback to students about actions taken, since the minutes of these group meetings provide a formal record that is available to all students. Additionally, and as a more informal route, from 2009-10 module leaders have been asked to discuss with students how they have responded to the previous year's evaluations.

Student participation in programme validation and review

33   Students contribute to the processes of validation and review in a number of ways. Current students and graduates complete a survey that seeks their views about aspects of the curriculum, and current students meet with the validation panel. The College considers that such consultation ensures that programme development teams are aware of current students' and graduates' opinions, and that validation panels can judge the extent to which students' opinions have been taken into account.

34   Following the 2005 ELIR, the College revised its procedures for periodic review, leading to the development of new arrangements for internal subject review, implemented in 2008-09 (see paragraphs 98-99). A self-evaluation document prepared by the subject team draws on information compiled in annual programme reviews (see paragraphs 96-97), including summaries of formal and informal student feedback. The review panel also meets with a group of current students and the internal subject review panel includes a student from an unrelated programme; the College believes that this is an effective way of ensuring a clear focus on the student experience.

35   Overall, there is effective use of students' views in review and validation processes, and the College is to be encouraged in the early steps it has taken to include student members in its internal subject review panels.

Postgraduate research students

36   The 2005 ELIR report noted the College's expectation that research students should complete a questionnaire at the end of each year, but that this process had not been taking place routinely. Following this, an updated questionnaire was used and, since 2007, this has been replaced through the College's participation in the Higher Education Academy's Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). To avoid duplication of students' efforts, with students completing the PRES for both the College and their registering university, from 2008 students have been invited to complete the PRES by their registering university. Responses of the College's students are sent to the Manager of Research Postgraduate Studies and are discussed and acted upon by the College's Research Degrees Committee (RDC). The four student members of RDC raise views and concerns at the Committee, and there is also the opportunity for individual research students to contact the Manager of Research Postgraduate Studies directly to raise any matter of concern.

37   Overall, the College has clear mechanisms for gathering student feedback, and a strong commitment to listening and responding to such feedback. The College is encouraged to continue in its efforts to engage students, particularly in relation to their participation in formal surveys, given the importance the College itself places on student feedback to a range of quality management matters.

The College's approach to learning and teaching

Academic year and timetabling

38   The College operates two distinct teaching schedules that reflect the qualifications it offers. Years one and two (HNC and HND) are delivered in three termly blocks, with completion of modules at the end of each term. Years three and four (ordinary and honours degree) are delivered as two semesters superimposed on the three terms. In recent years, the delivery dates for years one and two at the Edinburgh campus have differed from those at the Aberdeen and Ayr campuses. The College is addressing these differences, and plans to introduce common start and end dates for the three campuses to facilitate cross- campus delivery; ease security arrangements for assessments; and provide clarity for students, tuition fee funders and student finance agencies. The new arrangements will be introduced for academic year 2010-11.

39   The College regards timetabling as an important element of its approach to teaching and learning. Arising from its desire to facilitate increased sharing of modules across the programmes, and also to remove timetabling constraints which potentially deter part-time students, in 2003-04 the College moved to a timetable organised into 3.5 hour blocks, with modules allocated to the same period each week. The College also identified that this timetable structure facilitates the use of more student-centred activities, including seminars and discussion sessions, the use of the virtual learning environment and the web, and structured private study time. Other more student-centred activities, such as laboratory classes, field work, and site visits, are also more easily accommodated within this arrangement. There is clear evidence of careful preparation, including helpful staff development, to support these changes, and the College considers that students have responded positively to the 3.5 hour block arrangement, which has assisted students in taking greater responsibility for their learning.

Promoting a student-centred approach

40   Academic study at the College is underpinned by a strong vocational focus, facilitated by field visits and case studies, staff's close contacts with industry, and the use of industry practitioners as guest teachers. A student-centred learning approach is reinforced by small class sizes and the close community atmosphere at each campus. The College believes that these features help to create good working relationships between staff and students, and foster students' confidence, independence and resourcefulness, providing sound foundations for active learning.

41   The College recognises a variation in the extent to which students are engaged in the learning process, for example identifying that some degree-level students find it challenging to engage with independent study and to develop an analytical approach in their work. The Education Management Group has explored this and reflected on whether the revised timetable structure has exacerbated this challenge. The outcome of these deliberations is that the College remains committed to maintaining a learning environment which promotes student-centred learning while, at the same time, finding ways of encouraging the less engaged.

42   The structure of the College's programmes, in which years one and two comprise HNC and HND programmes, means that students who might otherwise not aspire to degree-level studies have the opportunity to progress to a degree programme. However, the College identifies that the relative curriculum rigidity and focus on summative assessment within the HNC/D qualifications can lead to some students adopting a 'learning-for-assessment' attitude that works against the ideal of full student engagement with their learning. The SQA's new design principles for Higher National awards, which include Graded Units as a means of integrating learning across core modules, recognise the desirability of taking a more holistic approach to the curriculum.

43   The College uses Graded Units and other approaches (such as field trips, visits and case studies) to support its objective to enrich the learning process and help students to engage with their learning from an early stage. The College also recognises the need to ensure an increase in the autonomy of student learning as they progress from one academic level to the next, and sees a number of activities as important in supporting this, in particular induction and personal development planning from year one, and the study skills training provided at the start of year three (see paragraphs 52-54, 68-71). The College also recognises the importance of encouraging students to develop an eagerness to learn.

44   The College has a clear commitment to developing students as engaged learners. For example, the College is exploring the potential of using the SQA's Graded Units as part of its work with the national Enhancement Theme Graduates for the 21st Century. However, students demonstrate only a limited awareness of the approach to learning embedded in the Graded Units, study skills, and other initiatives to support their engagement with learning. While the College's Strategy for the Enhancement of Quality in Learning, Teaching and Assessment sets out overarching principles and broad aims in these areas (see paragraphs 126-129), there is no

explicit plan to support the implementation of these initiatives. The College is strongly encouraged to plan in detail the implementation of these initiatives across the College, and to establish mechanisms to evaluate their impact on the student learning experience.

Assessment and feedback to students on their assessed work

45   The role of assessment in learning is emphasised in the College's Assessment Strategy, which aims to ensure that there is a consistent approach to assessment across programmes and campuses, and that assessment practice aligns with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* published by QAA. Students' learning is supported through a variety of learning and teaching approaches, and different forms of assessment are used to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills to best effect. Implementation of the outcomes of the Strategy has been assisted by the adoption of the University of Glasgow's Code of Assessment for years three and four (see paragraph 115). In order to promote greater transparency in the assessment process, the College has supplemented the University's Code with grade-related criteria that clarify the expected academic standards. Assessment in years one and two is in accordance with the principles governing SQA awards.

46   The Assessment Strategy and other supporting material, including that provided to students, are comprehensive and clear, and provide appropriately detailed information on all routine aspects of assessment.

