QAA

Institutional audit

Harper Adams University College

MARCH 2010

Preface

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

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

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

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

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner

- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications

- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews and on feedback from stakeholders.

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

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of awards

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes

- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

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

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students

- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences

- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Harper Adams University College (the University College) from 8 to 12 March 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the institution offers.

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

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

In the audit team's view, the institution's approach to quality enhancement is informed by strategic direction, with mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and dissemination. In delivering improvements to students' learning opportunities, it has taken forward the priorities of skills development, learner support, and workplace and e-learning.

Postgraduate research students

In the audit team's view, the overall arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience, as reflected in positive student feedback. While the institution's procedures are sufficient to meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, the team has recommended revisions in relation to research students' training.

Published information

In the audit team's view, the institution has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. It meets the current national expectations for public information on teaching quality.

Features of good practice

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

- the active involvement of employers and other professional advisers in planning and developing the curriculum and in devising approaches for its effective delivery

- the enhancement of the quality and accessibility of a range of activities supporting the student learning experience through the implementation of special programmes under the collective name of Aspire (Advancing skills for professionals in the rural economy)

- the development by the University College of employer-linked provision through an approach that seeks to integrate this with its other collaborative provision in respect of quality assurance requirements.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the institution considers further action in some areas.

The team advises the institution to:

- revise procedures relating to research students' training, clarifying the means of delivery and the expectations placed on students, in particular making explicit which aspects of the training are mandatory.

It would be desirable for the institution to:

- reinforce the role of the personal tutor in fostering amongst undergraduate students a clear understanding of the purpose and importance of personal development planning and in supporting the process

- strengthen the mechanisms for monitoring the completeness and accuracy of information relating to the University College on partner websites.

Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice*

- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements

- programme specifications.

The audit found that the institution took due account of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Report

1   An Institutional audit of Harper Adams University College was undertaken during the week commencing 8 March 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the institution's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2   The audit team comprised Professor H Grainger, Dr K King, Dr R Latto, Professor G Roberts and Ms R Watson, auditors, and Ms H Placito, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   Harper Adams University College (the University College), specialising in land-based subjects has degree awarding powers for taught and research degrees. Its mission is to provide higher education for the delivery of a sustainable food chain and rural economies. Key aspects of its strategy to achieve this mission are industry links, knowledge transfer to the rural economy and raising the institution's profile internationally. Harper Adams is one of two university colleges at the hub of the Rural Employer Engagement Development Network (REEDNet), which brings together all the land-based colleges in England and whose task is to stimulate and support the rural economy through an expansion of recognised work-based qualifications.

4   The University College is organised into five academic departments, each of which contribute modules to the integrated modular scheme for undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses, based on principles of credit accumulation. There are (in 2009-10) 118 academic staff, out of a total staff complement of 453. In 2009-10, the University College has 1,739 undergraduate students, 166 taught postgraduate students and 29 postgraduate research students, giving a total of 1,934. Approximately 46 per cent of undergraduate students are on courses accredited by professional bodies and virtually all incorporate a work placement. In addition, there are 902 students at partner colleges studying on courses of at least 60 credits that are accredited by the University College and lead to its awards. Through its employer engagement programme, it also has links with a number of employers and professional bodies.

5   Under the present arrangements for the management of academic quality and standards, the Academic Board has overall responsibility for the institution's learning and teaching strategy and the regulation of academic quality and standards. Implementing procedures for maintaining standards is the responsibility of the Academic Standards Committee and the Research Degree Standards Committee, while the Collaborative Programmes Management Committee has responsibility for the effectiveness of partnership arrangements. The Academic Planning and Resources Committee takes an overview of the resource implications of the portfolio of courses offered by the University College. The regulations and guidance for quality assurance processes are specified fully in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual, which is subject to rolling review to keep it up to date with both internal and external requirements.

