

Writtle College

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Institutional audit

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Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE. To do this the Agency carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. The Agency operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales.

The purpose of institutional audit

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

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

Judgements

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

- the **confidence** that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards;
- the **reliance** that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

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

Nationally agreed standards

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

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

The audit process

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

The main elements of institutional audit are:

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

The evidence for the audit

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

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

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

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 02/15 *Information on quality and standards in higher education* published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

Contents

| | | | |
|--|----------|--|-----------|
| Summary | 1 | | |
| Introduction | 1 | Learning support resources | 17 |
| Outcome of the audit | 1 | Academic guidance, support and supervision | 18 |
| Features of good practice | 1 | Personal support and guidance | 20 |
| Recommendations for action | 1 | Collaborative provision | 21 |
| Programmes in the Business Management Scheme | 1 | | |
| National reference points | 1 | Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trail and thematic enquiries | 21 |
| Main report | 4 | Discipline audit trail | 21 |
| Section 1: Introduction: Writtle College | 4 | Thematic enquiries | 23 |
| The institution and its mission | 4 | Section 4: The audit investigations: published information | 23 |
| Collaborative provision | 4 | The students' experience of published information and other information available to them | 23 |
| Background information | 5 | Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information | 24 |
| The audit process | 5 | Findings | 26 |
| Developments since the previous academic quality audit | 5 | The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes | 26 |
| Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes | 6 | The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards | 27 |
| The institution's view as expressed in the SED | 6 | The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning | 28 |
| The institution's framework for managing quality and standards | 6 | Outcome of the discipline audit trail | 29 |
| The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards | 7 | The use made by the institution of the academic infrastructure | 29 |
| Internal approval, monitoring and review processes | 7 | The utility of the SED as an illustration of the institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to act on these to enhance quality and standards | 30 |
| External participation in internal review processes | 9 | Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards | 30 |
| External examiners and their reports | 9 | Reliability of information | 30 |
| External reference points | 11 | Features of good practice | 31 |
| Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies | 13 | Recommendations for action | 31 |
| Student representation at operational and institutional level | 13 | Appendix | 32 |
| Feedback from students, graduates and employers | 14 | Writtle College's response to the audit report | 32 |
| Progression and completion statistics | 15 | | |
| Assurance of the quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward | 15 | | |
| Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development | 16 | | |
| Assurance of the quality of teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods | 17 | | |

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the Agency) visited Writtle College (the College) from 16 to 20 February 2004 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the College offers on behalf of the University of Essex (the University) which formally awards the College's degrees.

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

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

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

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

Outcome of the audit

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

- broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes, and the academic standards of the awards that the College offers on behalf of the University which formally awards the College's degrees.

Features of good practice

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

- the academic and pastoral support and guidance provided to students;
- the use of Staffnet in the establishment, maintenance and development of policies and procedures for quality assurance and enhancement which fosters consistency of approach across the College;

- effective human resource processes which are kept under review and are modified and updated in response to changing needs and environments;
- informative and user-friendly student information which is quality assured by robust procedures; and
- the use of the academic infrastructure in the context of the College's Widening Participation Strategy to provide structured opportunities for progression through the further/higher education continuum within the College's provision.

Recommendations for action

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

The audit team advises the College to:

- establish and implement clear requirements for the timely provision of formative feedback to students on coursework; and
- review the approach to action planning in its quality assurance processes to provide more clarity in the identification of responsibilities and timescales.

It would be desirable for the College to:

- review the approach to the administration of its Student Satisfaction Survey to secure a higher and, therefore, more representative response rate; and
- take steps to ensure that all students are aware of rights of access to facilities at the validating institution.

Programmes in the Business Management Scheme

The standard of student achievement in the programmes is appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*, published by the Agency. The quality of learning opportunities available to students is suitable for programmes of study leading to the awards.

National reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings the audit team also investigated the use made by the College of the academic infrastructure which the Agency has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The academic infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards.

The findings of the audit suggest that the College has responded appropriately to the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by the Agency, the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements.

In due course, the published information set will include summaries of external examiners' reports and of feedback from current students for each programme. The College is moving in an appropriate manner to fulfil its responsibilities in this area.

Main report

Main report

1 An institutional audit of Writtle College (the College) was undertaken during the week commencing 16 February 2004. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility for degrees of the University of Essex (the University).

