



Promoting higher quality

**The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education**

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Foreword

1 This is a report of an institutional academic review of Harper Adams University College (the College) undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). QAA is grateful to the College for the willing cooperation provided to the review team.

2 The review was carried out using an institutional review process approved by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), Universities UK (UUK), and the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP). The process is described in QAA's *Handbook for academic review*. The process was introduced in 2002 following completion of QAA's process of continuation audit, which was itself a revised version of the original national academic quality audit programme that began in 1991 under the auspices of the CVCP's Academic Audit Unit and was subsequently taken over by HEQC in 1992.

3 Institutional review addresses the ultimate responsibility for the management of quality and standards that rests with the institution as a whole. It is concerned particularly with the way an institution exercises its powers as a body able to grant degrees and other awards. It results in reports on the degree of confidence that may reasonably be placed in an institution's effectiveness in managing the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its programmes.

Introduction

4 Harper Adams University College (the College) was founded in 1901 with a bequest by Thomas Harper Adams, to prepare men and women for careers in agricultural and land-based industries. It is the UK's largest single provider of higher education serving the rural community and those industries which utilise the land and its produce. Its mission is 'to be the United Kingdom's premier specialist provider of higher education for the diverse industries, professions and communities associated with the countryside: its use, produce and environmental management'.

5 The College occupies a rural campus of approximately 230 hectares near the town of Newport, Shropshire. The single campus includes a working farm of just over 200 hectares, and 11 hectares of woodland. It holds farm business tenancy agreements on adjacent land, adding a further 70 hectares of land farmed by the College. The farm, which provides resources for research by students and staff, and biological and financial data for appraisal work by students, is run on commercial principles. It is run by full-time staff,

whose job descriptions include accommodating student projects and offering basic training in specific livestock and arable skills.

6 The College achieved degree-awarding powers in 1996 for undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. A successful application for devolved authority from the Open University to register students for research degrees was awarded in November 2001, as a precursor to a full application to the Privy Council for independent research degree-awarding powers in the foreseeable future. The College has full responsibility for the academic and administrative conduct of its research degree programmes, apart from the approval of external examiners and the conferment of degrees.

7 The College offers a number of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees which are accredited by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and the Engineering Council. In 2000, the College was one of the first higher education institutions to enter into a partnership agreement with RICS under which they will work to develop further research, postgraduate and professional provision.

8 The College was awarded a 3B rating in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (Agriculture, Food and Veterinary Sciences Panel), the same grade as received in the previous Exercise. At the time of the review, a new research strategy was being developed in the College.

9 Virtually all the College's taught course areas fall entirely within, or at the interface of, the *subject benchmark statement* for agriculture, forestry, agricultural and food sciences. A number of programmes additionally interface with general business and management, engineering, building and surveying and town and country planning. All programmes are based on a modular scheme and on principles of credit accumulation.

10 In December 2001, the total staff complement was 372 (295 full-time equivalents), of whom 111 (96 FTE) were academic staff. As at December 2001, a total of 1,794 students were enrolled, the highest number in the history of the College. They comprise: 1,596 undergraduates (including 90 part-time students); 94 taught postgraduates (including 59 part-time); 42 postgraduate research students (including three part-time); 44 students studying on the Learning and Skills Council access to HE course; and 18 associate students who are predominantly from overseas.

11 The College has academic partnerships with three further education institutions: Reaseheath College, Rodbaston College and Warwickshire College. The undergraduate numbers given in paragraph 10 above

include 343 students enrolled at these partner colleges, predominantly on HND courses.

12 The partnership with Larenstein International Agricultural College, Holland, a specialist college providing higher education equivalent courses, was terminated in 2000. A partnership agreement with China Agricultural University was signed in 2000, under which an annual maximum of 12 students from that University may register on the College's taught postgraduate programmes.

13 The College is a registered charity with a Board of Governors, members of which act as trustees. The Board of Governors delegates responsibility for academic provision and for monitoring academic quality and standards to the Academic Board of the College.

14 The institutional review of the College coincided with the decision to implement a significant re-structuring of key committees, some of which have direct bearing on the governance of learning and teaching (see below, paragraph 34). The review team's studies of the College's approach to quality management of quality and standards therefore had elements of looking back on current and previous arrangements, and looking forward to the possible impact of the new structures.

15 A brief guide, facts and figures for 2001-02, prepared by the College, is attached as appendix 1. A list of the College's collaborative partnerships, current at July 2002, is attached as appendix 2.

The review process

16 The College provided the review team with a *Self-Evaluation Document (SED)*. Key documents provided with the *SED* included: undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses; the *Academic Quality Assurance Manual*; the academic staff handbook; and the strategies for learning and teaching, widening participation, estates, research and human resources. The *SED* was helpfully annotated with reference to documents cited by the College as evidence to support its evaluation of the management of the quality of provision and the standards of awards. The team had access to the 1993 HEFCE teaching quality assessment report for Mechanical Engineering (Agricultural Engineering), the 1998 QAA subject review report for Agriculture, Forestry and Agricultural Sciences, Food Sciences and Land and Property Management, and the 1995 HEQC quality audit report of the College.

17 The review team comprised Dr N J Fox, Ms D J Lockton and Mr L E Walker, reviewers, Ms S Patterson, review secretary for the briefing visit, and Ms N Evans,

review secretary for the review visit. The review was coordinated for QAA by Dr D J Buckingham, Assistant Director, Institutional Review Directorate.

Briefing visit

18 The review process began with a briefing visit to the College on 29 and 30 April 2002. At the briefing visit a number of documents referenced in the *SED* were made available to the review team. The team asked the College to make available for the review visit further documentation in addition to that cited in the *SED*. During the briefing visit the team met the Principal, senior members of the College with particular quality assurance responsibilities, and students representing the student body of the College. The team used the briefing visit to clarify certain aspects of the College's quality assurance arrangements and to identify themes for further exploration during the review visit.

19 The *SED* identified areas where the College was furthering its enhancement of the quality of its provision. During the briefing visit, the review team was provided with a document outlining a proposed new organisational structure to become operational from September 2002 (see also below, paragraph 34). The team was therefore particularly interested to explore the strategic direction of the College; the organisational structure, and how it allowed the interaction of corporate and academic planning; and how the various forward strategies impacted on the future direction of the College and the setting and maintenance of standards.

20 The review team identified a number of themes to explore with staff and students during the review visit. These included strategic development and control of the curriculum; resource underpinning for the learning and teaching strategy and the links between the learning and teaching strategy and the human resource strategy; assessment strategies and standards; and the management of collaborative provision and its relationship to the widening participation strategy. During the review visit the team also wished to seek evidence of adherence to QAA's *Code of practice*.

21 In its briefing meeting with student representatives, the review team was interested to explore student involvement at institutional and operational level and institutional support for independent learning. From its discussions, and from the findings of the QAA subject review report, the team formed the view that student involvement at both institutional and operational level was effective and valued by the students.

Review visit

22 The review visit took place at the College between 28 and 31 May 2002. At the review visit, the College provided the review team with its most recent drafts of its learning and teaching, human resources and information strategies (see below, paragraph 58 *et seq*). During the review visit, the team conducted eight meetings with: the Principal; members of the Principal's Executive Group (PEG); members of the School of Agriculture; members of the School of Management; partner college representatives; postgraduate taught and research students; members of staff involved with learner support; and senior management staff.

Developments since 1995

23 In May 1994, the College participated in an academic quality audit conducted by HEQC. In the report, published in March 1995, the College was commended for a number of its existing or developing practices including:

- the work of the Professional Development Unit in the field of curriculum, development and course delivery;
- the use of external representatives in the scrutiny of programmes, and throughout its quality assurance system;
- the systematic efforts to enhance the quality of the student experience, particularly at course level;
- the partnership between staff and students directed towards achieving continuous course improvement;
- the care and effort that goes into securing work placements;
- the induction arrangements for new academic staff;
- the operation of procedures for franchised courses.