6   Academic departments are responsible for the delivery of modules. Course managers, assisted by senior tutors, chair course committees and are responsible for the operational management of cognate suites of courses, which contain modules from several departments. Taught postgraduate programmes have a separate course manager. A single course committee for short courses, the Employer Engagement Courses Committee, chaired by the REEDNet Centre Manager, reports additionally to the Employer Engagement Accreditation and Validation Committee.

7   The audit team found that the institution had put in place a coherent system for the management of academic quality and standards, which is being kept under active review with the object of streamlining processes and structures, where appropriate.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

8   The standards of awards are established and subsequently maintained through approval, monitoring and review processes that also deal with the learning opportunities of students. Under the institution's credit-rating system, courses leading to an award at a particular level must comprise a complement of modules at levels appropriate to the level of the award which, taken together, make up the required amount of credit for that award. The same system forms the basis of the accreditation service the University College offers through REEDNet.

9   Approval of courses is a two-stage process, involving an outline proposal, then a full submission, to relevant committees, followed by a validation event, conducted by an appropriately constituted panel that includes external membership. The panel report, together with the approved programme specification, constitutes the definitive course documents.

10   Annual monitoring is based on reporting at both subject and course levels, with the two being brought together in an overview at institutional level. Subject reports deal with the modules offered within a specific subject area; they have a focus on standards issues arising from assessment boards and are particularly informed by external examiner comment. Course reports are broader-based, dealing fully with learning opportunities, but may also be informed by subject reports. Both form an input to an academic overview report, a comprehensive document that also draws directly on information from validation events, assessment boards, external examiner reports and student surveys.

11   Periodic review is on a six-year cycle leading to revalidation, with most courses being covered through successive events in the same year (most recently 2008-09), leading to a synchronised move to a modified set of courses a year later. The review process follows the same route as for the approval of new courses and is based on a critical appraisal report of the existing courses.

12   The current approval and review processes represent the result of streamlining and strengthening earlier processes, including the introduction of detailed guidance and reporting templates to facilitate consistency. They are applied equally to courses delivered at partner colleges leading to awards of the University College, with close variants implemented for 'short' courses (defined as 80 credits or less) developed with or for employers. Externality continues to be a strong feature and the audit team identifies as good practice the active involvement of employers and other professional advisers in planning and developing the curriculum and in devising approaches for its effective delivery.

13   In its procedures, the University College defines the role of external examiner as to audit and moderate the standards of its awards against those set in other higher education institutions. The system is structured so that a subset of external examiners from the subject level operates at the course level and a separate set (known as taught board external examiners) operates at institutional level across all courses. This reflects the structure of assessment boards, whose membership includes the relevant external examiners. The boards see that judgements about student performance are passed from subject to course level, while parity is maintained across courses. Different arrangements operate for research degrees (see paragraph 54).

14   Responses to external examiner reports are channelled upwards from subject to course level and are ultimately collated at institutional level in the annual academic overview report. The audit team found that external examiner comments were being thoroughly addressed through internal processes, but considered that responsibilities for responding to the external examiners themselves might usefully be clarified in written procedures.

15   In addition to external examiners, professional advisers with appropriate industrial experience are appointed to support undergraduate courses and other courses delivered in the workplace. The audit team considered that the respective roles of external examiner and professional adviser, while having similar status, were being kept appropriately distinct (see also paragraph 12).

16   The University College requires its awards to be correctly positioned according to the level within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and this, together with the associated national guidance on credit frameworks have evidently informed the credit values assigned under the modular scheme. Programme specifications follow a common template, which requires referencing to qualification and subject benchmark statements and any other benchmarks used to establish standards. Where relevant, courses are developed to meet requirements for accreditation by professional bodies. The audit team found that the University College makes good use of its strong links with employers and professional bodies, whose accreditation reports are also used to inform annual course monitoring (see also paragraph 12). It also keeps abreast of revisions to the *Code of practice* and developments within the European Higher Education Area: the institution first issued detailed transcripts to students in 2009.

