Quality Review Visit of Berkshire College of Agriculture

October 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Berkshire College of Agriculture

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Berkshire College of Agriculture.

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.**
- **There is limited confidence requiring specified improvements before there can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.**

Areas for development

The review team identified the following **areas for development** that have the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at Berkshire College of Agriculture. The review team advises Berkshire College of Agriculture to:

- expedite the approval and implementation of the new governance arrangements to ensure effective and collective oversight of quality assurance (Code of Governance)
- ensure more robust recording of the outcomes and actions arising from student feedback (Quality Code)
- ensure that all student representatives receive appropriate training and support for their role (Quality Code)
- provide specific higher education induction and support to all staff teaching higher education programmes, including support for delivering distance learning provision (Quality Code)
- expedite the approval and implementation of the higher education-specific peer observation scheme (Quality Code)
- systematically review and improve academic learning resources to ensure that resources are adequate and readily accessible to students (Quality Code).

Specified improvements

The review team identified the following **specified improvements** that relate to matters that are already putting, or have the potential to put, quality and/or standards at risk at Berkshire College of Agriculture. The review team recommends that Berkshire College of Agriculture:

- develops and implements a formal process for ensuring that information for staff and students (current and prospective) is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy (Quality Code, Consumer Protection)
- develops, formalises and implements a systematic process for considering monitoring data on higher education programmes at College and governing body level (Quality Code)
- ensures that admissions arrangements for higher education programmes, including complaints on admissions, are clearly articulated and made available to students (Consumer Protection)
- develops, and communicates to prospective students, comprehensive terms and conditions in line with CMA guidance (Consumer Protection)
- develops, formalises and implements a policy for course closures and changes (Student Protection)
- develops, formalises and implements a complaints policy, and adopt appeals procedures, that are compliant with the requirements of the OIA and degree-awarding bodies (Student Protection).

About this review

The review visit took place from 10 to 11 October 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Abigail Hind
- Ms Janet Faulkner
- Mrs Sarah d'Ambrumenil (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

- provide the relevant funding body with an expert judgement about the readiness of a provider to enter, or continue to operate within, the higher education sector.

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

- ensure that the student interest is protected
- provide expert advice to ensure that the reputation of the UK higher education system is protected, including the protection of degree standards
- identify development areas that will help a provider to progress through a developmental period and be considered 'established'.

Each review visit considers a provider's arrangements against relevant aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements, and in particular:

- the reliability of degree standards and their reasonable comparability with standards set and achieved by other providers
- the quality of the student academic experience, including student outcomes where the provider has a track record of delivery of higher education.

About Berkshire College of Agriculture

Berkshire College of Agriculture (the College) is a specialist land-based college located on a single site equidistant from Maidenhead and Henley-on-Thames in Berkshire. The College has approximately 1,500 students, most of whom are studying on further education courses in a range of land-based subjects. Higher education has been delivered at the College for over 15 years and the College currently has 74 students enrolled on higher education programmes.

The College delivers its higher education provision through agreements with degree-awarding bodies. At the time of the review, this comprised a FdSc Children's Development and Learning validated by the University of Reading (UoR) and three programmes validated by the Royal Agricultural University (RAU), namely FdSc Animal Behaviour and Welfare, FdSc Equine Entrepreneurship and Business Management and BSc (Hons) Veterinary Physiotherapy. Until recently, the College had also delivered Higher National programmes through Pearson, although no such programmes were currently being offered. The College has also recently discontinued a partnership with Buckinghamshire New University in order to focus on the new validation arrangement with RAU that specialises in land-based provision.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)

1   The degree-awarding bodies have primary responsibility for ensuring the alignment of programme and module learning outcomes with the FHEQ. Responsibility checklists clearly indicate the division of responsibilities for the monitoring and maintenance of academic standards between the partners, which includes the delineation of responsibility for assessment, external examining and assessment boards.

2   External examiners are appointed by the degree-awarding bodies and report to the College and the respective universities through standard templates. The external examiner reports make direct references to the FHEQ and require external examiners to confirm the appropriateness of learning outcomes and to comment on the comparability of academic standards. External examiner reports available to the review team confirm that academic standards are both appropriate and comparable. Good use is made of external examiners at programme level in the maintenance of academic standards, although consideration and monitoring of external examiner reports above programme level is less well defined (see paragraph 9 below).

