



Royal Agricultural College

Institutional Review by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

February 2012

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About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the Royal Agricultural College (the College). The review took place on 30 January to 3 February 2012 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers and a review secretary, as follows:

- Professor Hilary Grainger
- Mr Martin Stimson
- Mr Joshua Wright
- Mr Greg Clark (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the Royal Agricultural College and to make judgements as to whether its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - threshold academic standards¹
 - the quality of learning opportunities
 - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on public information and the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

In reviewing the Royal Agricultural College the review team has also considered the theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [theme](#) was the First Year Student Experience (see page 17).

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² For background information about the Royal Agricultural College see page 3. A dedicated page of the QAA website explains the method for [Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland³ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

¹ For an explanation of terms see the [Glossary](#) at the end of this report.

² www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx

Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about the Royal Agricultural College.

QAA's judgements about the Royal Agricultural College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the Royal Agricultural College.

- Academic standards at the College **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at the Royal Agricultural College:

- its strategic approach to employment and career development for students, as evidenced by the wide range of activities and processes it has in place (paragraph 2.6.3)
- its active and inclusive consideration of issues to support learning opportunities for students with disabilities (paragraph 2.7.2).

Recommendations

The QAA review team **recommends** the Royal Agricultural College to:

- ensure that the level of qualification is recorded consistently in validation and revalidation documents and in its programme specifications by the beginning of the academic year 2012-13 (paragraph 1.2.2)
- ensure the consistent and timely uploading of all external examiners' reports and Annual Programme Managers' Reports (to include the responses made to external examiners) so as to permit access to students by the beginning of the academic year 2012-13 (paragraph 1.3.4)
- take further its efforts to date towards ensuring consistency in assessment by the production of a cohesive operational plan for the delivery and monitoring of all strands of the Assessment Strategy by the beginning of the academic year 2013-14 (paragraph 1.4.4)
- keep under review the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems (and specifically the remit and workload of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC)) until the end of the academic year 2013-14. This timescale should allow the College sufficient time to take due account of its proposed significant strategic developments, especially in the areas of collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (paragraphs 1.5.6 and 2.11.3)
- review the effectiveness and consistency of formal module-level evaluative student feedback to ensure that the student voice informs module development and any attendant staff development needs by the end of the academic year 2012-13 (paragraph 2.2.5)

- ensure that formal award certificates and/or the accompanying transcripts offered under collaborative provision arrangements duly record the location of study before the next production of certificates in the current academic session 2011-12 (paragraph 2.10.5).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following action** that the Royal Agricultural College is already taking to make academic standards secure and improve the educational provision offered to its students:

- the efforts of the College, to date, to improve the effectiveness of student representation. This is with a view to encouraging further consideration of the funding of a sabbatical officer, appropriately trained and supported, to lead and to foster participation in the enhancement of student representation. Such a postholder could participate more actively in the enhancement of the wider student experience (both academic and pastoral) drawing on existing good practice in the sector (paragraph 2.2.4).

Public information

The information the Royal Agricultural College provides about its higher education is current, reliable, useful and accessible to students.

The first year student experience

The Royal Agricultural College manages the first year student experience carefully and effectively.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland](#).⁴

About the Royal Agricultural College

The Royal Agricultural College is a small, specialist higher education institution. As of November 2011 it has 1,122 registered students studying Foundation Degrees, honours degrees and taught master's degrees. The College received taught degree awarding powers in 1995 and became publicly funded in 2001. The College does not award research degrees but supervises individual MPhil and PhD students who are registered under the University of Coventry's validation procedures.

At the time of the review, the College's stated mission was:

To provide leadership regionally, nationally and internationally, through education, research and consultancy, to the agriculture, equine, food, drink, property and land-based industries.

Since the review concluded, the review team notes that the College has recently approved the following change to its mission statement:

To be the centre of excellence for developing the leaders of tomorrow in sustainable

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/pages/ireni.aspx

development relating to the rural economy and food chain, and to provide leadership regionally, nationally and internationally through its education, research and knowledge exchange activities.

The College's previous QAA Institutional audit in 2007 led to judgements of confidence in the management of students' learning opportunities, confidence in the management of the academic standards of its on-campus provision, and limited confidence in the likely future management of the academic standards of the College's collaborative provision. The limited confidence judgement meant the College was obliged to develop and implement an action plan to address the weaknesses identified by the review team. The action plan was completed and signed off by QAA in 2009.

Explanation of the findings about the Royal Agricultural College

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.⁵

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a brief glossary at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)⁶ is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.⁷

1 Academic standards

Outcome

1.1 Academic standards at the Royal Agricultural College **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The review team's reasons for making this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualification benchmarks

1.2 The College approves and reviews its programmes of study with considered reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), and also relevant discipline-based frameworks including the Sector Skills Council (LANTRA) expectations, and the animal care and welfare national standards. In consequence, the learning outcomes specified for the programmes match the expectations of the FHEQ.