17   Assessment regulations are standard across the modular scheme and apply equally to collaborative provision. They are reviewed annually and, where appropriate, students' views are taken into account. They are published for students in course handbooks and periodically reinforced through oral briefings. Programme specifications (published in an abridged form in course handbooks) explain the relationship between curriculum and assessment, while module descriptors clearly indicate the distribution of marks between different assessment tasks. Students were positive about the information they received on assessment; inevitably there were comments made about variability in the quality and speed of feedback on assessment, but also general acknowledgement that improvements were being made. Students have access to external examiner reports through their representatives on course committees (see paragraph 26).

18   The assessment process is supported by a range of templates, detailed operational guidance and examples of good practice, all intended to achieve consistent standards within a scheme where individual modules may contribute to several courses. Considerable emphasis is given to moderation of assessment tasks and the marking and moderation of students' results. Anonymous marking operates for both examinations and coursework, and samples of marked and double-marked assessments are made available for external examiner scrutiny.

19   There are two levels of assessment boards. Subject assessment boards deal with student performance and academic standards at module level. Course assessment boards are responsible for awards and progression. In addition, there is a recently established REEDNet Assessment Board for short employer-linked courses. The way that assessment boards conduct their business is monitored through the reports of taught board external examiners, a small team especially appointed to see that procedures and regulations are applied consistently across course assessment boards through attendance at these boards. Their comments were overwhelmingly positive.

20   A wide variety of data is used in annual course monitoring and periodic review, and particularly in the annual academic overview reports. The audit team found that the University College was making good use of statistical information at subject, course and institutional levels, enabling it to make comparisons and highlight trends in student performance and progression data, as a basis for operational and strategic decision making.

21   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

22   In reviewing its policies and procedures with respect to the learning opportunities of students, the University College seeks to verify their continued alignment with the *Code of practice*. Qualification and subject benchmark statements and professional body requirements are referenced in the initial design and review of courses in the context of learning opportunities, as well as the standards of awards.

23   The processes of course approval, monitoring and review are described above (see paragraphs 9 to 11). This section highlights points of particular relevance to the learning opportunities of students (teaching, learning resources and student support). Consideration of staffing and learning resources is an important part of the approval process for new courses and criteria for approval used by the validation panel include the appropriateness of resource provision and the suitability of the staff, as demonstrated by their qualifications, scholarship, research and outreach activity.

24   Annual course reports seen by the audit team contained effective reviews of the resources and learning opportunities available to students, together with recommendations for enhancements, based on information from students, staff, external professional advisers and employers. Subject review reports may also deal with matters relating to learning opportunities raised by external examiners and professional advisers (see also paragraph 12). The critical appraisal report for periodic review requires an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the learning experience from the perspectives of staff, students, employers and professional bodies. Examples of the reports seen by the team were comprehensive and suitably evaluative.

25   The University College carries out a number of surveys to obtain student feedback, in particular a wide-ranging annual survey, covering course organisation and management, as well as central library and student services. At module level, students are asked to rate modules on a scale (from very poor to excellent) and there is a requirement to investigate and report on particularly low, or high, scoring modules in annual subject review. There is separate feedback on student placements and, from new students, on admission and induction processes and the utility of pre-entry information. The National Student Survey (NSS) provides a supplementary source. The results of all these surveys are drawn together in the annual academic overview report. Research students are surveyed using the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. The audit team concluded that there was extensive and effective use made of management information collected from students in maintaining the quality of learning opportunities.

26   There is very full student engagement with quality assurance processes through student representation on every relevant committee at both institutional and course level. Minutes of course committees indicated a good balance of staff and student members, with the students taking a full part in meetings. Students do not currently sit on review panels for validation and revalidation, but they are involved, through course committees, in preparing the documentation for them and the panels obtain information on student views from annual course surveys and from student meetings in periodic review. Students also sit on the institutional committee which approves the decisions of review panels. Audit team meetings with both staff and students revealed that there were also very good informal channels of communication between these groups, facilitated by the institution's small size.

