QAA

University College Falmouth

MARCH 2007

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

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

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

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

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

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

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

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

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy. (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006 - Annexes B and C* refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University College Falmouth (the University College) from 12 to 16 March 2007 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University College offers.

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

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK.

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

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

Outcomes of the institutional audit

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

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University College is taking a range of coherent steps towards quality enhancement, some of which were at a relatively early stage of development at the time of the audit. The audit team would strongly encourage the University College to consider ways in which the range of activities being undertaken might be better captured and recorded so as to inform its institutional oversight of enhancement-led activities.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit found that the University College's arrangements for postgraduate research students were in alignment with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes,* and were operating as intended.

Published information

The audit team noted the formal procedures to ensure that external information was scrutinised for accuracy and consistency prior to publication and concurs with the view of the University College that its documentation is correct and reflects what is distinctive and special about the institution. The team concluded that reliance can reasonably be placed in the integrity and reliability of the information that the University College publishes about its educational provision.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

- the way the University College has implemented a strategy for developing staff so that they are better able to engage proactively with strategic objectives, while building capacity within the institution

- the new process for Annual Strategic Review; the strategic focus of which makes an important contribution to the institutional management of the quality of learning opportunities and of academic standards

- processes for implementing a widening participation strategy that involve students as mentors and ambassadors

- the process of strategic engagement with Cornwall's priorities for social and economic regeneration.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University College consider further action in some areas.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- continue to develop the style in which the meetings of its main committees are minuted to better convey the richness of the developments taking place

- through its review of student feedback, ensure greater consistency in the use of both quantitative and qualitative feedback in its Annual Strategic Review reports, and give careful consideration to the explicit inclusion of written student feedback

- systematically capture empirical information from students at unit level.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- continue to reflect on the fitness for purpose of its policies, processes and procedures in relation to institutional management of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities as the institution expands in size and scope

- secure better institutional oversight of the range and diversity of its enhancement-led activities.

Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice*

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

- subject benchmark statements.

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

Report

1   An institutional audit of the University College Falmouth (University College) was undertaken during the week commencing 12 March 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University College's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The scope of the audit included all of the University College's provision. At the time of the audit, the University College did not have any collaborative arrangements.

2   The audit team comprised Mr D Ferney, Mr J Last, Professor P Luker and Ms M Rohr, auditors, and Ms J Pallant, audit secretary. Dr J Mitchell, Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group, coordinated the audit on behalf of QAA.

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and mission

3   University College Falmouth is a designated specialist higher education institution providing education in the areas of design, media and art. The institution experienced a rapid expansion in student numbers and in its academic portfolio in the 1980s and 1990s. In March 2004 the Privy Council granted the institution taught degree awarding powers. The name University College Falmouth was assumed in 2005. The University College is accredited to deliver postgraduate research programmes by the University of Plymouth (since 1992) and the University of the Arts London (since 2005). The University College is situated on two geographical sites, the Woodlane Campus and the Tremough Campus, the latter being shared with the University of Exeter.

4   Academic programmes are provided both in further education and higher education and range from foundation entry level to postgraduate study. At the time of the audit, the University College offered programmes in the areas of design, media and art to 2,091 students, of which 194 were postgraduate students.

5   University College Falmouth is a founder member of the Combined Universities in Cornwall initiative which is a partnership between Cornwall's higher and further education providers to promote the economic, social and cultural regeneration of the area by creating more study and research opportunities.

The information base for the audit

6   The information available for the audit included the following recent documents:

● the report of an institutional audit, based on activity undertaken in connection with the institution's application for taught degree awarding powers (January 2006).

7   The University College provided QAA with a series of documents and information including:

● an institutional briefing paper (the Briefing Paper) with appendices

● access to the University College's intranet.

8   In addition, the President of the Students' Union of the University College prepared a student written submission on behalf of the University College's students. The audit team is grateful for the students' engagement with the process.

