



St Mary's University College

Institutional audit

December 2010

Annex to the report

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited St Mary's University College, Twickenham (the University College) from 6 to 10 December 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University College offers, both on its own behalf and on that of the University of Surrey.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University College's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its own awards and those it delivers on behalf of the University of Surrey
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University College's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University College has an enhancement framework through which it takes deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. Although some aspects of the framework are new or need further development, the introduction of annual enhancement themes was found to be effective.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The University College has a sound basis for the current and future management of research degrees, which it delivers on behalf of the University of Surrey; its procedures meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (the Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA.

Published information

For the most part, reliance can reasonably be placed in the integrity and reliability of the extensive and accessible information that the University College publishes about its educational provision.

Features of good practice

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

- the use of the Principal's Dashboard of College indicators which provides easily accessible, key management data (paragraph 27)
- the activity of the Centre for Workplace Learning in enhancing student employability (paragraph 40)
- staff development activities such as learning lunches (paragraph 55)
- the University College's promotion of selected enhancement themes, which encourage discussion and change at programme level (paragraph 59).

Recommendations for action

The audit team considers it would be advisable for the University College to:

- rebalance quality and standards committee work to achieve: (i) a more analytical and influential role for school committees and Validation and Review Committee; and (ii) the involvement of a wider pool of academic staff (paragraph 15)
- develop institutional validation requirements and protocols for the delivery of flexible, blended and distributed learning (paragraphs 16, 39)
- strengthen its monitoring of student learning opportunities on joint honours programmes (paragraphs 17, 49)
- review its validation and revalidation processes in order to improve their effectiveness, encourage the production of more analytical, self-evaluative documentation, and foster enhancement (paragraph 19)
- ensure that its engagement with potential academic partners is managed in a clear, formal, documented, comprehensive and measured fashion, with strengthened due-diligence scrutiny (paragraph 62)
- develop a clear procedure for managing the termination of programmes and partnerships in order both to secure the student experience and to ensure effective institutional oversight of the process (paragraph 63)
- revise its procedures for monitoring collaborative programmes, clarify individual and committee responsibilities and make greater use of disinterested internal advice (paragraph 64)
- respond thoroughly and in a timely manner to external reports and take steps to ensure the accuracy and completeness of internal reports (paragraph 65)
- take steps to ensure that the *Code of practice's* advice concerning serial franchising of collaborative programmes is given due consideration (paragraph 68)
- develop a more secure process, with clearer internal and partner responsibilities, for checking and approving information published by itself and its partners (paragraphs 68, 83)
- take steps to ensure that the admissions requirements of partner institutions and organisations offering programmes leading to its awards are consistent with its own (paragraph 70)
- clarify and strengthen mechanisms for the review, approval and re-approval of learning resources in the institutional approval of collaborative partners (paragraph 72)
- ensure that all certificates and/or transcripts issued to graduates on the basis of work undertaken in collaborative provision record the name and location of the partner organisation concerned (paragraph 73).

The audit team considers it would be desirable for the University College to:

- strengthen its use of student data and opinion in programme development (paragraphs 31, 34)
- strengthen its procedures for informing students of its response to module-level feedback (paragraph 32)
- incorporate more systematically within programmes staff research and scholarly activity (paragraph 38)
- strengthen induction and support mechanisms for collaborative provision students (paragraph 48)
- strengthen its oversight of summative reports of student complaints and academic appeals (paragraph 52)

- strengthen collective feedback mechanisms for research degree students (paragraph 78)
- ensure that partner institutions publish full programme specifications in a manner accessible to potential as well as current students (paragraph 84).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1 The University College, a Roman Catholic higher education institution founded in the mid-nineteenth century, is committed to promoting education, training and research. A Christian ethos reflects its origins as a teacher training college, permeates its culture and informs its mission. The institution describes its aims, which are readily accessible in its Corporate Plan, as contributing to the creation of new knowledge and inspiring social cohesion and economic development.

2 The institution is organised academically around five schools of study: Communication, Culture & Creative Arts; Education; Human Sciences; Management & Social Sciences; and Theology, Philosophy & History. Around 70 per cent of its student population of over 5,000 are undergraduates: included in this population are 18 postgraduate research students registered with the University of Surrey.

The information base for the audit

3 The University College provided a briefing paper and supporting documentation. The index to the briefing paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the institution's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of awards and the quality of educational provision. The audit team had access to a report, dated February 2007, prepared in lieu of Institutional audit and based on enquiries undertaken in connection with the institution's successful application for taught degree awarding powers (the in-lieu report); and to the special review of research degree programmes of July 2006. All documents referenced in the briefing paper and others requested were readily made available. St Mary's University College's Student Union produced a helpful written submission, for which the team was grateful and to which it made repeated reference.

Developments since the previous audit

4 The University College has exercised taught degree awarding powers since 2007. The in-lieu report of that year expressed broad confidence in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities; it did not make formal recommendations but encouraged consideration of a number of areas where enhancement was possible: these areas have been effectively addressed. The special review, which confirmed the University College's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of postgraduate research degree provision, made three suggestions, one of which, concerning student feedback mechanisms, is further discussed here (see paragraph 78), as are some issues identified in the mid-cycle follow-up to the in-lieu report.

5 The University College has also: reviewed its Learning, Teaching & Assessment Strategy and its Research and Scholarship Strategy; developed an enhancement framework (see paragraph 58); increasingly but cautiously devolved responsibilities to schools (the responsibilities of which now include approving module changes and overseeing the work of programme-level bodies); formed a number of collaborative partnerships; and produced a Collaborative Handbook (see paragraphs 62 and 67). The recency of some of these

developments limits the audit team's ability to comment definitively on their future effectiveness.