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

3 The audit checked the effectiveness of the College's procedures for reviewing and enhancing the quality of its programmes of study; for publishing reliable information; and for the discharge of its responsibility for programmes leading to degrees of the University. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, the audit included consideration of an example of institutional processes at work at the level of the programme through a discipline audit trail (DAT), together with examples of those processes operating at the level of the institution as a whole. The scope of the audit encompassed all of the College's provision including collaborative arrangements.

Section 1: Introduction: Writtle College

The institution and its mission

4 The College has origins dating back to 1893 and is the oldest publicly funded institution in England serving the traditional industries of agriculture and horticulture. In line with changes in these industries, the College has diversified its curriculum portfolio to encompass a broader range of related vocational provision. It offers courses in further (FE) and higher education (HE) at its main campus and FE courses on a subsidiary campus at Shuttleworth College from where successful students may progress to HE at the main campus of Writtle College. Since August 1997, all undergraduate and postgraduate programmes of study at the College have been validated by the University. The FE courses offered by the College are predominantly awards of Edexcel (BTEC).

5 In 2002-03, 2,595 full-time equivalent students were registered at the College, of which two-thirds were enrolled on HE courses and the remaining third on FE courses. Approximately 5 per cent of students were enrolled on postgraduate taught courses and seven individuals were registered for postgraduate research degrees. In the three years prior to the audit, the College increased its intake of international, postgraduate and part-time students.

6 In 2000, the College was restructured with the dual aims of simplifying reporting lines and clarifying roles and responsibilities; two assistant principals were appointed with remits for academic matters and business development. The College was reorganised from three faculties into two faculties and a separate division of FE. Functions associated with business development, income generation, registry and management of the estates were also consolidated, and the College embarked on a series of ongoing activities designed to enhance management processes and value-for-money.

7 Academic programmes and staff are organised in four equal-sized departments within the faculty structure. The Faculty of Applied Science and Technology offers undergraduate courses in equine studies, agriculture, animal science and management, and postgraduate courses in horticulture and post-harvest technology. The Faculty of Business Management and Horticulture offers undergraduate courses in business management, leisure and tourism, rural resource management, landscape and garden design, interior design and postgraduate courses in business management. For the purposes of administration and review, provision is clustered in schemes of related programmes.

8 The College mission statement is: 'Writtle College will continue to develop as a national and international centre of excellence for education, primarily in the land based industries and related areas, and be the focal point for meeting the needs of such education and training in the region'.

Collaborative provision

9 The self-evaluation document (SED) stated that over many years the College had 'actively sustained links with other HE providers in the region and with colleges and universities overseas'. These links have provided opportunities for staff development, student and staff exchanges and collaboration in curriculum development. No College awards are available through any of these linkages. The College delivers a programme leading to a University MSc in International Horticulture in conjunction with HAS Den Bosch in the Netherlands. Responsibility for

quality and standards resides formally with the University, and the responsibilities of the College in relation to the collaborative arrangement are defined in the Memorandum of Agreement between the College and the University. Further information on the College's approach to working with other HE providers may be found in paragraphs 118 to 121.

Background information

10 The published information available for the audit included:

- the information on the College's web site and its prospectuses;
- the reports from a joint Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC) audit and HEFCE teaching quality assessment visit conducted in November 1996.

11 The College initially provided the Agency with:

- an institutional SED and annexes;
- a discipline self-evaluation document (DSED) for the provision selected for a DAT.

12 During and after the audit visit, the audit team was given ready access to a range of the College's internal documents in hard copy and through the intranet and to documentation relating to the DAT; the latter included samples of student work.

The audit process

13 Following a preliminary visit to the College in June 2003, the Agency confirmed that one DAT would be conducted during the audit visit. The audit team's final selection of DAT was programmes in the Business Management Scheme.

14 The Agency received the SED and supporting documentation in October 2003 and the DSED, which included programme specifications, in December 2003. Both the SED and the DSED were written specifically for the audit

15 The audit team visited the College on 8 and 9 January 2004 to explore with the Principal, senior members of staff and student representatives, matters relating to the management of quality and standards raised by the SEDs and other documentation. During this briefing visit the team signalled a number of themes for the audit visit. At the close of the briefing visit a programme of meetings for the audit was developed by the team and agreed with the College.

