Harper Adams University College

JUNE 2005

Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. QAA operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales.

The purpose of institutional audit

The aims of institutional audit are to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

Judgements

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 quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards
- 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.

These judgements are expressed as either **broad confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

Nationally agreed standards

Institutional audit uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), which include descriptions of different HE qualifications
- The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

The audit process

Institutional audits are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of institutional audit are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the audit visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the audit visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the audit visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the audit team five weeks before the audit visit
- the audit visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the audit team's judgements and findings 20 weeks after the audit visit.

The evidence for the audit

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the audit team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The audit team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work using 'audit trails'. These trails may focus on a particular programme or programmes offered at that institution, when they are known as a 'discipline audit trail'. In addition, the audit team may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality. This is known as a 'thematic enquiry'.

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance,* published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

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

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Harper Adams University College (the College) from 19 to 22 June 2005 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the College offers.

To arrive at its conclusions the team spoke to members of staff throughout the College, to current students, and it read a wide range of documents relating to the way the College manages the academic aspects of its provision.

The words 'academic standards' are 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.

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

In institutional audit both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

Outcome of the audit

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

- broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of awards.

Features of good practice

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

- the effective use of curriculum mapping to ensure the integrity of programme learning outcomes within a modular scheme

- the careful use of assignment briefs, moderation and marking criteria to assist in measuring the attainment of standards and providing effective feedback to students

- the role and use of professional advisers, and links with employers and professional bodies

- the careful and considered way in which the Curriculum Delivery Review was developed and implemented, and the way in which its impact is being monitored

- the way in which industrial placements for students at the College are managed, supported and integrated within the curriculum

- the way in which the College's student-focused approach supports a positive learning experience.

Recommendations for action

The audit team also recommends that the College should consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality and standards of the awards it offers are maintained. The team advises the College to:

- reconsider the elected nature of the chair of ASC, bearing in mind the findings of the Harper Review, to ensure that a corporate oversight is maintained

- keep under review the effectiveness of operational protocols for the monitoring and enhancement of awards offered at partner institutions.

In addition, the College may wish to consider the desirability of enhancing its quality management arrangements by:

- continuing its work to ensure that module learning outcomes are set at the appropriate academic level

- considering how the time taken to develop and approve new programmes might be reduced while maintaining robust and effective procedures

- developing a robust procedure for demonstrating and monitoring that the College's research activity effectively underpins the higher level curriculum.

Taught programmes in agriculture and in countryside, environment, leisure and tourism

To arrive at these conclusions, the audit team spoke to staff and students, and was given information about the College as a whole. The team also looked in detail at the programmes listed above to find out how well the College's systems and procedures were working at programme level. The College provided the team with documents, including student work, and here too the team spoke to staff and students. As well as supporting the overall confidence statement given above, the team was able to state that the standard of student achievement in these programmes was appropriate to the titles of their awards and their place in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. The team considered that the quality of learning opportunities available to students in each of the programmes was suitable for a programme of study leading to the named award.

National reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team also investigated the use made by the College of the Academic Infrastructure which QAA has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The audit found that the College was making effective use of the Academic Infrastructure to inform its framework for the management of quality and standards.

The audit found that the College was preparing appropriately for the publication of the teaching quality information that institutions will be required to publish, and which is listed in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance.*

Main report

Main report

1   An institutional audit of Harper Adams University College (the College) was undertaken during the period 19 to 22 June 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility as an awarding body.

2   The audit was carried out using a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and Universities UK (UUK), and has been endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills. For institutions in England, it replaces the previous processes of continuation audit, undertaken by QAA at the request of UUK and SCOP, and universal subject review, undertaken by QAA on behalf of HEFCE, as part of the latter's statutory responsibility for assessing the quality of education that it funds.

3   The audit checked the effectiveness of the College's procedures for establishing and maintaining the standards of academic awards; for reviewing and enhancing the quality of the programmes of study leading to those awards; for publishing reliable information; and for the discharge of its responsibility for conferring degrees. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, the audit included consideration of examples of institutional processes at work at the level of the programme, through two discipline audit trails (DATs), together with examples of those processes operating at the level of the institution as a whole.

Section 1: Introduction: Harper Adams University College

The institution and its mission

4   Harper Adams University College was founded as Harper Adams Agricultural College in 1901 with a bequest by Thomas Harper Adams to serve the rural communities and those industries which utilise the land and its produce. The College is located near the town of Newport, Shropshire on the College farm of 230 hectares which incorporates all major crop and animal enterprises in modern, purpose-built facilities. The farm is run by full-time staff, whose job descriptions include accommodating student projects and offering basic training in specific livestock and arable skills.

5   The College was granted degree awarding powers in 1996 for undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. Since 2001, the College has offered research degrees through devolved authority from the Open University. 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. In March 2005, the College applied to the Privy Council for independent research degree awarding powers. The College has been awarded the status of a Centre for Teaching and Learning (CETL). Known as Aspire (Advancing Skills for Professionals in the Rural Economy), the Centre aims to offer excellence in professional skills development, learner support, placement and other work-based learning and effective use of learning technologies.

6   In the academic year 2004-05, a total of 1,470 students were registered on the College's awards, offered through the College itself, Reaseheath College and Beijing Agricultural College. The postgraduate cohort comprised 51 taught postgraduate students and 21 postgraduate research students. In addition to these students, the College validates awards for some 400 students currently enrolled at Warwickshire College. The College also offers short courses, conferences, and research and technology transfer activities. In February 2005, the total staffing complement was 371 (324.8 full time equivalents (FTE)), of whom 93 (87.7 FTE) were academic staff, 35 (30 FTE) were technical or learner support staff and 14 (12 FTE) were library staff.

7   Virtually all taught courses fall within, or at the interface of, the *Subject benchmark statement* for agriculture, forestry, agricultural sciences, food sciences and consumer sciences.

A number of programmes additionally interface with general business management; engineering; building and surveying; town and country planning; and hospitality, leisure, sport and tourism. All undergraduate courses at the College include an industrial placement, normally of 11 months. Each course suite has an industrial placement manager who is responsible for helping students to find suitable placements, and for allocating a tutor to monitor the placement period. Students are actively encouraged to work abroad for their placement provided that the objectives of the placement period are met. The College has extensive contacts with many countries, and students have been placed in Ireland, Germany, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Assistance is given in securing employment and the necessary work permits.

8   The College records the job prospects of graduates, 96 per cent of whom are in employment or engaged in further study within 6 months of graduation. Research postgraduates have found employment in research institutions (31 per cent), industry (26 per cent), and careers as academics in higher education (28 per cent).

Mission statement

9   The mission of the College is 'Higher education for the delivery of a sustainable food chain and rural economy'. The College states that its mission is achieved through the Strategic Plan and the associated vision of a high quality University College made distinctive by:

- activities closely related to the needs of the rural economy, and industries reliant upon that economy, including a commitment to farming for sustainable environments, re-establishing connections between food producers and consumers and knowledge/technology transfer

- the development of new markets for students from a wider range of backgrounds, with associated course and pedagogic developments, particularly within the region

- a learning environment and student culture that enhance employability

- strong industry links that add business relevance to the College's role in higher education and encourage lifelong learning.

Collaborative provision

10   At the time of the audit visit, the College had two partner colleges in the UK further education (FE) sector, Reaseheath College and Warwickshire College. The College has franchised a number of HNC, HND and Foundation Degree courses to Reaseheath since 1990, with a total of 126 students enrolled as at 1 December 2004. The College validates some HND, Foundation Degree and honours degree courses at Warwickshire College. In addition, and since 2000, the College has developed curriculum and research opportunities with Beijing Agricultural College and research projects with China Agricultural University. As at 1 December 2004, 60 students were undertaking programmes at Beijing Agricultural College leading to honours degrees of Harper Adams University College.

11   In the context of the strategic plan, particularly in relation to 'recognition of the College as the focus for a National Rural University', the College is in discussion with several FE colleges specialising in land-based provision, with a view to transferring their existing validated higher education courses to the College. The College also has a number of links with commercial organisations, Government agencies and industry training agencies. These links involve both research and provision by the College of conferences and short courses. The Veterinary Nurse Training Centre was opened in May 2003 as a resource for students studying Foundation Degrees and honours degrees in Veterinary Nursing and Practice Management. In September 2003, the College launched the Centre for Rural Innovation.

Background information

12   The published information for the audit included:

- information on the College's website and its prospectuses

- the March 2003 report of the QAA institutional review of May 2002

- reports of QAA subject reviews.

13   The College provided QAA with:

- an institutional self-evaluation document (SED)

- its Strategic Plan 2002-2007

- its Corporate Planning Statement 2004-05

- its Student Handbook 2004-05

- its Academic Quality Assurance Manual 2005

- annual reviews for 2003 and 2004

- an update to the SED, dated 12 May 2005

- a discipline self-evaluation document (DSED) for each of the selected DATs.

14   The audit team was given access to a range of the College's internal documents in hardcopy and through the College intranet. The team appreciated the unrestricted access it was given to these sources of information.

The audit process

15   Following a preliminary meeting at the College in October 2004 between a QAA officer and representatives of the College and its students, QAA confirmed that two DATs would be conducted during the audit visit. On the basis of the SED and other published information, the audit team confirmed that the DATs would focus on taught programmes in Agriculture and in Countryside, Environment, Leisure and Tourism.

16   The audit team visited the College on 17 and 18 May 2005 for the purpose of exploring, with the Principal, senior members of staff and student representatives, matters relating to the management of quality and standards raised by the SED and other documentation. At the close of the briefing visit, a programme of meetings for the audit was agreed with the College.

17   At the preliminary meeting for the audit, the students of the College were invited through

their Students' Union (SU) to submit a separate document expressing views on the student experience at the College and identifying any matters of concern or commendation with respect to the quality of programmes and the academic standard of awards. They were also invited to give their views on the level of representation afforded to them and on the extent to which their views were noted and acted upon. The student body submitted to QAA a students' written submission (SWS) produced by the SU, drawing on information and views from a number of sources and surveys; the document had been shared with the College. The audit team is grateful to the students for preparing this helpful document to support the audit.

18   The audit visit took place from 19 to 22 June 2005, and included further meetings with staff and students of the College. The audit team comprised: Dr M Atlay, Dr P C Garnsworthy, Dr A Miller, Ms C Pickles, auditors, and Mr K Hodgson, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Dr D J Buckingham, Assistant Director, and Mrs N J Channon, Head of Operations, Reviews Group.

Developments since the previous institutional review

19   In May 2002, the College participated in a QAA institutional academic review. The report, published in March 2003, expressed broad confidence in the College as an effective institution able properly to discharge its academic obligations as an awarding body. The College was commended for a number of its existing or developing practices and was asked to consider the advisability of:

- reflecting on the shortcomings 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, and

- 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.

20   In addition, the College was asked to consider the desirability of:

- reviewing the balance between the strategic and operational responsibilities of the Academic Standards Committee

- monitoring the new processes of module review for their effectiveness in evaluation and informing stakeholders about the quality of modules

- making more opportunities for the central services that provide student support for learning at operational level to have formal input into academic strategic planning

- 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

- 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

- monitoring the ways in which academic discretion is applied in relation to student achievement.

21   The College has responded to the recommendations of that institutional review in a number of ways. The College has:

- decided to maintain a single validation event as a major validation exercise, referred to in the current SED as Curriculum 2004

- introduced changes to the protocols for managing collaborative provision

- conducted a review of the Academic Standards Committee

- amended the process of module review

- introduced regular meetings involving the Academic Registrar and line managers in the Academic Support Services

- restructured the external examiners' template

- stated minimum assessment expectations in the Academic Quality Assurance Manual

- developed further guidance for exercising academic discretion.

The audit team comments in this report on the effectiveness of these actions taken since the previous institutional review.

Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes

The institution's view as expressed in the SED

22   The SED provided a description of how the College assures the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The College confirmed that these procedures apply to all provision, including collaborative provision. It explained that its approach to the assurance of quality and standards is based upon the following intentions:

- devolution of responsibility associated with authority

- student participation in all aspects of academic decision making, other than for individual students' achievements

- peer review incorporating internal and external colleagues and appropriate incorporation of other external reference points

- proactive enhancement of systems to ensure that resources are directed at improving the student experience and learner attainment

- procedures to ensure action when decisions are made

- auditing of action through the documentation of regular meetings

- appropriate levels of separation of powers between policy determination and implementation.