47   The College considers that feedback to students on their performance in assessment is an important part of the learning process, and that the formative role of assessment is particularly valuable in a modular system, where assessment is distributed throughout the academic year and performance in each assessment contributes to students' ongoing learning. The College's policy is to provide feedback to students on both coursework and examinations within four weeks of the submission or examination date. Consistency in formal assessment feedback has been discussed by the Education Management Group, and programme leaders are asked to check that feedback is being given in a systematic way by making it a standard item for consideration at SLG meetings (see paragraphs 20-22).

48   The College believes that students should, in principle, be able to keep their assessed work and feedback in order to be able to reflect fully on their performance, but identifies that this ambition conflicts with the need for work to be retained by staff, particularly where students' work must be available for scrutiny by external verifiers. To overcome this conflict, the electronic submission, marking and return of coursework to students is being considered, and the use of pdf files and recorded audio feedback are being trialled (see, for example, paragraphs 68-71). The College sees these technological initiatives as a way of supporting learning by removing some of the practical constraints associated with providing feedback.

49   During the ELIR, students indicated that feedback on their performance was variable between programmes and campuses. Students reported that some work is not returned, and that feedback is often late and lacking in the detail required to help them to improve their performance. It is evident that the aims of the College's Assessment Strategy and policy on assessment feedback are not being consistently achieved. The College is strongly encouraged to continue to communicate its requirements and ambitions in assessment, and to ensure that staff adhere to its assessment feedback policy in order to support effectively the learning of current students. The College is further encouraged to continue with its existing initiatives to promote the achievement of pedagogically-led assessment.

Support for learning

50   The College does not have central specialised student support staff, but instead seeks to guide and support students within a small campus community environment, involving all

teaching staff in differing degrees of formality. Academic support for students is provided by programme leaders and advisers of studies, the latter providing academic and pastoral support for all students in one or more years of a programme. Senior tutors provide a focal point for student support at each campus, dealing with welfare and counseling, the needs of students with disabilities, and financial advice. The College acknowledges the importance of communication between the senior tutors and advisers of studies, both within each campus and between campuses.

51   In addition to academic and pastoral support, there is a range of College services. The Education Office provides help with administrative matters, as do Education Support Services (which has a registry function). Library and IT staff provide help in their respective areas. Students are positive about the Education Office's 'open-door' policy and the support received from programme management teams. Students are comfortable with approaching academic staff on non-academic matters, and are aware of the College's arrangements with external services that they can be referred on to for further support (see paragraph 80). As part of its schedule of periodic review, the College plans to undertake an internal review of its student support services during 2009-10, in line with the specific emphasis on this in the Scottish Funding Council's guidance for institution-led quality review.

52   The College recognises the importance of providing appropriate support for students in 'transition', and identifies two key transition points: year one, and progression (or direct entry) to year three. These transition points have been considered in the past as part of the College's work in the national First Year Enhancement Theme, and 'transition' is one of the College's priorities for its work with the current Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century (see paragraph 44).

53   The College seeks to take a standardised approach to induction and first year students have an induction programme during the first two weeks of their studies, covering basic study skills, learning resources, teaching staff and facilities. First year students at the Edinburgh campus participate in a longer induction period, including a West Highland Experience study tour, which has received very positive feedback from students. Opportunities for students to provide feedback on their induction are offered through the survey of new students' opinions.

54   For students progressing from Higher National to degree level (year 3), an induction programme includes an introduction to the College's Study Skills Toolkit. At the time of the ELIR, the use of an online interactive study skills facility, focusing on information and retrieval skills, was being explored. Students suggested that they are aware of the Study Skills Toolkit but indicated that they had made only limited use of it.

55   The College is reflecting on the need to ensure a balance in its approach to teaching, learning and assessment between students who will exit their study with Higher National-level awards, and those students for whom the first two years represent a progression towards study at degree level. Nevertheless, the College remains committed to providing a learning experience that encourages students to progress beyond their first year, and seeks to achieve this through greater student engagement through the SQA Graded Units (see paragraph 42). For example, the College has responded to student feedback on transition to honours degree study by actively encouraging year two and three students to attend year four students' honours project presentations.

56   Additional study support, such as extra tutorials and one-to-one guidance, is provided by the College. For example, an 'Enabling Team' established at the Aberdeen campus provides support for study skills, and the College has secured funding to pilot a weekly drop-in clinic at the Ayr campus for students seeking advice on effective writing. Staff confirm the value of these individualised support services for students who lack confidence in study skills and academic writing.

57   Career guidance provision for students reflects the College's wider approach to supporting students, with individual members of teaching staff in each programme team allocated the role

of industry liaison and careers coordinator. Staff are conscious of the importance of providing proactive careers advice beyond the specific vocational areas related to programmes, and use field trips and external guest speakers as ways of engaging students in career planning. The end of year students' opinions survey for 2007-08 showed relatively low student satisfaction levels with careers guidance provision. The College is already aware that the devolved nature of careers advice can result in variation in the quality of that provision, and requires core management teams to comment on this during annual programme review. The College intends that careers guidance provision, including the career coordinator role, will be reviewed in the forthcoming Student Services Review (see paragraph 51).

Postgraduate research student experience

58   The 2005 ELIR report commented on the limited induction provision for research students and the extent to which research students were able to take full benefit from the College's research environment. The College has responded to this by taking deliberate steps to improve the induction of new research students, including both induction by supervisors and College-wide induction events.

59   The College provides an induction checklist to be used by supervisors before new research students arrive. This covers introductions to the College and its organisation, and to relevant staff and other research students. It also includes familiarisation with local procedures, including health and safety. Students receive an induction pack, containing copies of the postgraduate handbook and the guide to postgraduate studies from their registering university, a personal training log book and a personal development planning (PDP) pro forma. Upon arrival, students meet with the Manager for Research Postgraduate Studies, who explains both the College's and the registering university's requirements, and the student's entitlements. New research students also attend induction events organised by the university with which they are registered.

60   The College indicates that, since the 2005 ELIR, research student integration into the wider research environment in the College has been facilitated through seminar series and journal clubs organised by each Research Group, and by participation in an annual Postgraduate Conference. Research students also attend monthly staff briefing events on the College's activities. The importance of skills training and its recording is recognised, and all new research students are now issued with a personal training log book in which they record all training undertaken. The log book is signed by the principal supervisor quarterly, and annually by the Manager of Research Postgraduate Studies. The research postgraduate handbook and the College's website contain details of required training, as well as information on further training opportunities. Training workshops for students are organised annually and, in August 2009, students and supervisors took part in the first event of a rolling three-year training programme designed specifically for the College by Transkills, the University of Edinburgh's postgraduate transferable skills unit, and in consultation with the research students.

61   Overall, the College has taken significant and successful steps to enhance the postgraduate research student experience.