16 At the preliminary meeting for the audit, the students of the College were invited, through their Students' Union, to submit a separate document

expressing views on the student experience at the College, and identifying any matters of concern or commendation with respect to the quality of programmes and the standard of awards. They were also invited to give their views on the level of representation afforded to them and on the extent to which their views were taken into account. In October 2003, the student body submitted to the Agency a students' written submission (SWS) produced by the Students' Union, drawing on information and views from a range of sources. The student body indicated that the document had been shared with staff in the College and that there were no matters within it that would require the audit team to treat it with any level of confidentiality greater than that applying to the audit process. The team is grateful to the students for preparing this valuable document to support the audit.

17 The audit visit took place from 16 to 20 February 2004 and included further meetings with staff and students of the College, both at central level and in relation to the selected DAT. The audit team comprised Mr R Davison, Dr P Maher, Dr M Rhodes, Dr A Miller, auditors, and Mr S Appleton, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for the Agency by Mrs S Patterson, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Developments since the previous academic quality audit

18 The College received a joint visit from HEQC and HEFCE in November 1996. The teams conducted both a quality audit of institutional processes and a teaching quality assessment of the agricultural and leisure management provision of the College.

19 Features which were commended in the audit report included the use of the quality management processes of the validating institution; the approachability of staff, who were supportive of students; the provision of support for educational strategies; recognition of the importance of views of employers and industrial contacts; the identification of the need to improve the link between staff appraisal and staff development. Work continues in these areas which are persistent strengths in the College. The response to the 1997 report was made available to the audit team. It was clear to the team that there had been thorough and thoughtful consideration of the recommendations in the report.

20 The audit team recognised that significant progress had been made in relation to the recommendations for necessary and advisable action in the report of the audit. There are clear regulations and generic and specific assessment criteria are published in handbooks and in assignment briefs; the terms of reference for the two-tier assessment

boards and the Academic Board are clear and operating effectively. The revised terms of reference for academic committees are published on the College intranet. Quality assurance processes were reviewed and are encapsulated in the internet-based HE Quality Assurance Manual (the Manual) on the intranet. Monitoring of the activities of the awards boards is now achieved through reporting to the Academic Standards Committee (ASC) and then the Academic Board. The University's regulations for postgraduate research students have been supplied in booklet format to the postgraduate research students, who reported that their Director of Studies interprets the regulations to them at key stages of their experience. This material is provided on the College intranet and students confirmed that it was accessible, clear and accurate and that they understood its contents. A curriculum framework document contains guidelines for the specification of level descriptors. Curriculum development in the areas of animal science and management, and equine studies and business management provided a good illustration of the use of mapping of intended learning outcomes at module and programme levels in relation to relevant subject benchmark statements and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*. It was evident that a shared understanding of the concept of academic standards in relation to the curricula was being disseminated. Reports of quality assessment at the College had identified the need to improve the nature and use of statistical information on student progression and achievement; for identification and sharing of best practice; and for consistency in tutorial and other support for students. Improvements have been made in all three areas. The introduction of a new Management Information System and the use of the resultant data at assessment boards and in the annual monitoring reports (AMRs) have improved the use of statistical information. The team heard about a number of mechanisms for dissemination of effective practice including the peer review process and the sharing of practices in curriculum development, and with mapping learning outcomes.

Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes

The institution's view as expressed in the SED

21 The framework for assuring quality of provision and for the maintenance of academic standards is defined in the Memorandum of Agreement between the College and the University. The College views the relationship with its validating institution as mature

and stable. The University is formally responsible for the academic standards of the awards offered in its name by the College: as appropriate to the maturity of the relationship the College has willingly accepted the maximum possible operational responsibility for the quality and standards of the courses that it delivers. The College has established an appropriate hierarchy of committees to support implementation of the processes set out in the Memorandum of Agreement. The College introduced a curriculum framework in 2001 for undergraduate programmes and further framework, in collaboration with the University, to aid development of Foundation degrees. Postgraduate provision is not included in the curriculum framework.

The institution's framework for managing quality and standards

22 Procedures for the validation of new proposals, annual monitoring and periodic degree scheme review (DSR) are defined in an appendix to the Memorandum of Agreement. The Memorandum of Agreement was renewed in 2002 and the opportunity was then taken to revise the appendix in the light of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*. Working groups of ASC have since been set up to ensure that College processes are aligned with the Code (see paragraph 55). The procedures outlined in the Appendix apply to all HE provision delivered by the College on behalf of the University and take account of the academic infrastructure. The internet-based Manual, produced by the College's Academic Services section and placed on Staffnet, fosters consistent observation of the relevant policies and procedures across the institution. The Manual is updated whenever a policy or procedure is modified.