1.2.1 The documents used by the College for the approval of new programmes (the Concept Note template) require the formal recording of the level of study. External examiners have reported annually on the appropriateness of the academic level of the provision. However, there were a number of examples where the level of the programme was found to be implicit in the validation and revalidation documentation, rather than being recorded explicitly in the appropriate templates.

1.2.2 The review team **recommends** that the College should ensure that the level of qualification is recorded consistently in validation and revalidation documents and in its programme specifications by the beginning of the academic year 2012-13.

Use of external examiners

1.3 The College's scrupulous use of external examiners ensures that the academic standards both of its research and taught programmes are maintained at the appropriate levels.

1.3.1 The College's Teaching Quality Handbook sets out comprehensively the procedures for the appointment, induction and roles of external examiners for all College taught programmes. Procedures for the appointment of external examiners to research degrees are operated in compliance with the regulatory requirements of the University of Coventry. Examiners are provided with a comprehensive induction and relevant documentation, and are routinely invited to attend the College in advance of examination boards to meet staff and students.

⁵ The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.

⁶ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx

⁷ See note 4.

1.3.2 External examiners oversee and approve examination papers in advance, but currently not assessment briefs. External examiners' reports are considered at programme, School and College levels. External examiners attend school boards, and issues raised in their reports are responded to within the Annual Programme Managers' reports, although the team found a couple of instances where examiners' comments had not been addressed to their satisfaction. At the College level, the Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC) considers the reports in the context of the documents presented for the Annual Programme Managers' Reports with the aim of identifying cross-college issues. The small scale of the institution facilitates an individual consideration of the reports rather than via an overarching summary of themes. The team found that the College had taken appropriate measures to address the issues raised by the previous QAA Audit (2007) in respect of the recommendation to 'reconsider the use made of external examiners, in particular the lack of external examiner input at the College Examination Committee'.

1.3.3 The team found that not all external examiners and Annual Programme Managers' Reports were posted on the electronic communications portal, as claimed in the self-evaluation document. Meetings with students also indicated that not all were specifically aware of the existence and/or location of external examiners' reports, and the team did not see evidence of systematic, formal feedback to students on issues raised in the reports.

1.3.4 The team **recommends** that the College should ensure the consistent and timely uploading of all external examiners' reports and Annual Programme Managers' Reports (to include the responses made to external examiners), so as to permit access for students by the beginning of the academic year 2012-13.

Assessment and standards

1.4 The College's procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of assessment strategies were broadly effective in ensuring that students have the opportunity to demonstrate learning outcomes of their programmes.

1.4.1 In 2009, Academic Board commissioned the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee (LTEC) to undertake a benchmarking review of assessment practices. The review had led to a number of activities and initiatives across the College which had a bearing on the College's Assessment Strategy. The review had raised concerns about inconsistencies of practice relating to marking, meeting deadlines, the timeliness and quality of feedback to students, the implementation of the agreed capping of examinations at two hours across all modules, and the moderation of coursework briefs. While some of these issues have been resolved, the team found evidence that some were still under review. For example, concerns had been raised by some external examiners regarding inconsistencies in assessment feedback. Furthermore, in meetings with students and from reading the student written submission (SWS), the team heard about issues relating to bunching of assignments and disparity of practice with respect to return dates of assignments. However, both taught and research postgraduate students commented on a clear brief, as well as good support and preparation for the dissertation and thesis elements of their programmes.

1.4.2 LTEC had also recently undertaken a college-wide review of marking guidelines to ensure that students were better informed about how to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. These new guidelines, together with generic marking criteria, were approved for use in the academic year 2011-12. The team also noted that although the College had recently developed a college-wide approach to the detection of plagiarism, there were still some minor inconsistencies in the operation of this approach across the College.

1.4.3 The design and approval of assessment, including the range and distribution of assessment, is considered at the validation stage. AQSC's annual review of its operation reflects on the outcomes of validations and reviews and monitors the effectiveness of assessment arrangements. AQSC also reviews regulations on an annual basis.

1.4.4 Given the scope and volume of activity in this area, the team **recommends** that the College should take further its efforts to date towards ensuring consistency in assessment by the production of a cohesive operational plan for the delivery and monitoring of all strands of the Assessment Strategy by the beginning of the academic year 2013-14.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.5 The team found that the design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes enables standards to be set and maintained, and allows students to demonstrate the learning outcomes of the award. Documentation relating to the design and development of programmes was comprehensive, and supportive templates were readily available from the College's 'Template Centre'. The scrutiny process includes consideration both by the College's academic community and the Executive, and the team saw extensive evidence of detailed scrutiny of course proposals which included discussion with students. All approval activity of on-campus provision and provision delivered via collaborative arrangements is clearly documented, and follows the College's procedures as set out in the Teaching Quality Handbook. There are detailed reports with conditions and recommendations for validation set by panels.

