

Royal Agricultural College

FEBRUARY 2007

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2007

ISBN 978 1 84482 710 7

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

Printed copies are available from:

Linney Direct
Adamsway
Mansfield
NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450481

Email qaa@linneydirect.com

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Contents

Preface	iii
Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex	iv
Summary	1
Introduction	1
Outcomes of the institutional audit	1
Features of good practice	1
Recommendations for action	2
Reference points	2
Report	3
Section 1: Introduction and background	3
Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards	3
Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities	5
Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement	8
Section 5: Collaborative arrangements	8
Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students	9
Section 7: Published information	10
Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations	10
Appendix	12
The Royal Agricultural College's response to the institutional audit report	12

Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland, QAA conducts institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector, to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills). It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree-awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

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

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of awards
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006 - Annexes B and C* refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the Royal Agricultural College (the College) from 19 to 23 February 2007 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 College offers.

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

In institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK). The 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

Outcomes of the institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's current management of the academic standards of its awards and the future management of the academic standards of its on-campus provision. There is limited confidence in the likely future management of the academic standards of the College's collaborative provision.
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team considered that the College was clearly committed to enhancing the quality of learning opportunities and welcomed the adoption of its new strategic approach to quality enhancement. The team recognised that it would take some time for the benefits of the new approach to bear fruit and, therefore, advised the College to make more systematic institutional-level use of the evidence emerging from existing quality assurance procedures to inform institutional strategies for quality enhancement.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

At the time of the audit, the College had a small number of research students, most of whom were registered students of Coventry University as the formal awarding body. The audit found that the quality of learning opportunities provided by the College for postgraduate research students was appropriate.

Published information

The audit found that the information available to students, both before and during their courses of study, was accurate and helpful. The audit team concluded that the College had appropriate procedures for ensuring that published information was accurate.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

- the development of a bespoke student record and management system (tRACker) which is being used proactively to address issues of student progression and retention

- the establishment and use of School Advisory Councils which inform and enhance the development of the curriculum and student experience
- the selection, supervision and oversight of student placements on undergraduate programmes.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the College consider further action in some areas

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- to reconsider the role of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee to ensure that all validation decisions are fully informed and have appropriate externality
- to ensure all awards presented for validation adhere to the approved College validation process and reflects good practice in the sector
- to reconsider the use made of external examiners, in particular the lack of external examiner input at the College Examination Committee
- to ensure that the emerging strategy for collaborative provision is underpinned by a framework that defines categories of partnership and sets out a clear management regime for each category.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- to introduce more systematic institutional-level consideration, oversight and action on themes emerging from existing quality assurance procedures
- to reconsider how the College might achieve improved student representation and participation in institutional level committees
- to ensure that the strategic planning and management of learning resources are undertaken effectively by the responsible body
- to reconsider student learning support arrangements for international students whose first language is not English.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings the audit team investigated the use made by the College of the Academic Infrastructure which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education institutions. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure which are:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the College took due account of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, subject benchmark statements, programme specifications and some aspects of the *Code of practice* in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. However, the report highlights a number of areas where the College may wish to reconsider sections of the *Code of practice*.

Report

1 An institutional audit of the Royal Agricultural College (the College) was undertaken during the week commencing 19 February 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the College's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The scope of the audit included all of the College's provision including that offered through collaborative arrangements.

2 The audit team comprised Professor M Cook, Dr M Edwards, Ms H Marshall and Professor I Robinson as auditors and Ms A Blackburn as audit secretary. Dr A J Biscoe, Assistant Director, Reviews Group, coordinated the audit on behalf of QAA.

3 The College was subject to an institutional audit in 2003 which concluded that limited confidence could be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The College prepared an action plan in response to the findings of the audit and the audit was formally signed off by the QAA Board in July 2006 as completed.

Section 1: Introduction and background

4 The College's mission is to 'provide leadership regionally, nationally and internationally, through education, research and consultancy, to industry and the professions in the rural economy and food chain'. In recent years the College has diversified its curriculum away from sole reliance on agriculture to include the food industry and wider rural economy. The unifying theme in the College's programmes is business management, which is seen as the preferred destination for many of the College's graduates. Established in 1845 the College first began receiving public funding in 2001.

5 The College plans to expand on campus from its current 650 full-time equivalent students to 1,000 in 2015, to include 150 Foundation Degree (FD) and 250 postgraduate students. There are currently fewer than 10 full-time equivalent students registered for postgraduate research degrees (MPhil/PhD) and they are registered with Coventry University. It is intended that the number of international students increase from the present 47 to 200.