The institution's framework for managing quality and standards, including collaborative provision

23   The College's Board of Governors has ultimate responsibility for the determination of academic policy, and for the monitoring of academic standards of awards and the quality of programmes. Implementation of this responsibility, and overall responsibility for monitoring quality and standards, is devolved to the Academic Board. The Board of Governors links to the Academic Board through a Governor who serves on the latter, and through the Principal and deans, who are ex officio members of both boards. The Academic Board includes representatives of the two main collaborative UK-based partner colleges.

24   The SED described the current academic management arrangements in which the senior management team meets as the Core College Executive. This group includes the Principal, Dean of Academic Affairs, Dean of External Liaison, Academic Registrar, Director of Corporate Affairs, Director of Finance and the Head of Information Systems. The full College executive additionally includes the heads of Educational Development and Quality Enhancement, Liaison and Marketing, Rural Business School Project, the heads of the five Academic Groups (Animals, Business Management and Marketing, Crops, Engineering, Rural Affairs and Environment) and the Enterprise Development Director. The senior management team meets as the Core College Executive fortnightly. The full College Executive meets on a monthly basis.

25   Responsibility for implementing procedures to monitor quality and academic standards is delegated to the Academic Standards Committee (ASC), which includes representatives of the two UK-based partner institutions and two external members from higher education institutions. ASC has established an Accreditation and Validation Sub-Committee (AVSC) to advise it on the accreditation and credit rating of courses, modules and programmes. AVSC also approves

individual programmes offered under the studies by negotiation scheme, which allows students to develop a course relevant to their needs and aspirations by selecting appropriate modules from the modular scheme.

26   The 2003 institutional review report had suggested that it would be desirable for the College to review, 'the balance between the strategic and operational responsibilities of the Academic Standards Committee'. The College subsequently appointed a senior retired academic, Professor Harper, to review the Academic Board and its subcommittees. Following its consideration of the outcomes of the report of the Harper Review, the College chose not to change the terms of reference of the Committee but instigated some changes to its membership and operation. At the time of the Harper Review, the College had recently established an Academic Planning and Resources Committee (APRC) to ensure early and effective resource planning of academic developments which it believed would alleviate some of the pressure on ASC, as noted in the 2003 institutional review report. The College also increased the membership of the Committee to ensure cross-academic group representation.

Academic Board

27   The Harper Review concluded that the Academic Board worked well but that it should give more attention to the implementation and monitoring of key policies. From its study of the agenda and minutes of the Academic Board, the audit team reached the view that the Board was appropriately discharging its responsibilities for agreeing academic policy, and for ensuring the quality of programmes and the academic standards of student achievement through its oversight of the implementation and monitoring of those policies.

Academic Standards Committee

28   In the light of the comments in the 2003 institutional review report, the audit team considered the balance between the strategic and operational nature of the ASC. It noted that the remit was broadly unchanged since the institutional review, that the agenda and

paperwork was extensive, and heard a view expressed by senior staff that it was still a challenge to restrict the business of the ASC to manageable proportions. The team concurred with the findings of the Harper Review that, in the context of the College, a single committee with a remit for quality, standards and enhancement was appropriate, and formed the view that the introduction of APRC, and changes to the membership and operation of the Committee, had assisted ASC in undertaking its duties effectively.

29   The Chairs of APRC and ASC are elected by and from among the ex officio and academic staff members of the committees. In the case of the ASC, this includes staff nominated by heads of group and others elected by academic staff from across the College. While the audit team acknowledged that drawing the Chair from amongst the elected and nominated staff members was in keeping with the College's philosophy of ownership and the development of staff, it considered that, given the central role of the Committee in the College's quality processes, it was particularly important for the Chair to have the necessary authority and independence to ensure that the Committee could undertake its work effectively. The team also noted the wide range of responsibilities within the College of the current Chair of ASC, including chairing AVSC, and acting as the liaison coordinator with a partner college as well as his substantive role as a course manager and member of academic staff. While the team had no concerns about the effectiveness of the current Chair, it formed the view that, in less capable hands, such wide-ranging demands on the Chair of ASC had the potential to affect adversely the capacity of the Committee to discharge its responsibilities to optimum effect. The report of the Harper Review recommended that consideration should be given to appointing the Chair from a senior substantive post which had strong links to quality control and enhancement. The team would support the findings of the Harper Review in recommending that the College reconsider the elected nature of the Chair of ASC to ensure that corporate oversight is maintained.

Academic Quality Assurance Manual

30   Underpinning the College's procedures for the assurance of quality of provision and the academic standards of awards is the Academic Quality Assurance Manual (the Manual). The College regards this as a definitive reference source for staff and students on the arrangements through which the College's taught degree awarding powers are discharged for all programmes delivered at Harper Adams University College and its partners. It also details the arrangements through which its research degree awarding powers, devolved from the Open University, are organised. A variation is made in the case of Beijing Agricultural College, in that staff and students at Beijing Agricultural College have a bespoke manual which contains only the relevant content of the College's Manual for more effective application in China. The Manual is available on the College's intranet, and is supplemented by various other policy documents such as a staff handbook, placement handbook, and a placement code of practice. Meetings with staff confirmed to the audit team that the Manual, in particular the up-to-date on-line edition, was regularly used by members of staff.

Assessment

31   Awards of the College, including those at partner colleges, operate within a common regulatory framework. The assessment procedures and regulations are described in the Manual. The College defines a set of generic outcomes for each of its awards which have been matched against the requirements of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Modules are defined in terms of level and value of credit, learning outcomes, indicative content, learning and teaching strategies and assessment strategies.

32   The College has developed a system of curriculum mapping to ensure that all programmes meet the generic outcomes defined by the College and the specific learning outcomes agreed at validation. The curriculum maps are also used by AVSC to ensure that, within the context of a modular scheme with

extensive sharing of modules, minor changes to programmes still ensure that the original programme outcomes are met. Furthermore, the College explained that curriculum maps are used to enable students to develop balanced programmes as part of a studies by negotiation award. The audit team considered the use of curriculum maps effective practice in ensuring the integrity of learning outcomes within the context of a modular scheme.

33   The audit team was able to review the use of learning outcomes to define awards and assign modules to appropriate levels within the modular framework through its consideration of award and module structures in the DATs and in other course documentation. At the module level, the team considered that, while learning outcomes were generally appropriate to the level of modules within the framework, this was not always the case, particularly in some of the stated outcomes of programmes at master's level. The team heard of the importance of learning outcomes in establishing assignment briefs and developing assessment criteria, and noted the steps the College had taken to provide development for staff in establishing levels and writing outcomes. The team would encourage the College to continue its work through staff development and the validation process to ensure that learning outcomes are consistently appropriate to the level of study of the module.

34   Subject group leaders organise an internal peer review of all coursework tasks and draft examination papers to share expectations on levels and good practice. Students receive detailed assignment briefs which are then used as the basis for providing feedback to students. Students at the College who met the audit team expressed the view that the assignment briefs were helpful in making clear the demands of each assessment and that feedback was generally timely, constructive and helpful. The team considered that the College's use of assignment briefs, moderation and marking criteria to assist in the measuring of standards and providing effective feedback to students was a feature of good practice.

35   All course modules are assigned to an appropriate subject group, and to the associated Subject Assessment Board (SAB). SABs consider profiles of marks presented by module leaders and review the standards set following internal and external review of assessments. SAB members are responsible for developing and delivering effective learning, teaching and assessment programmes, and for moderating results. They are also responsible for enhancing module delivery and assessment in light of student performance and feedback from peers, students and self-reflection, and providing input into annual monitoring processes.

36   Student progression and awards are considered by the appropriate Course Assessment Board (CAB) based on the confirmed marks arising from the SABs. Each SAB is represented on every CAB in which it is involved in student assessment. Each CAB has at least one academic external examiner and one professional adviser to act as external reference points on quality, standards and student achievement. The Manual describes professional advisers as having 'industrial qualifications or experience appropriate to the programmes and award outcomes and appropriate professional standing, expertise and experience to offer advice in support of maintaining standards in higher education'. Professional advisers have particular responsibilities with respect to student achievement of professional skills. They are required to submit an annual report to the Chair of the Academic Board on matters relating to student achievement of technical and generic skills through workplace-based learning.

37   The audit team noted some of the difficulties that had been encountered with the introduction of the new student record system, and heard of steps being taken to enhance the quality of information being presented to the assessment boards. From the evidence available through discussions with staff, and scrutiny of course monitoring and external examiners reports, the audit team concluded that the College had an effective framework for assessing student attainment and for confirming the academic standards of awards.

The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

38   The SED stated the College's targets for the enhancement of quality and standards over the next three years. These include:

- the need to guard against potential slippage in corporate goals and take remedial action

- continuous monitoring and support of arrangements with Beijing Agricultural College

- review of particular sections of the Manual

- continued attention to the roll-out and evaluation of the Curriculum Delivery Review recommendations

- review of APRC

- review of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) procedures

- development and implementation of the learning and teaching strategy

- ensuring that the Staff Development Review process is fully effective in supporting both individuals' development and the corporate planning process.

39   In its meetings with key staff of the College, with students (particularly international students) and in its study of available documentation, the audit team was able to explore the progress being made on these plans for enhancement of the management of quality and standards. It found that some issues had been progressed more swiftly than others but that most issues, with the exception of APEL procedures, were already underway.

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

Programme Approval and Review

40   The College's procedures for the approval of new programmes of study are set out in the Manual, and had recently undergone minor review and revision. The first stage of the development of a new course is the submission of a concept note to the APRC which sets out a brief rationale for the proposal, the award title,

the relationship to any existing award(s) and a proposed approval schedule. Outline proposals are expected to be supported by market research on recruitment and skills needs. APRC considers the resource demand and recruitment analysis and makes a recommendation before a development approval proposal is presented to the Academic Board for consideration.

41   If the Academic Board agrees the proposal then detailed course planning proceeds and culminates in the production of documentation for submission for validation. The application for full approval must include evidence of industrial and student demand, a copy of a memorandum of cooperation if the proposal is joint with another institution, the programme specification, a complete statement of the specific resources which will support the course including the CVs of staff, details of specialist teaching accommodation and specialist equipment, and the course handbook.

42   ASC is responsible for ensuring that documentation is of a sufficiently high standard to present to a validation or review panel. It discharges this responsibility by establishing a scrutiny panel of three of its members to examine the draft documentation and report to the next meeting of the Committee. Once approval from ASC is given, a validation event is established involving internal and external members drawn from the academic sector and from commerce, industry, practice or the professions as appropriate. The validation panel is normally chaired by an internal member of staff but may, exceptionally, be someone from outside the College with appropriate standing and experience of the College's requirements. The panel considers proposals against a set of criteria which include: the extent to which the programme meets College requirements including the relevant subject benchmark statements, the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*) and the FHEQ, all published by QAA. The validation panel may set conditions and recommendations to which the course team must respond. Responses to conditions and

recommendations are monitored by ASC and, if approved, through the annual course monitoring process.

43 The audit team examined the operation of the validation process in its discussions with staff from across the College, and scrutinised the minutes of the relevant committees, validation documents and reports. It was informed that typically courses can take from 18 months to two years to go through the process from initial consideration, through APRC, Academic Board, scrutiny panel, ASC, validation, satisfactory response to conditions to final approval by ASC. The team considered that the current process was generally robust and effective in ensuring that academic standards were appropriately secured and quality of provision established. However, it questioned whether the process was efficient in the use of staff time and in enabling the College to be responsive to changes in the external environment. It appeared to the team that, despite the amount of work undertaken prior to the validation stage of the process, the conditions and recommendations set by validation panels were not significantly less than those found elsewhere in validation exercises with less extensive preparation, and that there were areas where, despite the College's careful and considered approach, there was still scope for improvement such as in the verification of learning outcomes as being appropriate to level and verification of the linkage between the higher level curriculum and research and scholarship (see below, paragraph 54). The College might wish to consider ways in which the process by which new programmes are developed and approved could be streamlined to reduce the time taken while maintaining its robustness and enhancing its effectiveness.