24 The College was invited to consider:

- systematic ways in which good practice might be identified and shared;
- the necessity for a number of quasi-formal groups to emerge within the committee structure and the importance of their contribution to processes;
- the possibility of reviewing how its committees determine and exercise their responsibilities;

- how further academic development might be informed by the systematic consideration of good practice;
- whether its senior committees received sufficient information of strategic or corporate importance from monitoring procedures carried out at lower levels;
- exploring further initiatives to achieve greater coordination between academic and management processes;
- whether its academic policies and responsibilities for their implementation need to be made more explicit so that their effectiveness can be evaluated;
- rationalisation of the current mechanisms for gathering student views;
- the development of consistent staff recruitment strategies and means of monitoring their operation;
- establishing guidelines on expectations of information on progress of staff during the probationary year;
- the potential of the new Staff Development Committee for coordinating College-wide activities.

25 The *SED* gave detailed responses to the matters raised in the 1995 HEQC report, and subsequent developments. It noted a particular number of developments at subject level to aid dissemination of good practice, including:

- the introduction of review of teaching schemes;
- moderation of assessment briefs;
- peer observation of teaching; and
- annual staff development review;

and, at institutional level:

- the creation of the Harper Adams Teaching Fellowship scheme;
- the establishment of a learning and teaching forum; and
- the introduction of formalised reporting from subject groups, including the identification of good practice.

26 The *SED* noted the rationalisation of committees reporting to Academic Board, and the increase of operational management groups and project groups considered necessary to ensure effective consultation, communication and coordination in a period of intense change since 1995. It recognised that the 1995 HEQC report had noted perceived tensions in the 'matrix'

organisational structure of the College (see also below, paragraph 33), and expressed the view that coordination between the functions 'could be further improved by a review of the way in which Academic Board fulfils its terms of reference and in the way in which it considers strategic issues' (see below, paragraph 35). A review of the work of Academic Board will be undertaken in 2003.

Adherence to QAA's Code of practice

27 The *SED* stated that the College had evaluated its policies and procedures against the appropriate sections of QAA's *Code of practice* (the *Code*). A series of working parties, comprising both staff and students, was established to evaluate the extent of adherence to the *Code*, and to make necessary recommendations to Academic Board. The *SED* gave detailed references to the papers of the Academic Board meetings at which these evaluations were considered. Revisions were made to the *Academic Quality Assurance Manual* as a result of recommendations arising from a review of College policies against the sections of QAA's *Code* on external examiners, assessment of students and programme approval and monitoring. A review of the sections of the *Code* which had yet to become fully operational by the time of the review visit was stated in the *SED* to be ongoing.

28 From the evidence available to it, the review team concluded that the active sections of QAA's *Code* had been thoroughly considered by Academic Board and its sub-committee, and that procedures had been revised appropriately in the light of recommendations made by the working parties. The team considered, however, in relation to the section of QAA's *Code* on collaborative arrangements, that the College may wish to ensure that its expectations for full adherence to the *Code* in respect of collaborative provision are made clear to staff of its partner institutions as it seeks to strengthen the management of quality in partnership links (see below, paragraph 83).

Institutional approach to quality management

Academic management structures

29 The responsibility for determining academic policy, standards and quality is devolved by the College Board of Governors to Academic Board, which is chaired by the Principal. The *SED* identified the overarching policy of Academic Board as one of 'continuous improvement in respect of the quality of its entire academic provision...achieved by encouraging participation, ownership and critical self-reflection'.

30 The *SED* described the current academic management arrangements, within which 'there are two Deans of School each with four Heads of Group (HoGs) reporting to them'. The senior management team in the College is the PEG, whose membership includes the Principal, the Deans (one of whom holds the post of Director of Research), the Head of Educational Development and Quality Assurance (HEDQA), the Director of Corporate Affairs, the Director of Finance, the Head of Information Services and the Academic Registrar. This executive body has responsibility for advising Academic Board on resource implications of academic planning, and prepares the College corporate plan. During the review, the pivotal role of PEG in determining and initiating strategic developments became clear to the review team from the records of action points of PEG meetings, although currently these are not published within the College. PEG might consider the merit of internal publication of its records to assist transparency in decision-making.

31 The Heads of Group Meeting (HoGM) is an executive group, with membership significantly overlapping that of PEG (including the Principal) but including heads of academic subject groups. Its main responsibilities relate to resources to support teaching, research and 'reach-out' (the College's term for external activities such as short courses and consultancy) and quality matters relating to resource deployment. The Academic Development Group (ADG) is a sub-committee of HoGM, comprising the HoGs, HEDQA and the Head of Learning and Teaching Support Services.

32 Course managers are members of the schools, and report to the appropriate HoG in respect of their subject responsibilities. They also report to HEDQA in respect of their responsibilities for the effective management of educational programmes. The Course Managers Group (CMG) is an executive group whose membership includes course managers, HEDQA, the Assistant Registrar and the Postgraduate Administrator.

33 The *SED* recognised some tension in the current matrix of reporting arrangements as having the potential to lead to uncertainties in the discharge of the responsibilities of HoGs and course managers. The review team confirmed this view from discussions during the visit, and considered that these tensions were exemplified in the complementary but potentially overlapping responsibilities of ADG, which deals with 'operational issues relating to teaching, learning and assessment', and the CMG which deals with 'operational issues relating to the management of taught courses'.

34 The *SED* noted that difficulties had been identified in bringing together corporate and academic planning. No single body within the management structure could coordinate resource management in relation to academic plans, and there was a need to establish mechanisms to allocate resources in response to environmental threats to academic quality. At the time of the review visit, a major re-structuring of the College management was underway. An Academic Planning and Resource Committee (APRC) of Academic Board will be re-established to provide a high-level strategic decision-making forum that will link business and academic planning.

35 In this re-structuring, the two schools of Agriculture and of Management are to be abolished, and academic provision is to be re-organised within five academic subject groups, each to be managed by a HoG who, in turn, reports to a new post of Dean of Academic Affairs. The post of Dean of External Liaison has also been established, and the role of the Academic Registrar has been expanded. The role of HEDQA will be re-focused towards quality enhancement. HoGs will receive devolved budgets to support module delivery and course management in their subject areas, reach-out and research, and will have some autonomy in using these resources. The proposed restructuring will place course managers within the management structure of the five academic subject groups and in a line management relationship to HoGs. The review team formed the view that the proposed restructuring was both administratively sensible and had the potential to provide greater consistency in the operation of academic planning and assessment practice.

Academic management of quality and standards

36 The *SED* explained that the maintenance of quality and standards, and 'mechanisms to facilitate quality enhancement', had been 'focused at the module level through annual staff development reviews and subject assessment boards, and at the programme level through course committees and course assessment boards' (see below, paragraph 84). It went on to explain that 'auditing procedures in support of quality assurance' were focused through the Academic Standards Committee (ASC), which is a standing committee of Academic Board. ASC has delegated authority to discharge the policies of Academic Board in relation to the maintenance and enhancement of quality and standards. In matters of the accreditation and credit-rating of courses, modules and programmes, the work of ASC is supported by its Accreditation and Validation Sub-Committee (see below, paragraph 51).

37 ASC has responsibility for implementing procedures for the audit and review of courses and modules, and as such has a brief for maintenance and

enhancement of quality and standards. ASC has a wide ranging remit. It is empowered by Academic Board to:

- evaluate the academic standards, progress and development of new and existing courses;
- pursue continuous improvement of the academic provision;
- ensure appropriate arrangements for the validation and re-validation of courses;
- accredit learning programmes;
- undertake periodic review of all courses;
- receive and consider all reports of validation and review events;
- determine policies for the admission, assessment and withdrawal of students;
- agree assessment regulations for all taught courses and awards;
- consider nominations for external examiners;
- ensure proper consideration of external examiners' reports;
- ensure appropriate action is taken in response to external examiners' reports;
- appoint course monitors from amongst Committee members (see below, paragraph 43);
- supervise the annual course monitoring process;
- monitor the adequacy of resource provision for courses;
- keep under review the teaching, learning and assessment methods in courses;
- collate and report to Academic Board information of strategic importance arising from course monitoring;
- validate proposed access courses and similar foundation courses;
- establish a panel to deal with cases of plagiarism or assessment fraud.

38 The records of ASC meetings show that the Committee is provided with a considerable amount of primary and secondary evidence upon which to make judgements, including an overview of the academic year, incorporating detailed statistics and analysis; overview of external examiner reports; course monitoring reports; validation reports, and responses to conditions of validation.