Arrangements for promoting and managing international exchanges

62   At the time of the ELIR, the College had a small number of incoming ERASMUS students (4.5 FTE undergraduate students). The College acknowledges that very few of its own students choose to participate in ERASMUS or other international exchange schemes. Given the College's emphasis on developing students' international perspectives on policies and practice as part of its work on graduate attributes (see paragraphs 63-67), the College is encouraged to reflect on ways of promoting students' international experience.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting the development of graduate attributes, including those relating to employability, in all of its students

63   The College seeks to promote the development of graduate attributes, including employability, in all of its students through its engagement with the current national Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century. The College sees this Enhancement Theme as providing an important opportunity to integrate priorities that have arisen from enhancement activity carried out under earlier Enhancement Themes, and which inform the College's Strategy for the Enhancement of Quality in Learning, Teaching and Assessment (see paragraphs 126-129).

64   The College's graduate attributes were identified and developed through consultation at Teacher Liaison Group meetings, the annual Education Conference, and with student focus groups at each campus. Within its identified graduate attributes, the College places a particular focus on ensuring well-developed practical skills. The College also recognises the importance of identifying graduate attributes at each award exit level prior to students' potential progression to degree-level study.

65   Staff and students endorse this approach, highlighting the benefits of a practical emphasis within academic programmes, and the value of significant engagement with industry contacts. Students also highlight examples of how the curriculum helps them to prepare for their future careers through contact with industry professionals, including the College's consultancy staff; regular field trips and live case studies; and 'topical issues' lectures and visiting lectures from former College students.

66   The revalidation of the College's programmes in 2006-08 reinforced the emphasis upon the vocational nature of these programmes, with the introduction of a number of modules designed to support graduate employability, including those covering management skills and entrepreneurship, professional practice, industrial placements and work experience, project management and case studies. Additionally, the College offers a range of 'value-added' experiences to its students, which complement the vocational orientation of its programmes. These include opportunities for students to enter competitions, undertake volunteering or community work, and participate in work placement schemes. Of particular note is the College's Trust Traineeship, which annually provides the opportunity for a small number of students to undertake a 10-week paid placement within the College's Consulting Division, working on knowledge transfer activities. The College regards the Traineeship as making a considerable difference to students' capabilities over their period of study at the College, and students who had undertaken the Traineeship were very positive about the experience.

67   The College acknowledges that it has established a strategic approach to promoting graduate attributes, but as yet it has not fully developed a framework for implementing this body of work. In its work with graduate attributes and related initiatives, the College is strongly encouraged to plan in detail the implementation of its strategic approach and to establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate these approaches.

Personal development planning

68   The College considers that personal development planning (PDP) is an important tool in encouraging students to engage with their own learning. The wider integrative role of PDP is also considered by the College to be important in bringing together work surrounding student transitions, assessment feedback, graduate attributes and employability. As such, PDP is a key component of the College's Employability Strategy.

69   As a pilot exercise in 2008-09, PDP, supported by an e-portfolio system, was offered to all first-year students at the Edinburgh campus. First-year Rural Business Management students at the Aberdeen and Edinburgh campuses also used PDP as part of the assessment in a module. From 2009-10, PDP has been introduced to all first-year students and will be rolled out

successively. As well as the benefits to students of promoting planning and reflective practice, the e-portfolio system allows organised storage of assessed work, and there is also the facility for work to be submitted, marked and returned electronically.

70   Currently, students' experience of and engagement with PDP is variable across programmes and campuses. Staff recognise that PDP needs to be better integrated into programmes, and observe that some students see the activity as a 'performance appraisal' activity, rather than an opportunity to reflect on academic achievement and focus on personal and career development planning.

71   The College is encouraged to progress its activities to ensure effective PDP roll-out and PDP support for students across the different programmes and campuses. In doing so, the College is also encouraged to develop mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating students' use of PDP.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing the learning environment

72   The three campuses are an important resource for the delivery of the College's land-based programmes. Physical resources for new programmes are considered at the early stages of the programme approval process, and annual programme reviews provide feedback to the Divisional Management Team on the adequacy of the learning environment. There is evidence of the upgrading of existing facilities, and the development of new facilities, in response to the outcomes of these review activities. The partnership with the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, for the joint delivery of the BSc Horticulture with Plantsmanship has led to enhanced facilities to support the delivery of the programme, which are recognised by staff and students as excellent.

73   At the time of the ELIR, work had begun on the construction of a joint campus of the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and the College in Ayr. The move to the new campus is planned to take place in 2011. The College has planned for a population of 350 of its students on the campus, out of a total student population of 3,350 on the joint campus.

Virtual learning environment

74   The College is currently in the process of migrating to a new virtual learning environment (VLE). There is evidence of some staff using the VLE in innovative ways; however, variation in staff engagement with, and student experience of, the existing VLE is apparent. While students considered that use of the VLE supports their learning where it is used effectively by staff, they also consider that staff use of the VLE is variable across the College. Students expressed the view that it would be helpful for the College to establish an institution-wide minimum expectation for the use of the VLE within modules and programmes.

75   The College intends that the migration to the new system will encourage staff and student re-engagement with the VLE. However, at the time of the ELIR, there was only limited evidence of a College-wide proactive approach towards promoting the use of the VLE to support student engagement in learning.

Library and Information Technology provision

76   In response to the 2005 ELIR report, the College established a working group to review library provision and to work towards a strategic plan for library services. In addition to reviewing the campus facilities, including the buildings at each of the campuses, the libraries have participated in the Scottish Higher Education Digital Library and have invested significantly to increase provision of electronic journals. The library service plays an active role in helping students to engage with academic literature, and runs workshops on information literacy. The library service also works in conjunction with academic staff to provide feedback on the appropriateness of student's sourced references.

77   Students recognise the value of being able to make use of library facilities at all campuses, either through the inter-campus library catalogue and borrowing facilities, or by visiting the separate campuses. Library provision is generally considered to be well staffed, friendly, and able to provide valuable online support. Information Technology support was similarly described by students as responsive, and particularly helpful to distance-learning students and postgraduate research students.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to promoting equality of opportunity and effective learning for all of its students

78   The College approach to promoting equality of opportunity seeks to embed equality and diversity into both strategic planning and operational activity within the institution. The College does not formally delegate responsibility to any one committee, but instead seeks collective responsibility in accordance with five high-level aims set out in the College's Equality and Diversity Strategy (2009-12). The College provides staff with guidance on Equality Impact Assessment, including a template for staff wishing to carry out such an assessment.

79   The College has demonstrated its commitment to widening participation with the development of a Widening Participation Policy designed to increase mature and part-time student numbers. The Policy identifies as strategic strands: partnership with further education colleges and schools; flexible delivery; information and support; and admissions. The College is addressing widening participation through membership of the Lothian Equal Access Programme for Schools (LEAPS), the North Forum's schools outreach project (ASPIRENorth), and the West Forum Access to Science programmes. The College also works closely with the Royal Highland Education Trust to develop Higher/Advanced biology resources and hosts school group events.