9   During the briefing and audit visits, the audit team was given convenient access to a range of the University College's internal documents. The team identified two programmes for which sampling audit trails were requested, to illustrate further aspects of the University College's provision, and additional documentation was provided for the team during the audit visit. The team is grateful for the prompt and helpful responses to its requests for information.

Developments since the last audit

10   The last institutional audit report, dated January 2006, was based on the evidence gathered by the QAA in the academic year 2002-03 in connection with the University College's successful application for taught degree awarding powers (TDAP). Although there were no recommendations issued with this report, the University College responded to the report by formulating an action plan derived from the issues identified in the TDAP activity. At the same time a major review of the management and committee structure was undertaken to prepare the institution for further expansion.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

11   Formal responsibility for the maintenance of standards and the quality of learning opportunities lies with Academic Board which delegates appropriate responsibilities to other committees, notably Academic Standards and Enhancement Committee (ASEC) and the Learning, Teaching and Access Committee (LTAC). ASEC oversees the implementation, operation, modification and development of the University College's approved academic quality assurance and enhancement policies and procedures through systematic monitoring and review. LTAC is responsible for matters related to learning and teaching, and widening participation. The audit team found that these committees worked well together, but advises that the record of meetings should be improved to capture better the interplay between them.

12   Every undergraduate and postgraduate taught programme has at least one external examiner. The processes for nominating, appointing, inducting and mentoring external examiners are consistent with good practice in the sector. The University College responds appropriately to issues raised by external examiners. The audit team was able to confirm the University College's view that its external examining system is robust and reliable and that it plays a pivotal role in ensuring comparability of standards with sector norms.

13   All proposals for new courses are subjected to a rigorous process of scrutiny that involves the participation of at least one academic subject specialist from another institution and, where appropriate, an external practitioner. The audit team regarded the training and mentoring of internal members and chairs of approval panels as good practice. Each course has a programme specification that references sector and professional body benchmarks as appropriate, and clearly articulates the intended learning outcomes and how they will be assessed. The University College's assessment policies reflect appropriately the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*), *Section 6: Assessment of students*, published by QAA, and are clearly explained in course handbooks and understood by students.

14   The audit team concluded that the framework for managing academic standards was well designed, that it operated effectively and that the University College had appropriate mechanisms to keep it under review. The team also considered that it would be desirable for the University College to continue to keep its policies and procedures under review as the institution changes in size and/or scope.

15   The audit found that confidence could reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University College's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

16   Responsibility for the students' academic experience rests with the Academic Standards and Enhancement Committee (ASEC). ASEC considers the annual monitoring of courses, the documentation for which confirms the appropriateness of the monitoring and evidences the developmental aspects of the process. On occasions, however, the richness of the debates and the involvement of the University College community in these processes, although evident from the meetings the audit team had with staff, was not well demonstrated in the committee minutes. The University College is encouraged to review the style of minuting of these committees to capture better these debates.

17   At the time of the audit the current process of annual course review was in the first year of operation following a strategic decision to develop the process from one of reporting and monitoring to one that asks course teams to take a strategic view of annual review. Although the system is at an early stage of development, with some variability in Annual Strategic Review reports, the change is clearly designed to strengthen the focus on strategic thinking and planning and has the potential to make a strong contribution to improving the student learning experience.

18   Students are generally positive about their learning experience. Students confirmed that they had an understanding of the ways in which the University College offered students opportunities to develop their experience and an awareness of a range of informal oral feedback mechanisms through which this could occur.

19   External examiners' reports are generally reviewed effectively through the Annual Strategic Review process, although the process for examining does not require formal meetings with students or require written student feedback to be collected and presented to examiners. Consequently, examples of the student voice contributing fully within the Annual Strategic Review process were not always easy to locate; this applied both to summative views on courses and those relating to individual elements of the course, where there was little evidence of a systematic collection and review of unit level evaluation. The University College is advised to consider, through its review of student feedback, how it captures and systematically reviews student feedback data, including data from the National Student Survey, in these processes.