6 The College manages a limited portfolio of collaborative programmes ranging from FDs to MBA awards, all of which are delivered in English. The programmes include FDs and an honours top-up degree delivered by local further education partner institutions, a distance-learning honours degree conversion programme and an MBA programme taught jointly with a European university. In addition, another MBA programme is offered where students commence their studies in one of two American universities and the College recognises the credits gained in these institutions and allows them to enrol for the College's MBA programmes in January each year. The College's Sustainability Framework envisages that collaborative provision expansion will include 100 in-company MBA students (United Kingdom (UK) and international), as well as 200 FD students from the UK.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

7 Formal responsibility for defining and assuring academic standards lies with the Academic Board, which is supported by a committee structure that is clearly described in the College's Teaching Quality Handbook. The major operational committee is the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, which has two significant subcommittees reporting to it: the Validation Review Board and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee. The minutes of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee are long and detailed and, along with other information considered by the audit team, provided considerable evidence of the effectiveness of current internal College processes to make sure academic standards are secure.

8 The Academic Quality and Standards Committee has responsibility for monitoring policies and procedures for programme validation and review. Accordingly, it receives from the Validation Review Board reports on programme approval and validation events, which must involve a subject specialist external to the College. Although it does not have the full paperwork available to the Validation Review Board, the Academic Quality and Standards Committee can, and frequently does, amend the recommendations made in such reports. The audit team found that such action detracted from the intent of the programme approval procedures, especially as the Committee does not have any external representation. The team considers it advisable for the College to reconsider the role of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee to ensure that all validation decisions are fully informed and have appropriate externality.

9 The audit team noted that since the previous institutional audit there had been considerable development of the College's procedures for approving and monitoring collaborative provision, and the Academic Quality and Standards Committee plays an important role in this. However, there have been a number of cases whereby the new procedures have not been fully and consistently applied. For example, a hybrid of the old and new procedures was used to approve a programme to be offered in Malaysia in partnership with a private organisation (see Section 5: Collaborative arrangements). In another case, a programme approved to operate in a nearby partner institution was withdrawn as it had not recruited in its first two years and was, without any further consideration of resource or other issues, listed in the College's prospectus as a programme to be delivered on-campus. Moreover, while the College has no experience of directly delivering distance-learning provision and does not have any distinct procedures for quality assuring such provision, it has validated a distance-learning BSc top-up degree at a UK partner institution. Given the central role of programme approval processes in the College's assurance of academic standards, the team advises the College to ensure that all awards presented for validation adhere to the approved College validation process and reflect good practice in the sector.

10 The College's use of external examiners is generally consistent with good practice in the sector: the appointment process is clearly described and understood and appropriate individuals are appointed in this capacity. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the College is making good use of its external examiners and that their views are carefully considered by school programme committees and are reported upwards through the annual monitoring process. External examiners routinely participate in moderation and discussion of student work and performance at the school examination boards. The school examination board reports are then forwarded to the College Examinations Committee which is responsible for making final award decisions. This Committee also has the authority to question or modify examination results, although it does not have any external examiners as members. Furthermore, there is no formal mechanism for gaining the views of external examiners subsequently. A careful reading of the College Examinations Committee's minutes led the audit team to conclude that standards had not, thus far, been put at risk. However, given the central role ascribed to external examiners in the College's procedures for assuring the academic standards of its awards, the team advises the College to reconsider the use made of external examiners, in particular the lack of external examiner input at the College Examinations Committee.

11 The College has made considerable progress since its previous institutional audit in revising its policies and procedures and reviewing its committee structure in order to be better positioned to assure the academic standards of its awards. For example, the College has developed the Teaching Quality Handbook which, it is clear, has been designed to bring many of the College's procedures and policies in line with the Academic Infrastructure and sector good practice. Moreover, there is clear evidence that there is a much wider understanding among College staff of sector good practice in the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. However, as noted above and elsewhere in this report, the College has yet to fully embrace some of the good practice outlined in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, for example, on external examiners; programme approval, collaborative provision and assessment.