Curriculum 2004

44 In 1998, the Academic Board had approved a proposal to undertake a major revision to the undergraduate curriculum to approve its portfolio of 'Modules for the Millenium' (M4M). The 2003 institutional review report had recommended that the College reflect on 'the shortcomings of

the single-event methodology used for this 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'. It suggested that the College might consider alternative and more measured means of staging and subsequently monitoring any major revalidation activity.

45 In September 2002, the College embarked on a further major review of its curriculum. The SED explained that the College's objectives were to ensure that its undergraduate module portfolio was:

- efficient and effective, according to resource availability

- challenging in developing students' ability to learn independently, whilst maintaining retention and completion rates

- competitive in attracting students to the courses based on the portfolio, within the available resources in relation to student enrolments

- progressive from facilitating access to providing opportunity for intellectual development at all levels

- interactive with the research and reach-out functions of the College.

46 A curriculum delivery review (CDR) team was convened comprising three senior members of academic staff, supported by two administrative staff. The SED explained that the main changes arising from the review were:

- a three-term academic year (as opposed to two semesters)

- a minimum module credit value of 15 (as opposed to 7.5)

- placement periods normally expected to run within academic sessions (as opposed to February to January)

- inclusion of two independent study weeks half way through the first and second terms for intermediate and honours level students

- progressive reduction in teaching weeks per module

- one major examination period (as opposed to two)

- course design teams were required to work within a quota of modules, based on forecast student numbers (where they had not previously done so)

- undergraduate courses were grouped into one of six vocational areas (as opposed to five).

47   One of the main aims of the review was to increase efficiency through a reduction of the number of modules from 382 to around 200 through an increase in module size and a rationalisation involving revised module option choices and appropriate sharing of modules across programmes. The resultant CDR report and associated implementation plan were approved by APRC and the Academic Board, in March and June 2003.

48   The College considered the resultant changes to its curriculum, Curriculum 2004 (C2004), a 'step change'. The project was managed by a steering group, chaired by the Chair of the CDR, with a remit to direct and support this major exercise through a project plan which incorporated:

- clear guidance for course teams on the module resource to which it had access

- thorough preparation including a series of workshops in April, June and September 2003 and January 2004 for course developers and internal validation panel members

- fortnightly meetings with course teams and heads of academic groups to identify and resolve competing demands on resources

- supporting templates and guidance material for course teams, including those for critical review reports, programme specifications, module descriptors and course handbooks.

49   In the lead up to the C2004 course development work, academic members of staff attended at least one of a series of workshops which considered how the C2004 process would be supported by detailed written

guidance and templates. The latter incorporated elements of QAA's Academic Infrastructure, to promote consistent best practice across the College. Internal critical review meetings were held in October 2003 to provide a basis from which revised courses could be developed.

50   The College reflected on the findings of the institutional review report and concluded that, provided sufficient resources were made available and the process more closely managed, a single approval event was still preferable. This decision was informed by the integrated nature of the undergraduate curriculum and the volume and range of internal and external expertise required within and across the courses under review. The approval process culminated in a full two-day event in April 2004 at which programmes and modules were considered by validation panels.

51   Through its discussions with staff, its review of relevant documentation and in detailed consideration in the DAT areas, the audit team was able to explore the development of the CDR and the effectiveness of its implementation in the C2004 process. It considered that C2004 had been a major initiative for change that had involved staff from across the College undertaken in a relatively short timescale. Staff spoke to the team of the high workload involved, and more positively about the support that had been made available and the outcomes and their impact on standards and quality and the student experience.

52   The audit team saw clear evidence that responses to any conditions set as part of the review and revalidation process were being carefully monitored by ASC. At the time of the audit visit, the College was reflecting on the effectiveness of the procedures but stated that it would probably undertake a similar process when the programmes come forward for review in 2010. While it was still too early to make a judgement about the overall effectiveness of the CDR in meeting its stated aims, the team noted that its operation through the C2004 process and its impact on quality, standards and the student experience was being monitored through the committee system. Although, as

with any major change process, some difficulties in implementing the CDR process had been encountered and acknowledged by the College, it was clear to the team that the main shortcomings identified in the M4M process had been addressed. The team considered that the careful and considered way in which the CDR had been developed and implemented, and the manner in which its impact was being monitored, was a feature of good practice.

Periodic review

53   All courses are subject to a progress review, normally on a six-year cycle for courses with a duration of three years or longer, and a five year cycle for courses of fewer than three years duration. Most of the College's provision was included within the C2004 process. However, postgraduate provision and that in partner colleges was outside the scope of C2004, and is reviewed under the College's process for periodic review which the Manual describes as a searching and systematic evaluation of the operation of an existing course and the career success of graduates to ensure that it remains academically and vocationally valid and continues to meet the conditions of the awards.

54   The audit team reviewed documentation and reports relating to a number of postgraduate awards which had recently undergone periodic review. The team noted that the College expected the process to consider the extent and development of underpinning research and scholarly activity. It found a minimal reference to research underpinning in some of the validation reports, and concerns expressed in others including a requirement for research to be strengthened. The team noted that College staff had close and extensive links with commerce, industry and the professions which significantly enhanced the curriculum. However, it also noted the decline in the volume of research in the College as recorded in the annual research report, and the importance the College attached to research in underpinning the curriculum and providing the foundation for the College's extensive knowledge transfer activities. It heard of plans to enhance the

College's research capacity, although staff who discussed these matters with the team were less clear about how research activity actually connected with the curriculum, and how it underpinned higher-level teaching in practice. The team would encourage the College to consider how it might develop a robust procedure for demonstrating and monitoring that the College's research activity effectively underpins the higher level curriculum.

Minor changes

55   Minor changes to approved courses are authorised by the AVSC, which also has responsibility for monitoring any incremental drift in programmes. Changes to modules are considered by the appropriate SAB before submission to AVSC for approval. In the context of a scheme where one module may contribute to a number of different awards, the AVSC serves to ensure that all course managers are aware of changes to a module and, through the curriculum mapping process, ensure the integrity of individual programmes is maintained. The audit team considered that the work of AVSC was effective in maintaining an oversight of modules and courses in operation and of approving individual studies by negotiation programmes.

Annual monitoring

56   The management and quality assurance of validated courses is the responsibility of the course team under the leadership of the course manager. The process of annual monitoring culminates in the compilation by the course team of an annual monitoring report which includes statistical data on entry, progression, performance, careers and the views of staff and students. From academic year 2004-05, all monitoring reports will also include a report from the professional advisers in further support of graduate employability. In its SED, the College stated that annual monitoring is intended to confirm the general 'good health' of a programme and its awards, and agree short-term actions to remedy any deficiencies and identify good practice for dissemination. Annual monitoring is undertaken at both subject and course level, with detailed guidance being provided in the Manual.

57   Course reports are considered by the annual course monitoring meeting of the course committee. It is attended by a course monitor who is appointed by ASC from amongst members to monitor the quality and standards of each course and report any issues which are not being adequately addressed. Course monitors report to ASC on the extent to which the previous year's action points or outcomes from validation panels have been implemented, the thoroughness of the process, the action plan arising and any cross-institution issues outside the authority of the course committee. Monitors' reports are considered individually by ASC and feed into an annual overview report. Subject level review reports are produced by chairs of SABs, in consultation with colleagues. These highlight significant developments in the subject area, major changes to modules in response to the student and staff feedback, the operation of the SAB and responses to SAB external examiners' reports. These reports are considered by ASC, and feed into the annual overview report which is considered by ASC and the Academic Board.

58   One of the features of the College's monitoring processes is that students are asked to score all modules on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) as part of an annual course monitoring survey. Reports are required to feed into the annual subject review process identifying the actions being taken or the good practice exemplified where cumulative module scores are outside the norm.

59   In the SED the College stated that it considered its annual monitoring processes effective in confirming the standards of awards, identifying enhancement possibilities and disseminating good practice at both the course and institutional level. The audit team reviewed this process primarily in the area of the DATs and through consideration of ASC papers and discussions with staff and students. It heard of the difficulties in obtaining reports from some areas where module scores were outside of the norm, but heard of the concerted action the College was taking to embed this practice in its monitoring procedures. The team was able to

endorse the College's view of the effectiveness of its annual monitoring processes as stated in the SED, although it considered that a more detailed analysis of the information available at the award level might have been made in the course monitoring in some areas. The team was less convinced that the course monitoring it saw provided a thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the careers advisory service and of personal and technical tutoring as stated in the staff development policy, but considered that there was sufficient oversight of personal support for students. It would encourage the College to amend its staff development policy to reflect the reality of its course monitoring arrangements.

External participation in internal review processes

60   The SED stated that the contribution of external members to review and approval events is substantial in providing greater breadth of experience and expertise, ideas for enhancement of proposals as well as objective insight. The Assistant Registrar (Registry) is responsible for assembling validation and review panels, and ASC is responsible for monitoring the composition of panels when considering their reports. Panels consist of internal and external members and normally include at least three external members chosen to provide subject expertise, knowledge of comparable courses in other institutions and experience of commerce, industry, practice or the professions as appropriate, and representatives of professional bodies.

61   The audit team reviewed the composition of validation panels for C2004 and for a range of programmes in the preceding year. It noted the careful way in which the panels for C2004 were constructed to reflect a breadth of external expertise both through academic and industrial and professional representation. The validation panels for these events had external chairs since internal senior managers were involved as members of subject and course teams. While the audit team understood the reason for this approach, it was less convinced by the arguments for external chairs for other

College validations and reviews where external expertise is adequately represented on the panel and where a member of staff of the College might be in a better position to ensure that College policies and practices were appropriately addressed. The team found that there was appropriate external expertise in internal review processes and particularly that industrial and professional issues were addressed through the validation process.

62   While it was not possible to assess the impact of external representation on the working of the Academic Board and ASC through consideration of the minutes, which the audit team considered somewhat sparse in detail, senior staff who met the team spoke of the positive effect which the external perspective brought to the working of these committees and of the value in having direct representation from partner colleges in policy development and implementation. The team concluded that external representation on its core committees was making a significant contribution to the College's systems for setting standards and maintaining quality.

External examiners and their reports

63   The College values the contribution of its external examiners and views their comments as an important means of confirming that it is setting appropriate academic standards. The College appoints all external examiners for taught programmes at both the College and its partner organisations. Some external examiners are appointed to examine provision in the College as well as related provision at a partner college. External examiners for all research students are recommended by the College for approval and appointment by the Open University.

64   There are clear criteria and procedures for the appointment of external examiners which are published by the College in the Manual. Nominations for appointments by the College are coordinated by heads of group and scrutinised by a subgroup of ASC, and the decision of ASC is then ratified by the Academic Board. External examiners are briefed on appointment, receive information on assessment procedures and

regulations and meet subject staff and students. A commitment to ensuring that external examiners are well prepared for their role is illustrated by the College having provided additional external training for some inexperienced new examiners. All external examiners review assessment briefs and examination papers, moderate samples of student work and examinations scripts for each module and submit a report at subject level. Since the last institutional review, it has been confirmed that the external examiners should be provided with representative samples of students' work that are equivalent to 6 per cent or 6 items, whichever is the greater. Within a group of subject examiners, at least one is appointed as course examiner who will attend CAB and provide an additional report on course-wide matters.

65   Comments from external examiners are reviewed during annual monitoring and can inform action planning. Initial responses to the reports of external examiners are generated by the assessment board chair and course manager on behalf of the course committee. A formal written response provided at College level is written by the Head of Educational Development and Quality Enhancement (HEDQE) and approved by ASC.

66   The College considers that its external examiners are effectively prepared for their role and that the SABs and CABs are well served by examiners. Staff who met the audit team endorsed the view expressed in the SED that external examiners are well supported to undertake their duties and their role is effective in monitoring standards and enhancing quality. The report template has been revised, and this revision is considered to have led to improved reports across all centres and to have supported the enhancement work of SABs and CABs much more effectively than before. The College is looking to the Higher Education Academy to provide national training for external examiners to augment the local briefing.