80   The 2005 ELIR report described the College's approach to supporting students with disabilities as 'reactive rather than proactive'. The College has sought to address this through seeking external guidance and assistance from community support agencies such as Skill Scotland, the Disabled Student Stakeholders Group, and Counselling Works. The College has also worked collaboratively with the disability services of partner organisations, such as the Edinburgh University Student Disability Service, Stevenson College and Motherwell College; additionally, the University of Dundee Access Centres carry out screenings and assessments on behalf of the College. The College arranges specialised support on a campus basis for students with mental health problems.

81   As part of the College's Disability Equality Scheme, students who disclose a disability are invited by the College for an interview to discuss their individual needs and support requirements. Advisers of studies have an important pastoral role in this arrangement, and are considered by students to play a significant role in assisting with specific learning needs. There are a range of resources available for students who have support requirements, and these include an extended library loan service; a fetching and carrying service; private study facilities; and help in using the catalogue and search systems within the library. Within Information Services, assistive technologies, including laptop computers and digital recorders, are also available. As part of the planned Student Services review in 2009-10 (see paragraph 51), the College intends to explore more flexible ways of promoting equality of opportunity within campuses; for example, a possible post of International Students' Adviser of Studies is currently being considered.

82   Overall, the College has taken clear steps to improve its arrangements for supporting students with disabilities.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to supporting and developing staff to promote effective learning for their students

83   The College indicates that its Staff Development Strategy for the Learning Division was updated in October 2009, and that the opportunity was taken at that time to reflect on the

effectiveness of previous activities. The Strategy was also updated to align staff development more closely with quality enhancement, and it therefore takes cognisance of the seven guiding principles for staff development set out in the in the College's quality enhancement strategy.

84   Training and staff development activities for staff in the Learning Division fall into three categories: general, generic and subject-specific. General staff development needs are the responsibility of the Human Resources Group. Generic staff development requirements (common to Learning Division staff) and subject-specific staff development fall within the remit of the Divisional Staff Development Manager. The College recognises that close liaison between the Divisional Staff Development Manager and the Human Resources Group is needed for all three categories to be effective.

85   The College indicates that there is a standard induction programme for new teaching staff, designed to complement the corporate induction coordinated through Human Resources. There is a clear induction programme, and new staff indicate that they are appropriately supported. Within this induction programme is a New Teacher Seminar Programme, intended to run annually starting in the academic session 2009-10. Peer support is a formal part of the induction programme and new teaching staff are allocated a mentor.

86   New teaching staff who have no formal teaching qualification are expected to undertake the Postgraduate Certificate/Diploma in Higher Education Learning and Teaching, offered by The Robert Gordon University as a distance-learning programme. As an alternative to that programme, staff can study at the University of Glasgow for a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. Currently, there are no staff who have chosen this option. The College recognises the need to ensure that sessional and part-time teachers are supported to coordinate and manage their module delivery. Accordingly, part-time and sessional teachers are encouraged to participate in appropriate staff development activities.

87   The College recognises the importance of informal staff development through the sharing of good practice. The College expects the combined role of Learning Division Staff Development Manager and Enhancement Themes Co-ordinator to make best use of the ideas emerging from the national Enhancement Themes (see paragraph 135). Teacher Liaison Groups (TLGs) are also seen to be important for the sharing of good practice. These groups operate at each campus, outside the formal committee structure, and act as a sounding board for new ideas and a means by which comments and observations may be reported into the formal system. Recent topics at the groups have included the use of videoconference facilities for teaching delivery, e-books and e-resources, developing graduate attributes, and support for students with dyslexia.

88   The annual College Conference provides an opportunity for networking, and includes a day for separate divisional conferences. The knowledge transfer aspect of the conference has been further strengthened through cross-divisional sessions organised by the Knowledge Transfer Management Group (KTMG). The Learning Division Staff Development Manager, who is a member of the KTMG, organises the Learning Conference in consultation with staff throughout the Division.

89   Some staff within the Research and Consulting Divisions have relatively high teaching contributions to the Learning Division, delivering full modules and acting as members of core teams. Other specialist staff from these divisions are treated as 'guest lecturers', and their teaching contribution is coordinated by the module leader from within the Learning Division. The College recognises the importance of ensuring that these Research and Consulting staff are involved in staff development activities, and is currently addressing this within the Research and Consulting Divisions.

90   The College indicates that much of the staff development activity directly supports effective student learning, and has been focused in such areas as training in new technologies, workshops and events organised by the Higher Education Academy, and events organised by the

University of Glasgow Learning and Teaching Centre. In most cases, external events are attended by only one or two members of College staff, and the aim is then to capture and disseminate information and examples of good practice.

91   The 2005 ELIR report encouraged the College to view the development of a new staff grading and pay structure, and performance-related pay, as mechanisms to demonstrate the importance attached to students and their learning, and to develop and implement criteria that encourage, recognise and reward good practice in teaching and student support. The College recognises the importance of staff reward and recognition for good practice in teaching and student support. Performance-related pay has not been introduced for posts below Group Manager level; at teaching grade levels, new promoted grades have been introduced to recognise higher levels of responsibility. There are also plans to enhance the status of these promoted grades by the use of new titles such as Senior Lecturer. A review of pay grades is indicated in the current College Strategic Plan, particularly within the Academic Directorate. In addition, the College has introduced two awards to recognise excellence: the Award for Excellence in Teaching or Training; and the Principal's Award for Lifetime Achievement in Teaching or Training.

92   The 2005 ELIR report noted that research student supervisors should have the opportunity, particularly at the outset of their supervisory careers, to engage with appropriate training for their supervisory role. Since then, supervisor training has been given high priority, with all new supervisors attending a training workshop before being allowed to be part of a supervisory panel. All existing supervisors attend refresher courses every two years and, in addition, workshops on particular aspects of supervision are provided annually. Records of supervisor training are kept in the postgraduate research database, and staff are not allowed to supervise research students unless their training is up to date.

93   Overall, the Staff Development Strategy effectively sets out the principles of the College's approach in both subject-specific and generic areas, and indicates broad areas of action. Staff are clear about the arrangements for support and consider that their needs are met, but also indicate that they have limited opportunities to contribute to the development of strategic priorities for staff development. There is currently no detailed mapping of staff development priorities to the College's strategic priorities for quality enhancement, and the College is encouraged to develop detailed implementation plans for prioritised staff development areas in support of its strategic priorities in this area.