12 The audit team noted that there was significant disparity between the published entry requirements in the postgraduate prospectus and programme specification for similar taught postgraduate courses. In meetings with staff, the team heard that, in common with much of the sector, the College would accept candidates with distinction marks at Higher National Diploma, and significant cognate experience for postgraduate study. This was the case for awards where many of the modules in the particular programmes are taught in common with programmes from which a first degree is the minimum entry standard. The team also noted that information on admission criteria in the undergraduate prospectus was not always followed in the cases of some international students joining the courses in the second year. The team would encourage the College to carefully check the consistency of admission requirements for all of its awards.

13 Notwithstanding the exceptions noted above, the College has established a quality assurance framework which largely addresses the recommendations of the previous institutional audit report. The audit team commends the College for the progress it has made in this regard, including making more information for the management of academic standards and quality available through the College's bespoke student record system, tRACker, to central College committees. The team noted, however, that there was limited systematic institutional-level consideration, oversight and action on themes emerging from existing quality assurance procedures. For example, there is no requirement to produce an overview report of comments made in external examiners reports for the College's senior deliberative committees. Similarly, while the Academic Quality and Standards Committee receives individual programme approval and validation reports, periodic review reports, and an annual report on the activities of the Validation Review Board, there is little attempt to provide a critical evaluation of outcomes, trends, emerging issues and an analysis of ways ahead. As the College begins to take a more proactive approach to the management of academic standards in the next stage of the development of its quality assurance framework, the team considers it desirable for the College to introduce more systematic institutional-level consideration, oversight and action on themes emerging from existing quality assurance procedures.

14 Overall, the audit found that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current management of the academic standards of its awards and the future management of the academic standards of its on-campus provision. However, the audit team concluded that limited confidence can be placed in the likely future management of the academic standards of its collaborative provision.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

15 The College has a traditional hierarchical committee structure to monitor and manage the quality of students' learning opportunities. The Academic Board retains overall strategic responsibility for the monitoring of learning and other quality matters, devolving detailed operation to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. Two of the subcommittees of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee - the Validation Review Board and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee - play pivotal roles in the validation and periodic review of taught provision, and the more proactive development of teaching, learning and assessment respectively. The College has approved a Learning and Teaching Strategy, which gives direction to all academic developments with the intention of being 'recognised regionally, nationally and internationally by peers, clients and decision-makers as the leading Higher Education Institution in the UK for delivery of education...to industries and professions in the rural economy and food chain'.

16 Annual monitoring is undertaken by programme managers who produce an annual report for each course. In the case of collaborative provision, the Link Tutor is responsible for working with the partner institution to produce the annual report. The reports, based upon a College template, draw upon evidence from all key stakeholders including staff, students and external examiners and include reflection on reports from external bodies, such as professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. The annual reports are considered individually by the Academic Quality and

Standards Committee, which focuses particularly on responses to student and external feedback. The external examiner is routinely given sight of the annual report. The audit team read a number of annual reports and found them to be thorough and reflective. The action plans were appropriate and there was evidence that the reports receive full debate at meetings of School academic staff and at the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The team considered that the annual monitoring process works well both for on and off-campus provision.

17 The Validation and Review Board is responsible for undertaking the periodic review and re-approval of programmes six years after validation for on-campus provision, and after three years for collaborative provision. The audit team scrutinised documentation from a number of recent reviews and re-approvals, both for on-campus and collaborative provision, and found that the process reflected sector good practice and was generally thorough. The periodic reviews consider the programme specification, the match with national benchmarks and outline module handbooks. Teaching and learning, resources and student achievement are also given appropriate detailed consideration as part of the process. The team considered that programme specifications described the student experience accurately, and reflected sector good practice.

18 Both annual monitoring and periodic review reports make extensive use of outputs from tRACker. The system accepts the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service application data for each candidate and creates the original record for all registered students, enabling students' declarations of disability, language skills and similar matters to be brought to the attention of staff at the appropriate time. A unique feature, widely used by staff, is the ability for staff to annotate student records with concerns, student personal notes and other such material. Other staff with access rights to the records are thus informed of relevant matters before any engagement with the student and have student admissions and performance records immediately to hand. Students have the right to view their own personal records online, and can thus be re-assured of data integrity.

19 The opportunity for staff to interrogate tRACker to produce module and cohort data enables early and informed discussion of student performance. Similarly, personal tutors are able to monitor closely their tutees' success, and are able to intervene in an appropriately sensitive, supportive and timely manner whenever necessary. College staff with a broader responsibility for student retention are likewise able to identify early trends of concern and follow up with module tutors or personal tutors as appropriate. The audit team considered the development and use being made of tRACker in student support was a feature of good practice.