39 The review team formed the view that ASC took its responsibilities very seriously. ASC's business is a mixture of strategic, monitoring and operational concerns, perhaps intrinsically difficult to manage

within a single committee. The Committee's agendas are rather crowded as a result of its wide range of responsibilities, a crowding which undoubtedly contributes to the 'slippage in implementing policy or specific action points' noted in the 1995 HEQC report. The SED acknowledged that this 'slippage' persisted at the time of the review visit, but considered that it should be prevented in future by the restructuring of executive responsibilities.

40 The review team was mindful that in a small organisation, such as the College, a preponderance of committees is neither an efficient nor a practical way of managing quality and standards. Nevertheless, in the view of the team ASC was overstretched by its wide-ranging remit. The establishment of APRC as a committee of Academic Board will undoubtedly help to redistribute loading from ASC. The College will, no doubt, take the opportunity of the establishment of APRC to review and re-focus the role of ASC.

Student representation in quality management

41 Students are represented on the Board of Governors, Academic Board, ASC, the Research Committee and course committees. All student course representatives are members of the Students' Academic Group. The aims of this Group are described in the *Academic Quality Assurance Manual* (the *Manual*) as 'to provide an effective link between student course representatives and the Academic Board and its standing committees'. The Group is chaired by the Students' Union Academic Representative, elected by the student body, with the Students' Union President acting as Secretary.

42 Postgraduate taught students are represented on the single course committee that serves this suite of programmes, but do not have identified representation on the Board of Governors, Academic Board or ASC. Research students are specifically represented on the Research Committee and Health and Safety Committee. In its discussions about student representation, the review team heard from staff that, because of the small size of the College, informal contacts could resolve any specific problems faced by postgraduate students. On many occasions during the visit, and in the *SED*, the team was reminded that, in a small institution, informal contact could be an effective means of communication and resolving problems. While the team considered this to be a reasonable proposition at the time of the review visit, it was mindful that the continuing assurance of quality may be less able to depend upon these informal contacts as the College's postgraduate profile expands. The College may wish to reflect further on areas where informal contact substitutes for formal arrangements. For example, the proposed expansion of postgraduate provision may warrant identified representation of taught

postgraduate students on Academic Board and ASC, to ensure that their views on learning and teaching are reliably represented at strategic and policy levels.

Annual course review

43 The procedures for monitoring and review of courses and modules are set out in detail in the *Manual*. Management and quality assurance of validated courses is the responsibility of the course team under the leadership of the course manager. The process of course monitoring culminates in an annual report. Course committees, chaired by course managers, consider the annual course monitoring report. The meeting is attended by a 'course monitor' appointed by, and reporting in writing to, ASC, which reviews annual course monitoring action plans. The review team considered the deployment of course monitors from ASC in this process to be a feature of good practice, both helping ASC to judge the effectiveness of course review procedures and helping ASC members to ground their role in the operational realities of quality assurance processes.

44 The *SED* commented that 'review of course monitoring reports for 2000-01 indicates that feedback from tutors has not been systematically or proactively collected', and noted that this 'will be remedied for the 2001-02 monitoring round'. The review team studied a number of the most recent monitoring reports, and noted that these were well-presented, linked to performance indicators, action-oriented, included evaluative comments from students and external examiners, and contained data on student progression and achievement. The team formed the view that the course review process was a robust and genuinely interactive process in line with the College's stated policy of 'continuous improvement in respect of the quality of its entire academic provision...achieved by encouraging participation, ownership and critical self-reflection'.

45 The course monitoring process is itself reviewed and summarised for ASC by HEDQA in a useful document which comments on the conduct of the process, its major outcomes and action plans, and provides a summary of good practice. The review team noted this as an example of the valuable role played by HEDQA in presenting to the major committees digestible sets of information related to the working and outcomes of quality assurance processes. The 1995 HEQC report had questioned whether senior committees received sufficient information of strategic or corporate importance from monitoring procedures carried out at lower levels. The findings of the current review suggest that senior committees do now receive sufficient information and analysis for the purposes of monitoring quality assurance processes and their outcomes.

Annual module review

46 The *Manual* states that 'it is the responsibility of teaching staff to continuously monitor and improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment in their subject and modules. The outcome of this process shall be audited through annual staff review processes and the meetings of subject assessment boards'. Staff evaluation of a module's effectiveness may form part of the annual staff development review, but this is not a requirement, and there is no requirement on staff to prepare an annual module report. Modules are evaluated annually by students, and high or low scores 'shall be subject to a more formal review so that feedback can be given to the course committee', which was considered by the review team to be a feature of good practice.

47 The *SED* stated that 'a system of module monitoring linked to the subject review process has recently been introduced', with module and subject group leaders being 'informed by the course manager about particularly strong or weak modules for the identification and dissemination of good practice or remedial action'. The latest edition of the *Manual* offers a template for module review that had been introduced for the 2001-02 academic session. Because the introduction of the template was so recent, the review team was unable to verify its use or trace any actions arising from formal module review. The team formed the view that, prior to the introduction of the template and formal reporting back from subject board to course committee, module review was a less systematic and reliable process than course review. The College will, no doubt, wish to monitor the new processes for their effectiveness in evaluating and informing stakeholders about the quality of modules.

Periodic review

48 The College regularly reviews its courses through formal revalidation events. The *Manual*, however, describes a process which it defines as periodic review in which 'all courses are subject to a progress review, normally on a six-year cycle'. It goes on to describe this review as 'a searching and systematic evaluation of the operation of an existing course and the career success of its graduates to ensure that it remains academically and vocationally valid'. The review team sought examples of periodic review as described in the *Manual*, but was informed that the process described as periodic review is embedded within the cyclical revalidation process. The *Manual* may merit an editorial review to make clear that course revalidation events are used by the College to serve the purpose of periodic review.

Validation and approval of courses

49 Validation and approval of courses is a one-stage event following a series of document scrutiny activities by various individuals and by ASC. The procedures are set out in detail in the *Manual*. Approval is based largely on judgements of the suitability of the course specification and module specifications. Any conditions set for conditional approval are mandatory and are reported to ASC, which monitors compliance with these conditions. Any recommendations 'should be seriously considered' but are not mandatory. Responses to recommendations are expected to be addressed in annual course monitoring reports.

50 Study of a range of validation documentation confirmed to the review team (with the exception of the 'M4M' exercise see below, paragraph 53) that course validation and approval procedures were rigorous and carefully conducted. Course and module specifications provide appropriate information for deliberation through dialogue between course teams and validation panels, and meet the requirements for 'programme specifications', including reference to QAA's *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) and subject benchmark statements. The review team also found evidence of attention to subject benchmark statements in the minutes of ASC. The involvement of external expertise is prominent. Validation events are carefully recorded and provide evidence of genuine critical engagement.

Validation and approval of modules

51 Module specifications are discussed and initially approved by a subject board and forwarded for final approval to the Accreditation and Validation Sub-Committee of ASC. Students receive the validated module specifications. Module study guides for students are not standardised, and do not form part of the validation process.

52 The review team was able to take only a limited view on the effectiveness of this process, and of the way in which the relationship of new modules to existing courses was discussed in relation to coherence and progression. At no time, however, in the team's exploration of course validation procedures was there any indication that inadequate attention was given to the validation and approval of modules.

Modules for the Millennium (M4M)

53 In 1998, Academic Board approved a proposal to undertake a major revision to the undergraduate curriculum to approve its portfolio of 'Modules for the Millennium' (M4M). The Board wished to have this modular portfolio in place for the commencement of

the 2000-01 academic session, 'with the intention of more fully exploiting the flexibility afforded by operating modular courses'. The revision of the curriculum was, in part, following ASC's recommendations for action in response to the outcomes of the 1998 QAA subject review report. The approval of the curriculum framework and all institutional regulations and design principles was the subject of an event in July 1999, which included external representation. Subsequent to this, the entire undergraduate curriculum was reviewed over a period of two days in January 2000, with a view to validating the new proposed modular curriculum. The review was conducted in five major groupings of courses, for example, one of the five groups, Food and Business, covered 13 awards and 176 modules. As this unusual exercise would provide illustration of the College's capacity to manage quality and standards effectively at an institutional level, the review team was interested to study the documentation associated with the M4M events and their follow-up, to explore in several meetings the participants' evaluation of the experience, and to discuss the rationale and future plans for a scheduled 're-run' of the event.