The University College's framework for the management of academic standards and learning opportunities

6 The Principal delegates his executive responsibility for the management of quality and standards to the Vice Principal (Students and External Relations); heads of school are responsible for assuring quality and standards in their own areas. Academic Board, as the principal academic decision-making body, has formal responsibility for all matters covered by Institutional audit. It discharges this responsibility through five standing committees (Knowledge Transfer; Planning and Resources; Research and Scholarship; Teaching and Learning; and Validation and Review) and through reports from the Student Experience Committee (a committee of the Board of Governors) and examination boards. The Quality Assurance Office, which oversees the operation of these procedures on behalf of the Registrar and a vice principal, serves as a locus of advice and support for programme directors and works with academic and support staff to ensure that policies, procedures and regulations are understood and implemented.

7 The audit team notes that school-level deliberative structures, which are permitted certain operational variations, are designed to cohere with their institutional-level counterparts through means which include school representation on all standing committees. While acknowledging the potential value of permitting schools, which differ significantly in size as well as disciplinary characteristics, to determine aspects of their own operational arrangements, and while noting that the efficacy of such arrangements is discussed in annual visits undertaken by the Validation and Review Committee, the team found some lack of clarity about the different functions of the deliberative structures within the five schools and how each might be expected to perform.

8 The audit team confirms that the responsibilities of all institutional-level bodies are clear and unambiguous and that, subject to the recommendations contained below, the institutional framework for managing academic standards and learning opportunities is effective in design and operation.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

9 For ease of reference all aspects of external examining, programme approval, monitoring and review and institutional engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points are described and discussed in this section.

External examiners

10 Assessment procedures operate at both institutional and programme levels. The four University College boards of examiners (for undergraduate programmes, Foundation Degrees, postgraduate degree programmes and the Postgraduate Certificate of Education) are responsible, as subcommittees of Academic Board, for deciding degree classifications and for determining such matters as extenuating circumstances and disciplinary cases. Such boards include external examiners, who are tasked with commenting on the conduct of both programme boards and University College boards: these comments are submitted directly to Academic Board.

11 Nominations for appointment as external examiner are confirmed by the Validation and Review Committee; the Quality Assurance Office periodically reviews the cohort as a whole to ensure the existence of an appropriate range of experience and expertise. Formal procedures for appointment and induction are in place, and appointees' duties are clearly specified. Reports are addressed at all institutional levels, both individually and, in annual monitoring, collectively and retrospectively (see paragraph 17); responses are properly communicated. The audit team found these procedures effective and aligned with the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (the Code of practice)*, Section 4: *External examining* and confirms in particular the requirement that reports are discussed with student representatives on programme boards. External examiners contribute effectively to the management of academic standards.

Approval (validation), monitoring and review (revalidation) of programmes

12 The University College has a staged procedure for programme validation, beginning at school level and ending, once all iterations have been completed and all conditions met, with a recommendation from the Validation and Review Committee to Academic Board. Academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities and engagement with the Academic Infrastructure feature throughout. Key to the process is the stage when proposals are scrutinised by a validation panel, each of which contains three external experts. While noting the strongly independent character of this scrutiny, the audit team was not persuaded that internal academic discussion is consistently robust.

13 The Validation and Review Committee's formal responsibilities, which involve examining proposals prior to their consideration by a validation panel, relate largely to ensuring procedural propriety and effectiveness. Nevertheless, the Committee's subsequent recommendation to Academic Board is based largely on the findings of the Validation Panel and the response from the Programme Board. The Committee may deal with as many as three proposals (not unusually consisting of over 100 pages of variably self-evaluative material) at one meeting. While this problem is pragmatically addressed by asking an individual member to act as chief scrutineer for a proposal, this practice, combined with the fact that, while the scrutineer is always present the attendance of the five school-based members of the Committee is not always complete, means that: (a) the Committee as a whole may not be intimately acquainted with each proposal, with the result that detailed whole-Committee discussion is seldom assured; (b) the particular contribution of academic staff, and hence the level of academic debate in Committee, is limited; and (c) the weight of academic discussion and influence therefore falls on the advice of external validation panel members. It follows that the University College falls some way short of taking full and active responsibility for setting the academic standards of its own awards.

14 The audit team noted two other factors potentially detracting from the strength of the validation process. First, the programme-based nature of validation does not address the fact that almost 30 per cent of all students are taking joint honours (see also paragraph 17). Second, and in contrast to the strong focus on external scrutiny noted in initial validations, the required documentary support of external examiners is sometimes appended to proposals only after institutional-level prompting and too late to influence programme planning.

15 School-level discussions vary similarly in depth and quality. In particular the requirement that each school incorporate quality assurance into its deliberative structures and processes, normally through a dedicated forum or committee, does not always extend to validation, since in at least two schools no deliberative body has scrutiny of validation

proposals in its terms of reference. Hence, validation does not necessarily involve school-level academic scrutiny beyond the programme group. It is advisable that the University College rebalance quality and standards committee work to achieve: (i) a more analytical and influential role for school committees and Validation and Review Committee and (ii) the involvement of a wider pool of academic staff.

16 While the University College identifies collaborative activity, international partnerships and distance learning technologies as increasingly important, the documentary guidance on validation, although dated 2010, does not prompt proposers to consider possible collaborative use when designing their programmes. Particularly in the light of the audit team's reservations about aspects of current procedures, it is advisable that the University College develop institutional validation requirements and protocols for the delivery of flexible, blended and distributed learning (see also paragraph 39).