94   The College clearly values the involvement of the Consulting and Research divisions in its educational work. As part of its effort to ensure appropriate linkages between the Learning and Research Divisions, the College has established an Academic Advisory Committee (AAC) to bring together senior staff from both the Learning and Research Divisions to ensure collective strategic planning. There is clear evidence of the effective operation of this Committee in strategic areas. In addition, the post of Academic Director and Vice Principal Research, as head of the new Academic Directorate, has been established to strengthen links between the Learning and Research divisions, and to provide strategic leadership across these two areas, in order to promote the development of a research culture appropriate to the College's strategic aims. The College believes that the existing divisional structure is successful, but also recognises that the boundaries between divisions need to be flexible in order to capitalise on the expertise available. The College considers that this might be achieved through cross-divisional working, such as the greater involvement of Learning Division staff in Research Division seminars, and closer participation of Research and Consulting staff in programme development and management. The College also intends to explore more systematically the different dimensions of scholarly activity, and to find ways of facilitating more engagement in scholarly activity by Learning Division staff. The College is encouraged to continue its current initiatives, and to develop further approaches, to support pedagogic scholarship.

The effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience on collaborative programmes

95   The College jointly delivers with the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh its BSc Horticulture with Plantsmanship programme. Management of the student learning experience on this programme is undertaken using the same arrangements as for the College's other taught undergraduate programmes.

Institution-led monitoring and review of quality and standards

Key features of institution-led monitoring and review at the institution, and the extent to which these arrangements meet sector-wide expectations.

Annual programme review

96   Annual Programme Review (APR) is an important part of programme management within the College's quality assurance system. APR involves self-evaluation of the performance of a programme, conducted primarily by the programme leader and core team. The APR report follows a standard template and includes data on student admissions, progression, achievements and first destinations; it also considers feedback from students, staff, external examiners, SQA external verifiers and industry contacts. A key component of the APR process is critical appraisal: issues that require action are identified and their resolution reported in subsequent APR reports; each programme leader and the Vice Principal Learning meet in order to discuss matters arising from the APR reports.

97   All APR reports are scrutinised by the Academic Services Manager, who prepares an overview report which forms part of a process, both of checking adherence with the College's quality assurance arrangements, and considering the effectiveness of all aspects of programme management. The APR overview report includes a summary of individual APR reports and a summary of external examiners' reports, and it identifies cross-programme issues for consideration and action. The overview report is submitted to the Education Management Group (EMG), the Divisional Management Team (DMT) and the University of Glasgow/Scottish Agricultural College Liaison Committee. The individual APR reports of programmes validated by the University of Edinburgh programmes are overseen by subject panels comprising College and University members. The APR overview report is comprehensive in scope and is effective in completing the annual monitoring loop.

Internal subject review

98   The 2005 ELIR report stated that the College's procedures for periodic review did not fully match the expectations of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework and, in particular, the Scottish Funding Council's guidance in relation to internal review at the subject level. As a result, revised procedures for internal subject review were developed and approved by the College in December 2007. The key reference points in developing the internal subject review process were the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review,* published by QAA and the Scottish Funding Council's updated *Council Guidance to Higher Education Institutions on Quality*. The revised arrangements for internal subject review incorporate revalidation of individual programmes. Accordingly, a schedule of internal subject reviews, covering all undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, has been identified for the period 2008-09 to 2013-14, in order that the reviews coincide as closely as possible with the schedule for programme revalidations.

99   The College considers internal subject review to be an important element of its quality assurance and enhancement processes. Its purpose is to provide assurance that academic standards are appropriate and secure, that the quality of the students' learning experience is

appropriate, and that the quality of learning and teaching is being enhanced in a managed way. A key document in internal subject review is a self-evaluation document covering all programmes in the subject group, supplemented by documentation provided for individual programmes that are being revalidated. Review panels comprise College staff, an academic representative of the validating university, two external academics (or one academic and one industry representative), and a student from an unrelated programme. Overall, the College's revised arrangements for internal subject review meet sector expectations for institution-led quality review.

Management of research degrees

100   Postgraduate research degrees are managed by the Research Division, where research students are based in one of four research groups. Students are provided with a research postgraduate handbook containing a range of information regarding both the awarding universities' requirements and the procedures and practices to be followed. Research students' progress is monitored through the registering university's reporting system. Within the College, the Research Degrees Committee (RDC) is responsible for overseeing the student experience. The College's Manager of Research Postgraduate Studies attends meetings of the higher degrees committees of the three registering universities, and any matters relating to College research students are reported back to the College's Research Degrees Committee.

101   The 2005 ELIR report asked the College to take steps to ensure that the progress of research students was monitored effectively. In response, the College introduced more rigorous quality assurance processes: the Research Degrees Committee has been reconstituted; new procedures and practices have been developed with reference to the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*; and arrangements are now in place for student induction, formal skills training, and supervisor training (see paragraph 92). In addition, the College intends to create a more formal system for the annual review of research degrees for implementation during 2010. This annual review system will mirror the annual programme review arrangements for taught programmes, and will involve the four research groups completing a report, using a standard pro-forma, followed by consideration of the reports by RDC. The reports, together with comments from RDC, will then be considered by the Research Division Management Team and, based on the feedback received, research group managers and the Manager of Research Postgraduate Studies will take action as appropriate.

102   Overall, the College has responded systematically to the findings of the 2005 ELIR report in relation to the institutional management of the quality of learning opportunities for postgraduate research students

The extent to which the institution's monitoring and review arrangements include consideration of all students

103   The College recognises that monitoring and review should consider any disparity in the learning experience of different categories of students in order to help ensure that no category is disadvantaged, and considers that its policies are sufficiently inclusive to ensure parity of experience across different student groups. The College believes that, in a small institution with low student numbers, it is unrealistic to 'fine tune' monitoring and review to focus meaningfully on particular groups; it also considers that such small class sizes mean that it is easy for individual student voices to be heard.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to self-evaluation, including the use made of external reference points

104   The College characterises itself as an institution in which reflection and self-evaluation are second nature, and states that self-evaluation is a fundamental role of the committees that support the Learning Division. The College provided examples where the Education Management

Group has reviewed policies and procedures in the light of experience and changing circumstances, and the work of this Group and the Learning Divisional Management Team demonstrate reflection and self-evaluation. The work of the joint College/university committees also acts as a focus for self-evaluation through annual reporting and consequent discussions at these committees. Additionally, the universities consult with the College on harmonising quality assurance procedures, and act as external reference points through the participation of their staff on validation and internal subject review panels.

105   The College views APR and internal subject review as exercises in self-evaluation. Staff confirm this in relation to APR, which encourages self-evaluation, particularly with regard to facilitating the updating of the curriculum. The identification in the APR overview report of cross-programme themes and their subsequent consideration further evidences the College's self-evaluative approach. Staff consider internal subject review to be a reflective, self-evaluative process. The College indicates that an evaluation of the operation of the internal subject review process will be carried out in the light of experience.

106   The College considers benchmarking against external reference points to be an essential component of self-evaluation. A key external reference point is the Academic Infrastructure, comprising the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, subject benchmark statements, and the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework*. The College states that, as standard practice, policies and procedures are reviewed for adherence with sections of the *Code of practice* and changes made as required. External examiners' reports also are regarded as a significant stimulus for reflection and self-evaluation in the College's review processes.