54 The review team accepted the logic of the College's rationale for a comprehensive review, given the interconnected nature of awards and their contributory modules and the need to construct a resource-efficient curriculum model. From the evidence presented, it appeared to the team that the College had taken pains to assemble panels with considerable external expertise and had, within the time available to panels, engaged in genuine critical activity, resulting in a large number of conditions and an even greater number of recommendations. The reports of these events varied considerably in length and incisiveness, however, and it was clear to the team that panels had adopted differing approaches to the deliberation of weighty and complex documentation. It also appeared that the event was further complicated by the fact that panels had, in practice, been engaged in differing kinds of approval activity, being a mixture of review or revalidation of existing courses, modifications or reconfigurations of courses, and validation of essentially new courses.

55 In meetings with staff, it was made clear to the review team that the experience of the M4M events had been one of intense activity. Members of the College also expressed the view that, in retrospect, the process could have been managed more effectively, as it left the College with what might be described as 'remedial activity' when it became apparent that the judgements of individual panels, taken together, did not fully obtain the resource-efficiency aim of the exercise, and that timetabling consequences were not fully predicted.

56 Senior staff who discussed the M4M event with the review team reiterated the intention to carry out a similar exercise in line with the cycle for revalidation, but acknowledged the need for tighter parameters in which to make approval judgements, particularly regarding resource implications. They also stressed the need to adopt a more rigorous 'project management approach' to the exercise. The team, however, was not convinced that even with those additional measures in place that such an exercise should be repeated. In the view of the team, the very scale and speed of this type of exercise was intrinsically difficult to manage with assurance. For example, the team found evidence that some validation conditions had not been formally signed off or reported to ASC prior to commencement of the course. The tracking of at least one substantial 'recommendation', relating to a reconsideration of all level three modules in a course, and which in the judgement of the team merited the status of a 'condition', was not reported as required in the annual course monitoring report. It appeared to the team that senior committees and key managers had not received sufficient, detailed and timely assurance that all conditions had been addressed by course teams.

57 The review team therefore recommends that the College reflects upon the shortcomings of the methodology used for the major revalidation exercise of January 2000, in particular the limitations inherent in a concentrated single-event approach in respect of the rigour of the exercise and of subsequent follow-up. Instead, the College is advised to consider alternative and more measured means of staging and subsequently monitoring any major revalidation activity.

Strategic vision for learning and teaching

58 The College's Learning and Teaching Strategy document (1999-2000) sets out its framework for learning and teaching. The strategy offers a vision of the promotion of excellence of a lifelong learning community of current and former students. It identifies five aims:

- to develop individuals' intellectual and practical skills;
- to extend the boundaries of knowledge;
- to enhance partnership with industry, professions and community;
- to support development of the academic community; and
- to extend access and improve learning in a high-quality environment.

59 It also contextualises the strategy, and identifies a number of risks to the strategy, including falling student numbers, demand for flexibility in course educational provision and the development of alternative modes of curriculum delivery by competitors. The strategic objectives and action points are transparent, and wide dissemination of the strategy across the College should enable staff to situate their learning and teaching activities within a strategic framework. A draft extension of the strategy for the period 2002-05 sets out objectives and an action plan for the coming period. It identifies a number of areas for action including: the use of new technologies to enhance educational opportunities for learning; promotion of progression from further education to higher education; and extension of the College's learning and teaching strategy to its partner colleges.

60 The learning and teaching strategy is one component of the College's wider process of corporate planning. The SED explained that the corporate plan was prepared by PEG, 'informed by the annual staff development review process as well as by specific consultation and briefing sessions with governors and academic, support and administrative staff', and with input from student representatives. The 1999-2004 corporate plan situates the learning and teaching strategy within a wider institutional and environmental context, and reflects on major environmental threats and opportunities to the College's portfolio of educational provision. The corporate plan recognises that the College will need to monitor performance to ensure it meets these environmental challenges.

61 Linked with the learning and teaching strategy, the College's human resources (HR) strategy has the twin objectives of identifying the skill mix required to deliver the College's core business and managing the staff resources to meet these needs. The staff development review process was revised in 2001, 'to better align the activities of staff to corporate objectives'. The HR strategy for 2001-04 focuses on staff recruitment and retention, staff review, development and training, performance review and under-performance, with significant funding identified to achieve these targets in each of the three years. The *Annual Operating Statement, 2001-02*, showed evidence, however, of slippage in achieving a range of key objectives around staff development.

62 An updated draft HR strategy for 2002-05 was under discussion in the College at the time of the review visit. This draft identified 'reach-out' as a major core function and income generator, and noted that the strategy 'will need to support change...so that staff can get as close to the needs of the industries and communities served by the College'. The intention to increase the proportion of staff engaged in reach-out

activity was confirmed to the review team in discussions with senior managers. This is a self-declared strategy to generate income for the College, to address shortfalls from reducing student numbers and loss of RAE-related research funding. Senior staff explained to the team that a College-wide review of curriculum delivery was also being implemented with the intention of gaining efficiency in staff-time devoted to learning and teaching, through rationalisation of timetables and increased independent learning. While the HR strategy will identify the College's skill needs for enhanced reach-out activity, and attempt to deliver these through the provision of staff development, the review of curriculum delivery will seek efficiency gains in staff resources given to learning and teaching.

63 Also relevant to the College's vision for learning and teaching is its strategy for widening participation. The aim of this strategy is to move towards a student profile that more accurately reflects the constituency that would benefit from the educational resources of the College, in rural, urban and local populations. The review team noted that the widening participation strategy acknowledged the cultural challenges for the College, for instance in ensuring that a wider stakeholder group was represented within governance structures. Widening participation will require all staff to acknowledge the changing shape of the stakeholder groups, and to evaluate their own assumptions about the profile of the College's students and the portfolio of courses they study.

64 The review team considered that appropriate measures to achieve the objectives of these key strategies were in place. Their development and monitoring by PEG, as part of the wider corporate planning process, should enable the College to manage the strategic direction of learning and teaching by monitoring performance against action plans. The proposed APRC should be able to take a significant role in managing the strategic direction of learning and teaching.

65 At the time of the review visit, the College had recently developed a draft risk management strategy document, to be considered by the Board of Governors in July 2002. It was not possible, therefore, for the review team to assess whether the risk management strategy was embedded in College procedures. This strategy addresses the various risks associated with the delivery of its strategic plans, and will provide external assurance that the College will manage risk in accordance with the requirements of the Turnbull Committee. It provides a mechanism for risk minimisation, although it does not address the management of those adverse events that do occur.

66 From its exploration of the explicit aims and objectives set out in the strategic planning documentation, and from discussions with staff, the review team formed the view that the College was reflective in its strategic vision for learning and teaching. However, to successfully deliver the range of objectives, within the challenging stated timescales, will require that institutional-level management systems within the College continually monitor progress and address real or potential slippage. In the view of the team, a number of challenges to teaching quality might arise from the rapid pace of change at the College. These include the re-balancing of resources to support reach-out work, and the expansion of collaborative activities with further education colleges. The success of the planned strategic developments will rely upon effective change management, and to this end the role of the senior management groups will be crucial. The team was interested to learn that senior managers at the College were engaging in a programme of training in effective change management.

67 The review team would support the College's intention, expressed to the team by senior staff, to extend to key areas of its developing strategies the project-management approach that it favours for other initiatives. The team saw advantage in taking a project-management approach at institutional-level to the implementation of strategies to ensure that strategic direction is clear, and that operational delivery is monitored, while applying the proposed risk management strategy.

Independent learning

68 The College's learning and teaching strategy identifies the achievement of its students' ability 'to learn independently and display the skills required for lifelong learning' as a core educational objective. The strategy goes on to note that the skills for independent learning must be developed through an appropriately designed curriculum. One area of the curriculum that addresses these skills is the Professional Scholarship Programme, a series of core modules addressing generic personal and professional skills, taken by all undergraduate diploma and degree students. At the time of the review visit, the scheme did not extend to postgraduate students.