27   Strengthening the relationship between staff research and scholarship and the course curriculum is a strategic objective for the University College. Progress is tracked through measuring the percentage of modules that draw on staff research, scholarship or outreach activity. A recent development is the creation of a new post of Research Coordinator, with responsibilities for research and knowledge transfer, including advising on research that can underpin the curriculum. The linkage between research and teaching is verified through course validation, while annual monitoring assures that it is maintained or developed. Validation reports indicated thorough probing by review panels in this area, while annual subject review reports were meticulous in mapping publications to modules. Students, meanwhile, have the opportunity to develop their own research skills through project work (which forms a substantive part of courses) and through level-specific preparatory modules.

28   A work placement (typically one-year) is an integral part of all undergraduate courses and the placement is firmly and effectively embedded within the institution's support structures, as confirmed by students. Placement learning is one of the development themes of the Aspire (Advancing skills for professionals in the rural economy) programme, which secured public funding through a scheme to establish centres for excellence in teaching and learning. Two Aspire fellowships have been established to develop placement learning and disseminate good practice internally and externally.

29   Both e-learning and work-based learning are also Aspire development themes. There has been a significant expansion in e-learning facilitated by the virtual learning environment (VLE), first introduced in September 2006. Good practice has been encouraged through an informal user group of teaching staff and disseminated through a targeted programme of staff development, supported by handbooks, published under the Aspire brand. The audit team found that the institution was taking a measured, step-by-step approach to the development of e-learning, having set realistic targets for use of the VLE, which it was monitoring through its executive structure. Distance-learning is confined to a single employer-linked course. There are no current plans to extend this type of provision.

30   The learning opportunities of students are also supported through the admissions process and by the provision of various institution-wide learning resources and services. The NSS and internal surveys indicate that students view the library and information technology resources as excellent. Students are also extremely positive about the laboratories and farm facilities. The audit team found that the institution was managing and developing its learning resources well, responding effectively to both external advice and changing student needs.

31   The institution's current admissions policy takes account of revisions to the *Code of practice, Section 3: Students with disabilities*, and latest advice from the UK Borders Agency regarding international students. It is published on the University College website, together with details of admissions requirements, which include English language qualifications for applicants from outside the UK. Strategies for widening participation have been informed by its involvement in projects focusing on rural access to higher education and its objective to improve the impact of knowledge transfer on rural businesses. The admissions policy and process are monitored through analysis of admissions data and through information from an internal survey of new students.

32   There is an integrated approach to student support, which links the support provided at course and departmental level with that provided by central services, in particular the learner support team. New entrants are screened to identify whether they might benefit from learner support, while disability awareness training is mandatory for all staff. Students were highly complimentary about the information and guidance they received from course managers and senior tutors, while the open-door policy of staff meant that most difficulties could be resolved before they became significant problems. Students also valued the input of their course placement manager and placement tutor. The strength of student support is reflected in positive NSS results.

33   In only one area were students hesitant about the support available: personal development planning, in particular the involvement of the personal tutor. Staff also seemed unclear about the role of the personal tutor in this process. The audit team therefore considers it desirable for the University College to reinforce the role of the personal tutor in fostering among undergraduate students a clear understanding of the purpose and importance of personal development planning and in supporting the process.

34   It became apparent to the audit team that the Aspire programme with its overlapping themes of learner support, professional skills development, work placement, work-based learning and e-learning was highly instrumental in strengthening the links between the various strands of student support. Special support is available for international students, including a two-week orientation programme, while in the context of Foundation Degree students, an academic guidance tutor has been appointed to support their transition to higher education – support that

is being extended to other students identified as needing it. The team found that student support arrangements were comprehensive and well integrated; it identifies as good practice the enhancement of the quality and accessibility of a range of activities supporting the student learning experience through the implementation of special programmes under the collective name of Aspire.