1.5.1 The Annual Programme Managers' Report template ensures consistency of practice in reviewing programmes. The reports take account of external examiners' comments (and they confirm the achievement of learning outcomes) and student feedback. All annual reports are considered on an individual basis by AQSC as they become available. On one hand this means that the reports are seen in a timely fashion by the committee, but on the other hand it can mean that emergent cross-institutional themes are not always evident. Action plans emanating from review are not always implemented thoroughly, and the team found that the volume of reporting and action planning increased the burden of scrutiny for AQSC. The Validations Review Board, a subcommittee of AQSC, also conducts an annual review of all validations. In the example report considered by the review team, this process produced a series of recommendations which resulted in a considerable increase in the work load of AQSC.

1.5.2 The team found evidence that the College had responded appropriately to the recommendations from the previous QAA Institutional audit (2007): to reconsider the role of AQSC, to ensure that all validation decisions are fully informed and have appropriate externality, and to ensure that all awards presented for validation adhere to the approved College validation process and reflect good practice in the sector. Furthermore the College had been asked to introduce more systematic institutional-level consideration, as well as oversight and action on themes which emerged from its existing quality assurance procedures.

1.5.3 The College had redefined the relationship between AQSC and the Validation Review Board (VRB) in order to ensure a more effective working relationship between the two bodies, via cross-committee membership and joint responsibility of the chairs of the two bodies in signing off on final conditions for the validation and revalidation of programmes. Key appointments of the Quality Enhancement Officer and Quality Support Officer were welcomed as strengthening the quality assurance and enhancement structures. The structure and style of the AQSC Annual Report to Academic Board has been revised in order to reflect and evaluate comments received from external examiners and student survey responses. The team found the report to be a constructive and informative document.

1.5.4 A Collaborative Provision Committee had been established in response to the QAA Institutional audit (2007) recommendation that the emerging strategy for collaborative provision is underpinned by a framework that defines categories of partnership and sets out a clear management regime for each category. However, once its main tasks had been accomplished the Committee was disbanded, with the management of the Collaborative Provision Policy and Procedures and oversight of the Register of Collaborative Provision now subsumed within the remit of AQSC.

1.5.5 Although there was evidence that AQSC keeps its relationship with VRB under review, an analysis of the minutes of the key academic committees indicated an increasing volume of work over time. The team found evidence to suggest that workload for AQSC was heavy with frequent meetings and long agendas, and there were some concerns that the volume of work might become untenable, especially when an expansion of collaborative, flexible and distributed learning is planned.

1.5.6 The team **recommends** that the College should keep under review the effectiveness of its quality assurance systems (and specifically the remit and workload of the AQSC) until the end of the academic year 2013-14. This timescale should allow the College sufficient time to take due account of its proposed significant strategic developments, especially in areas of collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning.

Subject benchmarks

1.6 The team found that subject benchmark statements and qualification statements are used effectively in programme design, approval, delivery and review to inform the standards of awards.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at the Royal Agricultural College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 The College upholds professional standards for teaching and learning.

2.1.1 The College engages with the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Change Academy and takes account of the Professional Standards framework in the management and development of staff. Research-led teaching is referred to as an aim in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment action plan, and many of the students met by the review team attested to the way in which the research activities and professional practice of the staff permeated their teaching.

2.1.2 LTEC and AQSC both perform a monitoring role in respect of staff qualifications, and all new staff undertake the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. Staff are encouraged to become members of the HEA and this is monitored by the Quality Enhancement Officer. There is a staff mentoring scheme for all staff new to teaching in addition to an appraisal scheme. Continuing professional development guidance for staff is readily available on the College's electronic resources site, Gateway. Staff development activity emerges from a range of mechanisms, and workshops are planned and organised throughout the academic year.

2.1.3 The peer observation of teaching scheme is supportive of staff and is enhancement-led with reference to the Quality Enhancement Officer's role in facilitating the

dissemination of good practice. The use of a template for observations ensures consistency of approach. LTEC monitors the scheme and reviews policy, with AQSC also receiving a summary report reflecting on outcomes of staff development activities and peer observation.

Learning resources

2.2 Strategic planning for resources informs the development of the corporate plan for the institution. In the previous QAA audit the team had recommended that the College should ensure that the strategic planning and management of learning resources was undertaken effectively by the responsible body. The evidence provided during the review assured the team that this has been acted on and that it is no longer a concern. The LTEC has a strategic overview of resources to enhance learning. Senior staff confirmed that resource planning occurs annually by consulting with relevant managers. The learning facilities and staffing resources for partners are considered within the partner/programme approval procedures.