69 A lack of evidence of independent learning skills has been identified by some external examiners in their reports, who have noted a 'lack of ability to analyse and reason' and 'lack of independent study skills (and evidence of wider reading)'. From the documentary evidence, and from discussions during the visit, the review team considered that the continuing use of half-modules in the College tended to restrict the effective application of approaches to independent learning. The SED noted that the major curriculum review exercise

(the 'M4M' exercise, undertaken in 2000) included 'a number of principles...to support greater student independence' and 'allow them to maximise their achievements at level three'. These principles included a reduction of the number of half-modules to facilitate 'more coherent courses of study within a modular framework...and an associated restriction on the maximum number of assessments for each module to reduce over-assessment'. The team learnt that the College had recently undertaken, with the help of a recognised external advisor, a comparison of its regulations with five other institutions offering agriculture-related subjects. One outcome of this exercise was to recommend a further review of the use of half-modules. The team was encouraged by the College's efforts to enhance independent learning skills by reducing the number of half-modules, and by its work to ensure 'level-three-ness' of modules at advanced levels of study.

70 The *Learning and Teaching Strategy* for 1999-2002 identifies objectives to 'develop independence in students through resource-based learning'. Increased connectivity and a remote access portal will enable greater student access to electronic resource-based learning (e-learning), and students in partner colleges will be able to access College resources via this portal. E-learning initiatives focus on a virtual learning environment which is being developed to deliver module content and to provide a medium for communication between and among students and staff. Several staff development activities have been funded to provide skills to work in a virtual learning environment. Progress towards e-learning has accelerated with the establishment of the Harper Adams Learning and Teaching Support Service (HALTSS), and a group has been established to address matters relating to e-learning, and to develop the College's e-learning strategy.

71 The draft e-learning strategy identifies pedagogy as the primary driver behind e-learning. This view of e-learning as a means to enhance independent learning was strongly supported by members of HALTSS and others who met the review team. They recognised, however, that e-learning might use more resources in learner support than could be liberated by reducing teaching staff contact, and emphasised the importance of independent learning support becoming a function of academic staff in general, as opposed to the function of a specialised learner support team.

72 In contrast, a move towards greater independent learning, equating to less staff-student contact in taught courses, is perceived by some senior managers as a means to save staff resource, for re-allocation to income-generation activities. This perception is one of the drivers behind the scheduled curriculum delivery review.

73 The review team found a conflation of 'independent learning' and 'e-learning' in its discussions with College staff and managers, and in related documentation, including the draft learning and teaching strategy and e-learning strategy documents. The College will, no doubt, wish to take care that 'e-learning' and 'independent learning' are not regarded simply as being synonymous. Despite its espoused emphasis on pedagogy rather than technology, the e-learning plan is principally concerned with allocation of resources to support IT initiatives, although staff development in the enabling of e-learning is also being funded for members of staff.

74 The emphasis on independent learning in the various strategy documents is appropriate to higher education provision, and it is important that this is translated into application, both in the College and its partners. The review team endorsed the College's view that e-learning is an important area for development. The team would also support the views expressed by staff with whom it discussed these matters about the need for e-learning to be addressed from within a strong pedagogic framework, and the need to bear in mind that this mode of curriculum delivery has resource costs in terms of learner support as well as potential savings. The College is currently pursuing e-learning with appropriate caution. The team considered this cautious approach to be sensible. The College might see advantage in addressing it as a project, managed at College level, to ensure that it is led by pedagogic aims.

Learner support

75 Learner support services in the College are organised through HALTSS. These include library services, learner support, and tutors for numeracy and disability support. This group is indirectly represented at senior management level, as the Head of Learning and Teaching Support Services is a member of the Information Systems and Technology Group. The Head of Information Services (who is a member of PEG) also sits on this Group. A survey of learner resources in 2001 among students found that, in general, resources were considered by students to be adequate, although more open-access PCs were required. The minutes of Academic Board showed that the latter had now been addressed.

76 The intended re-balancing of staff time given to students and time given to supporting reach-out work will bring challenges for maintaining the current level of learner support. The College might see advantage in ensuring that, in the organisational restructuring, learning support services have appropriate direct input into the academic planning process in order to maintain the profile of support for student learning in the students' learning experience.

Taught postgraduate study

77 Postgraduate modules are taught on a model of 40 hours of contact (usually in a one-week block), followed by 110 hours of independent learning that might include various activities geared to the module assessment. Postgraduate students who met the review team considered that they obtained sufficient support through informal contacts with module staff during the independent-learning component, although the team considered that this model of postgraduate learning, without formal support for the independent learning element, might pose a challenge to the quality of the students' learning experience. The students expressed to the team their view that they would be concerned were there to be a move toward delivering the taught element through a predominantly e-learning approach. The College later informed the team that it had no plans to move toward greater levels of e-learning in its postgraduate programmes.

Collaborative arrangements

78 At the time of the review visit, Harper Adams University College had local partnership arrangements with Reaseheath College and Rodbaston College, both specialist further education colleges, and Warwickshire College, a general further education college. The College terminated its partnership with Larenstein International Agricultural College in 2000. The *SED* stated that the partnership was terminated because of the 'weak application of quality assurance arrangements by the partner college and the challenges faced in monitoring the entry qualifications of students from a global entry'. Larenstein students can, however, continue to be associate students of Harper Adams University College. The partnership agreement with China Agricultural University allows a limited number of graduates of the University to register on the College's taught postgraduate programmes. The College also has a number of links with commercial organisations, Government agencies and industry bodies and industry training agencies. These links involve both research and provision by the College of conferences and short courses. At the time of the review visit, only a very small proportion of the short course provision was credit-rated or led to an award of the College.

79 The *Academic Quality Assurance Manual* gives a detailed procedure for the initial establishment of a collaborative partnership, including a preliminary partnership review, the report of which makes recommendations to Academic Board to proceed, or not. Once Academic Board has approved the establishment of the partnership, a collaboration agreement and memorandum of cooperation is drawn

up, and a course validation event takes place using the same procedures used for in-house provision. A course manager from closely related courses at the College is appointed to provide support and guidance. Assessment arrangements are the same as in-house arrangements, unless variations have been agreed at validation. Course assessment boards are chaired by senior College staff and attended by College appointed external examiners. An annual course action plan, arising from the annual course report produced by the course team in the partner college, is developed to include any identified weaknesses, with proposed solutions, and identified features of good practice. This plan is submitted to ASC along with the report of the ASC appointed course monitor. The *Manual* specifies that there should be an annual review meeting of senior staff from the College and each partner, at least four months before the start of the next academic year, formally to review arrangements under the agreement and consider future plans.

80 The *SED* stated that there had been an extension to the programmes through Reaseheath and Warwickshire Colleges associated with 'lower levels of teaching input by Harper Adams' staff', and 'the validation of degree courses for at least part delivery at the partner colleges'. In the case of Warwickshire College, the extension was associated with 'future level-three teaching and assessment'. Consequently, a system of partnership development reviews was implemented in 2001, from which, the *SED* explained, 'a number of action plans were agreed and were implemented during 2001'. Partnership development reviews will be undertaken every three years chaired by a senior member of College staff. The purpose of these reviews is to develop a strategic overview of the partnership, to disseminate good practice and to review quality assurance arrangements and their adherence to QAA's *Code* in respect of collaborative provision.

81 At the time of the review visit, partnership development reviews had taken place at Rodbaston, Reaseheath and Warwickshire Colleges. The review team considered these reports to be thorough in their analysis. The partnership development review conducted at Rodbaston College led Harper Adams University College to transfer delivery for the HND in Animal Care, Science and Business Management to Harper Adams University College for the 2002 intake. The *SED* explained that this was partly due to concerns about the partner's higher education ethos.

82 The review team noted that, in a number of cases, courses were being provided in their entirety at partner colleges in areas where there was little or no expertise at the College. The team concluded that, while liaison at course management level was effective, there could be less confidence that liaison at the module level was

equally effective, given that in some modules the College could provide no equivalent expertise. Although the team found no evidence that this had compromised academic standards, given the intention of the College to expand appropriate collaborative partnerships, the College will no doubt wish to ensure that it proceeds with caution in areas where the relevant expertise is not contained within its own staff.