35   New academic staff appointments are required to become fellows of the Higher Education Academy within three years. Those having no prior experience in higher education or no qualification accredited by the Academy must study towards a qualification in order to gain fellowship. Induction for new staff incorporates sessions on teaching, learning and assessment and they are assigned a mentor for their first two years. The same induction and mentoring arrangements are also open to research students. Formal training in teaching is provided through a postgraduate certificate, run by Keele University and accredited by the Academy. The audit team found that induction and mentoring were appreciated by new staff, while those who had recently completed the postgraduate certificate had found the course rewarding.

36   As part of their further development, academic staff engage in peer-to-peer teaching observations organised at departmental level. The process is developmental, its purpose being to assist staff to reflect on their individual development needs. It is therefore a preparation for the annual performance and development review which all staff undergo, and which results in agreed action points that take into account individual development needs. The completion of individual performance and development reviews also helps to determine generic staff development priorities.

37   Since 2005, the Aspire programme has sponsored award schemes for staff, based on peer and student nomination, which recognise and reward staff, including partner staff, who make a significant contribution to teaching, learner support or to the wider student experience. Award winners share good practice through specially organised workshops, which also provide a broader staff development opportunity.

38   The overall conclusion reached by the audit team is that **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

39   The University College seeks to deliver quality enhancement by driving continuous improvement through quality assurance processes that identify opportunities for building on strengths, by developing the pedagogic skills of staff and disseminating good practice, and by implementing special initiatives. The Aspire programme has been an important catalyst. Recent institutional initiatives have been concerned with developing the organisational structures to support part-time and work-based learners, given the expansion brought about through REEDNet. Strategic direction is based on the Learning and Teaching Strategy, with progress reviewed annually at institutional level using performance indicators.

40   In the audit team's view, the institution's approach to quality enhancement is informed by strategic direction, with mechanisms in place for implementation, monitoring and dissemination. In delivering improvements to students' learning opportunities, it has taken forward the priorities of skills development, learner support and workplace and e-learning.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

41   The majority of the award-bearing courses delivered through collaborative arrangements are Foundation Degrees whose progression routes are to 'top-up' honours degrees at either the partner college or Harper Adams. Collaboration between the University College and its employer partners is centred on courses that lead to the award of credit, which may translate into a recognised higher education award. Partnerships involved in providing such courses are included in the institutional register of collaborative provision along with its partnerships with educational institutions. The register is published on the University College website.

42   The institution draws a distinction in its procedures between employer-linked courses of up to 80 credits and courses in excess of 80 credits, with only the latter being subject to supplementary quality assurance procedures that deal with the establishment and operation of the partnership, as distinct from the courses, to which mainstream procedures apply. The audit team considered this definition to be a reasonable interpretation of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

43   The process of establishing a partnership comprises several stages. Approval of an outline proposal leads to due diligence, following which a panel conducts a preliminary partnership review. If this is approved there is a course validation event at the partner's premises. A streamlined version of this process may be applied to partnerships with employers, bringing together partnership review and course validation in a single event. The audit team looked at several examples of contractual agreements between the University College and its partners; these seemed to be comprehensive, were consistent with guidance set out in the *Code of practice*, and were duly signed by respective parties. A standard agreement to be used for employer-linked courses of up to 80 credits was available in draft.

44   Monitoring the 'day-to-day' operation of the partnership is the responsibility of a partnership coordinator appointed by the University College, and the audit team saw several examples of effective monitoring. However, the main mechanism for monitoring partnerships is partnership review, which for educational partnerships occurs annually and for employer partnerships according to specifically agreed arrangements. It is additional to the annual course monitoring process and its purpose is to review quality assurance arrangements and to establish an action plan for the next year. The reports on partnership reviews seen by the audit team were positive in tone, but also suitably analytic.

45   Publicity and marketing materials produced by the partner relating to the collaboration are subject to regular monitoring through the annual partnership review, as well as ad hoc checks during the year. Based on its own review of online information, which uncovered certain shortcomings, the audit team considers it desirable for the University College to strengthen the mechanisms for monitoring the completeness and accuracy of information relating to the University College on partner websites.