17 Programme directors submit an annual monitoring statement on a comprehensive pro forma to the head of school (whose overview report, which includes identification of good practice and new initiatives in teaching and learning, draws heavily on such statements) and thence to the Validation and Review Committee. The statements embrace both standards and quality, requiring programme teams to demonstrate their responses to objectives set in the previous monitoring round and to comment critically on external examining and the present and possible future use of learning resources. As with validation and revalidation, the process emphasises programmes and modules at the expense of the challenges connected with joint degrees: these range from the exploration of epistemological discrepancies between disciplines to bunching of assessment in the case of students studying two programmes: this has potentially negative implications for the quality of learning. (Paradoxically, bunching of assessment within a programme featured strongly in the audit as an issue the University College is addressing). It is advisable that the University College strengthen its monitoring of student learning opportunities on joint honours programmes.

18 The audit team confirms that the Validation and Review Committee gives generally effective attention both to school overview reports (which inform priority setting and ensure that some dissemination of good practice takes place) and to annual monitoring statements, both individually and also collectively, in the form of a summary report from the Assistant Registrar. On the basis of its scrutiny of a range of such statements, the team judges the process to be generally effective: though variable in presentation, annual monitoring statements consistently include reflection on student feedback, external examiners' comments, retention and performance data, and follow-up actions. Nevertheless, for two main reasons the University College has yet to secure maximum benefit from the process: firstly, the statements and issues arising are not always widely disseminated, and secondly, they do not always prompt follow-up action.

19 All programmes are subject to quinquennial revalidation, a process which largely replicates initial validation, augmented by a meeting with current (and on occasion former) students, and by such data as the views of past students, external examiners' reports and programme annual statements on quality assurance and enhancement. The audit team considers that the University College has yet to take full advantage of the opportunity for systematic reflection offered by revalidation. In one such event, for example, comments from past students were brief and newly-supplied, annual monitoring statements lacked evidence of further reflection, and minutes of five years' examination board meetings lacked comment on responsive action; another event included little student feedback, only the most recent annual programme monitoring statement and little reflection on past experience; a third event, seemingly because a revalidation was combined with the validation of a new single honours degree in a cognate area, focused on the latter: the candidate for revalidation was discussed only briefly and mostly in relation to student feedback issues. It is advisable that

the University College review its validation and revalidation processes in order to improve their effectiveness, encourage the production of more analytical, self-evaluative documentation, and foster enhancement.

20 Overall, and notwithstanding the critical comments and recommendations included in this section, the audit team found the approval, monitoring and review processes, while in need of significant development in a number of areas, broadly fit for the purpose of assuring quality and standards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

21 The audit team confirms that staff members are encouraged to make use of all aspects of the Academic Infrastructure. Engagement with the Infrastructure is central to validation and revalidation, as is compliance with relevant requirements of professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. The Quality Assurance Office is charged with ensuring the currency of information about the Academic Infrastructure by monitoring changes as they occur, offering guidance on all relevant reference points, and monitoring compliance with professional body requirements. The team noted instances of the practice of benchmarking the quality of learning resources leading to remedial action: for example, a benchmarking initiative following critical comment in the National Student Survey about the problem of accessing core texts led to an increase in the Library budget.

22 The audit team found that the University College takes account of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Assessment policies and regulations

23 The University College's assessment framework, which is overseen by the Teaching and Learning Committee on behalf of Academic Board, derives from the 2008 Assessment Policy, which aims to achieve consistency in areas including: the number and type of assessments; the nature and timeliness of feedback; anonymous and double marking; misconduct cases; extenuating circumstances; and the adjustment of assessment for differently able students. While the audit team found evidence of the Policy being debated and amended where it has proved unhelpful, it noted also that expectations in respect of the timely return of assessed work are not as yet universally met. Since, however, the team learned that this issue is currently being addressed, the University College will doubtless wish to report further at mid-cycle follow-up.

24 The two-tier system of college and programme boards described in paragraph 10 is supported by an Extenuating Circumstances Board and academic misconduct panels. Overall, while programme boards exercise responsibilities for module assessment, the institutional approach to assessment is predominantly centralised. This has a clear advantage in terms of consistency, drew no criticism from students who met the audit team, attracts positive comment from external examiners, and appears from the team's review of examination board minutes to be properly and effectively implemented.

25 Overall the audit team found that assessment policies and regulations make an effective contribution to the University College's management of quality and standards, and meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining; Section 5: Academic appeals and student complaints on academic matters; and Section 6: Assessment of students.*

Management information (statistics)

26 The Quality Assurance Office collects and disseminates information on the management of quality and academic standards, including benchmarking degree classifications in initial teacher training against those of other identified institutions. In annual monitoring, the programme monitoring statement pro forma requires teams to discuss and comment on management data generally and to propose remedial action in respect of modules where the pass rate falls below 85 per cent. The audit team found that programme teams make variable use of the data, but that institutional-level practice is more consistent.

27 The University College is increasingly able to take a strategic approach to data analysis through the Principal's Dashboard. This developmental initiative facilitates data visualisation and strengthening the evidential basis of decision-making by providing data snapshots for all institutional levels. The Dashboard is currently available to all senior staff and heads of school, and its availability is being extended further. The audit team found that the Dashboard provides easy access to effective management information (for example data from student exit surveys are available at school as well as institutional level to support the aim of improving retention rates) and considers it an important contributor to enhancement. The team found, even at this early stage of its development, that the use of the Principal's Dashboard of College indicators, which provides easily accessible, key management data, is a feature of good practice.