107   In designing its programmes the College consults with stakeholders, including current and former students, staff, employers, professional bodies and academic peers in other higher education institutions. The vocational nature of the programmes means that the views of employers and industry bodies are particularly important. Market research conducted as part of programme development and review is used to help gauge industry expectations; industry representatives sit on validation and revalidation panels and can influence the design of the curriculum, and the College's knowledge transfer activities generate a range of contacts with industry and thus contribute to keeping programme content current and relevant.

108   The 2005 ELIR report stated that the College made good use of external reference points in the design and delivery of its programmes, and evidence from the current ELIR indicates that this continues to be the case. Notwithstanding the College's extensive use of industry as a key reference point, no programmes are formally accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies (PSRBs). The College does not have an institutional position regarding the use of PSRBs and, during preparation for validation, programme leaders and core teams decide whether or not to seek PSRB accreditation. As part of its ongoing self-evaluation, there would be benefit in the College reflecting on its approach to professional accreditation of its programmes and the contribution such accreditation might bring to meeting its strategic objectives, adding to its external reference points, and promoting student employability.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to the management of information to inform the operation and evaluation of its monitoring and review activity

109   Programme validation documentation contains a range of appropriate information, including the rationale for development of the programme, its structure and content, approaches to learning, teaching and assessment and conditions of award. For APR, data on first destinations, admissions, progression, and results are provided centrally by Education Support Services. In internal subject review, consideration is given to a range of information, including data on student recruitment, progression, success and employment rates, student satisfaction survey results, external examiners' reports, and surveys of former students and employers (see paragraphs 98-99).

110   Information emerging from the College's monitoring and review activity is used for a variety of purposes, including identifying good practice and identifying where management intervention is needed. The College acknowledges that more could be done to report the outcomes of its monitoring and review activity to students, and has identified initiatives to address this (see paragraph 32).

111   Information derived from monitoring and review activity is also used to inform decisions about resource allocation. Internal subject review includes consideration of the viability of programmes in terms of projected student numbers and the resources needed to support the subject area.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to setting and maintaining academic standards, including the management of assessment

112   The College identifies that the establishment of academic standards begins with its programme design and validation processes, the procedures for which are outlined in the Education Manual. Programme structure and content are described in the programme validation document, which also includes module descriptors specifying learning outcomes and approaches to assessment.

113   The College states that, while it has considerable autonomy, the degree awarding universities retain oversight of academic standards. Validation panels include representatives of the validating university, and the universities' academic standards committees (or equivalent) have final responsibility for approving proposals. External examiners oversee academic standards at programme and module level on behalf of the validating university and report directly to the university as well as to the College. The programme leaders' responses to external examiners' comments are included in the reports submitted to the universities.

114   The College's HNC and HND provision is validated under the SQA's Higher National design principles. As with degree programme validations, there is external comment from academic peers and representatives of industry through membership of the validation panels.

115   The College considers the management of assessment to be important for the setting and maintenance of academic standards. The College's Assessment Strategy seeks to ensure that there is a consistent approach to assessment across programmes and campuses, and that assessment practice is in accordance with the relevant section of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. Detailed policies and procedures are contained in the Education Manual and apply to all programmes. Assessment in years one and two is in accordance with the principles governing the SQA's Higher National awards, and assessment in years three and four is based on the University of Glasgow's Code of Assessment. Assessment information is communicated to students through the programme handbooks. This includes the assessment regulations and conditions of award, together with all module descriptors.

116   External examiners for all undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes are nominated by the College and appointed by the validating university. Policies and procedures relating to external examiners reflect those of the partner universities and the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, and are detailed in the Education Manual and in the External Examiner Handbook. The College highlights that external examiners play a significant part in the maintenance of academic standards through the formal process of moderation of assessment and the submission of the external examiners' report. They also engage in discussions with members of the programme management team throughout the year and at the annual meeting of the Board of Examiners. External examiner reports are scrutinised by the Academic Services Manager and summarised in the overview reports submitted to the College and to the partner universities.

117   Overall, within the context of its validating universities and the SQA, the College takes an effective approach to setting and maintaining academic standards.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to managing public information about quality and academic standards, including the linkage with the institution's monitoring and review arrangements

118   The Student Recruitment and Admissions Manager is responsible for the accuracy and timeliness of printed and online information about the College's education provision. The College produces leaflets for each undergraduate and postgraduate award offered, together with more generic information leaflets on subject areas. The main printed publication is the undergraduate prospectus. As well as general information, this contains information about each award prepared to a standard template. There is currently no printed postgraduate prospectus. The College states that, as more taught postgraduate programmes are offered, the need for a specific postgraduate publication will be reconsidered. The College website contains both the undergraduate prospectus and postgraduate prospectus, and also provides information about individual programmes, including details of programme structure and content. The College is considering making its programme specifications (prepared for programme validation) available on the College website.

119   Overall, the College's approach to the management of public information about its quality and academic standards is effective.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to linking its monitoring and review processes to its enhancement arrangements

120   The College's quality enhancement strategy (see paragraphs 126-129) recognises the need for self-evaluation and review to operate at a range of levels in order for review activities to contribute to a culture of quality. The annual programme review process requires programme leaders to report on progress made on issues raised in the preceding year's report, and cross-programme issues are highlighted in the APR overview report and acted on following discussion at the Education Management Group.

121   The College recognises that there are some areas where it is less straightforward for issues arising from its quality assurance processes to lead to desired enhancement. In the APR overview reports specific actions are identified in response to some issues, whereas other issues are identified as ongoing (for example, staff use of the VLE) (see paragraphs 74-75).

122   There is clear evidence that, overall, the APR process leads to quality improvement both at the programme level and through the identification of cross-programme issues.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to monitoring and reviewing its collaborative activity

123   The College has collaborative relationships with the universities that validate its degrees, and these are formally documented in memoranda of agreement.

124   The College indicates that it has a productive collaboration with the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (RBGE) for the delivery of the BSc Horticulture with Plantsmanship, which builds on a joint approach taken in the delivery of an HND programme established in 1995, and is based on the complementary expertise and resources of the two institutions. This relationship is supported by a Memorandum of Agreement which defines the responsibilities of each partner and sets out approaches to academic management of the programme and promotion and publicity. The College's programme leader for the horticulture programmes is responsible for managing the programme. Teaching is approximately equally divided between the College and the RBGE, and RBGE staff deliver and assess modules in accordance with the policies and procedures of the College and the University of Glasgow. The Memorandum of Agreement is effective in delineating responsibilities. There was, however, a significant delay in the signing of the Memorandum, with the result that the programme had began operating in advance of the formal agreement being signed. The College is strongly encouraged to take steps to prevent any similar occurrence, in order to secure the quality of the student learning experience.