20 Questionnaires are used routinely at module and course level to gather feedback from students on their learning experience. The audit team saw evidence of effective student representation at course and school level. In particular, the team noted as a feature of good practice the role of school advisory councils in informing and enhancing the development of the curriculum and student experience. The school advisory councils include in their membership prominent industrial external experts who can feed in ideas about the currency of the curricula to the College. They also provide a platform where recent alumni of the College can contribute to the process of enhancement.

21 The audit team noted that while students are members of the Academic Board and the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, they are not currently represented on the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee. The student representatives on the Academic Board and the Academic Quality and Standards Committee are considered as full members of the relevant committee, and as such receive all papers and minutes for information and comment prior to each meeting. The team learnt that the Academic Board is proposing that there be one postgraduate research student on the Research Committee. Moreover, the team noted that student attendance at College-level committees was neither regular nor routine. Given that the College greatly values hearing the student voice and considers that student perspectives can add considerable value to committee debates, the team considered it desirable for the College to achieve improved student representation and participation in institutional-level committees.

22 As part of their management of learning opportunities both the Academic Board and the Academic Quality and Standards Committee receive information and reports from a variety of sources. However, neither body tends to reflect critically upon themes and trends emerging from the wealth of data available from reviews, validations, annual monitoring and student performance. The audit team considered that the lack of production and consideration of annual overview reports of, for example, approval, review, validation, student performance, retention, admissions and collaborative activities was something of a missed opportunity and might lead to important trends not being picked up by the College. The team considers it desirable for the College to take a more proactive forward looking view on the development of its academic portfolio, enabling a more systematic institutional-level consideration, oversight and action on themes emerging from existing quality assurance procedures.

23 The Learning and Information Services Committee is responsible for developing the College's resource infrastructure and, in particular, creating a strategic College plan for the management of information and learning resources, to monitor and advise on the implementation of the plan, to engage with staff through appropriate working groups, and to report annually to the Academic Board. The audit team found little evidence that the Learning and Information Services Committee was coordinating development of the learning resource infrastructure and believe that resource and infrastructure developments are being led by heads of service with little informed user-advice. The team concluded that it would be desirable for the College to ensure that the strategic planning and management of learning resources is undertaken effectively by the responsible body.

24 Most undergraduate programmes include a sandwich placement, with some students being based at one of the College farms. Other programmes bring a focus upon field and farm-based experiences for students. Both are acknowledged as strengths by the student community. Placement officers provide student guidance and support in identifying appropriate placements, liaise with employers, and monitor student progress through a placement visit and regular communication. All students are visited on placement irrespective of where in the world they are placed. The College has a range of strategies for ensuring this, including engaging and briefing appropriate academic staff from higher education institutions in the country in question to visit students on behalf of the College. The audit team considered the approach to the selection, supervision and oversight of student placements on undergraduate programmes to be a feature of good practice.

25 Through its reading of the annual reports, the audit team learnt about the English language difficulties encountered by some overseas students, especially during the early part of their studies. Students, whose first language is not English, are required to demonstrate competence in English language, typically by taking Test of English as a Foreign Language or International English Language Testing System assessments. The team noted, however, that undergraduate students from at least one overseas institution with whom the College has a progression agreement are able to enter directly into level 2 study without demonstrating such English language competence. The team also learnt that the College would, on occasion, set its own English entrance examinations for prospective students and provide an ad hoc programme of language support for students during the early months of their course. In light of the College's intention to grow their international recruitment, the team considered it desirable that the College reconsider student learning support arrangements for international students whose first language is not English.

26 Staffing is the responsibility of College senior management working in conjunction with the school deans. The College has developed a three-year human resources strategy, derived from the Corporate Plan, which is monitored regularly by the Senior Management Group. The audit team noted that appraisal is embedded within the College for all staff and that staff development opportunities flowed naturally from appraisal. The College provides a range of internal development activities and staff are encouraged and supported in undertaking development outside the College. Staff research, and other knowledge transfer and scholarly

activities, is actively encouraged. All new academic staff undertake a bespoke Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, from which the College's peer observation programme has evolved. There is an annual College-wide promotion round for teaching staff, and promotion criteria are well known and published internally. Similarly, criteria for professorial recognition are appropriate and available to staff.

27 From the evidence available to it, and in particular recognition of the critical focus given to the student learning experience in all academic review processes, the audit team concluded that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

28 The institution's Briefing Paper stated that the College's approach to quality enhancement is to have 'an institutional level process of implementing, planned, deliberate measures to bring about continuous improvement, advancement and innovation, based on self-evaluation and building upon what already exists' to improve the quality of learning opportunities.