28 The audit team concludes that the University College makes routine and generally effective use of management information in the management of academic standards.

29 Overall, confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University College's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its own awards and those it delivers on behalf of the University of Surrey.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

30 In the interest of convenience, all aspects of external examining, programme approval, monitoring and review and institutional engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points are described in Section 2.

Management information (feedback from students)

31 In 2010, the University College undertook surveys of (i) first-year Foundation Degree students and second-year honours students (the results of which encouraged it to identify assessment, including feedback, as its current enhancement theme, see paragraph 59); and (ii) research degree students. It also took part in the 2010 Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey. Programme boards are required to discuss and report annually on issues arising from the National Student Survey, although, on the basis of its scrutiny of a range of annual programme statements, the audit team concluded that not all programmes do this in an appropriately reflective manner. In particular, no procedure exists to ensure that programme-level good practice identified in the Survey is identified, developed and shared across the institution. Accordingly, a significant enhancement opportunity is being missed: it is desirable that the University College strengthen its use of student data and opinion (see also paragraph 34) in programme development.

32 Responsibility for module-level evaluation rests with programme teams, with the results discussed by programme boards (including student representatives), summarised in

annual programme statements (see paragraph 17) and overseen by the Teaching and Learning Committee and the Student Experience Committee. Students informed the audit team that arrangements for distributing and collecting the paper-based forms vary, with completion mandatory on some programmes and optional on others. Some students also stated that they receive little or no information on how their feedback is used. It is desirable that the University College strengthen its procedures for informing students of its response to module-level feedback.

33 The audit team appreciates that, in a small institution with a caring ethos, many issues of concern are addressed quickly and responsively. Nevertheless, the University College is aware that in an enhancement-oriented institution such approaches can complement but not replace formal procedures to collect, analyse and respond to student opinion. Hence, while the team considers the University College's approach to collecting and utilising student feedback broadly fit for purpose, it welcomes the steps currently being taken to strengthen the responses to such feedback and the manner in which those responses are communicated.

Role of students in quality assurance

34 Students have institutional-level representation on the Governing Body, Academic Board, Research and Scholarship Committee, and the Teaching and Learning Committee. They do not sit on the Validation and Review Committee or (revalidation panels; they may be invited to join institutional working groups, but this is not standard practice. School-level representation is less developed and not universal on school boards. The audit team considers that increased devolution to schools means that significant decisions may be being taken without student participation. It is desirable that the University College strengthen its use of student data (see also paragraph 31) and opinion in programme development.

35 As noted previously (see paragraph 11), students are represented on programme boards and these are viewed internally as effective outlets for sharing good practice and resolving difficulties. Prospective programme representatives are offered helpful information and a training package prepared, delivered and currently undergoing enhancement by the University College in conjunction with the Students' Union. Included among programme boards' responsibilities is the sharing of external examiners' reports with student representatives. While the audit team confirms the general effectiveness of the system, it suggests that the University College might usefully invite boards to ensure that student access to such reports is always achieved in practice.

36 The audit team concludes that the University College's mechanisms for engaging students in quality assurance are broadly effective.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

37 Since the University College's research ethos is a developing one with not all programmes and schools having an established research culture, the influence of staff research on the curriculum is not uniform. Nevertheless, members of academic staff emphasised to the audit team the role of professional practice in informing the curriculum; the curriculum as a whole being underpinned by external research; and that scholarly activity involves members of academic staff being abreast of, and communicating, state-of-the-art research whether or not they are themselves research-active. The University College also maintains a central fund through which it awards grants to staff for work that involves research and scholarship directly related to the curriculum, and is in the early stages of

developing knowledge transfer centres to provide opportunities for applied research to contribute to teaching and learning.

38 The audit team noted, however, that no undergraduate whom it met was able to cite any instance of research or scholarship influencing the curriculum, and that staff members confirmed that this influence is variable across schools. Postgraduate students, on the other hand, described their curriculum as underpinned by staff research and professional expertise. Notwithstanding the progress currently being made, the team concluded that the University College has some way to go before it can assure itself that undergraduate programmes as a whole are underpinned by research and scholarly activity. It is desirable that the University College incorporate more systematically within programmes staff research and scholarly activity.

Other modes of study

39 The University College's requirements for flexible and distributed learning are widely available and aligned with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*). While they feature strongly at validation and annual monitoring (where the requirement to comment on the delivery of courses delivered thus is fully embedded), the audit team was unable to locate explicit criteria against which validation panels are required to assess proposals. Since, as already noted in paragraph 16, flexible and distributed learning are of increasing significance, this lacuna again makes it advisable that the University College develop institutional validation requirements and protocols for the delivery of flexible, blended and distributed learning.

40 In August 2010, the University College published an Employability Statement addressing career planning, work experience placements, and support for the development of employability within programmes. The audit team noted that the institution consistently achieves employability rates above benchmark, and with some 200 students taking accredited placement modules at levels 5 and 6, work-based learning is an important aspect of educational provision. The Centre for Workplace Learning manages all aspects of this activity: it prepares prospective placement students by an initial consultation by a placement advisor; it facilitates the completion of a three-way learning document signed by Centre, students and employer; it supports placement students both formally and informally; and it oversees assessment (some of which, because it is innovative in character, is potentially challenging). The activity of the Centre for Workplace Learning in enhancing student employability is a feature of good practice.

41 The University College encourages student exchange, and growing numbers of students are studying overseas. The International Office provides support during selection, but only limited support to students in situ. The audit team also learned of other challenges, including transferring credits from partner institutions. While acknowledging that the University College has recently constructed a more rigorous process, the team noted also that this process has yet to be fully tested in practice; it anticipates, therefore, that the University College will take the opportunity offered by mid-cycle review to report more fully on its effectiveness.