23 The SED stated that '...Academic Board...[had] ultimate responsibility for Academic Standards and the Quality of Learning Opportunities across the institution'. The work of the College's Academic Board is supported by two subcommittees, the ASC and the Academic Policy Committee (APC). The ASC has a significant role in monitoring the implementation of policy and procedures for the establishment and maintenance of academic standards. The APC is responsible for the formulation of policy, procedures and regulations and provides the main institutional forum for discussion on learning, teaching and assessment issues. Academic Board, ASC and APC all have cross-membership, including representation from the University on Faculty Development Boards (FDBs).

24 Each faculty is served by a FDB, chaired by the relevant dean. The FDBs are subcommittees of the Academic Board and report directly to it. They are

charged with monitoring and reviewing provision; managing new course proposals; ensuring that resources, both human and physical, are appropriately deployed, and overseeing the operation of quality assurance mechanisms within faculties.

25 Programme proposals are considered by a validation panel, the report of which is considered by the FDB. The stated purpose of validation is to ensure that standards are equivalent to similar courses in the sector, that there are adequate resources allocated to the provision and that there is full alignment with the academic infrastructure. Monitoring is carried out throughout the academic year by course scheme management committees which meet three times a year using standard agendas that have been introduced recently in the College; monitoring is viewed as an ongoing process rather than an annual occurrence. The FDB receives all AMRs for the faculty and submits the reports and an overview summary to the ASC (see paragraphs 37 to 41).

26 The audit team would concur with the College's view that its structures for the management of quality and standards operate within a constructive relationship with its validating agent and represent an appropriate framework for fulfilment of its responsibilities in this area.

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

27 The SED did not include specific information on the College's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards, but signalled a number of areas where the College was planning action that would contribute to an enhancement agenda. These included:

- greater flexibility in course delivery to meet the needs of growing numbers of part-time students;
- increasing the tutorial support for an increasingly diverse student population;
- developing autonomous learning within the mixed further/higher economy to support progression.

28 The College is committed to an active widening participation agenda: one of the mechanisms for achieving this is the development of a portfolio of Foundation degrees in association with the University, supported by the adoption of a curriculum framework for implementation from October 2004. In meetings, the audit team heard of examples of the progression of students from FE courses to HE courses within the College, and formed the view that the College was actively and successfully implementing a widening participation policy.

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

Programme approval

29 The first stage of the approval process is consideration of an outline proposal, which includes details of market intelligence, by the FDB. Resource requirements, including library, information technology (IT), accommodation and staffing, are also examined by the College Executive Group (CEG). A draft programme specification is compiled for consideration at all stages of the approval process. The proposal is forwarded to the Academic Board for approval in the context of the College's Mission and Goals as set out in the Strategic Plan. Permission to publicise the programme is obtained from the Board of Studies for Learning Partnerships at the University. At this stage, all promotional material for the programmes carries the phrase 'subject to validation'.

30 A Curriculum Development Group is responsible for producing documentation in readiness for the validation event in accordance with the guidelines in the Manual. Course documentation must include programme specifications and reference to the *FHEQ* and consideration of any relevant subject benchmark statements. At this stage the Development Group is encouraged to consult external examiners for cognate College provision and industrial contacts. An independent internal Course Development Review (CDR) team examines the documentation to confirm that the proposal is ready for submission to a validation panel. The minutes of the CDR are included in the documentation for the validation event.

31 The terms of reference and membership of validation panels are specified in the Manual. The panel includes representation from the University and a minimum of two external members; in most cases panels also include industrial representatives to confirm vocational relevance.

32 The curriculum development group is responsible for action in response to any conditions attached to the approval of the proposal. The chair of the validation panel event is responsible for signing off the validation report once he/she is satisfied that conditions have been met. The report is copied to the relevant FDB, ASC and the Academic Board and is received by the Board of Study for Learning Partnerships at the University. The validation process is complete when endorsement is received from the University Senate.

33 The timing of the validation event is determined by back-scheduling from the dates of the meetings of the Board of Study for Learning Partnerships at the University. The aim is to hold events so that there is

time to fulfil conditions before the course begins, which happens in the majority of cases. The audit team learnt of one validation event which took place in mid-August with a proposed start date of the subsequent October. The validation panel did not include University representation despite this being a procedural requirement. While accepting that this may have been an isolated incident, the team encourages the College to avoid such late validation events and ensure that the membership of validation panels matches the requirements set out in the Manual.