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

3   The College governing body (the Corporation) meets six times a year. Link Governors support various strands of College work, and the recently elected Chair also acts as the Link Governor for higher education. Although the current Berkshire College of Agriculture Code of Conduct for Corporation Members is referenced to a previous version of the AoC Code of Governance, the review team considers that the work of the Corporation broadly reflects the principles set out in the current version. The Head of Higher Education provides written reports to the governors as a standing agenda item, which are considered at most meetings of the Corporation.

4   The College operates a Risk Register, which in 2016-17 identified the need for higher education provision and collaboration opportunities to be reviewed. A subcommittee of Corporation, the Audit Committee, commissioned a review of risks resulting in an advisory report on the HE Strategy that was considered by the Corporation in October 2017. The Corporation simultaneously approved a new HE Strategy in September 2017 to support changes in governance and expansion in its provision. The Strategy also identifies how the higher education provision maps to the College strategic priorities.

5   The Corporation originally considered a review of the College arrangements for higher education in September 2016 and noted the need for bespoke policies and procedures, which were reported to be under development at that time. The HE Strategy, approved in September 2017, endorses the need for changes to the governance and quality assurance arrangements. An extensive programme of work was outlined to the review team, which includes the development and/or revision of higher education policies, including a formal HE Quality Assurance and Improvement Policy. This programme of work also includes the creation of more formalised oversight processes through a new Higher Education Quality Review Board (HEQRB) and termly HE Team Quality Reviews, through which academic quality would be formally monitored and higher education-specific policies developed and reviewed. Despite the need for

such structures being identified in 2016, this programme of work was still in the early stages of development (see area of development in paragraph 6 below).

6 The College has improved governor-level scrutiny of higher education in recent years. However, extensive levels of delegation are currently assigned to programme teams for routine academic quality monitoring. Although safeguards on academic standards are in place through oversight by the degree-awarding bodies and external examiners, internal mechanisms for maintaining oversight of academic risk have relied on informal approaches and are overly reliant on one individual. As noted above, new governance arrangements are proposed and senior managers outlined that the new HEQRB will enable broader oversight through the inclusion of the Principal, higher education Link Governor, Head of HE and programme managers as members. The new arrangements have the potential to significantly improve and broaden oversight within the College, although the detail has yet to be fully developed. The College intends to consult with staff on the new process, although this has not yet occurred, and the lack of detail suggests that the timescales for consultation and implementation are unrealistic. The review team therefore advises the College to expedite the approval and implementation of the new governance arrangements to ensure effective and collective oversight of quality assurance, identifying this as an **area for development**.

The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

7 The awarding bodies set the academic standards and retain ultimate oversight of the maintenance of standards. For RAU programmes, the College is responsible for designing and producing programme specifications which are subject to the University approval process to ensure that appropriate academic standards are articulated. For UoR provision, programme specifications are those of the awarding body.

8 The College uses the degree-awarding bodies' quality assurance mechanisms, including external examiner input, marking criteria and moderation processes, to set assessments and to verify that students have achieved the learning outcomes outlined in the programme specifications. Initial marking is completed by a College module leader and reviewed by another internal marker through a rigorous assessment moderation system. Assessment Boards are managed and chaired by the degree-awarding bodies, with members of the programme team in attendance to discuss student outcomes. All staff teaching on higher education programmes are approved by the degree-awarding bodies.

9 External examiners make twice-yearly assessments, meet with students, comment on assessment briefs and provide advice on a range of matters. Although external examiner reports are scrutinised by programme teams, these have not been routinely collated and considered above programme level by the College. Metrics for enrolment, retention, progression and achievement are included in the annual programme reports sent to the awarding bodies and are included in the higher education report to Corporation. Although the degree-awarding bodies maintain oversight of academic standards through annual programme monitoring, management of assessment boards and use of external examiners, there is limited oversight of the operation and outcomes of the quality assurance processes at College level beyond the Head of Higher Education (see area of development in paragraph 6).

Rounded judgement

10 Responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards ultimately rests with the degree-awarding bodies, which maintain oversight through the direct management of assessment boards, involvement in programme-level meetings and through the operation of

the external examining system. These safeguards ensure that academic standards are reliable and comparable. Internal College reporting structures for higher education are currently limited, over-reliant on one individual and unsystematic. The College is seeking to address this through changes to the governance and quality assurance arrangements, and the review team has noted an area for development to ensure that the approval and implementation of the new approach is expedited and fulfils its potential.