2.2.1 The Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy and accompanying action plan provide a detailed approach to ensuring appropriate learning resources. LTEC monitors use of the College's electronic resources site, Gateway, and organises some best practice workshops. All modules have a presence on Gateway, although the team saw a range of practice despite a minimum standards requirement. Nevertheless, students were very complimentary about Gateway. LTEC monitors the latest developments in the Virtual Learning Environment, Moodle, for implementation. There are separate strand strategies for IT and the Library which monitor progress and indicate shortcomings. The Library has expanded its subject book and periodical stocks with a particular focus on e-resources. AQSC's annual review of its business in 2009 identified a need to upgrade equipment and facilities within the teaching and learning spaces, which resulted in the provision of Tablet PC's and Academic Presenters provided for all rooms, funded through the College's Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF). Concurrently, an LTEC review of teaching and learning across the College provided information to inform campus developments and the teaching requirements for additional, new teaching rooms completed in 2011. Working with the Quality Enhancement Officer, LTEC oversees staff development opportunities and the deployment of the teaching and enhancement student success fund. This provides funding to staff who bid for financial support for enhancement purposes.

2.2.2 Although Library opening hours are extended in the run up to and during examination periods, students had raised the issue of generally insufficient Library opening hours on a number of occasions. National Student Survey (NSS) results confirm general satisfaction with learning resources. The College has given close consideration to the outcomes of the NSS and of the internal student satisfaction survey to the level of the programme in order to promote reflection and discussion.

2.2.3 Students are represented on deliberative committees at all levels up to and including the governing body. Some training is provided and a handbook supports student representatives, along with the continuity of support provided by the post of the Student Liaison Officer who is an employee of the College. The team saw evidence of effective consideration of college-wide issues at fortnightly meetings of the central Student Management Committee. The composition of the Committee is made up of all programme representatives, the Students' Union executive, and representatives of the College's senior management.

2.2.4 Although student representatives played an active role in the organisation of social activities, they had a more limited understanding of the potential of their role in academic matters. The student written submission also commented on difficulty with attendance of representatives at programme-level committees. The small scale of the institution results in

widespread opportunities for students to engage with staff. Furthermore, there are numerous examples of students making contributions to policy development and change on an individual basis by means of informal intervention rather than through committee membership. The team recognised the efforts of the College, to date, to improve the effectiveness of student representation and **affirmed** this action. This was with a view to encouraging further consideration of the funding of a sabbatical officer, appropriately trained and supported, to lead and to foster participation in the enhancement of student representation. The team felt that such a postholder could participate more actively in the enhancement of the wider (both academic and pastoral) student experience, drawing on existing good practice in the sector.

2.2.5 Students participate in the NSS and an internal student satisfaction survey using an external provider, 'QuestBack'. Results are considered by the programme manager in the annual reports. Although it is not currently possible to disaggregate results from the internal student satisfaction survey relating to international students in order to consider them as a distinct cohort, LTEC is considering ways of using the NSS and other surveys for enhancement purposes. The team was advised that the Student Perception of Module survey had moved from an annual survey to a rolling three-year programme of review in 2007. Furthermore, towards the end of 2008 this had been redefined further to permit programme managers and module leaders to determine their own frequency of review prompted by a risk-based approach rather than a systematic formalised approach to gathering student feedback at the module level. The review team agreed that, although this addressed some of the more burdensome aspects of the system, it could prevent the College from obtaining regular and reliable student opinion which could influence decisions relating to quality. There was no systematic means by which the student voice could inform module developments or any attendant staff development needs. The team **recommends** that the College should review the effectiveness and consistency of formal module-level evaluative student feedback to ensure that the student voice informs module development and any attendant staff development needs by the end of the academic year 2012-13.

2.2.6 The current policy on the return of marked work was flexible and characterised by the College as being 'as soon as reasonably practicable'. The review team was advised of a general practice that staff must specify the date marked work will be returned to students on the assessment brief, the template for which is available from the Template Centre. The team also heard that, in general, staff endeavoured to work to a three-week turnaround in marked work, although they did hear in meetings with students that practice was variable across the College.

2.2.7 Beyond representation on committees, students are also involved in quality assurance through active discussion in periodic review and validation review boards.

Management information used to improve quality and standards

2.3 The College has a number of mechanisms for the collection of management information which includes the Annual Student Performance Report (ASPR), Annual Programme Managers' Reports, and annual reports from the major committees of the Academic Board. The ASPR contains a very full and detailed data set (including information relating to postgraduate research students), with benchmarking to external providers including entry requirements, applications, widening participation statistics, entry qualifications, UCAS tariff points, conversion rates of applications to admissions, student performance, overall wastage, non-continuation, employment, final award outcomes, and NSS and Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data reports. There was also evidence of benchmarking of student performance against key competitors. Nevertheless, it was unclear how far data collected was used directly for enhancement purposes or what actions had taken place as a result of the analysis. The team heard how the College was working to

introduce a new management information system for student record/tracking, QUERCUS, over the next academic year.