20   The University College's support systems for students are well established, robust and are clearly understood and valued by students. At the time of the audit a number of new initiatives were being developed and both the students and the audit team acknowledged the emerging mechanisms to support new students from the point of application through to enrolment. The audit team also applauds the ways in which the University College is engaging students both in their courses and in the wider community, by means of the student volunteer and student ambassador schemes. Students were similarly aware and supportive of developments in e-learning and the embedding of employability into the curriculum. However, the team found little evidence of similar views regarding the value of personal development planning, or of its systematic use, and they would encourage the University College to consider how it might integrate personal development planning more meaningfully into the student learning experience.

21   Following a strategic decision to place teaching at the core of the institution's activity, the University College established a new post, the Director of Teaching and Learning, and an associated Learning and Teaching Research Centre. Although the Learning and Teaching Research Centre was still at an early point of development at the time of the audit, the audit team found evidence that considerable progress had been made and that the initiative was already contributing, in a significant way, to the development of student learning opportunities.

22   The University College has appropriate policies in place to support staff in assuring the quality of teaching and demonstrated a commitment to planned development activities in support of the improvement of learning opportunities. These activities include the work of the Learning and Teaching Research Centre, a range of general staff development activity and some developments specifically targeted at new staff and middle managers. The audit team identified two initiatives as particularly noteworthy: in one staff are mentored by experienced postholders to enable the University College to broaden its constituency of panel chairs for review and validation events; and a second where designated Business Fellows work in support of embedding employability into the curriculum through negotiation with employers to provide 'live briefs' and industry placements to students.

23   The audit found that confidence could reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University College's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

24   The University College employs a range of approaches to the enhancement of quality.

25   While noting some variability in the approach taken by courses to the completion of ASR reports, particularly with regard to the ways in which feedback from students is reported and used, the audit team concluded that the ASR process made an important contribution to the management of quality and standard, promotes strategic thinking, and could be a key component of an institutional enhancement strategy. Periodic review is also a reflective process which is informed by the views of students and which results in the enhancement of learning opportunities.

26   The University College has taken steps to use its external examiners and its links with professional bodies and regional organisations to develop provision and enhance the employability of its students.

27   The audit team identified, as a feature of good practice, opportunities provided by the University College for students to acts as ambassadors, volunteers and mentors, and of the key role played by the latter in the success of the pre-entry retention package. The University College intends to develop opportunities for student ambassadors, volunteers and mentors to receive institutional credit for their work.

28   The University College's recently established Learning and Teaching Research Centre was beginning to make a wide-ranging contribution to the identification and dissemination of pedagogic research and good practice, in areas such as assessment and capturing the student voice, and that its e-learning strategy contributes towards the strategic goal of introducing more opportunities for flexible learning.

29   The University College is taking a range of coherent steps towards quality enhancement, some of which were at a relatively early stage of development at the time of the audit. The audit team would strongly encourage the University College to consider ways in which the range of activities being undertaken might be better captured and recorded so as to inform its institutional oversight of enhancement-led activities.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

30   The University College notes in its Briefing Paper that it does not have any formal collaborative arrangements as defined in the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning* (*including e-learning*) and this was confirmed through the audit. However, the audit team did find evidence of an extensive range of activity that demonstrates the University College's engagement in collaborative working within a wider definition and context, which it wished to acknowledge.

31   The University College is a founder member of the Combined Universities in Cornwall initiative which is a partnership between Cornwall's higher and further education providers to promote the economic, social and cultural regeneration of the area by creating more study, research and knowledge transfer opportunities. In line with the Combined Universities in Cornwall objective to expand higher education in Cornwall, the University College plans to increase its student numbers to 3,000 students by 2011-12. In support of this, a number of new subject areas are to be validated during 2007, such as Fashion Design, Advertising and Public Relations and Digital Animation.

32   A number of collaborative projects have already been completed and further plans are being proposed. The new Tremough campus is owned by the University College but, through a leasing arrangement, it is shared with the University of Exeter, which also offers courses on the site. A joint Students' Union serves the student population of both the higher education institutions.