11   The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

12   The College admissions policy is applicable to both higher education and further education applicants, although it has a predominant focus on the needs of further education students. The Head of Higher Education, HE Registrar and Programme Leader are involved in the selection process and most students are interviewed. The College acknowledged that an issue with admissions on one particular programme had resulted in poor retention rates, and recruitment to this programme has since ceased. The College HE Strategic Action Plan resolves to review entry criteria and only offer programmes in areas core to College specialisms.

13   Each programme has student representatives who have opportunities to meet formally with staff from the validating body. For UoR programmes, this is achieved through attendance at termly Staff-Student Liaison Committee meetings, which have a UoR representative present. RAU student representatives are expected to attend regular Programme Committee meetings, although these were not held during 2016-17 and the College did not hold any alternative formal meetings with RAU student representatives (see specified improvement in paragraph 21). Students now complete annual module feedback questionnaires. The annual monitoring reports contain a section relating to student feedback, but reports reviewed by the team merely confirm that module reviews had taken place rather than reporting any issues raised by students for consideration. Although small cohort sizes and good communication between students and tutors facilitate extensive informal feedback, there is a current over-reliance on informal mechanisms and a lack of documented consideration or decision making in regard to this feedback. The review team therefore advises that the College ensures more robust recording of the outcomes and actions arising from student feedback (Quality Code), identifying this as an **area for development**.

14   Students receive a College briefing on the role of student representatives. Formal training is provided for student representatives on UoR programmes. No formal training is provided by the College or University for RAU programmes, although informal support is offered by tutors to all representatives. Recently elected representatives met by the team generally understood their role, although were not aware of the requirement to attend specific meetings. The review team therefore advises the College to ensure that all student representatives receive appropriate training and support for their role, identifying this as an **area for development**.

15   Staff development needs are identified through the appraisal process and through peer observation. Staff met by the review team cited examples of how the College had supported study for higher qualifications and how remission for teaching on higher education was available, although some staff were unclear on the amount of remission. Staff also stated that programme teams work closely together, which enables sharing of good practice in teaching and learning, and that staff new to higher education teaching could be partnered with more experienced staff. The College takes advantage of staff development offered by a land-based sector organisation and engages with the continuing professional development offered by UoR, although no such provision is available from the main awarding body, RAU. At present there is no higher education-specific induction, development or training provided by the College for staff and there is limited support for staff making the transition from further education to higher education teaching. Furthermore, there is no structured training for staff delivering distance learning programmes. The review team therefore advises the College to

provide specific higher education induction and support to all staff teaching higher education programmes, identifying this as an **area for development**.

16   A new HE Peer Observation Scheme has been developed, which is supportive and developmental in its approach. However, at the time of the review, this was still in draft form with the latest version dated August 2017. This is scheduled to be introduced in 2017-18, although staff met by the review team had limited knowledge of the new process and as yet had received no training or development as regards its implementation. The review team therefore advises the College to expedite the approval and implementation of the higher education-specific peer observation scheme, identifying this as an **area for development**.

17   Students are supported by tutors for academic and pastoral issues and can access further support on the latter from the College Pastoral Support Officer. A dedicated welfare office supports students with regard to financial issues, general welfare, additional learning support and counselling. All students met by the review team demonstrated an awareness of the support available, were clear on how this is accessed and noted that the support provided had been effective.

18   Specialist physical resources available to students are well regarded by external examiners and students. However, there is less satisfaction with the level of academic learning resources as expressed by students through meetings and the National Student Survey. The College has limited library facilities on campus, although electronic journals and ebooks are available online. Students on UoR programmes have external user rights at the University library. RAU students do not have the equivalent rights, although students are taken to the University library every six weeks to access resources. In addition, tutors make available their own copies of books and some students met by the review team purchase their own texts. There is no systematic review of academic learning resources, although the limitations of the current resources have been identified in the HE Strategy and the HE Internal Review and Action Plan 2015-16. There has been a specific, additional investment in the higher education library budget allocated for this year, which is in the process of being spent. The review team advises the College to systematically review and improve academic learning resources to ensure that resources are adequate and readily accessible to students, identifying this as an **area for development**.