67   External examiners can, and have, raised matters of concern at institutional level, for example, in the use of appropriate level descriptors in specifying intended learning

outcomes (ILOs) and the extent of research underpinning at academic levels H and M. While the College had provided some training in 2003-04 for module staff in the use of level descriptors and setting of standards, this situation has not yet been fully resolved. College staff who discussed these matters with the audit team were aware of and responsive to criticism from external examiners in respect of the setting of standards at levels H and M. For example, in respect of a comment relating to the need for improved critical analysis, the team heard that this matter had undergone extensive consideration; that staff were increasing awareness of the need for students to adopt this style of writing and that this was now evident from some marking schemes and student work; but that some learning outcomes could still be modified to reflect the need for demonstration of critical thought at levels H and M.

68   The audit team heard from staff of some frustration relating to the arrangements of the Open University in respect of the reports from external examiners about candidates for research degrees. Under arrangements governed by the Open University, these reports are not fully disclosed to the College. The team agreed that this restriction on information carried the risk of adversely affecting the College's understanding of the matters discussed at the research examination, and to limit the potential of research teams at the College to use these reports in a constructive way to inform and enhance practice.

69   External examiners are invited to comment on the applicability of courses, and such comment provides useful information to the College as it repositions its curriculum. Overall, the audit team found that the College's external examining arrangements are robust and systematic and make a significant contribution to the College's ability to assure the quality of its provision and secure the academic standards of its awards.

External reference points

70   A College curriculum framework was established prior to the CDR in 2004, the use of

which is intended to embed reference to the Academic Infrastructure within course documentation. Programme specifications incorporate reference to the FHEQ and a range of relevant subject benchmark statements. The consideration of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, has been used since 2001 by ASC to modify College policies and strategies, and alignment with the precepts of the sections of the *Code* is described in the SED as embedded. The SED helpfully indicated how and where the elements of the Academic Infrastructure had been used to inform policy development and the review of courses. Particular examples include the use of the sections of the *Code* relating to placement learning and postgraduate students which have clearly informed practices affecting the quality of learning opportunities.

71   Programme specifications express level and course ILOs using the language of level descriptors as defined by the FHEQ, although questions have arisen in relation to the clear expression of these ILOs and the extent to which research underpins learning at levels H and M within agriculture courses. In general, the audit team was able to endorse the view of external examiners that the setting of standards is appropriate and that measurement of attainment by students uses a suitable range of approaches that are well matched to ILOs.

72   The College's curriculum framework ensures that designated key skills are embedded within the curriculum for all courses. This is achieved through the specification of a set of generic ILOs which are common to all courses, and are stated within each programme specification together with a list of subject or course-specific ILOs. Staff development activities were used to inform module tutors about the way in which the curriculum framework should be used, through, for example, workshops focusing on the setting of standards and the use of the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements when writing programme and module learning outcomes.

73   The audit team considered that use by the College of several subject benchmark statements and the requirements of professional, statutory

and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) as reference points for innovative curriculum areas was indicative of a sophisticated use of external reference points. In particular, the College makes good use of its strong links with PSRBs and employers to inform curriculum development. Employers make direct comment on the applicability of the courses, and this is captured in particular through placement reports.

74   The College is proud of its mission to promote the employability of its students, and the associated requirement that most students undertake a placement year. The management and organisation of the placement is closely aligned with the section of the *Code of practice* on placement learning. Evidence from the DATs indicated that some excellent arrangements and challenging assignments are in place to support student achievement in their placement year.

75   The September 2004 revisions of sections to the *Code of practice* were in the process of being considered by the ASC at the time of the audit visit. These sections of the *Code* have been used as reference points for further development of aspects of the procedures set out in the Manual. Overall, the audit team found that the College was making effective use of the Academic Infrastructure and the guidance of relevant PSRBs to inform its framework for the management of quality and standards.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

76   The College has some 40 per cent of its students on awards accredited by PSRBs. Courses are accredited by bodies which include the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and the Institution of Agricultural Engineers (IAgrE), on behalf of the Engineering Council. The College stated in the SED that all of the provision put forward for approval or revalidation in 2003-04 was successfully accredited. The ASC receives accreditation reports, and any recommendations for enhancement are included in the annual round of course

monitoring. A review of Foundation Degrees had been undertaken just prior to the audit visit. The audit team considered that the College had strong links to external agencies and used the feedback from their reviews to further enhance the College's provision.

Student representation at operational and institutional level

77   Members of the Students' Union Executive sit on the Board of Governors, the Academic Board and ASC. In addition, members of the Students' Union Executive meet with the Principal, Director of Corporate Affairs and Student Services Manager, on a fortnightly basis, to review, plan and coordinate activities. An annually elected postgraduate student represents research students on the Research Committee, and postgraduate students also sit on other key committees.

78   Course handbooks explain that course representatives provide a formal link between the course management team and students. Terms of reference for course representatives are included in course handbooks, and senior tutors brief nominees on the expectations of their role. Each course cohort elects at least two representatives who are expected to provide feedback to, and raise operational problems with, module tutors and the course team, on an ongoing basis or through termly course committee meetings. The Students Academic Group (SAG) consists of all the taught course student representatives together with the Students' Union (SU) representatives on the Academic Board, and forms a link between institutional and programme level student representation.

79   The SED gave examples of effective student representation, such as discussions at ASC of independent study weeks, assessment regulations and turnaround time for assessed work. The audit team heard that SAG has helped to 'academic jargon-proof' documents such as the guidance on negative marking of multi-choice exam questions and academic misconduct leaflets. SAG was also instrumental in steering the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy for Disabled Applicants and

Students to one that is particularly inclusive. Feedback from students in 2003-04 indicated that some 90 per cent of students perceived their representatives to perform an acceptable to excellent job.

80   The SWS stated that students were happy with the system of representation, noting that 'invariably student views are listened to and taken on board'. Students who met the audit team at the briefing believe their voice is heard and were able to give examples of issues being resolved, noting that, in practice, issues will often be addressed informally by module or senior tutors. Some international students, however, expressed concern to the team that they were not represented specifically at the institutional level. The former international student representative on the SU had not been replaced at the end of her term of office. Although this appeared to the team to be a matter for the SU to resolve, the College will, no doubt, wish to ensure that international students are adequately represented, particularly with the planned expansion in international student numbers.

81   Students who met the audit team during the DATs were aware of their representatives on College committees, and were confident that issues raised at the course level would feed upwards into the institutional processes. Senior managers have identified the need to disseminate outcomes back to the wider student body so that students see how their input is valued; and propose to do this by posting action plans on notice boards and providing student representatives with training and written guidelines on reporting.

82   The audit team heard in several meetings that there are many informal mechanisms for raising student issues and dealing with their concerns. Students praised the open-door policy of the majority of staff, including the Principal. These informal mechanisms appeared to the team to be effective, and frequently to lead to timely actions that benefit students sooner than would be the case with formal mechanisms. The 2003 report of the institutional review noted a concern that informal contact might substitute for formal arrangements to the detriment of quality assurance. The current audit team found no evidence that this was occurring and concluded that students are well represented at all levels and, through that representation, were able to contribute effectively to quality management. The team was able to conclude that students are well represented at institutional and operational levels, supporting the view that the College's student-focused approach supports a positive learning experience.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

83   Written student feedback is collected to support modules, courses and institutional services in a number of ways. Feedback is collected both to monitor the adequacy of provision and also to determine ways in which it may be enhanced. At the module level, the Manual specifies that tutors will draw on a range of evidence bases to inform enhancement, including feedback from students. The Manual includes a simple form on which students can provide written feedback on aspects of module provision that they particularly liked or would like to see revised.

84   At the course level, senior tutors collect written feedback on course modules, assessment, academic support and other institution-wide services. New students, those returning from placement and finalists complete additional course level forms that also feed into annual course reports (ACRs). Feedback includes both perception scores to provide monitoring data, and free-text responses to support enhancement. The annual course monitoring meeting considers student feedback as part of its evidence base and this results in an action plan for enhancement.

85   Various service providers also seek feedback from students. For example, on-line surveys related to library and information technology (IT) provision have been reported separately to the Academic Board. Learner support and careers staff also ask users of their services to provide more comprehensive

feedback than is elicited from the course level surveys, and this is currently used in staff development reviews.

86   The research postgraduate student representative prepares an annual report of student perceptions, based on a survey, for the Research Committee. Termly meetings for all research students with the Dean of Academic Affairs provide additional informal opportunities to provide feedback on provision at this academic level, and such feedback is also reported to the Research Committee for consideration. Feedback from postgraduates is now gathered by email as a direct result of student suggestion.

87   Graduate feedback is used to inform periodic reviews. For example, the C2004 process was supported by surveys of over 1,000 alumni, although the College does not routinely ask graduates for feedback other than destination information.

88   Feedback is collected from employers in a number of ways. Placement managers coordinate the collation of feedback from placement employers, and this feeds into their annual report to the course monitoring meeting. Written feedback from placement employers is often not returned, so placement managers include their impressions of employer perspectives in annual reports. Employers have contributed to a number of events led by the Careers Advisor in which graduate preparedness for employment and the curriculum has been the theme. Graduate employers also contribute to the evidence base expected to be included within critical review reports. The SED explained that consideration was being given by the College Executive to how employers can better contribute to cross-institution initiatives.

89   In its evaluation of the strengths of the College, the SED stated that 'Harper Adams' staff and processes are student focused. This results in high levels of student participation in feedback and decision making, which engenders a sense of community'. The audit team would concur with this statement, based on documentation and its discussions with students and staff. Students who met the team in DATs and other meetings

confirmed that there were good opportunities to provide feedback and their opinions were surveyed on many occasions. They expressed the view that they know staff as colleagues and can raise matters freely. They noted, however, that although feedback given in course committees receives a quick response, they were unaware of the outcomes of feedback given through surveys. The team concluded that the College's careful collection and use of feedback from students and employers contributes to the overall conclusion that the College's student-focused approach supports a positive learning experience.

Progression and completion statistics

90   Annual consideration of admissions, progression and completion statistics occurs in ACRs and in ASC annual overview reports, and results in actions which are intended to lead to quality improvement. The SED explained that the use of this two-tiered approach ensures that analysis of data is used 'to inform both operational and strategic decision making'. The consideration of trends is used to inform decisions about curriculum and learner support, and positive examples were reported in the SED and in one of the DATs. The annual overview by ASC enables the Academic Board to monitor progress and attainment of awards. Institutional-level consideration of trends in recruitment has led to decisions to review the range of courses offered by the College. Having revised the course offerings, the College is keen to evaluate the relative success of its new courses, and is quick to change the nature of these courses in response to current student feedback.

91   In addition to annual consideration of trends, the periodic review by the CDR process included a review of trends in data. Analyses of progression and completion and attainment including first destinations and placements were used in support of a rationale for new developments.

92   The quality of the statistics and the amount of detail presented in the ACR and the annual overview report to ASC had clearly improved in 2004-05 in comparison with 2003-04. Similarly the quality of discussion in the annual overview report for 2004-05 was an improvement on that

for the preceding year. Until 2003-04, quantitative student feedback data were not compiled or distributed until after the start of the new academic session, reducing their effectiveness in generating quality enhancement for subsequent cohorts. For 2003-04 data were distributed to tutors in advance of the new session so that they could reflect on the feedback and take more timely action if necessary.

93   Despite some initial problems with the introduction of a new student management information system, SITS, the audit team saw clear evidence that the quality of data provided by the new system had improved and was used to inform decision making at both subject and College levels. For example, the ACR includes consideration of admissions data and levels of student attainment - at module and award stages, both through use of data and a commentary. Similarly, the Academic Board considers achievement of awards on an annual basis and seeks explanations from course teams for any noticeable differences in achievement rates between courses.

94   Overall, the audit team formed the view that the College is making good use of statistical information at the course, subject and institutional levels. The collated statistics are complete and useable, although the team considered there to be scope for improvement in the transparency and presentation of these analyses so that they can be readily understood. The monitoring of the trends shown by data analyses has been used to shape actions, and has enabled the Academic Board to require changes that are likely to lead to improvements in quality of learning opportunities. The College is well informed about its own performance indicators, and is clearly keen to use this information to shape its provision and the way that it presents itself to students and employers.

Assurance of the quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward

95   The College's Academic Staff Handbook provides information on the College's practices and procedures covering a range of issues including: guidelines on the duties of lecturing staff, mentoring arrangements, promotion criteria and processes, and classroom observation. The Handbook is provided to new staff and made available on the staff intranet. Staff who met the audit team spoke positively about the value of the Handbook in setting out the College's expectations, policies and practices. The College gained Investors in People (IiP) recognition in April 2003.