46   The procedures for annual course monitoring and periodic review and revalidation (see paragraphs 9 to 11), apply equally to partners, and the audit team was able to verify that issues relating to collaborative provision featured prominently, even in overview reporting at institutional level. The arrangements for assessment and external examining (see paragraphs 13; 17 to 19) are also applied in partner colleges. Students' assessment results are processed through the University College database and used to produce the relevant transcript for each student. These show the University College as the awarding institution and name the partner as a teaching institution. Transcripts for students from employer-linked courses take the same form.

47   The University College characterises its current position as one of consolidation, in which it continues to adapt and review its processes, particularly in relation to its relatively new employer-related initiatives, so as to build on the institution's own best practice and that elsewhere in the higher education sector. The audit team identifies as good practice the development by the University College of employer-linked provision through an approach that seeks to integrate this with its other collaborative provision in respect of quality assurance requirements.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

48   The number of research students is relatively small (29) and only modest expansion is envisaged. In relation to research, the University College sees its role as providing a strong presence in applied research, with the capacity to translate research into practice. Overall responsibility for research is the remit of the Vice Principal, assisted by the Research Coordinator. The Research Degrees Standards Committee is responsible for developing policy and procedures pertaining to research degrees. Heads of department have responsibilities for the research activities of their staff and students. Within departments, research students are effectively treated as staff members; those who met the audit team saw this as important in facilitating interaction with academic colleagues.

49   There are written procedures for the management and quality assurance of both staff research and postgraduate research. A student handbook gives further details, while a handbook for supervisors is in draft. Regular monitoring of arrangements for research degrees is through an annual report considered at various levels of the committee structure. This combines a review of the previous year's activity, drawing on national benchmarks, and an action plan for the coming year. The audit team found these reports to be comprehensive, with clear recommendations and action points.

50   All prospective research students are interviewed by the Research Coordinator and potential supervisor; those accepted have individual induction and receive a copy of the Postgraduate Research Students' Handbook. Students who met the audit team were complimentary about admissions and induction processes. Each student has a supervisory team comprising a main supervisor (termed director of studies) and at least one secondary supervisor. The students were clear about the respective roles of members of their supervisory team and valued the accessibility of their director of studies. The supervisors' handbook will enlarge on procedural requirements in relation to admissions and supervisors' workloads and responsibilities.

51   Research students are required to attend a series of formal supervisory meetings of which records are kept on standard report forms. These are in addition to the regular, but more informal, progress meetings. The supervisory team prepares a first-year assessment report based on a significant piece of work by the student and an oral examination (conducted independently of the supervisory team) and makes a recommendation for the student to be registered for either MPhil or PhD. The audit team considered the first-year assessment to be a transparent process, supported by published assessment criteria and detailed feedback, enabling students to obtain a realistic view of progress achieved. A similar process occurs at the end of second year, this time based on submission by the student of a refereed or conference paper.

52   The University College recognises that research students, as well as developing research skills, need to develop a broader set of personal and professional skills. Its procedures differentiate between individual training to be provided by the supervisory team and more generic training to be provided centrally, and assign responsibility for making students aware of training opportunities to their director of studies. However, the audit team found a lack of clarity in the descriptions and requirements of postgraduate training in published documentation available to students. The status of the Postgraduate Certificate in Skills for Researchers within the generic training programme was unclear, as was that of the annual researchers' colloquium and other available support sessions. The team heard mixed comments from students as to their understanding of the compulsory elements of their training. With respect to training for teaching, currently the only information that exists is in the as yet unpublished handbook for supervisors. The audit team considers it advisable for the University College to revise procedures relating to research students' training, clarifying the means of delivery and the expectations placed on students, in particular making explicit which aspects of the training are mandatory.