34 The College considers that its procedures for course development and approval are rigorous and effective, citing evidence from formal evaluation questionnaires and commendation from the University. In the view of the audit team, the procedures are, in general, embedded and fit for purpose and operate in accordance with the requirements of the Manual.

Annual monitoring

35 A new framework for course monitoring was introduced in 2002-03 following discussion by the College's Academic Management Group (AMG) and FDBs. The revised process was guided by the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme approval*, monitoring and review, and the desire of the College to move towards a more evidence based and analytical process.

36 Programmes are monitored by a Course Scheme Review Committee (CSRC) which meets three times a year, reporting to the relevant FDB. Meetings work to a set agenda; the first meeting, which takes place in Semester 1, focuses on data on applications, the recruitment and induction processes and student feedback from the Staff/Student Liaison Committee; the second meeting in Semester 2, considers student feedback from modules taken in Semester 1 as well as the results of the Semester 1 assessments and external examiner comments; programme specifications are considered at both of these meetings. The third meeting which is scheduled before the start of the next academic year is responsible for the production of the AMR. Student feedback and assessment results from Semester 2 are also considered with recommendations being made to FDB on module and assessment changes if the CSRC deems these to be necessary. Although the AMR contains considerable data on student profiles and achievement, there was little analysis of the data and the use of such data in course management appears to be limited (see paragraphs 76 to 79). The recent introduction of the standard framework for CSRCs means that the College has not yet undertaken any formal evaluation of the process.

37 The AMR is intended to be a reflective, considered review of the year's activities, taking into account views from all stakeholders. An action plan is an integral part of the report, intended to bring about year-on-year improvements. In one AMR read by the audit team a number of issues surrounding assessment on specified modules was recorded, including lack of clarity in the structure of assessment, overly complicated assignments and practical difficulties experienced by students in assessing the work of another group of students; the team could find no reference to any of these points in the action plan. Similarly, although suggestions to improve the delivery of the Learning Methods module for a particular group of students were included in the body of the report, the action plan made no reference to these. The action plan also lacked specification in the timescales for action to be implemented: most actions had a timescale of '2003/2004' attached to them. Staff responsible for action were often identified only as 'Course team' or 'Module tutors'. The team would recommend that more precise timescales and named individuals be attached to action plans arising from AMRs.

38 The AMRs are considered by the relevant FDB which subsequently reports to the ASC. The timetable for annual monitoring requires that the AMR be compiled by the Course Management Team at the end of each academic year. The minutes of the ASC meeting in November 2003 stated that the Annual Course Reports for the academic year 2001-02 from both faculties were received and noted. Subsequently, the audit team was informed that the ASC had in fact received the reports in the previous academic year and that the November 2003 meeting had received updates on those reports. The minutes of the same meeting state 'The Annual Monitoring reports for the Faculty of Business Management and Horticulture and the Faculty of Applied Science and Technology for 2002/03 were received and noted'; no action points were recorded. The team suggests that the identification of action arising from ASC consideration of AMRs would benefit from differentiation between course issues and College issues, coupled with clear timescales and nomination of staff responsible for taking action.

39 All modules are reviewed annually and student feedback is sought at the end of each module via standard questionnaires (see paragraph 72). The module leader completes a Module Review Form (MRF), summarising the student comments and identifying issues for consideration at faculty and college level. As some modules contribute to several programmes, the MRF is considered by the relevant

CSRC for all instances of module delivery. The audit team examined examples of MRFs. Although issues were identified, responsibilities and timescales for action were not specified. The team formed the view that this was a further area that would benefit from more structured action planning.

Periodic review

40 All programmes are subject to formal quinquennial review through the College's DSR process. The aim of the DSR is to take a holistic view of the programme and its strengths and weaknesses, drawing on relevant data and performance indicators. The first stage of the DSR is the production of a Self-Assessment Report, guidelines for which are included in the Manual; the academic infrastructure is clearly referenced.

41 As specified in the Manual, the review panel includes a representative from the University, a student representative and two external members. Following the review event a report which includes commentary on the effectiveness of the scheme and details of any necessary changes is submitted to the CSRC, ASC and the Academic Board. The report is then passed to the Board of Studies for Learning Partnerships at the University for submission to the Senate for approval.