96   All new employees receive a three-day induction into the College, coordinated by the Staff Development Officer (SDO). New academic staff are appointed a mentor who is an experienced colleague who will guide them through their first two years at the College. Academic staff and others who support student learning attend an induction into higher education learning and teaching practices in the context of the College. Academic appointments include a condition that membership of the Higher Education Academy should be achieved within a two-year period, fulfilment of this condition being monitored by the line manager. Staff are offered the opportunity to undertake a postgraduate certificate in teaching and learning at Keele University. Staff who met the audit team were complimentary about their induction into the College and the support they received. Those who were undertaking the Keele programme were positive about its benefits, and in particular its value in setting work at Harper Adams in the wider context of teaching in higher education.

97   The SED stated that all employees undergo a staff development review (SDR) at least annually, but noted that there had been some slippage in the completion of SDRs caused by the large numbers of staff reporting directly to the Heads of Academic Group. It identified the SDR process as being an area where further work was required to ensure that it was entirely effective in supporting both individual's development and the corporate planning process. At the time of the audit visit, the Governors Staffing Committee had recently approved changes to simplify the development review scheme paperwork and the associated process, in order to ensure that the annual

review meetings were more closely aligned with the corporate planning and staff development planning processes. The audit team heard that the revised process, entitled the Personal Development Review (PDR), allowed for some cascading of responsibility for undertaking the reviews to alleviate the high workload the previous process had placed on Heads of Academic Group. The revised process was being implemented at the time of the audit visit, so the team was unable to examine the impact of the changes or the extent to which they were embedded across the College. However, the team formed the view that the College had an effective system for identifying staff development needs, and that this was likely to be enhanced by the implementation of the PDR process.

98   The College operates a Teaching Fellowship Scheme which aims to recognise and reward excellent practice in teaching and learning, and which is open to all teaching and support staff. It utilises similar criteria to those for the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, and the College stated that at least three awards were made annually. The audit team heard in some detail of the value of the teaching fellowship and how Award winners disseminated their good practice to colleagues at the College and its further education college partners. The audit team concluded that the College had appropriate and effective systems in place to identify, reward and disseminate good practice in teaching and learning.

Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development

99   The delivery of the staff development needs identified through the PDR process and from the Strategic Plan and its component strategies as well as from legislative developments is supported by the SDO. The College's staff development policy (January 2002) states that there should be an annual report on staff development presented to the Board of Governors. Although the audit team found no recent such report, it heard of a system of regular reporting on staff development requirements and the action

being taken to address them, through the Executive arm of the College and up to the Board of Governors through the regular reports of the Principal. It concluded that the College had effective systems for monitoring staff development needs and their implementation, although it would suggest that the College's staff development policy should be revised to reflect the current practice.

100 The College operates a developmental peer observation of teaching scheme. Teaching staff are expected to invite a colleague to observe at least one session per annum, and to reflect on feedback within their annual personal development review. New staff, or those who are undertaking the postgraduate certificate programme, are expected to arrange at least three peer observation sessions in support of their own professional development. While there was some uncertainty about the implementation of the College's peer observation of teaching scheme in some areas, the audit team also heard of examples of what it considered good practice in the way in which the scheme was systematically linked to the PDR process in the Business, Management and Marketing Subject Group. The team would encourage the College to disseminate this aspect of good practice across all groups.

101 Staff are supported in their professional development needs through the activities of the Learning and Teaching Forum, which provides regular workshops on aspects of learning, teaching and assessment facilitated by internal and external contributors. The SED cited recent examples of activity, including workshops on assessment and marking criteria; assessment design and academic misconduct; independent learning; supporting students' numeracy needs; developing critical thinking and a number of sessions on supporting disabled students. Staff who met the audit team spoke positively about the staff development opportunities available to them within the College. The team saw evidence that staff development opportunities were provided in response to identified needs, although the College acknowledged the difficulty in ensuring that staff who would benefit most

from such sessions took up those offers. The team heard that the revised PDR process was intended to address this issue by more closely aligning personal development needs to targeted staff development combined with regular monitoring. It concluded that the College was aware of the need to ensure that staff development opportunities were closely tied to individual requirements, and that it was taking appropriate steps to address this issue. The team concluded that the College had appropriate and effective procedures in place to assure the quality of teaching through staff support and development.

Assurance of the quality of teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods

102 The College stated in the SED that its teaching delivered through distance methods was limited to a Foundation Degree in Equine Studies at Warwickshire College. The development work for this award had been funded by a HEFCE pilot grant, and QAA's *Guidelines on the quality assurance of distance learning* had been used to inform approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. The programme had been recognised with a National Beacon Award in 2004 for the use of IT to deliver distance learning. The College stated that a proposed FdSc in Poultry Production and Science would also include distance learning, and that work on this was informed not only by the 2004 revision of the *Code of practice*, published by QAA, but also by the extensive experience of colleagues at Warwickshire College.

103 The SED stated that progress on meeting the College's learning technology aspirations, as outlined in its learning and teaching strategy, had not advanced as rapidly as originally planned. Students who met the audit team praised the use of the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) in supporting their Effective Communication and Academic and Professional Development modules, but noted that the VLE was not widely used outside this area. Academic staff confirmed this, and expressed the view that they saw the value of the VLE potentially as part of a blended learning

approach rather than as an alternative means of ensuring access to handouts and lecture notes.

104 The audit team heard that the VLE was being used to provide additional support material for tutors and students based in Beijing Agricultural College, and heard of plans, through the College's Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Aspire, to further develop materials to support student learning and assessment through the VLE. The College had recently appointed an e-learning Development Officer to support the development of the use of the VLE. The audit team concluded that although the College might have been somewhat slow to exploit the potential benefits of e-learning it was now addressing these matters and had appropriate structures in place to achieve its aims.

Learning support resources

105 The College has a new Learning Resource Centre incorporating state-of-the-art library and IT facilities. The former library space has been converted to a new teaching block with fully networked AV facilities in the teaching rooms. Space on the main site has been refurbished for exclusive use by taught postgraduate students. The SED explained that, by the start of the 2005-06 session, a wireless network access pilot will have been fully implemented across campus and remote, off-campus access to the network, intranet and email servers will be in place for staff and students. A number of subject-specific resources have been developed since 2002 in the farm, engineering and laboratory areas to support research and the curriculum.

106 Senior managerial responsibilities for learning resources are shared between the Dean of Academic Affairs, Academic Registrar and Head of Information Systems (IS). Subject-specific resources are managed by Heads of Group through their devolved budgets, with the coordination of resources being overseen by APRC. Periodic reviews undertaken in 2003-04 identified some situations where existing resources could be better deployed in support of the taught curriculum. APRC has considered a number of these recommendations, and

course team responses are detailed in 2003-04 ACRs. The Farm Strategy Committee, which considers the commercial and biosecurity needs of the farm, now also considers the use of farm resources in support of the curriculum.

107 In the SED, the College stated that the learning resources generally receive positive endorsement from students, external examiners and other peers who review them as part of programme review or accreditation processes. In surveys, students have generally regarded the farm as a particularly useful teaching resource. Students who met the team expressed the view that the farm was an invaluable practical resource and was well used for teaching. Students studying agriculture related courses agreed that the farm facilities were good, although some felt that the farm was not used enough in teaching. The DSED for the agriculture group of courses indicated that the College is aware of students' wishes to see greater use of the farm in teaching, and noted that additional practical training had been agreed from session 2005-06.

108 At the briefing, students reported that IT and Library facilities were much improved since the new building had opened, with a good range of industry-standard IT packages. Students on recently introduced courses considered that, while new journal subscriptions, including on-line journals, were good, there was a shortage of back issues. The audit team heard that the library short-loan system could pose problems, but this matter was being addressed. Students who met the team in the DATs confirmed that library and IT facilities were good, and indicated that attitudes to study had improved considerably since the new library opened because it is now 'a nice place to study'.

109 Student feedback highlighted in the annual monitoring round in 2003-04 indicated that, across all cohorts and all aspects of learning resources and learning support, students rated highly the resources for learning. Taught postgraduate students are also positive about the quality of the resources. The SWS stated that 'facilities at Harper Adams have impressed all students'. The audit team formed

the view that the College's physical learning resources are good, and that appropriate institutional overview is maintained. Overall, the team was able to conclude that the College manages its resources for learning to provide effective support for students.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

110 Academic guidance, support and supervision includes one-to-one support, group support and written guidance. Each student is allocated a personal tutor who supports the student's personal development planning (up to ten students from a cohort), and senior tutors support individual and cohorts of students. Most academic staff operate either an open door policy or have a weekly diary posted to their door, so that students can make appointments. A core module, Academic and Professional Development (APD), supports communication, IT, numeracy and personal development skills. A team of learner support, careers, library and IT staff support both personal tutors and module tutors in the APD module. There is a programme of learner support drop-in workshops for all students, not just first years.

111 The College operates universal screening for specific learning difficulties during induction, followed by a voluntary second screening and full diagnostic test if requested. There are bookable, one-to-one appointments for all students with disabilities, to develop learning plans and provide support which is intended to enable students to learn independently, rather than to reinforce disability. The SWS noted the good academic support for students in general, and for dyslexic students in particular. The provision for disabled learners has been reviewed. The relevant section of the *Code of practice*, although superseded by legislative developments since its publication, was used as a reference point when the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy for Students with Disabilities was developed.

112 Course handbooks specify the academic expectations placed on students, and indicate how students can get the most from their studies. Extensive written assessment briefing

forms include clearly specified assessment criteria and, in some cases, associated marking criteria. Detailed written feedback is given on assignments, generally returned within two weeks of submission for all except the Engineering modules, for which ASC has approved a normal turnaround time of four weeks.

113 All undergraduate courses include a placement period. Course-specific placement managers and visiting placement tutors support students before and during placement, and a detailed Placement Handbook is available. For all students undertaking placements in non EU countries, an approved agent must be appointed to assist with vetting the employer, visiting the student at least once, maintaining regular telephone contact, supporting the student with any problems and repatriating the student in the case of an emergency. Students who met the audit team confirmed that support while on placement was good, and indicated that three visits by a tutor would be typical on a year-long placement. Students on placement would also be in regular contact with the College by phone and email. From its reading of the annual course monitoring report for the Agriculture DAT, the team learned that students and employers were generally happy with placements. However, students who go away from College immediately after their exams might not see their tutor before going on placement; and a number of students on placement abroad felt that they were not well supported by an overseas agent. Staff who met the team explained that new procedures had been introduced this year to overcome these issues, including briefing of tutors and detailed discussions with overseas agents.

114 Academic guidance and support arrangements for research students are specified in the research students' handbook. The relevant section of the Manual has recently been revised in light of the 2004 revisions to the *Code of practice* published by QAA. The Open University, as the awarding body for higher awards at the College, has confirmed in its most recent annual monitoring feedback report that 'research degree provision within Harper Adams

University College met the requirements of the relevant precepts of the QAA *Code of practice'.*

115 The 2003 institutional review report stated that it would be desirable for the College to make more opportunities for the central services that provide student support for learning at operational level to have formal input into academic strategic planning. The audit team discussed this issue with providers of learning support who expressed the view that, although none of them sit on the Academic Board or APRC, they all receive the minutes and feel adequately represented by their line manager, the Academic Registrar.

116 The audit team formed the view, from reading documentation and talking to students and staff, that arrangements for academic support are robust and effective for all categories of students. Through careful monitoring, including routine survey and analysis of student opinion, minor lapses are identified and procedures are modified to overcome problems. The team concluded that students are well supported in their learning by academic tutors and central services. The placement period is a special feature of the College's provision and the care taken to provide placement support, including seeking student feedback about the effectiveness of that support, contributes to the overall conclusion that the way in which industrial placements for students at the College are managed, supported and integrated within the curriculum is a feature of good practice.

Personal support and guidance

117 Each student has a personal tutor whose role is to support students' academic and general welfare. Personal tutors may direct students to any specialist help that they believe may be needed. The audit team was interested to learn that a number of tutors had undertaken listening skills courses to assist them in identifying when a student may be experiencing more difficult problems than they are able, at first, to acknowledge. Virtually all first-year students live on-campus. Final year students act as wardens in each hall of residence, and the team heard that they have

proved very effective in helping students in the transition of leaving home and meeting the challenges of study in higher education.