53   Student feedback is one of the inputs to the annual monitoring report for research degrees. Formal feedback mechanisms include committee representation and, from 2009, the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). Since PRES is conducted every two years, there are plans to revamp an internal survey, based on PRES, to cover the intermediate

year. Overall survey results have been positive and students stated that the institution responded quickly to their comments and feedback; for instance, it plans to address the limited opportunities available to some research students to become involved in teaching as part of their professional development.

54   Final assessment of research students entails submission of a thesis followed by an oral examination. Two or more examiners are appointed, including at least one external examiner; there are published appointment criteria and procedures. The audit team saw evidence of thorough consideration of the suitability of examiners. The examiners prepare independent reports before the oral examination and a joint report after it, clearly indicating whether or not the student has satisfied the criteria for the award.

55   The route to information on complaints and appeals is rather complicated to navigate, involving moves between the student handbook and the procedures manual, including the need to reference annexes. The audit team suggests it would be more straightforward for students if these procedures were fully explained in one place.

56   In the audit team's view, the overall arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience, as reflected in positive student feedback. While the institution's procedures are sufficient to meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, the team has recommended revisions in relation to research students' training.

Section 7: Published information

57   The University College publishes information on its website and in print, including prospectuses, policy documents and guidance; responsibilities are clearly delineated. For collaborative provision, partnership agreements set out arrangements for ensuring that promotional materials prepared by partners are accurate and kept up to date. Students considered that the pre-entry information about the University College reflected accurately what they experienced when they arrived.

58   The University College student handbook is supplemented by bespoke handbooks for undergraduate, postgraduate taught and research students respectively. Students indicated that handbooks and course information were comprehensive. The audit team reviewed a range of handbooks, concluding that templates for course handbooks were being utilised to bring consistency to the information provided. However, the team noted some variations in the case of handbooks for collaborative courses.

59   With regard to public information on teaching quality, the prescribed statistics, student survey results and links to QAA reports may be accessed from the Unistats website. In terms of the items of suggested public interest relating to the quality and standards of courses, few are published on the University College website but all are available on request.

60   In the audit team's view, the institution has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards. It meets the current national expectations for public information on for teaching quality.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the active involvement of employers and other professional advisers in planning and developing the curriculum and in devising approaches for its effective delivery (paragraph 12)

- the enhancement of the quality and accessibility of a range of activities supporting the student learning experience through the implementation of special programmes under the collective name of Aspire (Advancing skills for professionals in the rural economy) (paragraph 34)

- the development by the University College of employer-linked provision through an approach that seeks to integrate this with its other collaborative provision in respect of quality assurance requirements (paragraph 47).

Recommendations for action

62   Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- to revise procedures relating to research students' training, clarifying the means of delivery and the expectations placed on students, in particular making explicit which aspects of the training are mandatory (paragraph 52).

63   Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to reinforce the role of the personal tutor in fostering among undergraduate students a clear understanding of the purpose and importance of personal development planning and in supporting the process (paragraph 33)

- to strengthen the mechanisms for monitoring the completeness and accuracy of information relating to the University College on partner websites (paragraph 45).

Appendix

Harper Adams University College's response to the Institutional audit report

Harper Adams University College welcomes the judgement that confidence can be placed in the soundness of the current and future management of the quality of the learning opportunities provided for students and the academic standards of its awards.

We are particularly pleased that the audit team commended our:

- arrangements for ongoing quality enhancement through wide ranging development programmes

- work with the professions, to ensure our curricula meet employer needs to support graduate employability

- quality management systems for supporting employer-sponsored programmes.

These aspects of our provision will continue to support the learning opportunities that we provide for our students and the academic standards of our awards.

The three recommendations have also been considered by our Academic Board and incorporated into existing enhancement plans, in relation to: clarifying, in writing, the arrangements for research students' training programmes; supporting personal development planning of undergraduate students; and for monitoring partners' websites to ensure the currency of information.

We would like to acknowledge the professionalism of the audit team in their conduct of the audit.