2.3.1 Through the memoranda of agreement, all collaborative partners are required to provide updated publicity materials to the Marketing Department for approval prior to publication on which an annual check is then undertaken. Provision offered through collaborative arrangements is subject to the same quality assurance procedures as home-based provision and makes use of comparative data to manage programmes.

2.3.2 The College routinely collects information on disclosure of impairments. Any disclosed and verified disabilities are recorded on the student records. An annual survey of disabled students is conducted by the Disability Officer and the results are used to inform LTEC and the Inclusivity, Equality and Diversity Committee's action planning.

Admission to the College

2.4 The College's policy and procedures for the admission of students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied. An 'admissions policy' is published on the website, and identifies the process to follow for applicants and is a useful working document. The team was given access to a very comprehensive admissions/registry manual which provides very clear, fair and detailed information for staff. This is updated annually by the registry team.

2.4.1 Senior staff were asked about the mechanisms for updating the policy, for example in relation to tariff points. Staff explained that the policy was monitored by the Senior Management Group, by the internal audit process in 2010, and on a regular basis by the registry team. Staff indicated that a faculty requirement to raise the tariff points for entry would trigger wider consideration of the Admissions Policy by AQSC, and any substantial changes to policy required the approval of Academic Board. However, it was not clear to the review team that a published process was in place to monitor policies and procedures in a timely, periodic and consistent manner.

2.4.2 Students confirmed that they found all the information they required from the website in advance of enrolment. Information was also available on a college-provided memory stick. Some students had attended an Open Day which was valuable. The student written submission also referred to an interview process for which there is a protocol to ensure equality of experience.

Complaints and appeals

2.5 There is a clear complaints and appeals policy and procedure and this is communicated to students through the College Student Handbook, and via the 'Student One-Stop Shop' portal on the College intranet. It was not clear to the team, however, if there was a systematic approach to the monitoring and review of complaints procedures. The policy outlines how complaints are monitored at institutional level and a summary of the outcomes of complaints is considered annually by Academic Board.

2.5.1 Students reported that they were aware of how to complain and felt confident that they knew where to find information and advice should they need to complain or appeal. Close informal arrangements with the staff and small groups provide opportunities for students to meet with staff and resolve complaints without recourse to a formal route. The Student Liaison Officer provides advice and guidance on complaints and appeals. The College's self-evaluation document (SED) acknowledged that there were currently some issues of capacity and expertise for the Students' Union to give independent advice and support on complaints.

Career advice and guidance

2.6 The Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy explicitly refers to the enhancement of student employability as a strategic focus. Furthermore, the provision of careers education and guidance is explicit in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment action plan. The annual students' performance report analyses employment data and Annual Programme Managers' Reports reflect on employability. Statistics show that there is a good graduate employment and salary attainment. The College has built up effective links with employers and runs regular industry-based seminars and conferences. The team also saw evidence of personal development planning activity supported by online resources on Gateway.

2.6.1 The Teaching Quality Handbook details clearly the role and function of the careers service and the approach to careers information and guidance. The service uses the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services' guidelines and the careers office is reviewed on a regular basis. Students are very supportive of the staff who provide the careers service and were made aware of the service from an early stage of their studies. Students value the strong 'Ciren' alumni network and the College's use of industry-based seminars which provide opportunities to network. Recruitment opportunities are advertised on the College website.

2.6.2 The School Advisory Boards are used effectively to embed employability within the curriculum. Curriculum Vitae workshops are offered freely throughout the year and careers advice is included in some of the modules on Gateway. Students and staff confirmed the college-wide proactive and supportive approach to work placements. There is a Work-Based Learning Officer who supports students during the selection of work-based opportunities and during placement. Placements focus on real-life industry experiences and are greatly valued by the students. Comprehensive real-life resources are available on the College estate. The Pig Centre, Dairy Unit and the Rural Skills Centre provide an effective resource base for value added activities for students to increase their employability skills.

2.6.3 The team identified the College's strategic approach to employment and career development for students, as evidenced by the wide range of activities and processes it has in place, as being a **feature of good practice** contributing effectively to the students' learning opportunities.

Supporting disabled students

2.7 The Academic Strategy articulates the College's core values which embrace the 'transparency and inclusivity in its treatment of staff and students'. Detailed information is provided in the Student Handbook which is available publicly on the College website. The College has published a comprehensive Single Equality Scheme. The agendas of Academic Board and AQSC include a standing item for reflection on the impact of disability policy on all student groups, although there is no evidence in the minutes to indicate any resultant actions to date.