118 As at December 2004, some 5 per cent of the students enrolled at the College were international students. They are invited to the College a week in advance of other enrolments so that they can benefit from an orientation programme. English language provision is available on both a group and one-to-one basis. The developments with Beijing Agricultural College will increase the number of overseas students on campus by a total of 60 a year from 2006, almost doubling the current number of international students on campus. Plans are in hand to ensure that these students are sufficiently well prepared, both in advance of their arrival in the UK through the curriculum at Beijing Agricultural College, and supported upon their arrival, for the transition to the UK style of living and learning. The SED explained that a focus group of overseas students in 2003-04 was used to inform these plans.

119 Aggregated feedback from all students in 2003-04 on careers support and advice indicated that 95 per cent perceived the provision to be acceptable or better. In line with the guidance in the *Code of practice* published by QAA, the Careers Advisor also considers written feedback from all those who use the central service, to develop the service. In practice, due to the vocational nature of the curriculum and because most tutors also act as visiting placement tutors and have personal experience working in various industry sectors, students receive their careers advice in a distributed way.

120 The audit team heard from students that personal tutors are helpful, proactive, supportive for settling in, and easily contactable. They expressed the view that tutors generally gave 'fantastic support'. Some students reported, however, that they preferred to get support from the Senior Tutor and other members of the course team better suited to help with particular academic problems. Overall, the team found ample evidence, from reading documentation and talking to students and staff, that comprehensive arrangements are in place for

making personal support and guidance available to students, and considered these arrangements to be effective for all categories of students.

Collaborative provision

121 The 2003 report of the institutional review advised the College to develop 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. The audit team was interested to explore how the College had responded to this recommendation.

122 The provision at Reaseheath College includes horticulture related courses (golf course and landscape management), a countryside course and animals related provision (dairy herd management and equine studies) and food technology, for which Reaseheath College is a Centre of Vocational Excellence (CoVE). Enrolments to the Honours Degree equine provision was suspended in 2003 due to poor student recruitment and first year retention levels. The SED acknowledged that an unusually high staff turnover at Reaseheath College, and changes in the Higher Education Manager role since 2002, had created problems in ensuring that all staff are aware of the policies and procedures to be applied. A new Principal was appointed at Reaseheath in the spring of 2004, as a result of which there has been some reorganisation with a view to extending higher education provision. The SED further acknowledged that monitoring of the arrangements at Reaseheath College by Harper Adams University College had not always been effective, and noted that improved monitoring arrangements and staff development for staff of the partner college had been introduced in the 2004-05 session.

123 Warwickshire College's indirectly funded arrangements commenced enrolments in the 1999-2000 academic year with HND provision in animal welfare, and this was extended to include HND, Foundation Degree and honours degree equine courses (a programme area which has been awarded CoVE status), and HNC/HND arboriculture. This was all

transferred to a directly funded basis in 2003. The provision was extended to include HNC/Foundation Degree provision in landscape and garden design and sports turf management for 2004-05 enrolments.

124 The action taken by the College to give it greater confidence in its control of the collaborative provision leading to its awards has included: developing more detailed operational responsibilities as part of the annual annexes to the memorandum of cooperation; revising the relevant sections of the Manual to address respective responsibilities; developing its extranet; and appointing a liaison officer for each further education college. The 2004 partnership review meetings concluded that it would be beneficial to replicate the termly course managers' meetings held at Harper Adams with each of the partner colleges, to reinforce, consult on and communicate changes to academic arrangements. If collaborative provision is extended, the College acknowledged that the arrangements will need to be reviewed, since they are unlikely to support extended collaborative provision without further resource or possible reorganisation.

125 The audit team reviewed external examiners' reports which commented upon the academic standards of the collaborative provision, reviewed minutes of course committees at the partner colleges, minutes of annual partnership review meetings, and other relevant documentation. The team met representative students and some staff from Reaseheath and Warwickshire Colleges. From these meetings and from its study of the documentation, the team concluded that Harper Adams University College has generally improved its control of its collaborative provision at these partner colleges leading to its awards, although some shortcomings were noted. For example, not all course committees, as properly constituted, have taken place, potentially compromising the assurance of quality, and it has taken three years for the College to act on concerns that were first expressed in 2002 by an external examiner and to arrange development events to improve the

ability of some staff in a partner college to write assignments and examination papers, potentially compromising the security of academic standards. At the time of the audit visit, the Higher Education Link Co-ordinator and, in one partner college, the Higher Education Co-ordinator, had been in post for too short a time for their impact on quality and standards to be evaluated.

126 The audit team concluded that, although the College had taken action on the recommendation of the 2003 institutional review report, the College is advised to continue to review its operational protocols to ensure that they are effective in securing the academic standards of the College's awards offered through collaborative arrangements, and in assuring an appropriate quality of provision leading to those awards.

127 Since 2000 the College has worked to develop curriculum and research opportunities with Beijing Agricultural College and research projects with China Agricultural University. The audit team was able to confirm the course management and module teaching teams include staff from both Beijing Agricultural College and Harper Adams University College. In support of quality assurance, the College has developed for Beijing Agricultural College a bespoke quality assurance manual, external examiners' briefing notes, invigilation regulations for staff and exam rules for students. The audit team met the Dean of External Liaison and the Joint Courses Co-ordinator of the provision at Beijing, and studied the available documentation. The College outlined the many and varied preparations to welcome and accommodate the final year students from Beijing Agricultural College during the academic year 2006-07. Senior staff who discussed these matters with the team assured the team that the quality assurance processes were identifying particular issues in the management of this provision, which the College was currently taking appropriate steps to address.

Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trails

Discipline audit trails

Countryside, Environment, Leisure and Tourism (CELT)

128 The DAT covered courses leading to the awards of:

- BSc (Hons) Countryside Management

- FdSc/HND Countryside Management

- BSc (Hons) Countryside and Environmental Management

- HND Countryside and Environmental Management (running out, no longer offered)

- BSc (Hons) Environmental Protection (running out, no longer offered)

- BSc (Hons) Rural Leisure Management

- FdSc/HND Rural Leisure Management

- FdSc/HND Tourism and Business Management

- BSc (Hons) Tourism and Business Management

- BA Tourism and Business Management (running out, no longer offered).

129 The documentation consisted of a self-evaluation document supported by review documentation and programme specifications from a Curriculum Review in 2004 plus an ACR from November 2004 and the related Course Monitor's Report. The agreed outcomes from the review and the annual monitoring were presented. These documents described the nature of the provision and of key processes.

130 Programme specifications are available for all courses in the group. The programme specifications specified both generic and award-specific aims and ILOs. In defining ILOs, reference was made to the FHEQ and a range of relevant subject benchmark statements. The relation between the learning outcomes at module and programme level was explicitly mapped within the programme specifications.

The assessment practices outlined in the programme specification were consistent with the relevant sections of the *Code of practice,* although little explicit reference was made to the *Code*, which was described by staff and in the SED as having been embedded in policy.

131 Admission, progression and completion statistics were included in the Curriculum Review document (March 2004) and the ACR in support of some critical evaluation. Both included consideration of levels of student attainment at module and award stages through use of data and a commentary upon it. Although the audit team considered that there is scope for improvement in the transparency of the presentation and analyses of these data and the extent of the associated commentary in the ACR, emerging trends are identified and acted upon. For example, consideration of the progression and completion data by the Academic Board had generated a request for the CELT team to monitor progression of individuals through the personal tutorial system. It was confirmed in discussions that personal tutors were proactive in monitoring student progress, in particular, prior to assignment deadlines.

132 ACRs written by the course manager on behalf of the team are considered and confirmed by staff and students during the annual course monitoring meeting of the course committee. Action planning is refined and confirmed at this meeting and monitored by a course monitor on behalf of Academic Standards Committee. A report from the monitor to ASC provides the basis for its annual report to the Academic Board on implementation of action plans, effectiveness of annual monitoring, issues of concern and matters of exemplary good practice for College wide dissemination. It was clear to the audit team that staff are responsive to student feedback, for example, in terms of readiness to make changes to a module or course.

133 The audit team considered that the C2004 review of the curriculum had been rather more effective than the M4M review in 2000. There was clear improvement in the general approach and organisation and in terms of the

confirmation and recording of outcomes. However, some elements of evaluation and responses to recommendations from CDR seemed brief or incomplete in the ACR and, because it described several courses, it was not always possible to identify action in relation to particular courses. The team noted some uncertainty among the academic staff about the formal process for making minor changes.

134 External examiners' reports confirmed that academic standards were set and measured in an appropriate manner, and that student attainment was consistent with national standards in the subject area. Consideration of reports from external examiners at both module and course levels considered during annual course monitoring generates a response from the course committee that is recorded in the ACR. This is used to inform consideration by the Head of Group and the timely and comprehensive letters written by HEDQE, at college level, to each external examiner.

135 Procedures and regulations for assessment are presented in the Manual. Programme specifications indicate that a mixture of formative and summative methods is used, with some variety in type of assessment tool. The marking process includes second-marking; dissertations are blind double-marked, known marks for other work are moderated. Representative samples of 6 per cent or six items are reviewed by moderators and external examiners. The team noted some variability in provision of moderators' written comments for students. As a result of C2004, the course team is undertaking a review of the balance and scheduling of modes of assessment.

136 A sample of moderated assignments and examination scripts was considered by the audit team who agreed with the view of the external examiners, and confirmed that assessments were well designed to test relevant learning outcomes and that students were attaining the specified standards for the courses. The team was able to confirm that the standard of student achievement was appropriate to the title of the awards and their location within the FHEQ.

137 Student handbooks and module materials specify the learning programme, assessment requirements, and the breakdown between assignments and examinations. Informative assignment briefs specified dates for the launch, submission and return of work and some, but not all, contained detailed assessment guidelines. Guidance is provided on how to present assignments, such as reports, for which a template is made available. Students confirmed to the audit team that they were well informed about assessment requirements. Written feedback on assignments appeared to the team to be helpful and usually framed by assessment criteria for the work. Students reported that in February 2005, expression of their concerns about a concentration of multiple assessment deadlines resulted in adjustments to individual submission dates. The team formed the view that there is scope for the development of a course-wide approach to the scheduling of deadlines for module assignments.

138 Quality of learning resources was commended during the curriculum review and highly rated by students in the ACR. While students and staff reported through the ACR and CDR that they were generally satisfied with the new library, some students reported difficulties in accessing key texts at times of peak demand, although creative use by staff of class handouts has gone some way to alleviate this problem. The learning support and student services staff were described to the audit team by students as providing exceptional levels of support. A handbook is provided by the library to assist with referencing of work using standard conventions and avoiding academic impropriety.

139 Students reported that they enjoyed open, informal and effective communication with a highly supportive group of motivated staff. Formal channels for student feedback include module and College questionnaire surveys, reported in the ACR, student representation at the Course Committee and ad hoc surveys of canteen and library services. Matters raised informally by students have generally been addressed and resolved in a timely way, whether at local or institutional level, although

students commented that they did not always know whether issues raised through formal channels had been resolved.

140 Students participate in the Course Committee meetings, and there are strong informal links between staff and students as a result of an open door policy by staff. Students were confident that matters raised by them were satisfactorily dealt with at Course Committee or directly with any of a variety of tutors, according to personal preference of a student. Students' views about the curriculum are taken very seriously, and their comments frequently prompt changes in a new curriculum area and an evolving suite of courses. Overall, the audit team was satisfied that the quality of learning opportunities provided for students was suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Agriculture

141 The DAT covered courses leading to the awards of:

- BSc Agriculture
- BSc Agriculture and Animal Science
- BSc Agriculture and Crop Management
- BSc Agriculture and Environmental Management
- BSc Agriculture and Land & Farm Management
- BSc Agriculture and Marketing
- BSc Agriculture and Food Quality Management
- BSc Agriculture and Mechanisation
- FdSc/HND Agriculture
- FdSc/HND Agriculture with Mechanisation.

142 The DAT SED was written specifically for the audit by the course manager for Agriculture, and was subsequently approved by the course committee, which includes student representation. The document was mostly descriptive, although it did contain many references to evaluations by external examiners, review panels and students. Institutional

procedures, processes and facilities were described, making it difficult for the audit team to judge how effectively institutional-level procedures were operating at the discipline level. Discussions with staff and students, together with study of further documentation provided during the audit visit, clarified for the team distinctions between institutional and discipline-level procedures.