42 The University College has well-established arrangements for work-based learning; its initiatives in flexible and distributed learning and in overseas study are now, or may in the future, be expanded. It is currently developing and implementing policies to enable it to continue to assure itself of the security of its management of the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of these activities.

Resources for learning

43 The University College is investing heavily in learning resources: recent developments include a new lecture theatre, a laptop loan scheme, and increased digitised stock. Study skills support is provided by a drop-in Skills Shop supported by a Royal Literary Fellow and a tutor: students spoke highly of this facility. The Department of Information Services and Systems, which manages all library and information and communications technology services including the Learning Resources Centre (which subsumes the Library), has a four-year strategy aligned with institutional strategic aims and the Corporate Plan. New staff members are given an induction to the virtual learning environment by the institutional e-Learning Advisor, with usage monitored by the e-Learning Sub-Committee. Students informed the audit team that most programmes use the platform, at least to distribute lecture notes, but that usage is not universal.

44 The mechanisms deployed by the Department of Information Services and Systems to gather feedback about its services include focus groups, mystery shopping and survey feedback; Library and Learning Services gathers feedback through its own user group: together these form the basis of a newly-developed 'you said, we did' style of reporting to students. Students spoke warmly of the contribution to learning support made by recent initiatives, as they did of the academic liaison librarian system and off-site electronic access; they also confirmed that they are largely happy with their access to resources generally. The audit team considers the feedback mechanisms in this area the most responsive and innovative of those it scrutinised.

45 The audit team found the University College's arrangements for the provision, allocation and management of learning resources effective in maintaining the quality of student learning opportunities.

Admissions policy

46 The University College's centralised admissions process is transparent, adheres to the institutional Admissions Policy, is aligned with the relevant section of the *Code of practice* and reviewed annually.

47 The audit team confirms that the University College exercises effective oversight of on-campus admissions, and that the quality of this oversight has been heightened by use of the Principal's Dashboard (see paragraphs 27 and 58). This confidence does not, however, extend to all aspects of admission to collaborative programmes, to which later reference is made (see paragraph 70).

Student support

48 The University College provides support for prospective students, including advice to aid applicants' programme selection and pre-sessional English language support, which is available to international students and may be a condition of admission. Acknowledging the need to give further consideration to the enrolment-to-induction period, the University College has instituted an Enrolment Group and, recently, a review of registration. The audit team was told that on-campus students find induction helpful and valuable, but learned, both from documentary study and from meetings, that this positive view is not always shared by students commencing collaborative programmes. Here, the team noted uncertainty about issues including entitlement to learning resources, the location of study and progression requirements. Induction for information technology and library provision is also variable: while some collaborative provision students reported an excellent experience delivered by University College staff, others, even those reasonably close to the campus, remained

confused. It is desirable that the University College strengthen induction and support mechanisms for collaborative provision students.

49 All undergraduate students are allocated an academic tutor; joint honours students are assigned a tutor from one subject area and support from the other, sometimes, but not necessarily, in the form of a second tutor. While academic tutors have access to all parts of a student's profile (including, for joint honours students, those from the other subject area), academic monitoring takes place separately until the point of consideration by the University College Examination Board. This Board, however, while it processes students academically, does not review or synthesise the overall quality of student learning opportunities. Again (see paragraph 17), it is advisable that the University College strengthen its monitoring of student learning opportunities on joint honours programmes.

50 The University College operates a system of personal development planning for all students, using a dual track approach involving progress tutorials and programme-specific activities. It acknowledges that it continues to face challenges in this area; it has instituted a review of its approach; and it accepts that the system has yet to be adequately integrated either with the virtual learning environment or with academic programmes. The University College informed the audit team that it is addressing these issues.

51 A range of well-publicised support services, both faith-based and secular, is available. These include the Chaplaincy (which has an inclusive mission and welcomes students from many faith traditions and none), advice on funding, counselling, disability support, accommodation and careers. The Student Entitlement Framework defines the services and facilities available to each student category; the Student Charter and the complaints, disciplinary and studying without harassment procedures are readily available. Support for disabled students is coordinated and provided by the Dyslexia and Disability Coordinator; each school has a disability champion; equality and diversity issues are given high priority. The audit team learnt that these arrangements are generally well-regarded by students.

52 While student services are integrated and coordinated with other parts of the University College at a number of formal levels, the audit team noted the weakness of the central oversight of complaints and appeals which stems in part from the lack of an annual report on their number and nature, including giving consideration to developing trends and new issues as they arise. It is desirable that the University College strengthen its oversight of summative reports of student complaints and academic appeals.

53 On the basis of the information available to it and evidence gained from meetings with staff and students, the audit team confirms the overall effectiveness of the University College's student support arrangements.

Staff support (including staff development)

54 The University College has a clear Human Resources Strategy and well-publicised procedures for appointment, induction, probation, mentoring, appraisal and staff development (the latter normally involving newly-appointed academic staff members taking the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice). All members of academic staff are required to participate in a school-level co-tutoring scheme involving giving and receiving confidential feedback. The Staff Development Policy covers all staff and visiting lecturers, including supporting staff taking a higher degree (including the University College's MA in Academic Practice) and those engaged in research-related activities.