83 Staff of partnership colleges who met the review team reported that CVs of staff teaching on courses were submitted to the College, and that they would submit difficult admissions decisions to the College. The team also heard from representatives of partner colleges that, at present, some courses delivered by partner colleges can face problems of library resourcing. The College has a responsibility to ensure that learner support resources, including staff resources, for students on courses leading to its awards through collaborative arrangements are suitable for their purpose. While the team considered the College's output-based monitoring of its collaborative provision to be generally sound, it was less convinced of the soundness of the College's oversight of day-to-day management of students' learning opportunities and support in collaborative arrangements. The team recommends that the College should consider the advisability of developing operational protocols to ensure that staff in partner colleges are clear about their routine and regular responsibilities to the College, as the awarding body.

Commentary on the awarding body function

External examiners' reports

84 The College operates a two-tier system of subject and course assessment boards. The constitution, terms of reference, organisation and procedures of subject assessment boards and course assessment boards are set out in the *Manual*. A principal remit of subject assessment boards is to 'moderate and agree results for each module to ensure that standards are comparable to those of cognate subjects both within the College and in other higher education institutions'. A principal remit of course assessment boards is to 'make decisions on the progression and awards for all students registered for the named award(s) for which the board is responsible'. There are five subject assessment boards. Membership of subject assessment boards includes the head(s) of the academic subject group(s), the relevant module leaders and the subject external examiner(s). The *SED* explained that there are 'seven course assessment boards covering the five suites of undergraduate courses, the negotiated studies programmes and postgraduate courses'. Membership

of course assessment boards includes the course manager, all members of the course team, the chairs or nominees of relevant subject assessment boards, HEDQA and the course external examiner.

85 The *SED* described the roles of both subject and course external examiners as 'those of auditing, moderating and evaluation of teaching, learning and assessment processes through a process of socialisation, debate and written feedback'. 'Moderation' refers to the external examiner's scrutiny of a sample of student work and subsequent advice to an assessment board. External examiners do not mark students' work, and have no power of veto, although they have the right to submit confidential reports to the Chair of Academic Board.

86 An external examiner is recommended to Academic Board after nomination by the chair of the subject board (who acts as the main point of contact), and after consideration of the application by HEDQA and (through written communication) two independent external appraisers. The documents available to the review team demonstrated that this procedure was correctly followed.

87 In carrying out the prescribed duties, external examiners are expected to review module descriptors and assessment strategies, approve draft examination papers, sample marked examination scripts and coursework, and make judgements upon the standard of marking. They will also review other forms of assessment in the subject modules, especially in those cases where in-course assessment exceeds 30 per cent of the module assessment.

88 In practice, all examination scripts are normally made available, together with a sample of coursework, prior to the subject assessment board. External examiners read a selection of final-year projects, and usually read dissertations of all students who are subject to a *viva voce* examination. Guidance in the *Manual* to good practice in moderation suggests that 'a sample of six or six per cent (whichever is greater) of coursework scripts (representing the range of performance within the group) are photocopied and retained by each module leader for inspection by external examiners' (see also below, paragraph 99). The review team considered that this sample size was toward the lower end of accepted practice if a full range of student work is to be moderated.

89 External examiners are also asked to approve in advance all examination questions, but are not asked to approve all in-course assessments. Given that the overall assessment regime is a mixture of in-course assignments and examinations, and that course-based assignments contribute significantly to final awards, the College may wish to reflect upon the extent to

which the evidence supplied to external examiners enables them to be fully able to judge and advise upon the overall validity of assessment design and marking.

90 The *SED* stated that 'consideration of external examiners' reports is extremely thorough, in that full responses are considered at both the subject and course level and responses are approved through the course monitoring process'. Reports and associated responses are then collated by HEDQA to provide an overview report which includes a summary of actions to be taken. The *SED* also stated that 'this is believed to be an example of good practice which could be transferred to other university faculties or schools'.

91 The review team was therefore interested to study all the external examiners' reports that were made available to it, and to trace the follow-up of these reports through course monitoring and the overview report. The team found that, while the *SED* had accurately described the process in general, and that ASC and Academic Board were presented with helpful information for monitoring the external examiner system and its messages, there were instances of practice below this standard. For example, one external examiner in his most recent report expressed concern over two modules whose content he did not feel was entirely appropriate to master's level. The team was unable to find any response to this particular comment in the subsequent documentation. In other cases, concerns articulated with precision by external examiners had been answered with somewhat generalised responses.

92 The majority of the external examiners' reports studied by the review team demonstrated that external examiners were acting in a genuinely critical role. External examiners make their reports using an indicative guide provided by the College, in which they are informed of features upon which they 'may' wish to comment. The lack of a prescribed template for reporting, however, can lead to variability in the range and intensity of reporting, and makes it difficult consistently to summarise and quantify responses. The guide to reporting, moreover, does not require an external examiner to address whether previous comments, in the external examiner's view, have received a satisfactory response. The team would therefore encourage the College to revisit the structure of the external examiners' report template to ensure that external examiners reliably report on all aspects of quality and standards on which the College wishes to gather their comments and advice, including comment on the extent to which actions had been taken on the previous report.

Professional advisors

93 In addition to its external examiners, the College has professional advisors with appropriate industrial qualifications and experience for each suite of undergraduate courses. A professional advisor is required to act as an external reference point for the evaluation of workplace skills, to meet with students 'to form an impression of the way in which (they) have been prepared for employment', and to submit an annual report to Academic Board on 'an evaluation of the technical and generic skills required in the workplace, the extent to which students possess these, and the corresponding lessons for organisations of the curriculum and the placement period'. The review team was informed that the professional advisor was not involved directly with matters of academic standards. The team formed the view that the role given to professional advisors was an example of good practice, and welcomed the College's stated intention to further strengthen this arrangement.

Assessment

94 The review team examined the effectiveness of the College's policies in respect of assessment, and the way in which the College monitored their implementation in the context of managing the academic standards of its awards at institutional level.

95 The most recent QAA subject review report for Agriculture, Forestry and Agricultural Sciences, Food Sciences and Land and Property Management (February 1998), covered a majority of provision within the College. The report judged that the aspect of teaching, learning and assessment made a full contribution to stated objectives, noting that 'in the main, assessment is appropriate to levels and study and the learning objectives', and that 'a wide range of assessment is used, generally involving both continuously assessed projects and assignments, and those conducted under test conditions'. The report considered assessment design to be 'carefully considered in relation to the objectives, and moderated to ensure compliance with the assessment criteria'. Four years later, the current review team, on the evidence available, which by the terms of the review methodology excluded direct scrutiny of student work, generally supported the view that assessments were conscientiously designed and monitored, with the few caveats set out below.

96 The 1998 report also stated that 'in a small number of instances at level three...the examination questions were found to be insufficiently challenging'. The report concluded that provision could be improved by 'ensuring that students are given more appropriate opportunities to demonstrate successful achievement of

the intellectual objectives through more challenging activities at level three'. The current review team noted that the College had taken this comment seriously. Comprehensive consideration of the 'graduateness factor' had been urged by ASC, and critical analysis and, where necessary, consequent redesign of curricula, was evidenced in annual reports and validation reports. The team observed that external examiners' reports since the redesign of the curriculum had indicated that there was now greater analytical depth at levels two and three, although some reports continued to indicate that there was room for improvement.

Guidance and practice in assessment

97 The 1998 QAA subject review report stated that 'there is a declared policy on moderation for assignments and examinations'. The review team found this statement, four years later, to be somewhat ambiguous. The *Manual* contains a useful 'good practice guide' for double marking and for moderation, but from discussions with course and module leaders it became apparent to the team that this guide is one of 'good practice' rather than of institutional 'policy'. The review team therefore considered whether the guidance promoting good practice in assessment was sufficient to guard security of standards of marking, and enquired about the ways in which the College monitored at institutional level assessment practice in operation.

98 The College has taken steps to support comparability of standards by introducing a 20-point marking scheme for undergraduate and postgraduate assignments, designed to help standardise grade marking. The review team saw evidence that the use and appropriateness of the 20-point scale was subject to continuing scrutiny by ASC. Evidence made available to the team confirmed that cases of plagiarism were carefully considered and firmly dealt with.