143 The programme specifications have clear links to the FHEQ at the programme and module level. Aims and learning outcomes are mapped on to the *Subject benchmark statement* for agriculture, forestry, agricultural sciences, food sciences and consumer sciences published by QAA. Programme specifications are approved at validation events. With staff at the DAT meeting, the audit team explored the degree of incremental drift that was permitted without revalidation, and was informed that programme specifications can be modified by up to 10 per cent by the course team, subject to approval by AVSC. Although ILOs in programme specifications are adequate and distinguish between FHEQ levels, learning outcomes in module descriptors seemed to the team sometimes to lack clear indication that critical evaluation is being developed and tested in modules at honours and master's levels. Senior managers told the audit team that extensive consideration had been given to the expectations for critical analysis, and explained that evidence for critical analysis was present in marking schemes and student work, but some ILO statements 'had yet to catch up'. The team would encourage the College to continue its work to ensure that module learning outcomes are set at the appropriate academic level.

144 The C2004 validation event attached a number of conditions to approval of the Agriculture and associated courses. These were a reduction in the number of core modules and revision of the curriculum to include current agricultural issues. The validation panel also made several recommendations concerning assessment, course content and resources. The course team carefully considered all these issues and their responses were included in the ACR for 2004.

145 A feature of courses in the Agriculture group, as with all undergraduate programmes at the College, is the placement year. Details are included in the programme specifications and also in the Placement Handbook and the Placement Code of Practice. The value of the placement period and its contribution to developing students' knowledge, skills and confidence receives widespread commendation and undoubtedly contributes to the high level of employability of graduates. The audit team took particular note of the way in which industrial placements are managed, supported and integrated within the curriculum.

146 A full set of cohort data is included in each ACR, including number of applications, progression data and final destination for each individual student. The Course Manager analyses and discusses trends, and recommends action points or explanations. Recruitment on to agriculture top-up programmes had declined because an increasing number of students chose specialised top-up degrees in the animals or mechanisation areas. The course team has resolved to review the portfolio of top-up programmes to allow more specialisation and more closely match student requirements. Achievement data over the last few years had indicated that a lower proportion of agriculture students were awarded First or Upper Second class honours degrees, compared with the institutional average. This was attributed to the aspirations of agriculture students, many of whom intended to return to the family farm where a high classification of degree was not considered necessary for their future career.

147 Annual monitoring includes student evaluation, staff evaluation and consideration of external examiners' reports. Action points are generated by the annual review of course reports, and the annual report includes a check of progress against action points from the previous year. External examiners' reports, and responses from the Course Manager, are incorporated into the annual monitoring report. Recent issues raised by external examiners have included the marking scheme, collusion and condonement. In each case, the issues have

been referred to the ASC for consideration and ruling. Annual monitoring reports are also considered by a Course Monitor from ASC who checks and reports on progress against action points. From its scrutiny of documents and from discussions with staff, the audit team formed the view that the annual monitoring process worked effectively at local level and that there was a robust procedure for feeding information up to the institutional level.

148 Assessment regimes are set out in the programme specifications. Normally, modules are assessed by both coursework and end-of-module time constrained assessment, each contributing 50 per cent to the weighted mean module work. The DSED noted that students had previously complained about assignment scheduling, submission arrangements and return of marked work. These matters had been raised at a course committee meeting and were subsequently addressed. Coursework assessment methods are diverse and include literature review-based essays, problem-based assignments, sponsored industry projects requiring oral and business written reports, individual and team scenario exercises, experimental work and placement assignments. An external examiner commended the coursework assignments for generally being based on topics of current interest. Time-constrained assessment includes closed and open book assessment, with both seen and unseen questions. Examinations and assignment work are blind marked.

149 The audit team scrutinised a broad cross section of assessed work from 13 modules across the portfolio of agriculture programmes, and studied a selection of projects from BSc and HND programmes. The coursework assignments given to students contained clear instructions, briefs and marking criteria. Assignment briefs had been moderated by a senior member of the course team to ensure that they tested learning outcomes, were at the appropriate level, and complied with other requirements of the Manual. Assignments had been marked anonymously and a sample had been double-marked. All coursework seen by

the team contained helpful written feedback, always in a summary, and usually throughout the script as well. Students confirmed that they found feedback useful for understanding how to improve their performance; where further clarification was required, this was readily available from members of the course team.

150   Examination papers had been moderated as described in the Manual, to check that individual questions are appropriate and clear, that the whole paper covers the module descriptor, and that the paper provides equal opportunities for all candidates. Examination scripts generally contained comments from markers that related to marking criteria and were helpful for moderators. Some sets of examination scripts were accompanied by commentary on student performance that would be helpful for external examiners. Projects covered a wide range of interesting and challenging topics, and included appropriate reviews of literature, data gathering and analysis, and interpretation. Overall, the team found that marks awarded for assignments and examinations were appropriate for different standards of student achievement and levels of the programme, in agreement with external examiners' comments. The team concluded that the standard of student achievement was appropriate to the title of the awards and their location within the FHEQ.

151   Students receive a course handbook during induction that contains details of course management and tutoring, course structure, programme specifications, and assessment procedures. Students who met the audit team confirmed that the course handbook was a useful document that helped them to understand the learning and assessment expectations and to select module options. The team heard from students that the grading criteria that were specified in assignment criteria further helped their understanding of expectations.

152   The course committee is the equivalent of a staff/student liaison committee at programme level. The SED stated that course representatives provide a formal link between module tutors and course management team members. Their terms of reference are included in course handbooks. Each course cohort elects at least two representatives who are expected to provide feedback to, and raise operational problems with, the module tutors and the course team, on an ongoing basis or through termly course committee meetings. The audit team was provided with course committee minutes for the past year, covering four meetings. Students had raised a number of detailed issues concerning individual modules, and these had been met with a rapid response from the course team and an action point where necessary. Overall, the audit team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities available to students was suitable for a programme of study leading to the named awards in the agriculture group of courses.

Section 4: The audit investigations: published information

The students' experience of published information and other information available to them

153   Printed documents available to potential applicants and students include the prospectuses, course-specific booklets providing more detail on individual programmes than is possible through the prospectus, and handbooks specific to placements, postgraduate research students and international students. Course handbooks include programme specifications, which are separately available from the Admissions Office on request. In addition to paper-based information, course and institution-wide information is displayed on the College's website, documents such as the Manual are hosted on the College's intranet and the internal network's shared student drive hosts definitive module descriptors and other folders containing curriculum support materials that are prepared and posted by individual tutors. The SED explained that the VLE will be developed to host an increasing range of linked curriculum management and support materials.

154 The prospectus and course specific booklets are produced by the Liaison and Marketing team who work with colleagues within the College and its partner colleges to ensure that information is presented accurately. The Head of Liaison and Marketing signs off the proofs before the final print run is authorised. The Student Handbook is prepared by the Academic Registrar and the Student Services team. The Website Manager organises updated information at the institution and course level on to the internet. Course entry profiles hosted on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service website are coordinated by the admissions team with content provided by course managers who verify the accuracy of all course related information.

155 The SWS expressed students' view that the College's published information is accurate and helpful. Students who met the team during the briefing visit suggested that information transfer by word-of-mouth is important. Module descriptions in course documentation were considered to be good. One student on a taught postgraduate course reported that the postgraduate prospectus and website were not fully up-to-date when she applied to the College, but she obtained correct advice directly from the course team. Students who met the team in meetings during the audit visit confirmed that information was available from a wide range of sources and was accurate. They considered programme handbooks to be clear and useful, and especially praised the clear requirements for assignments.

156 From its study of printed documents, perusal of the intranet, and discussions with students, the audit team formed the view that information provided to students is generally useful and accurate. The team noted in particular the clear published assignment briefs and marking criteria that were provided for each assignment, and the placement handbook.

Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information

157 At the time of the audit visit, ASC was addressing the changes required as a result of several initiatives including:

- the requirements of the HEFCE 03/51 teaching quality information (TQI) set
- changes to the curriculum delivery model
- the role of APRC in the course approvals process
- reflections from C2004 in relation to critical review
- the current effectiveness of module reviews
- implications of the national student survey
- revisions to the *Code of practice* published by QAA and QAA's guidelines on producing programme specifications.

158 The aim of the College is to integrate the TQI requirements into normal processes. The required data set has been uploaded on to the Higher Education and Research Opportunities (HERO) website within the prescribed schedules. The HEDQE coordinates the production of the qualitative information requirements, while the Academic Registrar exercises the responsibility of verifying the accuracy of the quantitative data and the presentation to HERO. Summaries of external examiners reports for 2003-04 were published on the TQI site. The College plans to upload the annual overview report on academic standards and quality, as presented to the ASC, in lieu of responses to individual external examiners' reports as it considers that this approach will provide more meaningful information to stakeholders.

159 The audit team concluded that the College has systems in place to meet current TQI requirements in a timely manner. The team was satisfied that the College was actively engaging with the requirements of HEFCE's document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance,* and was aware of its responsibilities in relation to these requirements. On the evidence available to it, the team was satisfied that the information the College is currently publishing about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards is reliable, accurate and complete.

Findings

Findings

160 An institutional audit of Harper Adams University College (the College) was undertaken during the period 19 to 22 June 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility as an awarding body. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, two discipline audit trails (DATs) were conducted at discipline level. This section of the report summarises the findings of the audit. It concludes by identifying features of good practice that emerged during the audit, and making recommendations to the College for action to enhance current practice.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

161 The College has clearly defined procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review which are set out in its Academic Quality Assurance Manual (the Manual). New programmes undergo a developmental approval process that involves initial consideration of resource requirements by Academic Planning and Resources Committee (APRC) before outline approval is given by the Academic Board. The process is overseen by the College's Academic Standards Committee (ASC) which undertakes an initial scrutiny of the documentation before establishing a validation panel to consider the proposals in detail.

162 The integrated nature of courses within its modular scheme means that the College has undertaken reviews of the undergraduate provision on its own campus through large-scale events encompassing the full range of courses. These events initially consider course-level issues before reviewing individual modules. Reviews of postgraduate provision and that in the partner Colleges is undertaken by a process similar to that for the validation of new provision but including a detailed critical appraisal of the operation of the existing course.

163 Validation and review panels include external representation from academics, employers and the professions. They may approve or refer proposals and may attach conditions or recommendations to their judgements. Reports on these events and the responses to any conditions and recommendations are considered by ASC. Annual monitoring is undertaken at both subject and course level, and considers a range of indicators on the performance of modules and courses. The process is overseen by ASC which appoints monitors from amongst its members to report on the effectiveness of each course's monitoring. Summary reports on annual monitoring are considered by ASC and the Academic Board.

164 Student feedback is obtained through regular questionnaires at the course level in which students are asked to comment on a range of indicators including the quality of their modules. In addition, academic staff are expected to undertake regular monitoring of the modules they run through questionnaires or other means. The outcomes feed into the annual monitoring process. Students are also represented on the College's main committees and on course committees. Monitoring of work placements provides feedback from prospective employers. Students who met the audit team spoke positively about the way in which their views were sought and their concerns responded to.

165 The College has limited distance-learning programmes and applies the same quality assurance procedures to such provision as to its other courses. Collaborative partners undergo an initial approval process as prospective partner institutions before individual courses undergo validation. The validation process is essentially the same as that used for College provision. Local partner colleges are represented on ASC, and each undergoes an annual partnership review.

166 In its SED, the College stated that it was committed to maintaining the standards of its awards, enhancing the quality of students' learning experiences and improving student attainment. It saw the characteristics of its

academic assurance and enhancement systems as being those of: devolution of responsibility with authority, auditing, student participation, peer review and proactive enhancement.

167 From its review of the College's documentation and its discussions with staff, the audit team concurred with the College's assessment and concluded that its processes were effective, widely understood by staff and appropriately applied. On the basis of the evidence available to it, the team concluded that the College's procedures for assuring the quality of its programmes were effective. The findings of the audit confirm that broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

168 In securing the standards of its awards the College places emphasis on its external examiners, on its professional advisers, including employers and placement hosts, and on its procedures for programme approval, monitoring and periodic review. Terms of reference and criteria for the appointment of external examiners at subject and course levels and other external advisers are clearly set out in the College's regulations. The policies and practices of the external examiner system align with the precepts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA.