2.7.1 The College's Disability Officer is included in the review and monitoring of programmes. The template for the development of the programme and module specifications makes specific reference to the policy of inclusion. Support and induction for students with disabilities is evaluated annually as part of Programme Managers' reporting process. The Teaching Quality Handbook has a section which provides information on Student Support. Personal tutors are allocated to students and strong, dedicated tutorial and resource support is provided for students with dyslexia.

2.7.2 The team identified the College's active and inclusive consideration of issues to support learning opportunities for students with disabilities as being a **feature of good practice** contributing effectively to the students' learning opportunities.

Supporting international students

2.8 The College manages the quality of learning opportunities for international students effectively. The College has an International Strategy dated 2011-16 which is published on the College website, and offers a considerable amount of information provided in advance of enrolment for the benefit of international students in a variety of languages. The Student Charter also contains direct links to information about support services for international students. There is a comprehensive academic and social induction programme for international students. The team was advised in meetings with students and staff of an inclusive programme called 'Escape and Explore', which is a proactive set of activities focused on the needs of international students to familiarise themselves with local and national activities in the UK. The College employs an English language tutor and two International Support Officers to support students whose first language is not English. Pre-session language classes are offered, followed by a review of the student experience of the pre-session course. The College also provides ongoing English for Academic Purposes classes to support students. Among planned future activity is a proposal to 'widen international recruitment through the development of distance learning initiatives'. This links to the reference in the Corporate Plan 2010-15 for the further development of new technology in order to reach and strengthen support for international students.

2.8.1 Although a specific survey of international students is not undertaken, the team was advised that the nature of the College community is such that students are able to informally feedback directly to staff or through student representatives. However, in recognising that cultural differences might prevent some international students registering a complaint or offering feedback via this informal route, the review team suggests that there might be other more formal means by which the views of international students could usefully be collected. There was evidence that the College had identified in the annual monitoring reports that some international students had underperformed in some discipline areas but this had been followed up in the action to support students by targeted English language support.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.9 The College does not award its own postgraduate research degrees. The review team was advised that the majority of these are currently awarded through a collaborative agreement with Coventry University, although there are other individual awarding arrangements with the Universities of Bath, Exeter and Gloucestershire. Students undertake two initial research methodology training modules delivered by Coventry University at the start of their research programme. The College supervises individual MPhil and PhD students with additional external advice provided by invitation where specific subject expertise is required. The review team heard that the College is working towards developing its research capacity with a view to obtaining research degree awarding powers within five years. This will necessitate the completion of 30 PhDs and the expansion of staff research activity. However, the team did not see specific evidence of a plan which identified the numbers of research students or HEFCE Research Excellence Framework (REF) activity relating to this strategy.

2.9.1 The College has recently developed a new Postgraduate Centre (for taught and research students) which provides facilities for teaching, private study, and a communal area for hosting discussions. Senior staff indicated that research and scholarship was an evolutionary development. Staff research is publicised on the College website and the

students met by the team were aware and appreciative of the research interests, activities and practical expertise of the teaching staff and their relevance to the curriculum.

2.9.2 The College's Research Committee coordinates all student research degree projects and oversees all activities according to Coventry University's regulations, which cover student and project selection, student admission and induction, supervision, and interim and final assessment. The review team found that the minutes of the proceedings of the Research Committee reflect a discursive style and a non-systemised approach to business. Student progress is monitored through the committee on an individual basis and the statistics on applications and performance are included in the annual student performance report to AQSC. An Ethics Committee has been established, but it has had difficulty in meeting on account of the availability of the current chair who is a member of the governing body. The College has recognised this difficulty and is taking action to review the terms of reference and to ensure that attendance at meetings improves.

2.9.3 Research students are not represented on the Research Committee, although the students who met the review team commented that they were aware of issues discussed via good access to tutors, resources, the Library, and support. Each student has a tutor who is accessible on an informal and formal basis and there are small teams of specialist staff to support each student. Although the team heard that students have access to training opportunities and their teaching-related duties are carefully managed, it did not see any evidence of formal guidelines for the use of PhD students in teaching. Although the College has not entered into the use of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), the team heard that the small-scale nature of the research activity enables students to provide immediate feedback on their experience to tutors.

Learning delivered through collaborative education

2.10 The College manages the quality of learning opportunities delivered as part of collaborative arrangements effectively to enable students to achieve their awards.

2.10.1 The review team found that the College has responded to the previous QAA Institutional audit (2007) positively by producing a detailed register of collaborative provision, which is managed centrally by the Academic Registrar and updated regularly following annual consideration. The Register is considered annually by AQSC. In response to the findings of the previous audit, the College has also carefully categorised its collaborative provision and made the register publicly available on its website.