19   The College makes good use of external stakeholders and external input to improve the quality of the student academic experience. This is undertaken through membership of external bodies and through contacts with industry and local employers. The College operates mandatory work placements for its higher education students through a process managed by the College placement team. RAU students are issued with a Work Experience Module Handbook. Students met by the review team demonstrated awareness of the expectations in regard to placements and of the support available through the placement office in sourcing suitable placements.

20   Students are issued with handbooks at enrolment and those met by the review team confirmed that this information is useful. Responsibility for programme information rests with the Programme Leader, with some occasional checks being made by the Head of Higher Education. The College does not undertake systematic checks on the accuracy or completeness of information available to higher education staff and students. Furthermore, the arrangements and responsibilities for providing accurate and accessible higher education information are insufficiently defined. The review team identified inaccurate and outdated materials on the virtual learning environment, including the College Handbook dated 2013-14 and an old version of the complaints policy. Information for prospective students was also lacking in some areas (see area for development in paragraph 27). The review team therefore recommends that the College develops and implements a

formal process for ensuring that information for staff and students (current and prospective) is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

21   Ongoing monitoring is undertaken by programme teams, although not all programmes had operated regular Programme Committee meetings during the last year as required. Programme monitoring reports are produced annually by programme leaders in accordance with templates provided by the universities and are submitted directly to the respective awarding bodies, with copies forwarded to the Head of Higher Education. These reports include statistical data, external examiner feedback and module reports, although the review team noted limited analysis of key performance data in these reports and a lack of systematic consideration of these reports above programme level. The higher education reports to Corporation in December 2016 and September 2017 include monitoring data such as retention and progression statistics and some student feedback, and the 2016 report also includes reference to external examiner reports. However, it is not always evident how issues identified in these summary reports are being, or have been, addressed. In terms of more regular reporting, most Corporation meetings include a report on higher education, although these tend to focus on enrolment figures and validation relationships rather than consideration of the student academic experience. While the review team noted examples of positive changes to the learning environment, there is limited evidence of how initiatives are integrated in a systematic and planned manner or how good practice is routinely identified and disseminated through monitoring. New governance and quality assurance arrangements are to be implemented in 2017-18 to address the current weaknesses in higher education monitoring and oversight. However, details on the new arrangements are underdeveloped and staff met by the review team were largely unaware of how this would operate. The review team therefore advises the College to develop, formalise and implement a systematic process for considering monitoring data on higher education programmes at College and awarding body level, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

22   The Corporation has student members who tend to be recruited from the further education student body. However, two higher education students were invited to give presentations to a governor meeting in June 2017, which provided helpful insight into the student experience. The College indicated that this approach is likely to become an annual activity.

23   All student cohorts have at least one elected representative and the ways in which representatives perform their roles is largely dependent on the arrangements with each awarding body (see paragraph 13 and 14 for areas of development). Revised arrangements for student representation on Programme Committees, and the creation of the HEQRB, is intended to improve the means by which the College has oversight of student feedback.

24   The College employs staff with specific responsibility to support student welfare. Students met by the review team demonstrated awareness of this provision, including the support available to students in making a complaint. The College has not received any formal complaints from higher education students. Small cohort sizes enable close relationships between students and staff and therefore concerns and complaints are generally resolved informally. The College has identified the need for a revised complaints policy that satisfies the baseline regulatory requirements (see paragraph 31 for specified improvement).

Policies and procedures are in place to ensure consumer protection obligations are met (Competition and Markets Authority guidance)

25 A generic admissions process is available for all prospective students to the College. This is not specific to the needs of higher education applicants and neither this, nor other information provided to applicants, clearly explains the application process or the admissions complaints and appeals process. The College acknowledges that the current procedure is not fit for purpose and is intending to implement a new policy for January 2018, although evidence of progress on this policy was not available. The review team therefore recommends that the College ensures that admissions arrangements for higher education programmes, including complaints on admissions, are clearly articulated and made available to students, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