169 Programme approval and periodic review processes employ extensive external representation. The review process includes an evaluation of the course aims, outcomes, content and assessment in the context of the use of relevant subject benchmark statements and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), to ensure that there is a focus on the academic standards of the award. Advisers are asked to make comparisons with similar provision at other higher education institutions.

170 The primary role of the external examiners is to ensure that the standard of College awards is maintained and that individual students are treated with parity. Each external examiner is required to comment specifically on standards at the subject level. At least one subject examiner is appointed at course level and comments on the standards and procedures operating for all students across a course. Reports from external examiners are considered at course, subject and College levels. Course teams and the head of academic group contribute to the formal letter of response, which is written at College level, ratified by ASC and sent to each external examiner after appropriate actions have been taken. External examiners have confirmed that standards are comparable with those at institutions with which they are familiar. The audit team noted the promptness of the written responses by the College to matters raised by external examiners.

171 A number of the courses at the College are accredited by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), and such accreditations help to secure the appropriateness and academic standards of the College's awards. The outcomes of accreditation by PSRBs are incorporated into periodic review processes at subject level, and reports are received directly by the ASC for consideration at College level.

172 The College has recognised problems with the introduction of a new student data management system in recent years. At the time of the audit visit it was clear that the new SITS system was providing staff at subject and College levels with improved access to current data in the analysis of assessment, progression and awards. It was evident that consideration of relevant data by key committees such as the Academic Board had resulted in changes designed to lead to improvements in institutional-level management of quality and academic standards.

173 From its study of documentation, including samples of students' assessed work, and from its discussions with staff and students, the audit team formed the view that the College had strong systems for considering the views of external examiners, external advisers and PSRBs,

and made effective use of management information in securing academic standards. The findings of the audit confirm that broad confidence can be placed in the College's present and future capacity to manage effectively the academic standards of its awards.

The use made by the institution of the Academic Infrastructure

174 A College curriculum framework was established prior to the Curriculum Development Review (CDR) in 2004, the use of which is intended to embed reference to the Academic Infrastructure within course documentation. As each part of the Academic Infrastructure has become available, the College has taken appropriate steps to ensure that it has been considered and addressed. As sections, or revised sections, of the *Code of practice* became available, the College established mechanisms for reviewing and, where necessary, revising policies and procedures so that they are consistent with all parts of the *Code.*

175 The audit team concluded that this systematic approach had been beneficial, for example, with consistent practices across the College relating to curriculum design, external examining, placement learning and management of the experience of postgraduate students, among others. There is, however, some scope for further improvement in the specification of standards at levels H and M in some courses, in particular to reflect the research underpinning of that curriculum and the development of critical thinking skills.

176 All of the College's awards are described by levels which are consistent with those of the FHEQ. The use of common academic regulations across the courses supports consistency. Programme specifications have been routinely adopted by the College within a standard format that includes reference to relevant subject benchmark statements. The College's curriculum framework, with its embedded reference to the Academic Infrastructure, allows all of the College's courses to be validated and periodically reviewed with reference to the appropriate subject benchmarks, and to the requirements of

any accrediting PSRB. The audit team concluded that the College has made effective use of the Academic Infrastructure as a reference point for its policies and procedures relating to the management of quality and academic standards.

The effectiveness of the institution's procedures for supporting learning

177 The College has a new Library incorporating state-of-the-art library and information technology (IT) facilities. The farm, engineering and laboratory facilities have also received recent investment to support research and the curriculum. Students reported that IT and library facilities were much improved since the new building had opened, with a good range of industry standard IT packages. Student feedback in the annual monitoring round in 2003-04, across all cohorts and all aspects of learning resources and learning support, rated highly the College's resources for learning. The audit team formed the view that the College's physical learning resources are good, and that the College maintains an effective overview of the management of these resources.

178 Academic and personal support are provided by personal tutors, senior course tutors and a dedicated central learning support team. The College operates universal screening for specific learning difficulties during induction, and provides good support to enable students to learn independently. Comprehensive written support is offered to students through a range of specific handbooks. All assignments include clear briefs and guidelines, together with marking criteria that are used to form the basis of effective feedback given on most assignments. Further feedback is readily available from teaching staff, the majority of whom operate an open-door policy. All undergraduate courses include a placement period and course-specific placement managers and visiting placement tutors support students before and during placement.

179 The College has IiP recognition. Staffing policies and procedures are set out in the Staff Handbook, and involve mentoring and induction arrangements for new staff. All staff undertake an annual personal development

review (PDR) which aims to identify staff development needs and monitor their implementation. Staff development opportunities for academic staff include internal staff development events and access to a Postgraduate Certificate course on teaching and learning offered by Keele University. The College considers that it has effective procedures for supporting learning through staff development. It is seeking to strengthen its PDR process by linking it more closely with objective setting and by strengthening the monitoring arrangements. From its discussions with staff and its scrutiny of documentation, the audit team concluded that the College had appropriate systems and procedures in place to identify staff development needs and to support their implementation in support of enhancing students' learning experience.

180 The College draws on feedback from extensive student surveys conducted by service providers and at programme level to gauge user satisfaction with resources and student support. These surveys indicate a high degree of student satisfaction, which was confirmed by students who met the audit team during the audit. Overall, the team formed the view that effective management of the College's physical and human resources for learning supports a positive learning experience for students.

Outcomes of the discipline audit trails

Countryside, environment, leisure and tourism (CELT)

181 The programme specifications for this group of undergraduate programmes include appropriate aims and learning outcomes that are clearly linked to teaching, learning and assessment methods, and are specifically referenced to relevant benchmark statements. Student evaluation of the courses is positive, and students express high levels of satisfaction with the nature and extent of the support and learning resources available to them. They consider that they are very well informed about assessment requirements and criteria, and that they have constructive feedback on assessed work.

182 Students receive good guidance and support before, during and after their work placements. They have appropriate mechanisms for representation at course and College levels, and enjoy open, informal and effective communication with a very supportive group of staff. The audit team was able to conclude that the standard of student achievement in this group of programmes was appropriate to the title of the awards and their location within the FHEQ, and that the quality of learning opportunities provided for students is suitable for the courses leading to the named awards.

Agriculture

183 Programme specifications for this group of programmes are linked to the FHEQ at the programme and module level, and the aims and learning outcomes are mapped onto the *Subject benchmark statement* for agriculture, forestry, agricultural sciences, food sciences and consumer sciences. Learning outcomes in module descriptors, however, sometimes lack clear indication that critical evaluation is being developed and tested in modules at honours and master's levels. The audit team took particular note of the way in which placements are managed, supported and integrated within the curriculum. Students receive good support before and during placement. The College reported that the value of the placement period and its contribution to developing students' knowledge, skills and confidence receives widespread commendation.

184 A variety of methods is used for assessing students' achievement. Coursework assignments contain clear instructions, briefs and marking criteria, and assessed coursework seen by the audit team contained helpful written feedback. Students confirmed that they found feedback useful for understanding how to improve their performance. Projects seen by the team covered a wide range of interesting and challenging topics, and included appropriate reviews of literature, data gathering and analysis, and interpretation. The audit team was able to conclude that the standard of student achievement in this group of programmes was appropriate to the title of the

awards and their location within the FHEQ, and that the quality of learning opportunities provided for students is suitable for the courses leading to the named awards.

The utility of the SED as an illustration of the institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to act on these to enhance quality and standards

185 The self-evaluation document (SED) gave the audit team a clear and self-critical evaluation of the College's procedures for assuring the quality of programmes and securing the standards of its awards. It was open and evaluative, and reflected on the outcomes of recent internal and external reviews of the College's provision. Overall, the team concluded that the SED provided good evidence of the College's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to use the outcomes of that reflection effectively in the management of quality and academic standards.

Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

186 In its SED, the College set out clearly its targets for the enhancement of quality and standards over the next three years. The audit team considered that the targets set out in the SED gave sense of a clear institutional agenda for strategic change. In its meetings with staff and students of the College, and in its study of available documentation, the team was able to explore the progress being made on these plans for enhancement. It found that some issues had been progressed more swiftly than others but that most issues, with the exception of accreditation of prior experiential learning procedures, were already underway. The audit team confirmed that the enhancement agenda presented in the SED was relevant and appropriate, and aligned well with the findings of the audit.

Reliability of information

187 The prospectus and course specific booklets are produced by the Liaison and Marketing team who work with colleagues at the College and its partner colleges to ensure that information is presented accurately. The Head of Liaison and Marketing signs off the proofs before the final print run is authorised. A Website Manager organises updated information at the institutional and course levels on to the internet to complement paper-based publications. From its exploration of documents, sampling of web based materials and discussions with students, the audit team formed the view that information provided to students is generally useful and accurate.

188 The aim of the College is to integrate the teaching quality information (TQI) requirements into normal processes. The required data set has been uploaded on to the Higher Education and Research Opportunities in the United Kingdom website within the prescribed schedules. Summaries of external examiners reports for 2003-04 were published on the TQI site. The College plans to upload the annual overview report on academic standards and quality in lieu of responses to individual external examiners' reports as it considers that this approach will provide more meaningful information to stakeholders. The audit team was satisfied that the College was actively engaging with the requirements of HEFCE's document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*, and was aware of its responsibilities in relation to these requirements. On the evidence available to it, the team was satisfied that the information the College is currently publishing about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards is reliable, accurate and complete.

Features of good practice

189 Of the features of good practice noted in the course of the audit, the audit team noted the following in particular:

i   the effective use of curriculum mapping to ensure the integrity of programme learning outcomes within a modular scheme (paragraphs 32, 55)

ii   the careful use of assignment briefs, moderation and marking criteria to assist in measuring the attainment of standards and providing effective feedback to students (paragraphs 34, 112, 156)

iii the role and use of professional advisers, and links with employers and professional bodies (paragraphs 36, 56, 61)

iv   the careful and considered way in which the Curriculum Delivery Review was developed and implemented, and the way in which its impact is being monitored (paragraphs 51, 52, 91)

v   the way in which industrial placements for students at the College are managed, supported and integrated within the curriculum (paragraphs 73, 88, 113, 116, 145)

vi   the way in which the College's student-focused approach supports a positive learning experience (paragraphs 82, 89).

Recommendations for action

190 The College is advised to:

i   reconsider the elected nature of the chair of ASC, bearing in mind the findings of the Harper Review, to ensure that a corporate oversight is maintained (paragraph 29)

ii   keep under review the effectiveness of operational protocols for the monitoring and enhancement of awards offered at partner institutions (paragraph 126).

In addition, the College may wish to consider the desirability of enhancing its quality management arrangements by:

i   continuing its work to ensure that module learning outcomes are set at the appropriate academic level (paragraphs 33, 67, 143)

ii   considering how the time taken to develop and approve new programmes might be reduced while maintaining robust and effective procedures (paragraph 43)

iii developing a robust procedure for demonstrating and monitoring that the College's research activity effectively underpins the higher level curriculum (paragraphs 43, 54).

Appendix

Harper Adams University College's response to the audit report

The students, staff and governors of Harper Adams University College welcome the outcome of the institutional audit and its expression of broad confidence in the soundness of the future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The University College was also satisfied with the professional way in which the audit was conducted at all stages.

The University College was pleased that the audit team highlighted six good practice areas, including those related to Harper Adams' student-focused approach in support of a positive learning experience, the well supported placements which are integrated within the curriculum and the effective links with employers and professional bodies. These aspects are central to Harper Adams' continued success and external recognition of the good practice in these areas is especially welcome. Also pleasing is that the audit team considered that a number of aspects of curriculum management and assessment demonstrate good practice.

The University College was gratified that the audit team considered that the self evaluation document (SED) that underpinned the audit gave a clear, self-critical, open and evaluative assessment of existing arrangements. Importantly, the audit team confirmed that the strengths, current limitations and the enhancement agenda identified in the SED aligned well with its own conclusions.

The audit team's recommended actions have been incorporated into the internal enhancement plan for implementation over the 2005/6 academic session. This enhancement plan will continue to be updated and its effectiveness continuously monitored as part of normal review processes through the Academic Board.