2.10.2 Collaborative provision is managed through the College's standard deliberative committee processes. In response to the previous audit, the College had established a dedicated committee to consider the range and type of provision. This was disbanded once the provision had been appropriately classified and the collaborative register produced. The rationale given for this arrangement was to ensure that the College's quality assurance systems and processes could be then applied consistently to all of its academic arrangements, with oversight provided by Academic Board and its deliberative subcommittees. AQSC has a key role in the oversight of this area as there is a regular agenda item focusing on collaborative provision. The College publishes a separate section of its Teaching Quality Handbook specifically relating to collaborative provision and clear templates for institutional approval and review for staff. These identify detailed policy on the range of partnerships and processes and set out clearly the arrangements for the establishment and institutional review of collaborative partners.

2.10.3 The College has established effective mechanisms to manage and review provision which is cofunded by industry and/or employers. The team saw evidence of a clear strategic approach to this provision which is managed and reviewed so as to capitalise on

demand-led and high quality provision delivered in a business-focused model. The team saw evidence that processes governing other collaborative partnerships with local colleges were sound and well managed. The role of the Link Tutor is critical to the success of the effective management of this provision. Link Tutor responsibilities, which include regular monitoring and liaison, academic development, enhancement, and an overview of assessment activities, are fully documented.

2.10.4 The review team saw evidence to indicate that the College had plans to expand its collaborative provision. Given the current capacity of the College, and in particular the workload of its current deliberative committee system (see paragraph 1.5.3), the review team agreed that the range and scope of collaborative provision could present some management challenges in terms of providing a dedicated and systematic means of reflecting on the provision as a whole.

2.10.5 The review team saw a couple of examples of formal certificates and transcripts produced for collaborative provision arrangements which did not record the full details as expected by the *Code of practice*. The team, therefore, **recommend** that the College should ensure that formal award certificates and/or the accompanying transcripts offered under collaborative provision arrangements duly record the location of study before the next production of certificates in the current academic session 2011-12.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.11 The review team found that overall the College manage effectively the quality of learning opportunities delivered through flexible and distributed arrangements, including e-learning.

2.11.1 The College has articulated its vision to expand its flexible and distributed learning through existing collaborative partnerships. The review team heard about a strategy for expanding delivery using blended learning 'through collaborative provision'. For the immediate future, the College's approach to distance learning is to collaborate with experienced and reputable distance learning providers to convert existing campus-based provision into a distance/e-learning offering, so as to safeguard the quality of the student learning experience and to minimise any associated risk. Once such initial engagements have been established and evaluated, further expansion of such provision will be considered, possibly with a view to developing in-house expertise and delivery mechanisms.

2.11.2 The development of this provision has been recognised strategically through the creation of a new post, the Dean of International Affairs and Distance Learning. It is envisaged that this role will give leadership and a strategic focus to planned expansion in the home market, international markets and the further development of flexible and distributed learning. The team was informed about a focus on a limited number of international partners with whom there were established relationships. Staff confirmed that the development of collaborative partnerships with flexible and distributed learning was incremental, carefully developed and based on due diligence and work with existing and reliable partners. The College proposed to manage the development of this expansionist strategy through the existing quality assurance framework with an increase in the number of meetings.

2.11.3 Given the current capacity of the College, and in particular the workload of its current deliberative committee system (see paragraph 1.5.3), the review team agreed that the planned expansion of flexible and distributed learning could present some management challenges in terms of providing a dedicated and systematic means of reflecting on the provision as a discrete whole.

Work-based and placement learning

2.12 The College manages effectively the quality of learning opportunities delivered through work-based and placement learning.

2.12.1 The College has published a Handbook identifying policy and procedures for work-based learning activities. Staff confirmed the process for supporting students who are being prepared for work-based learning and placements, and students confirmed that the support processes were reliable and worked in practice. All of the undergraduate and postgraduate students met by the review team confirmed that the College supports their endeavours to find work both as part of the formal learning programme and during the vacations.

2.12.2 There is a strong institutional ethos relating to preparation of students for employment which was evident throughout the course of the review and is recognised as a **feature of good practice** (see paragraph 2.6.3). This was exemplified by multiple examples cited by staff and students of industry-focused events, seminars, workshops, and employment fairs to which industrial representatives were invited. These provide opportunities for students to network and learn about the skills required for industry.

Student charter

2.13 The College has in place a student charter setting out the mutual expectations of the institution and its students, which is available and is signed off both by staff and students. The charter is made available on a memory stick for all students at the start of their studies and it provides a clear signposting of College services. Although students met by the team confirmed that they had seen and signed a copy of the charter, they claimed to have had minimal involvement with it beyond the induction process. The charter is reviewed annually by the staff-student partnership in order to ensure that the document works in practice and remains relevant.

3 Public information

Summary

The Royal Agricultural College **makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available** via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate, and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when applying to the College, and in preparing for what they might expect when they join. The team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

3.1 The College complies with the requirement by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), that information on academic standards and quality should be published or made publicly available. The College is currently working towards the production of public information required for the forthcoming introduction of the Key Information Set in 2012.