55 The University College encourages innovation in a number of ways. Annual prizes are offered for innovation in teaching and learning and its dissemination, and for innovation and embedding equality and diversity. Annual teaching and learning study days include invited speakers on specialist topics, of which the most recent was enhancement. The University College also provides a programme of learning lunches, which have addressed a variety of topics, including employment destinations, international students and disability awareness. This wide range of staff development activities, particularly learning lunches, provides mechanisms for continuing staff development that can be easily accessed by staff, and was found to be wholly fit for purpose. Staff development activities, such as learning lunches, were identified as a feature of good practice.

56 Overall, confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University College's current and likely future management of students' learning opportunities.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

57 The University College identifies two strands to quality enhancement: the first involves an integration of teaching and learning, research and scholarship, and knowledge transfer; the second is the quality assurance system. The links between them are achieved through the Quality Assurance Office, cross-membership of committees (of which the audit team found ample evidence) and initiatives such as the school visits (which, the team confirms, include discussion of enhancement opportunities), conducted by the Validation and Review Committee, with representation from the Teaching and Learning Committee.

58 The Quality and Student Experience Enhancement Framework identifies the Teaching and Learning Committee (with specialist advice from its e-Learning Sub-Committee) as the focal point for enhancement, and the Research and Scholarship Committee as responsible for strengthening the contribution of research to the curriculum. The Framework also embraces the work of service departments and the Student Experience Committee to ensure that a comprehensive approach is taken. While the increased emphasis on enhancement in validation and monitoring is also apparent in the work of the Validation and Review Committee, as noted in paragraph 13, this Committee devotes only limited time to enhancement issues. The team also confirms that the Principal's Dashboard (see paragraphs 27 and 47) and staff development (see paragraph 55) support enhancement. At school and programme levels, school overview statements, programme annual statements (see paragraphs 17-18) and programme directors' meetings capture and assist in disseminating good practice.

59 As noted in paragraph 31, the University College selects an annual enhancement theme, and assessment was selected for academic year 2009-10. The audit team noted that the theme permeated discussion at all institutional levels and was dealt with both formally (in reports and policy proposals submitted to senior committees) and less so (in programme-level discussions and debates, some of which produced innovative suggestions ranging from providing assessment feedback on MP3 players to introducing different-sized modules to reduce assessment bunching). The topics covered included: the variety of assessment methods; feedback; arrangements for personal development planning (see paragraph 50); and deadlines for the return of assessed work. The team, finding that the theme engendered widespread discussion and triggered change in policy and practice, identifies the University College's promotion of selected enhancement themes, which encourage discussion and change at programme level, as a feature of good practice.

60 The University College has an Enhancement Framework through which it takes deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of the learning opportunities

available to students. Although some aspects of the Framework are new or need further development, the introduction of annual enhancement themes was found to be effective.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

61 Prior to the award of taught degree awarding powers in August 2006 the (then) College had few collaborative arrangements; subsequently it has expanded provision to the extent that at the time of the audit almost 13 per cent of higher education students were studying in partner institutions. In particular, in the two years prior to audit, the University College formed seven partnerships, two of them with overseas institutions. Of these, one, with a USA organisation, is particularly complex, involving two overseas venues with learning resources in one of those venues provided by a third party, a university in Thailand (see paragraphs 68-70 for a fuller discussion).

62 The expansion of collaborative activity and its diversification into validation and franchise agreements were triggered less by proactive strategic decision-making than by responding to requests from potential partners. In some cases this predominantly reactive approach led the University College to proceed before policies and procedures were fully in place. So, largely in the light of experience, the University College updated the relevant guidance document on several occasions, and in 2008 it commenced a review of school-level collaborative activity, moving towards producing increasingly detailed requirements. This work, when completed in November 2009, led to the publication, in September 2010, of a Collaborative Handbook which drew institutional policies and guidance together in one place. It is advisable that the University College ensure that its engagement with potential academic partners is managed in a clear, formal, documented, comprehensive and measured fashion, with strengthened due-diligence scrutiny.

63 The audit team noted that, in spite of the Memorandum of Cooperation referring to termination arrangements, no such reference appears in the Collaborative Handbook. The team was informed that in the one termination thus far initiated by the University College, the decision was made by the Principal, acting on the advice of the Vice Principal and other senior staff. The team examined the termination process, and noted that when problems with the quality of learning opportunities were identified, a meeting with the partner led to a decision to instigate a programme review by a member of staff. In the light of this report senior managers decided, in the interest of academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities, to terminate, putting in place arrangements to honour commitments to current and prospective students. Academic Board (in spite of having overall responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning) and its subcommittees learned of the termination only retrospectively. The Planning and Resources Committee was informed first of the decision to end the partnership; the Validation and Review Committee, which is responsible for monitoring the quality of programmes, was involved neither in the termination decision nor in determining how best to protect students' interests. It is advisable that the University College develop a clear procedure for managing the termination of programmes and partnerships in order both to secure the student experience and to ensure effective institutional oversight of the process.

64 The University College draws attention to the role of the Board of Governors in respect of collaborative arrangements, and states that the Board is regularly updated on progress. No report on the decision to withdraw from this partnership was, however, made to the Board. The audit team also explored whether, in the light of this experience, any subsequent internal discussion had taken place to review the event, identify pressure points and potential learning points (not least in respect of the efficacy of annual monitoring and the performance of senior committees) and reflect on whether greater use of available expertise might have been helpful in this developing policy area. The team could find no record of any

such discussion. It is advisable that the University College revise its procedures for monitoring collaborative programmes, clarify individual and committee responsibilities and make greater use of disinterested internal advice.