99 The assessment guidance suggests that 'the sample for any assessment is at least six or six per cent (whichever is the greater) of the scripts', as in the sampling for scrutiny by external examiners, and that 'all module assessments are subject to double marking in a three-year cycle'. The review team found no reference to the precise terms or specifications for sampling. In discussion with staff, the team was informed that 10 per cent sampling was more usual in practice, and that sampling did cover the normal range of student performance (eg top, bottom, middle, borderline). The most recent reports of external examiners included several comments that evidence of second marking was not always apparent, a point confirmed in the November 2001 HEDQA overview report to ASC.

100 As in the case of sampling for scrutiny by external examiners, the review team considered that this sample size was towards the lower end of accepted practice if a full range of student work is to be double marked, and that its proper implementation therefore needs to be monitored with care. The team found no evidence of procedures for systematic monitoring of practice, as might be expected if the guidance were a matter of policy rather than 'good practice', and concluded that the College had only limited means of checking the extent to which assessment practice adhered to its guidance on good practice. The team would therefore invite the College to consider reviewing the role of assessment guidelines in determining institutional practice, with particular emphasis on explicit minimum requirements, and to consider the means by which assessment practices can be more fully monitored.

101 The review team explored the arrangements for assessment related to work placements, which are a significant feature of the College's provision, and discussed them with students and staff. The team noted that the institutional guidance on work placement assessment included guidance for assessors who are not members of College staff, and formed the view that the arrangements for assessments of this type were well-established and robust in design.

102 The review team also considered the arrangements for the individual negotiated studies programme, as an illustration of the management of standards in a non-prescribed curriculum context. From its reading of the minutes of relevant boards and committees, and from discussions with students, the team concluded that arrangements for validating individually negotiated programmes, and for assessing and moderating student work were conducted in accordance with regulations, and with sufficient robustness to assure the security of the academic standards of the awards.

103 There is no specific College policy on feedback to students, but there is general guidance, and the review team was given to understand that students could normally expect feedback on coursework within two weeks, and could request feedback on examinations. Meetings with students tended to support the view that students received useful feedback against assessment criteria, and the team recognised that the nature of the College fostered an ease with which students could have access to tutors for advice on assessments.

104 Regulations allow academic discretion to come into play at a number of points, for example in extension of assessment deadlines, permitted referral of a major project and discretion in award classification, including the condonement of marginal fails. Of these, condonement is particularly significant because of its

potential effect on the awards granted to individual students. The review team found evidence of what may be considered to be variable degrees of practice across boards in relation to condonement discretion.

105 While this apparent variation in application of discretion may have been a result of real differences in individual cases, the review team was not convinced that practice in relation to condonement decisions was monitored to investigate comparability of decision making. This view was reinforced by written evidence of some concerns within the College over possible variation in application of discretion in condonement decisions.

106 The review team noted the comment in the November 2001 overview by HEDQA on awards and outcomes of assessment that 'relatively generous progression regulations, with regards level of permitted "trailed" modules, possibly contributes to the College's good completion rates for degree students'. While welcoming the College's awareness of an area that it will, no doubt, be carefully monitoring, the team formed the view that the combination of relatively generous progression regulations and the possibly cumulative effects of variability in condonement practice should also be monitored with care. The team noted with interest that the College had recently undertaken a useful benchmarking of its regulations against those of five other institutions offering agriculture-related subjects (see above, paragraph 69), which was considered to be a feature of good practice. Nevertheless, the College might wish to consider monitoring the ways in which academic discretion is applied in relation to student achievement.

Commentary on the College's self-awareness and its three year development plan

107 The SED outlined the College's perceptions of its strengths and limitations, and its three-year strategy for quality enhancement. The perceived strengths might be summarised as: a self critical community, with review mechanisms including a high level of external advice and scrutiny; effective committees; compliance with QAA's *Code*; demonstrable innovation in support of its mission; effective means of disseminating good practice; and high levels of staff involvement in the wider academic and professional communities. The review team judged those strengths to be confirmed by the evidence presented during this review. The *SED* also claimed 'exemplary mechanisms for considering and responding to external examiners reports' and 'flexible but rigorous arrangements for managing quality assurance within the collaborative provision'. While the team was generally satisfied that external

examining and collaborative provision are safely managed, it would be cautious about the use of the terms 'exemplary' and 'rigorous' in these contexts.

108 The *SED* prioritised a set of 'limitations' which may be summarised as the need: to implement a transparent resource allocation model to support academic planning; for clearer specification of responsibilities of key managers in relation to academic planning; to enhance integration of academic and resource planning through review of Academic Board and its committees; and for project management systems to support organisational change. These limitations, expressed by the College as 'needs', reflect its major aim of improving the efficiency of academic planning processes. Two other areas were noted in the *SED*: the scope to reduce the assessment burden on students; and the need to keep collaborative arrangements under continuous review.

109 The *SED* outlined the College's three-year strategy for quality enhancement by identifying aims based upon its perceived limitations and needs, accompanied by plans to address those aims and the timescales and responsibilities for addressing them. The review team considered carefully how these aims and the plans to address them might impact on the College's management of quality and standards. The team was helped in this consideration by frank and open discussions with senior staff, and by documents which provided an update on the College's strategic plans for academic reorganisation, and on its deeper analysis of potential fault lines in its current organisation. The team was initially surprised by the considerable range and scale of the organisational changes that were planned. The proposed managerial and operational changes included the College's responses to concerns that the team itself identified during the review, for example: the role of deans in academic management; the matrix relationship of course managers and heads of group; the volume of work undertaken by ASC; an insufficiently clear set of strategic planning responsibilities within the committee structure; and the wide remit of the HEDQA role with its combination of operational and auditing responsibilities. The broad sweep of the College's self-evaluation thus tended to be in harmony with the team's analysis. Overall, the team formed a view of the College as an institution which was undertaking critical self-evaluation of its structures and processes, and was generally taking appropriate steps to address limitations and build upon strengths.

110 The review team considered to what extent the planned restructuring, designed to support a re-framed and interconnected set of institutional strategies, was likely to continue to secure and enhance the institution's capacity to manage the quality of educational provision and the academic standards of

its awards. The team formed the view that the reorganisation of academic management and committees was a sensible move, likely to produce a cleaner structure for accountability in relation to quality and standards. The new management roles would also seem to put the College in a better position for managing change effectively. The team was not in a position to take a long view of the viability of the College's strategic intentions, but considered that those intentions had been carefully considered, including consideration of risk, and that the College's favoured project-management approach to the management of change was appropriate.

Summary

111 Harper Adams University College is the UK's largest single provider of higher education serving the rural community and those industries which utilise the land and its produce. Its mission is 'to be the United Kingdom's premier specialist provider of higher education for the diverse industries, professions and communities associated with the countryside: its use, produce and environmental management'. The College achieved degree-awarding powers in 1996 for undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. It registers students for research degrees under devolved authority from the Open University, and has full responsibility for the conduct of its research degree programmes, apart from the approval of external examiners and the conferment of degrees. The findings of this review confirm that the College is managing effectively its policies and procedures for determining and assuring the quality of its educational provision and the standard of awards granted in its name.

112 The major committees and key staff with responsibility for quality and standards receive sufficient information and data to support those responsibilities, although the workload of ASC is very substantial. The combined operational, audit and strategic functions of that Committee could pose a risk to quality and standards if the workload causes slippage in the Committee's activities. There would be advantage in re-focusing the Committee's crucial role in audit and monitoring quality assurance procedures as part of the proposed revision of the academic and management structures. The reorientation of the modular courses around five subject groups with devolved budgetary control should enable quality management to be better linked to resource planning at the operational level of courses and modules.

113 Procedures for the academic management of modules and courses are sound and are capable of assuring the quality of learning opportunities. The use of course monitors to act as information conduits

between institutional and programme levels is a feature of good practice. Validation and approval arrangements are sufficiently robust to guarantee proper scrutiny of curriculum design when applied to individual programmes. Review and monitoring processes are generally robust, interactive, well-documented and followed up. The mass revalidation event of January 2000, and its follow up, was less robust.