33   The University College is a partner in two Lifelong Learning Networks (LLN) designed to support widening participation in higher education from Cornish residents; one with a regional focus (the South West LLN) and one with a subject specialist focus (the National Arts Learning Network).

34   It is the responsibility of the Head of Business Relations, with the help of Business Fellows in each subject area, to advise and support staff and students in external project work and placements, provide contact for businesses, support staff and students wishing to start-up a business and assist staff involving businesses in course design and delivery. The term 'Business Relations' encompasses all activities that connect the University College with employers, industry and practitioners and incorporates applied research in collaboration with employers. These activities form an integral part of the University College's mission and not only enhance learning opportunities and teaching quality but also contribute to local economic regeneration.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

35   The University College's Research Degrees Management Group is responsible for admitting research students, assigning supervisors and monitoring activity and progression. These arrangements appear to be working satisfactorily for the small number of research students currently enrolled at the University College.

36   Since it intends to increase significantly the size of its postgraduate research community in the near future, as part of the CUC Phase 3 initiative, the University College is taking a number of steps to create a sustainable structure to support a growing volume of research and research supervision. It has consolidated staff research activity around three main clusters in order to focus and develop the research profiles of staff and to increase the visibility of their research to prospective research students. In 2005, the University College concluded an accreditation agreement with the University of the Arts London, as part of a strategic partnership to build supervisory capacity in shared specialist areas of art, design and communication, including practice-based research degrees. The first University College staff will complete an accredited development programme in research supervision in the current academic year. In addition the University College is investigating the feasibility of introducing sabbatical leave as a means of enhancing the research activity of staff and helping to consolidate a research culture which will be beneficial to students and staff alike.

37   The audit team found that the University College's arrangements for postgraduate research students were in alignment with the section of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research students* and were operating as intended.

Section 7: Published information

38   The University College publishes clear and accessible information for prospective and current students on its website and in printed form. In addition, the institution communicates with its current students through the campus intranet and, increasingly, through its virtual learning environment.

39   Students who met the audit team confirmed the usefulness of the information provided by the prospectus and the website during the application and admissions stages. Course-specific leaflets are available to applicants, which provide an overview of the approach to learning, teaching and assessment adopted by individual courses.

40   Students equally expressed satisfaction with the information in course handbooks and associated unit guides which introduce students to the aims and outcomes of their specific course and contain information on progression through the course in terms of curriculum content and learning, teaching and assessment methods.

41   The audit team noted the formal procedures to ensure that external information was scrutinised for accuracy and consistency prior to publication and concurs with the view of the University College that its documentation is correct and reflects what is distinctive and special about the institution. The team concluded that reliance can reasonably be placed in the integrity and reliability of the information that the University College publishes about its educational provision.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

- the way the University College has implemented a strategy for developing staff so that they are better able to engage proactively with strategic objectives, while building capacity within the institution (paragraphs 15, 24)

- the new process for Annual Strategic Review; the strategic focus of which makes an important contribution to the institutional management of the quality of learning opportunities and of academic standards (paragraphs 19, 27)

- processes for implementing a widening participation strategy that involve students as mentors and ambassadors (paragraphs 22, 29)

- the process of strategic engagement with Cornwall's priorities for social and economic regeneration (paragraphs 24, 28, 36).

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University College consider further action in some areas.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- continue to develop the style in which the meetings of its main committees are minuted to better convey the richness of the developments taking place (paragraphs 13, 18)

- through its review of student feedback, ensure greater consistency in the use of both quantitative and qualitative feedback in its Annual Strategic Review reports, and give careful consideration to the explicit inclusion of written student feedback (paragraph 21)

- systematically capture empirical information from students at unit level (paragraph 21).

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- continue to reflect on the fitness for purpose of its policies, processes and procedures in relation to institutional management of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities as the institution expands in size and scope (paragraph 16)

- secure better institutional oversight of the range and diversity of its enhancement-led activities (paragraph 31).