29 Enhancement activity is informed by the College's Learning and Teaching Strategy and led by the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee and supported by the Academic Quality Enhancement Officer. The broad thrust of the Learning and Teaching Strategy is to support activities that identify and develop good practice and these centre around four identified core themes: development of academic staff; development of teaching, learning and assessment; evolution of academic provision; and student support mechanisms. In furtherance of these core themes, two major cross institutional projects are being implemented: the Catalyst Project for Student Support and a Higher Education Academy project on Assessment Practice. The team learnt that both projects represent institutional level initiatives to enhance existing provision as well as to draw on good practice to inform future institutional policy and practice.

30 During the course of the audit visit, staff drew the audit team's attention to the various other ways in which the College is currently seeking to enhance the quality of learning opportunities. These included the development of the College bespoke data management system tRACker, which is now being proactively used to address issues of student progression and retention and the Library Services plan to undertake regular user satisfaction surveys. The team also learnt about the ongoing development of the Teaching Quality Handbook and the recent introduction of formalised module reviews.

31 The audit team considered that the College was clearly committed to enhancing the quality of learning opportunities and welcomed the adoption of its new strategic approach to quality enhancement. The team recognised that it would take some time for the benefits of the new approach to bear fruit, and therefore it would be desirable for the College to make more systematic institutional-level use of the evidence emerging from existing quality assurance procedures to inform institutional strategies for quality enhancement.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

32 In its previous institutional audit, the College was advised to 'clarify its position in relation to UK and overseas collaborative arrangements, putting in place specific measures to address the challenges of managing programmes at a distance, and identifying and supporting the learning needs of international students in the UK'. In terms of the range of programmes, types of arrangement, numbers of partners and numbers of students enrolled, the College's collaborative provision has increased considerably since 2003. The audit team learnt about a number of other collaborative provision programmes that had been approved but for a variety of reasons had yet to recruit any students. The team read in the Sustainability Framework that the College intends to increase its collaborative provision activity still further so that by 2015, there would be 300 students registered on collaborative programmes, or approximately 25 per cent of total full-time equivalents.

33 The College's strategic approach to collaborative provision is outlined briefly in the Sustainability Framework. However, the Sustainability Framework does not set out a clear rationale for the College's current portfolio of collaborative provision or the portfolio of collaborative provision that the College intends to develop in the future. Senior members of the institution told the audit team that the College tended to seize opportunities as they arose but would continue to adopt a cautious approach to expanding its collaborative provision.

34 Collaborative partnerships are approved following a report and recommendation from the Validation Review Board; the scrutiny includes an audit visit to the potential partner. Arrangements for the quality assurance of collaborative programmes differ from the College's on-campus programmes, only in that programmes are approved for an initial three years rather than six years as for on-campus programmes. These arrangements are set out in the Teaching Quality Handbook and were drawn up in light of publication of the revised *Code of practice Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

35 The Teaching Quality Handbook, or indeed any other College documentation seen by the audit team, does not, however, set out a clear typology of collaborative provision or indicate in any detail the different quality assurance arrangements that may apply for the College's existing portfolio of collaborative provision. The team saw evidence of a number of cases where the College's uniform approach to the quality assurance of collaborative provision resulted in some confusion by staff of the nature of certain partnerships and a limited engagement with the *Code of practice, Section 2*. This situation had occurred despite the recommendations contained in the previous institutional audit report. Following detailed discussions with senior College staff and close reading of relevant committee minutes, the team was satisfied that the current management of academic standards of the College's collaborative provision was not threatened. However, given the evidence of the College's recent unsuccessful efforts to expand its collaborative provision, the plans to significantly expand it in the future and the limited internal experience of the quality assurance of collaborative provision, the team has only limited confidence in the future management of standards of collaborative provision. The team advises the College to ensure that the emerging strategy for collaborative provision is underpinned by a framework that defines categories of partnership and sets out a clear management regime for each category.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

36 The College currently has a small number of postgraduate research students registered. The normal procedure is for them to be registered as students of Coventry University, although there is the possibility for individual students to be registered at other higher education institutions. All current postgraduate research students are governed by Coventry University regulations.

37 Oversight of postgraduate research student activity is exercised by the College's Research Committee which has a dual function. Its first task is to stimulate and facilitate research activities, and the second is to encourage and assist the registration, progress monitoring and examination of PhD students. Feedback from postgraduate research students is gathered through the annual monitoring reports for each student.