65 In March 2009, QAA published a report on a further education college in partnership with the University College. This report confirmed the finding of an earlier QAA report which had identified a retention problem on some higher education programmes, including one offered jointly with the University College. The audit team noted that annual programme monitoring statements and school overview reports were produced and submitted in the proper manner, but that they made only passing reference to retention; the University College therefore recorded the publication of the reports without reference to the problem or its management. It is advisable that the University College respond thoroughly and in a timely manner to external reports and take steps to ensure the accuracy and completeness of internal reports.

66 The University College applies the same quality assurance procedures to collaborative partnerships as to on-campus provision, with appropriate augmentation reflecting in particular the expectations of the relevant section of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*). Partnership approval involves a two-stage process: the appointment of a moderator (to provide independent oversight of the partnership) and a signed memorandum of cooperation. The first stage involves a submission of specified documentation to the Planning and Resources Committee, on the basis of which that Committee may give approval in principle. This triggers a detailed submission to the Validation and Review Committee, which instigates a more in-depth due-diligence investigation, including a site visit to the potential partner organisation to examine the learning environment and resources available to potential students.

67 The audit team noted that, although at the first stage verification of the quality of accommodation and available resources is the responsibility of the University College's programme director, on one occasion, while it is true that the institution was to be the subject to a due-diligence visit as a condition of approval, the form was completed by the proposed partner, apparently without endorsement. The team also noted that, while the University College describes the role of moderator as a source of wide-ranging advice and assistance to the programme director, with one exception the role is performed (in the case of validations) by the head of school and (in the case of franchised programmes) by the programme director concerned. It follows that the moderator is seldom in a position to offer the independent oversight originally envisaged. The team further noted that an institutional-level meeting with collaborative provision programme directors, which took place just prior to the audit visit, described the Collaborative Handbook as still a working document and invited suggestions for development. While the University College stated that this referred only to the continuing institutional pursuit of improvement, the team concluded, on the basis of documentary study, that not all necessary processes and procedures were fully in place or, if they were, that they were not being systematically implemented.

68 The audit team studied the second-stage approval of the partnership permitting a USA higher education institution to deliver a postgraduate certificate leading to an MBA in three locations (see paragraph 61). The USA partner has an agreement with a third party university in Thailand for the provision of learning resources for postgraduate students registered on the collaborative programme. The audit team found that the partner institution's website incorrectly stated that successful students qualify for an academic award of the Thai institution. It is advisable that the University College develop a more secure process, with clearer internal and partner responsibilities, for checking and approving information published by itself and its partners. The team also found that the University College has not yet fully addressed the possible implications of this serial franchise. It is

advisable that the University College take steps to ensure that the *Code of practice's* advice concerning serial franchising of collaborative programmes is given due consideration.

69 The audit team noted that no report was presented to any committee on the approval visit to the Thai venue (though the team learned that a visit had been made and a report written) and no visit was made to the London venue, where teaching takes place in rooms rented from another higher education institution. A report on the visit to the USA venue was, however, submitted to the Planning and Resources Committee, but not to the Validation and Review Committee. The team also noted that the visits were made either by a senior member of the Planning and Resources Committee or by the head of the sponsoring school.

70 When the validation report was received by the Validation and Review Committee, some four months after the USA visit had taken place, it recommended approval and forwarded the report to Academic Board. At this point two issues of concern occurred. Firstly, Academic Board met on the same day as the Validation and Review Committee and received the validation report as a tabled item. While the report was discussed by the Validation and Review Committee, on the available evidence the audit team was not able to confirm the extent or level of discussion at Academic Board or the basis on which the Board made the decision to approve the arrangement. Nevertheless, that it should have done so on the basis of an oral report and tabled paper is surprising, given both that the new programme led to the only MBA award made by the University College, and that the group of over 500 students taking the postgraduate certificate or the MBA was by far the largest in the institution, constituting some ten per cent of student numbers. Secondly, although the Board of Governors had been advised that the University College would require the partner institution to adhere to UK equalities legislation, the partnership imposed restrictions in terms of both age (contrary to normal expectations of UK admissions criteria) and, on the basis of the availability of suitable accommodation, marital/domestic status (contrary to normal institutional arrangements). Again, no record could be found of discussion about these points with the Board of Governors. Given the institution's commitment to equality and inclusiveness and its policy that admissions policies should be consistent wherever programmes are delivered, it is advisable that the University College take steps to ensure that the admissions requirements of partner institutions and organisations offering programmes leading to its awards are consistent with its own.

71 In the light of the range of circumstances surrounding this partnership, the audit team examined another validation, this time in a European Union country. In this case the visit was made by the Vice Principal (who chairs the Validation and Review Committee and also chaired the Validation Panel the following day), the head of the proposing school, a member of academic staff from the school (who is also a member of the Committee), the Registrar, and the Head of the Quality Assurance Office. While the team accepts that the timetable for the visit to the partner and the validation event had been constrained by major disruption to European travel beyond the control of the University College, it remains the case that the reports concerned were only presented to Academic Board three months later, immediately before programme commencement.

72 The audit team noted from student feedback the variability of students' experiences of learning resources. To the comments on induction already made in paragraph 48 can be added that the induction arrangements set out in handbooks for students at a European Union partner lacked a clear focus on academic matters such as study skills and learning resources; and that some students on the USA programme were finding it difficult to access hard copy library resources, found they were required to provide their own information technology and web access, and commented critically on the quality of information as to how the MBA part of the programme would be delivered and resourced overseas. It is advisable

that the University College clarify and strengthen mechanisms for the review, approval and re-approval of learning resources in the institutional approval of collaborative partners.