26 Information for prospective students on the higher education programmes is available on the College website, through UCAS and on the Unistats website, although the latter is not linked to the College website as required. Although not formalised, in practice applicants engage with staff prior to an offer being made, either through an interview or a telephone call. The College notes that important information, terms and conditions are outlined at this stage although this is largely provided verbally. The letter that students receive following the acceptance of an offer provides details of the course fee, but other written details on terms and conditions are limited. Further information is provided through an enrolment form, handbooks issued at induction and through the virtual learning environment, although not in a form that students would clearly recognises as constituting terms and conditions. The College acknowledges that the level of information currently provided to higher education applicants is insufficient and intends to develop a terms and conditions booklet for applicants during the coming academic year. However, no evidence of progress was available to the team. The review team therefore recommends that the College develops and communicates to prospective students comprehensive terms and conditions in line with CMA guidance, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

27 The review team noted that programme specifications available to students include wide-ranging terms regarding the College ability to change aspects of the programme without consultation, which could be considered unfair. Senior staff were unaware of this clause in the programme specification and stressed that no changes to programmes would be made without consultation (see specified improvement in paragraph 26).

28 The College complaints procedure is accessible to students via the College website. The review team noted that the Student Handbook and virtual learning environment directed students to an outdated version of the complaints policy. Furthermore, the complaints procedure does not clearly signpost access to the validating bodies or OIA complaints processes (see specified improvement in paragraph 31).

Student protection measures as expressed through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) Good Practice Framework, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's (PHSO) Principles of Good Administration, and HEFCE's Statement of Good Practice on Higher Education Course Changes and Closures

29 The College has closed two courses in the past two years. Arrangements put in place for students have been appropriate and enabled the existing cohort to complete the course and applicants to enrol at alternative institutions. Arrangements for changing the validating body for two programmes were also completed satisfactorily with the support of the students affected. Although the arrangements have protected students' interests, there is no stated policy on how such decisions are discussed with, or communicated to, staff and students. This omission has been identified by the College in its plans to develop new higher

education policies, although no evidence of progress was available to the review team despite the work being due for completion in December 2017. The review team therefore recommends that the College develops, formalises and implements a policy for course closures and changes, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

30   The College currently operates common complaints and appeals policies for its further education and higher education students. No formal complaints or appeals have been received to date. The College confirms that students have raised issues on an informal basis. While these issues have been largely addressed, the lack of recording of informal complaints limits the scope for the College to use the outcomes to improve the student experience (see areas for development in paragraphs 13 and 21).

31   The complaints and appeals policies available do not currently reflect the requirements of the OIA Good Practice Framework, specifically in relation to three stages of consideration, incorporating independence and a final review stage. The College has identified the need to create revised policies and to ensure that these are made available to students but has not yet commenced this work, despite a December 2017 completion date. The awarding bodies' appeals procedures have also not been highlighted to students, and staff awareness of the respective responsibilities and detailed arrangements for appeals was low. The review team therefore recommends that the College develops, formalises and implements a complaints policy, and adopts appeals procedures, that are compliant with the requirements of the OIA and degree-awarding bodies, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

Rounded judgement

32   The quality of the student academic experience is predominantly managed at programme level through the work of programme teams in liaison with the Head of Higher Education and HE Registrar. Arrangements for the oversight of higher education provision are generally conducted informally, and there is limited routine or structured reporting undertaken at College level on factors affecting the student academic experience. The review team therefore identifies six specified improvements and six areas of development.

33   The specified improvements outline recommendations to ensure that policies and procedures are developed and implemented effectively regarding: the accuracy of higher education information; the use of monitoring data; the clarity of the admissions process; the provision of terms and conditions; the arrangement for course closures and changes; and complaints and appeals policies. In the main, these specified improvements represent weaknesses in the approach to these aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements and insufficient priority given to assuring the quality of higher education provision. These shortcomings have been identified by the College, notably in the most recent higher education report and associated action plan to Corporation. A programme of work is outlined, which includes the implementation of a new structure through which such weaknesses can be more effectively identified and addressed, although this work is underdeveloped and not yet fully embedded in operational planning. The increased focus on higher education at Corporation level and the consolidation of provision and awarding bodies over the last year creates an environment in which such changes can be implemented effectively.

34   In addition to specified improvements, the review team advises the College to expedite the approval and implementation of the new governance and quality assurance approach as a means of addressing the current weaknesses in oversight. The review team also identified further areas for development in the arrangements for supporting student representation, the collation of student feedback, the support and development of staff

teaching on higher education programmes and the systematic approach to the review and development of academic learning resources.

35   The review team concludes that there is limited confidence requiring specified improvements before there can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.