38 Postgraduate research students are supervised in their studies by a team selected from appropriate College staff, the composition of which must be approved by Coventry University. Progress monitoring is carried out by the College Research Committee who follow the procedures of Coventry University with all milestones (approval of research project, annual reports, transfer to PhD, selection of examiners and final oral examination) marked by reports being sent to Coventry University. Formal communication with Coventry University is channelled through the Chair of the Research Committee, a process that is intended to ensure consistent treatment of all students. The audit team noted that applicants for postgraduate studies were only being accepted to carry out projects in areas where the College could provide suitable facilities and appropriate supervision, and that the quality of learning opportunities provided by the College were appropriate.

Section 7: Published information

39 The College publishes a range of information on its website, in printed form and in electronic form via a Universal Serial Bus Flash Drive given to new students. The approval of academic documentation is carried out at several levels. For example, the Teaching Quality Handbook, programme specifications and module reference sheets are approved by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. Guidance documents for students, such as the prospectuses, are overseen by the Academic Registrar. The audit team concluded that the College had appropriate procedures for ensuring that published information was accurate.

40 The audit team learnt from the students it met, and through reading the students' written statement and programme committee minutes, that the information available to students, both before and during their courses of study, was accurate and helpful. This applied to module content and assessment, award criteria, as well as regulations on both academic and non-academic appropriate conduct. However, the team noted cases where published information was inconsistent. For example, details of the assessments in module summary sheets and module handbooks sometimes differed.

41 Information on the Teaching Quality Information website outlines key comparative data on the broad range of courses. Because of the small number of students, the National Student Survey data by amalgamating undergraduate and postgraduate student information which is consequently and inevitably less valuable than if disaggregated. The audit team heard that in the future more information would be available to College students and staff from the intranet.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the development of a bespoke student record and management system (tRACker) which is being used proactively to address issues of student progression and retention (paragraphs 13, 19)
- the establishment and use of school advisory councils which inform and enhance the development of the curriculum and student experience (paragraph 20)
- the selection, supervision and oversight of student placements on undergraduate programmes (paragraph 24).

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the College consider further action in some areas

43 Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- to reconsider the role of Academic Quality and Standards Committee to ensure that all validation decisions are fully informed and have appropriate externality (paragraph 8)
- to ensure all awards presented for validation adhere to the approved College validation process and reflects good practice in the sector (paragraph 9)
- to reconsider the use made of external examiners, in particular the lack of external examiner input at the College Examination Committee (paragraph 10)
- to ensure that the emerging strategy for collaborative provision is underpinned by a framework that defines categories of partnership and sets out a clear management regime for each category (paragraph 35).

44 Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- to introduce more systematic institutional-level consideration, oversight and action on themes emerging from existing quality assurance procedures (paragraphs 13, 22, 31)
- to reconsider how the College might achieve improved student representation and participation in institutional level committees (paragraph 21)
- to ensure that the strategic planning and management of learning resources are undertaken effectively by the responsible body (paragraph 23)
- to reconsider student learning support arrangements for international students whose first language is not English (paragraph 25).

Appendix

The Royal Agricultural College's response to the institutional audit report

The Royal Agricultural College welcomes the Agency's institutional audit result and the judgements that confidence can be placed in the present and future management of the academic standards of its on-campus provision, the present management of the standards of awards made through collaborative provision and the quality of the learning opportunities available to all students, both now and in the future.

The Agency has recognised the considerable progress and development made in the College's procedures for quality assurance and enhancement since the last audit in 2003, and advice provided by the audit team will be used to inform and augment these procedures further.

The audit also recognised many features of good practice including, the use made of the College's bespoke Management Information System, its strong liaison with industry and other higher education institutions through its Advisory Councils and the management of its students on placement.

The College notes that the audit team's concerns over collaborative provision relate to its future, not its current provision. The College questions the basis for such concern. The resources to support future academic developments both on and off-campus are built into the College's strategic plans as outlined in its ten year Sustainability Framework plan produced for HEFCE in 2006. The College is confident that this plan will be delivered.

The actions described as advisable or desirable in the report have been discussed at Academic Board and an action plan will commence at the start of the 2007-08 academic year.

As the first institution to take part in the new QAA audit process, the College found the experience to be mostly positive and constructive. This will support the College in continuing to develop its processes, procedures and documentation for the assurance of its standards and learning opportunities.