73 The *Code of practice* expects degree certificates and/or transcripts to include the name of the collaborative organisation and its location. The audit team noted that the draft degree certificates and diploma supplement proposed for new collaborative provision do not clearly identify the location(s) concerned. It is advisable that the University College ensure that all certificates and/or transcripts issued to graduates on the basis of work undertaken in collaborative provision record the name and location of the partner organisation concerned.

74 The audit team concluded that, overall, the University College is taking a developmental and active approach to managing its collaborative provision, and has already recognised the need for further work to be completed to review and embed its arrangements. The team saw evidence of strengthened arrangements being put in place, including improvements in the presentation of formal reports to committees, and notes that the University College has developed a Collaborative Handbook that has the potential to meet its needs. Notwithstanding the recommendations contained in this section, the quality and standards of current provision are not currently at risk.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

75 The University College does not have research degree awarding powers: its 18 research degree students are reading for degrees of the University of Surrey (the University) and its research degree programmes therefore operate in accordance with, and are subject to, the University's regulations.

76 Within the University College, responsibility for oversight of all matters relating to research degree rests with the Research and Scholarship Committee; its Sub-Committee for Research Students Progress considers matters of admission, registration and progression: the terms of reference of both bodies are unambiguous. The University College's Code of Practice for research degree programmes, Handbook for Research Students and Guidelines for Directors of Study were found to be clearly expressed and comprehensive.

77 Candidates for admission are required to meet the University's admissions criteria and to have research interests matching those of a suitable member of University College staff. New research degree students normally take the University College's pre-registration programme, following completion of which they apply for University registration. Such students spoke in positive terms to the audit team of their induction, which is provided both centrally and at school level. They are assigned a Director of Studies as main supervisor (responsible for overseeing all aspects of supervision, support and training); at least one co-supervisor (who may be external to the University College); and (in accordance with University regulations) an external moderator appointed by the University to oversee their progress and general well-being. The audit team confirms that the University College conscientiously engages with this requirement, which complements the University's formal review mechanisms. The team also confirms that formal feedback from the various reviews is submitted to the Sub-Committee for Research Students Progress, which notes potential issues, problems and training needs, on which it reports to the Director of Studies and Head of School. The Sub-Committee was found to be diligent in this work.

78 Research degree students have regular opportunities to provide formal and informal feedback on their academic experience as a whole, although the audit team found that such feedback does not feature prominently on the Sub-Committee's agenda. Students have two places on the Research and Scholarship Committee, though representatives' attendance is

generally low. A centrally-organised Research Students' Forum provides a programme of events for students and supervisors from all schools, where issues relating to the research student experience can be raised. The June 2010 event, for example, informed students of, and initiated a discussion about, the results of the University College's research student survey. The University College's Code of Practice also gives research degree students representation rights on any school research group. The team found that while this operates effectively in some schools, not all schools with such groups offer representation to research degree students. Bearing in mind in particular the challenges facing any institution with small numbers of research degree students, it is desirable that the University College strengthen collective feedback mechanisms for such students.

79 Training is mandatory for all new supervisors; in addition, the University College has recently introduced a research forum to update supervisors on changes to policies and regulations. These provisions are complemented by training afternoons and external speakers for supervisors provided by the University. The audit team learned that opportunities for research degree students to contribute to teaching are rather rare, but that any such student assuming more than a marginal and supporting teaching role is expected to register for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice.

80 The University College has a sound basis for the current and future management of research degrees, which it delivers on behalf of the University of Surrey; its procedures meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

81 Responsibility for the accuracy and completeness of published information, including the relevant section of the institutional website, rests with the school or service department concerned; the Marketing Department ensures that the website and prospectus as a whole are correct and aligned with the University College's communication strategy. The University College has recently developed a protocol designed to ensure the continuing accuracy of the website and recruitment information. This requires contact staff in schools and support departments to undertake a biannual check of the accuracy of the publications for which they are responsible. The audit team learned that by following up nil returns, the Vice Principal ensures that no information is published without confirmation of accuracy having been secured.

82 The audit team reviewed the University College's website and a range of publications, including the Prospectus and student handbooks. While overall the team found the information provided accurate and accessible, it noted that both an internal review of partner institutions' publications and a study undertaken by the Marketing Manager had identified a number of detailed inaccuracies, relating largely to a failure to update material regularly. More seriously, a private provider's website made incorrect claims about possible exemptions, though the team was told (and confirms) that the International Office had disabled the web page concerned. The team also noted that the recent publication of guidelines for the use of the corporate identity by collaborative partners, together with a checklist for published information, had led to the identification of a number of errors. These had been raised with partners and the team was told that rectification was in hand.

83 Students based at the University College's campus informed the audit team that they are content with the accuracy and completeness of the information provided before and after admission, and that their attention had been properly drawn to key information. The experience with collaborative partner institutions is, as noted previously, more variable (see paragraphs 68 and 72): the team found that the University College's procedures to ensure the accuracy and completeness of published material are not as yet embedded. It is

advisable that the University College develop a more secure process, with clearer internal and partner responsibilities, for checking and approving information published by itself and its partners.

84 The audit team noted that programme specifications for the University College's higher education programmes are not uniformly available on partner websites: this was confirmed by students. While students receive such specifications in Student Handbooks, they are not consistently accessible to possible applicants. It is desirable that the University College ensure that partner institutions publish full programme specifications in a manner accessible to potential as well as current students.

85 It is confirmed that the externally available information required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England guidelines is published on the University College's website, and that the teaching quality information on the Unistats website appears accurate and complete.

86 For the most part, reliance can reasonably be placed in the integrity and reliability of the extensive and accessible information that the University College publishes about its educational provision.

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