114 External examiners' reports are generally used effectively, although there is some variability in the quality of reporting. In the main, issues raised in the reports are followed up, with actions monitored. The use of professional advisors to support the development and assessment of students' workplace skills is a feature of good practice. The College is acting to ensure an appropriate level-three challenge in modules at advanced levels of study, as recommended in the report of the 1998 QAA subject review. A feature of good practice is the benchmarking of regulations against those of similar institutions to help establish comparability. Assessment regulations, guidelines and practice are generally appropriate to maintain the security of academic standards, but arrangements for monitoring marking practice and the exercise of discretion are limited. There is no immediate risk to academic standards, although the College will need to guard against potential standards drift in borderline cases as a result of variable practice in the application of condonement.

115 Appropriate use is made of national references for quality assurance, including the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, professional body guidance and QAA's *Code*. Adherence to the *Code* is carefully monitored, and provides a basis for improvement of the College's own codes and policies. Programme specifications are suitable for their purpose.

116 Student views are sought systematically and action is taken on them. The identification of modules with particularly high or low scores in student evaluations for a more formal review is a feature of good practice. Students are well-supported in their learning by academic tutors and central services, and the work placement which is a feature of the College's programmes is well-managed in relation to quality and standards.

117 The College's management of the quality and standards of its collaborative provision is generally sound, with good working relationships between its own staff and the staff of its partner institutions. Arrangements for assuring the quality and standards of modules are more problematic when expertise in the subject is not present within the College's own staffing complement.

118 The College has good self-awareness of the strengths and limitations of its capacity for effective management of the quality of its academic provision.

It is well-aware of the challenges facing a relatively small, specialised institution with a limited resource base, operating in a competitive market, and with a wide set of strategic intentions which inevitably will sometimes work with, and sometimes against, each other. The proposed reorganisation of the academic management structure should help the College successfully to take on those challenges. The College is reflective in its strategic vision for learning and teaching. The findings of the review support a view of the College as a self-evaluative academic community.

119 Overall, the findings of the review support broad confidence in Harper Adams University College as an effective institution able properly to discharge its academic obligations as a responsible higher education institution and qualifications awarding body.

Action points

120 As Harper Adams University College continues to develop its procedures for the management of the quality of its provision and for the security of its awards, it should consider the advisability of:

- i reflecting upon the short-comings of the methodology used for the major revalidation exercise of January 2000, and of the limitations that this methodology created for the rigour of the exercise and of subsequent follow up (paragraphs 54 to 57);
- ii developing operational protocols for the management of its collaborative arrangements to enable it to be fully confident that it has ongoing control of all the collaborative provision leading to its awards (paragraphs 82 and 83);

and the desirability of:

- iii reviewing the balance between the strategic and operational responsibilities of the Academic Standards Committee (paragraphs 39 and 40);
- iv monitoring the new processes of module review for their effectiveness in evaluating and informing stakeholders about the quality of modules (paragraph 47);
- v making more opportunities for the central services that provide student support for learning at operational level to have formal input into academic strategic planning (paragraph 76);
- vi revisiting the structure of the external examiners' report template to ensure that external examiners reliably report on all aspects of quality and standards on which the College wishes to gather their comment and advice (paragraph 92);

- vii reviewing the role of assessment guidelines in determining institutional practice, with particular emphasis on explicit minimum requirements, and considering the means by which assessment practices can be more fully monitored (paragraph 100);
- viii monitoring the ways in which academic discretion is applied in relation to student achievement (paragraph 106).

Appendix 1

Harper Adams University College facts and figures 2001-02*

History

Harper Adams Agricultural College was formed in 1901 as an independent institution, following the private bequest of property and an agricultural estate in Shropshire, in order to train men and women for careers in agriculture and land-based enterprises. In 2002, its campus is based on the original estate, although it has been expanded significantly. The various government's agricultural departments and ministries provided funding until 1963. In 1963 it became a direct grant establishment of the Department of Education and Science and latterly an incorporated institution under PCFC and now HEFCE.

In 1983 Harper Adams received approval for delivering and maintaining the academic standards of CNAA awards. In 1992 it became accredited to award degrees of the Open University. In 1996 Harper Adams was granted its own taught degree awarding powers by the Privy Council and in 2001 was granted fully devolved authority by the Open University to register students for its higher research degrees.

Mission

To be the United Kingdom's premier specialist provider of higher education for the diverse industries, professions and communities associated with the countryside; its use, produce and environmental management.

Academic Organisation

Harper Adams' academic organisation is based on two schools, which are supported by a number of cross institutional functional units:

School of Agriculture:

Animal Production and Science Group
Crop Production and Science Group
Engineering Group

School of Management:

Land Management and Rural Economy Group
Business Management and Marketing Group

Students are not designated to these units but to cross-college course teams:

Agriculture
Animal Health & Science
Business and Agri-food Marketing
Countryside, Environment & Land Management
Engineering
Negotiated Study
Postgraduate
Access

*as provided by Harper Adams University College

Number of students

		2001-02	2001-02	2000-01	1999-00	1998-99
Harper Adams						
Undergraduate courses		First year entry	All cohorts	All cohorts	All cohorts	All cohorts
Agriculture	HND	40	170	214	230	239
	Degree	73	330	350	381	411
Animal Health & Science	Degree	9	58	49	33	15
Business & Agri-food	HND	30	78	77	77	85
Marketing	Degree	31	127	143	149	166
Countryside	HND	9	19	14	-	-
Environment & Land Management	Degree	65	255	263	250	223
Engineering	HND	21	47	42	41	49
	Degree	34	105	104	100	100
Associate & Negotiated Study		18	40	80	93	70
Non Honours Direct Entrants		42	42	42	43	28
Access Course		44	44	39	40	32
Postgraduate Courses	Taught	na	94	62	51	25
	Research	na	42	31	33	29
Sub total		416	1,451	1,510	1,521	1,472
Reaseheath College						
Dairy Herd Management	HNC	6	17	19	-	-
	HND	7	7	-	-	-
Equine	HND	14	18	10	-	-
	Degree	4	6	2	-	-
Food Technology	HNC	4	11	24	-	-
	HND	6	18	23	30	31
Golf, Countryside & Landscape	HNC	8	31	27	-	-
	HND	11	31	34	40	49
Rodbaston College						
Animal Care	HND	18	35	42	41	37
Warwickshire College						
Animal Welfare	HND	15	29	32	18	-
Arboriculture	HND	5	10	5	-	-
Equine	Foundation degree	31	31	-	-	-
	HND	31	51	30	-	-
	Degree	48	48	-	-	-
Sub total		208	343	248	129	117
Overall total		624	1,794	1,758	1,650	1,589

Student characteristics (total population)

Gender	Full-time	Part-time	Total
Male	927	112	1,039
Female	658	97	755
Total	1,585	209	1,794

Mature students

Proportion of full-time undergraduate population aged 21 or over on entry - 12 per cent
 Proportion of part-time undergraduate population aged 21 or over on entry - 16 per cent

Domicile

	UK	Other EU	Overseas	Total
Undergraduate	1,479	119	24	1,622
Postgraduate (taught)	73	6	12	91
Postgraduate (research)	34	2	3	39
Total	1,586	127	39	1,752

Institutional staff

	Full-time	Part-time
Number of staff employed by the institution	236	116
Number of academic/research staff	81	10

Appendix 2*

List of the Institution's collaborative partnerships (2001-02)

Validated programmes

None

Franchised programmes

External institution

Programme title

Reaseheath College

HNC/D Food Technology

HNC/D Golf Course Management

BSc Equine Studies, Business Management & Marketing

HND Equine Management

HNC/D Dairy Herd Management

HNC Countryside Management

HND Landscape Management

Rodbaston College

HND Animal Care, Science & Business Management

Warwickshire College

HND Animal Welfare & Management

BA/BSc Equine Studies/Science suite of awards

FdSc Equine Studies

HND Equine Studies/Science suite of awards

HND Arboriculture

Franchised modules

None

Other collaborative programmes

Larenstein International Agricultural College, Netherlands: Students from LIAC are able to study as Associate Students at Harper Adams University College, which will count towards the LIAC award.

China Agricultural University, China: Recruitment of CAU graduates on to MSc programmes delivered at Harper Adams.

*As supplied by Harper Adams University College

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