125   The College also collaborates with The Robert Gordon University to deliver modules that provide an agricultural specialism within the University's Master of Business Administration programme. Responsibility for the management of academic standards and quality of that programme rests with The Robert Gordon University.

Strategic approach to quality enhancement

Key features of the institution's strategic approach to quality enhancement

126   The College sets out its strategic approach to the quality enhancement of its taught programmes in its Strategy for the Enhancement of the Quality of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (the Strategy). The Strategy is well informed by a wide range of external policies, reference points and initiatives. The College describes its approach to quality enhancement as being informed by the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) *Vision of a High Quality Higher Education Sector* (2001) and by the work of the SFC's Joint Quality Review Group (2007). Thus, the stated aim of the Strategy is to define a learning and teaching environment which embodies the principles of high-quality learning, student engagement and a quality culture.

127   The Strategy was originally developed in 2004 and was updated in 2009. The Strategy is derived from the Learning Division's Strategic Business Plan 2009-2012, and is designed to be an integral component in the fulfilment of the College's mission and business plan. The grounding of the Strategy in the Learning Division's Business Plan is emphasised by the inclusion of the Learning Division's objectives, which stress market and financial drivers alongside educational objectives.

128   The Strategy identifies six elements of the academic environment which contribute to the student learning experience, and these provide the framework of the Strategy: programme design; learning, teaching and assessment; the quality assurance/quality enhancement environment; staff development; student support; and widening participation. Under each of these elements, the Strategy sets out what are described as 'guiding principles'. These include principles which are described as having been part of the College's approach for many years; other principles are more directional and forward looking.

129   The College states that it has adopted the definition of enhancement as set out in the *Enhancement-led institutional review handbook: Scotland (second edition) 2008*. As such, the Strategy draws a distinction between 'top-down' deliberate steps leading to enhancement, and 'bottom-up' improvements stemming from routine quality assurance processes and from individual reflection. Centrally-planned, deliberate enhancement activity is seen by the College as having particular advantages, which include the likelihood of having been informed by sectoral developments; the ease of application across a small institution; its value in controlling the direction of change; the likelihood of engendering larger-scale improvements; and the promotion of a culture of thinking creatively about enhancement. The College considers that 'bottom up' activities constitute enhancement if they are captured and disseminated more widely in a planned way.

The effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategies and policies for promoting quality enhancement across the institution

130   The 2005 ELIR report identified that the College's quality enhancement strategy at that time linked both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' processes of enhancement effectively, with a set of activities that staff could readily relate to, and noted that roles and responsibilities for implementation and monitoring of the strategy were clearly defined.

131   The College indicates that the current enhancement Strategy provides an overall institutional framework for enhancement, and that specific enhancement activities can be derived from the Strategy in the form of operational plans in particular areas. These operational plans are

not explicitly identified in the Strategy and, in revising the Strategy, the College took the decision not to develop an implementation plan or equivalent as it had done with the original Strategy. The College states that operational plans will be developed to take forward the various elements of the Strategy, although, at the time of the ELIR, there was no agreed timeframe to achieve this. At present, the responsibility for translating the Strategy into actions is devolved to programme teams and to individual teachers, usually acting in response to decisions taken by the Education Management Group.

132   The College stresses the importance of an institutional culture of quality enhancement, and highlights the central role of reflection and self-evaluation. This is seen as operating at all levels, from reflection by individual members of teaching staff to institutional reflection in the development of strategic approaches. There is clear evidence of such reflection and self-evaluation within the College.

133   Staff in the Learning Division demonstrate a widespread commitment to continuous quality improvement and routinely seek to make changes to the delivery of their modules and programmes designed to enhance the quality of the students' learning experience, with many of these improvements arising from quality assurance activity (see paragraphs 120-122). This 'bottom-up' culture of enhancement is effective in leading to positive change and has been successfully embedded across the Learning Division. However, such activity is not clearly linked to, or informed by, the College's strategic priorities for quality enhancement and does not ensure that institutional priorities are addressed. Additionally, subject staff do not readily situate their own enhancement activities in the context of the College's wider enhancement Strategy.

The effectiveness of the institution's use of external reference points in its approach to quality enhancement, including the extent to which the institution's approach is informed by national and international practice

134   The College's enhancement Strategy demonstrates an extensive engagement with a wide range of external reference points. The College states that it utilises external reference points to provide context and comparative benchmarks to its enhancement priorities and activities. It specifically identifies as reference points the Academic Infrastructure; industry contacts and employers; external examiners; the validating universities; the national Enhancement Themes; and participation in external conferences, workshops and networks. In addition, the College has considered its progress against the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee's *Indicators of enhancement.*

135   The outcomes from the national Enhancement Themes are regarded as a significant reference point for the College and an important stimulus for reflecting on learning and teaching practices. In 2006, as a result of a review of its work with the Enhancement Themes, the College concluded that, although it had been active, the outcomes of the Enhancement Themes had not directly influenced the College's enhancement work. In response to this, in 2007 it combined the role of Themes Co-ordinator and Staff Development Manager in order to more systematically link staff development activity to the Enhancement Themes work (see paragraph 87). A further review in 2007 indicated that a closer alignment between the Enhancement Themes and the College's activities was being achieved; most work since that time has been through the current Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century, including actively revisiting a number of earlier Enhancement Themes. In taking forward the First Year Theme the College has identified student 'transitions' as a particular priority (see paragraphs 52-53) and in relation to the Employability Theme, the focus of the College's work has been on students' use of personal development planning (PDP) (see paragraphs 68-71).

136   The College is also placing considerable importance on its work through the Graduates for the 21st Century Enhancement Theme to improve student engagement with learning (see paragraph 44). It is intended that students will be encouraged to become more active participants in their learning through a series of initiatives supported by the Enhancement Theme

and organised under five headings: assessment to motivate learning; assessment feedback; a structured introduction of PDP; support for students' transition; and research and consultancy. At the time of the ELIR visit, the College had progressed a number of planned actions, making, for example, effective use of student focus groups in its graduate attributes work, but had made less progress with others. However, many subject-level staff have a limited awareness of the five priority areas identified by the College under the Graduates for the 21st Century banner.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to identifying, disseminating and implementing good practice in the context of its strategic approach to enhancement

137   The College emphasises the need to capture enhancement initiatives that are derived from the activities of individual subject staff in order to maximise the institutional gains of these activities. It considers that programme design and validation, annual programme review, and internal subject review are the main vehicles to achieve this. Staff give many examples of how, at module and programme level, they seek to improve the student experience through sharing good practice. Staff identify some cases where actions have not been as effective as hoped, thus demonstrating an ongoing critical appraisal of enhancement initiatives. Staff also highlight how, through close working relationships, and communication channels such as the Teacher Liaison Groups, they can discuss issues and share good practice. The senior tutors on each campus also seek to work closely together to share experiences and issues, as well as to ensure consistency of approach across campuses. The annual Learning Conference (see paragraph 88) is well regarded by staff and seen as a common source of new ideas and opportunity to share experiences.