3.2 The College website provides all relevant information including a mission statement, sections of the corporate plan, statements on quality assurance policies and processes, and the learning and teaching strategy. Programme specifications are available for each curriculum area, and policy documents and Handbooks for staff and students are publicly available. With a few exceptions as noted in paragraph 1.3.4, the team found that external examiners' reports are generally made available for students via Gateway. Marketing material is scrutinised internally and checked at programme level. A register of College webpages exists and is annually updated. The review team saw evidence of clear

procedures for signing off and publishing information and these were confirmed in meetings with staff. The students the team met confirmed that the information the College publishes is both accessible and useful, including the information they considered before applying.

4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at the Royal Agricultural College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 The review team found that the College has taken a number of deliberate steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities since the previous QAA Institutional audit. The College has merged the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee (which reported previously to AQSC) with the Learning and Information Services Committee to create the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee (LTEC), which now reports directly to Academic Board. The restructuring of the committee system was designed to ensure a more strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities. LTEC has strategic oversight of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy which provides the framework within which quality enhancement is set. The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy has latterly been updated to strengthen its focus on enhancement of the student learning experience through inclusion of a set of core enhancement themes. The review team saw evidence of the College's strategic approach to enhancement as articulated by: the institutional Quality Enhancement Policy which sets out the policies and procedures for quality enhancement; the College's participation in the Higher Education Academy's Change Academy activities to develop student learning opportunities; the creation of the post of Quality Enhancement Officer; and the outcomes of a number of enhancement initiatives. These include the development of the Student Charter, the enhancement of the Peer Observation of Teaching scheme, the enhancement of the 2011-12 student induction programme, and the development of the Rural Skills Centre as providing opportunities for real-life practice and the development of employability skills.

5 Theme: First Year Student Experience

Each academic year a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's review teams. In 2011-12 the theme is the **First Year Student Experience**.

The review team investigated the first year student experience at the Royal Agricultural College.

Supporting students' transition

5.1 The team saw evidence that students are well supported with information and support from staff to enable them to adapt to the demands of College life. The comprehensive induction programme is inclusive and detailed and includes a variety of academic support activities, including considerable guidance to help students avoid the commission of assessment offences such as plagiarism. There is also college-wide support for social and pastoral activities which help students adapt to life at the College, and the students spoke very positively about the pivotal role of the Student Liaison Officer in this respect. There are also a number of field trips arranged for the first three weeks of study at the College in order to encourage cohort bonding and to give some early practical experience. Particular emphasis is placed on arrangements for the induction of international students, with a 'meet and greet' arrangement for students when they arrive in the UK and provision of dedicated courses such as English for Academic Purposes.

Information for first-year students

5.2 The team was informed that information received by students in advance of enrolment is accurate and sufficient to prepare them for their arrival at the College. Useful information is provided to students with joining instructions on a memory stick, and throughout their programmes via the College website and the 'Student One-Stop Shop' portal on the intranet. The students met by the team were fully aware of how to access support for their studies and how to register a complaint or an appeal. A great deal of the critical information for students is provided on Gateway and is easily accessible. Students are familiarised at an early stage with the College's proactive approach to employability skills and are made aware of placement and other work-based opportunities in the relevant industries.

Assessment and feedback

5.3 Students are provided with information about assessment on Gateway or in hard copy, which includes clear information about assessment criteria for the first year of study and opportunities for formative assessment. As noted in paragraph 2.2.6, staff must specify the date marked work will be returned to students on the assessment brief, the template for which is available from the Template Centre. However, this does mean that feedback time is not necessarily specified or monitored by the College and consequently can be variable and inconsistent. The team saw evidence that students were briefed about recent changes to the assessment regulations, and noted that one of those was to ensure that the length of level 4 and 5 examinations for undergraduate students was restricted to a two-hour maximum. The team was advised in meetings with staff and students that there is a high concentration of activity, albeit uncoordinated, to raise awareness among first-year students about academic offences relating to cheating and plagiarism.

Monitoring retention and progress

5.4 The review team saw evidence of the analysis of key statistical data in the Annual Programme Managers' Reports and also in the Annual Performance of Students Report considered by AQSC. The College's 'tRACker' system allows for the tracking of non-standard entry students and is effective in identifying 'at risk' students. There is also provision for an exit interview for any student intending to withdraw.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of: threshold academic standards; learning opportunities; enhancement; and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary.

Academic Infrastructure Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway (2011-12) to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

Code of practice The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions. This should not be confused with institutions' own Codes of Practice.

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

enhancement Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

framework A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

framework for higher education qualifications A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes** of study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

learning outcome What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

operational definition A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study) An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

programme specifications Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes** of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

public information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

subject benchmark statement A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

threshold academic standard The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

widening participation Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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