The effectiveness of the institution's approach to enhancing collaborative provision

138   The College jointly delivers with the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, its BSc Horticulture with Plantsmanship programme (see paragraphs 95, 124). The College's approach to enhancing the provision on this programme is the same as for the College's other taught undergraduate programmes.

Conclusion

Effectiveness of the institution's management of the student learning experience

139   The College seeks students' views about their programmes using a number of formal and informal mechanisms. Student Liaison Groups are viewed by both students and staff to be effective in capturing students' views, and this is enhanced by small class sizes and the close working relationships between students and staff. The College has also enhanced its use of questionnaires in seeking students' views, including the development of online surveys, and has taken a number of steps to enhance feedback to students on how their views have been acted upon. The College has taken clear steps to enhance its arrangements for seeking research students' views, including its participation in an external postgraduate research experience survey. Over recent years, the College has taken a number of steps to enhance student representation at cross-programme and senior College levels. In order to further strengthen student representation at senior and strategic levels, the College has taken the positive step of establishing Students' Association Development Officer and Student Sabbatical Officer posts. The College is encouraged to communicate clearly to students and staff its aspirations for these posts. There is effective use of student views in validation and review processes, and the College is to be encouraged in the early steps it has taken to include student members in its internal subject review panels.

140   The College values its close campus communities and considers that informal feedback by students is an effective supplement to formal information gathering. Nevertheless, the College also recognises the importance of ensuring that views which are representative of the student body are formally gathered, and is working with the Graduates for the 21st Century national Enhancement Theme on how to develop this.

141   Overall, the College has clear mechanisms for gathering student feedback, and there is a strong commitment to listening and responding to such feedback. The College is encouraged to continue its efforts to engage students, particularly in relation to students' participation in formal questionnaire surveys, given the importance the College places on student contributions to a range of quality management matters.

142   The College has a clear commitment to promoting learning and teaching approaches which develop student-centred learning, and has a number of initiatives to support student engagement with their learning. The College is strongly encouraged to plan in detail the implementation of these initiatives across the institution, and to establish mechanisms to evaluate their impact on the student learning experience. The College also emphasises the role of assessment in the learning process, including the importance of providing assessment feedback to students to help them improve their performance. In practice, students' experience of the quality and timeliness of assessment feedback is variable, and the College is strongly encouraged to continue to communicate to staff its expectations, and to ensure that staff adhere to its assessment feedback policy, in order to support effectively the learning of current students. The College is also encouraged to continue with its existing initiatives to promote pedagogically-led assessment. The College has taken significant and successful steps to enhance the postgraduate research student experience, including induction arrangements and research students' integration into the College's wider research environment.

143   Staff use of the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) is variable, and it would be helpful for the College to fully implement an institution-wide minimum expectation for the use of the VLE within its programmes. The institution is currently in the process of migrating to a new VLE, and the College is encouraged in its intention that the introduction of the new system will encourage staff and student re-engagement with the VLE.

144   The College's approach to promoting equality of opportunity seeks to embed equality and diversity into both strategic planning and operational activity within the institution. This approach includes a commitment to widening participation, in particular in relation to part-time and mature students. Over recent years, the College has taken clear steps to improve its provision for students with disabilities.

145   Through its engagement with the current national Enhancement Theme, Graduates for the 21st Century, the College is currently undertaking a range of activities to promote the development of graduate attributes in all of its students, including the identification of graduate attributes at each award exit level. The College's programmes have a strong vocational focus and the College aims to help graduates maximise their employability, including developing their practical skills. The College acknowledges that it has not yet fully developed a framework for implementing its strategic approach to promoting graduate attributes, and is encouraged to plan in detail the implementation of its strategic approach, and to establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate these approaches. Personal development planning (PDP) is a key component of the College's Employability Strategy. Currently, students' experience of and engagement with PDP is variable across programmes and campuses, and the College is encouraged to progress its activities to ensure effective implementation of PDP across the institution.

146   The College's Staff Development Strategy for the Learning Division was updated in 2009, and this has enabled a close alignment of the Staff Development Strategy with the College's Strategy for quality enhancement. However, there is currently no detailed mapping of staff development activities to the College's strategic priorities for enhancement, and the College is encouraged to develop detailed implementation plans for staff development to support its strategic priorities for quality enhancement. The College recognises the need to promote a culture of scholarship in the Learning Division, and is encouraged to pursue this.

Effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for institution-led monitoring and review of quality, and the academic standards of awards

147   Overall, the College has appropriate and effective arrangements for the validation, monitoring and review of its programmes. There is clear evidence that the College's annual programme review process leads to quality improvement, both at the programme level and through the identification of cross-college themes. The annual programme review overview report is comprehensive in scope and is effective in completing the annual monitoring loop. The College has recently implemented its revised arrangements for periodic review, and these meet sector expectations for institution-led quality review. The College has also taken systematic steps to enhance its institutional management of the quality of learning opportunities for postgraduate research students. Within the context of its validating universities and the SQA, the College takes an effective approach to setting and maintaining academic standards.

148   The College collaborates with the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh (RBGE), for the joint delivery of the BSc Horticulture with Plantsmanship programme. The programme operated in advance of a formal agreement between the College and the RBGE being signed. The College should take steps to ensure that formal agreements are always signed in advance of a programme operating, in order to secure the quality of the student learning experience.

149   There is clear evidence of the College engaging in ongoing reflection and self-evaluation. As part of this, the College makes effective use of a range of external reference points, including the Academic Infrastructure, external examiners' views, and employer and industry representatives. As part of its ongoing self-evaluation, the College is invited to reflect on its approach to the professional accreditation of its programmes, and the contribution such accreditation might make to meeting the College's strategic objectives.

Effectiveness of the institution's implementation of its strategic approach to quality enhancement

150   The College's Strategy for the Enhancement of the Quality of Learning, Teaching and Assessment is well informed by a wide range of external policies, reference points and initiatives, including the Scottish Funding Council's guidance, the Academic Infrastructure, industry linkages, and the national Enhancement Themes. The College intends to develop operational plans in order to implement the key elements of its enhancement Strategy, and is encouraged to progress the development of these plans, and to develop mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Strategy.

151   Staff demonstrate a widespread commitment to continuous quality improvement at programme level. Such activity, however, is not clearly linked to, or informed by, the College's strategic priorities for quality enhancement, and staff do not readily link their own enhancement activities in the context of the College's wider Strategy. The College is encouraged to strengthen the linkages between staff quality improvement activities and the College's strategic framework, in order to further identify, disseminate and embed good practice.

Overall confidence judgement

152   The findings of the ELIR indicate that there can be **confidence** in the College's current, and likely future, management of the academic standards of the awards it delivers and the quality of the student learning experience it provides.