42 The evidence seen by the audit team confirmed that the DSR process operated as described by the College. The team would encourage the College to establish greater distinction between 'conditions' and 'recommendations' in the reporting of the reviews. There were no deadlines or identification of responsibilities for required actions in the review reports seen by the team. The description of the process in the document 'Periodic Degree Scheme Review: Policy and Procedure' was not specific in describing mechanisms for follow-up action. The College may wish to review its approach to action in response to DSR reports so that timetables and the locus of responsibility are clearly defined. The College may also wish to give consideration to how progress in the meeting of conditions and responses to recommendations will be monitored.

External participation in internal review processes

43 Requirements for external involvement in internal validation and review processes are clearly articulated in the Manual. Validation panels have a membership of six, of whom one at least must be from the University and at least two must be external to the College and the University. Panels are constituted by the Academic Registrar at the College and membership must be endorsed by the

University. DSR Panels have a membership of nine which must include a representative of the University and two external members with relevant discipline expertise. Nominations of external members must be approved by the University.

44 Both validation and review processes are evaluated by the use of questionnaires distributed to panel members after the event with a summary of outcomes being presented to ASC. The feedback enables necessary modifications to the process to be identified and implemented. Scrutiny of the evaluation questionnaires provides the College with confidence in both the validation and the review processes, including the contribution of external input to the rigour of its procedures.

45 The audit team formed the view that the College was using the processes as described and that its effective use of external representation in its validation and review processes supported a judgement of broad confidence in the College's current and likely future management of the standard of the awards for which it is responsible.

External examiners and their reports

46 The Memorandum of Agreement between the University and the College states that the University 'is ultimately responsible for the academic standards of all schemes of study or research leading to awards of the University but accords to the College the maximum possible responsibility for academic standards consistent with the requirements of quality assurance and the regulations of the University'. A key feature in the relationship between the two institutions is the use of external examiners who are appointed by the University on the basis of recommendations from the College and who act as the University's representatives at College Awards Boards. The College views external examiners as an important means of confirming that it is setting appropriate academic standards. Although the University is formally responsible for the external examiners, the College has examined its own practices against the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* a working group as part of a wider process of consideration of its response to the academic infrastructure. (See also paragraphs 54 to 59 below.) The working group found that the College's practices in this area were generally in alignment with the *Code* but some areas for action were identified. The audit team noted the College's intention to reconvene the working group to review its practice when the revised *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* was published.

47 Nominations for external examiners recommended by the College's Academic Board are forwarded to the University's Dean of Learning Partnerships and, with only one recent exception, have been accepted by the University. External verifiers on Edexcel Higher National Diplomas and Certificates (HNDs and HNCs) are appointed by the Edexcel Foundation, which also determines their role and duties. The College plans to phase out its HNC and HND provision and to replace it with a range of Foundation degrees validated by the University, thus increasing the extent of collaboration between the two institutions.

48 The SED made reference to the difficulty of finding suitable external examiners for nomination to the University. In the course of the audit, the audit team was told that difficulties in finding external examiners arose in programmes where the College was a predominant provider and where the external pool of candidates was therefore more limited. The team was able to ascertain that the ASC had taken a proactive approach to the replacement of external examiners by giving departments extended notice of the need to find a replacement and by monitoring progress in acquiring nominations. The fallback position would be for the University to extend an examiner's appointment for a further year. The team took the view that the external examiner appointment process worked well and made a positive contribution to effective collaboration between the University and the College and to the assurance of standards.

49 The University determines the role and duties of its external examiners within two categories: module examiners who are responsible for examining performance and standards on individual modules, and course scheme examiners who are responsible for examining performance and standards on the course as a whole. In its consideration of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* (see paragraph 46 above), the College established a need for greater clarity in the distinction between examiner responsibilities for Modular Boards and those for Awards Boards. The audit team was told that, with the University's agreement, the distinction between the two categories had been modified by the College to take account of the arrangements whereby some modules were included in a range of course schemes. The College took the view that the external examiner for the most relevant course scheme would be best placed to examine clusters of cognate modules at levels 2 and 3. The team was able to ascertain from documentation that, following initial confusion among some external

examiners about their respective roles in relation to modules and course schemes, the matter had been clarified in a set of guidelines. The team was told that the College had received a positive response to the guidelines and was continuing to refine the definition of the two roles by further differentiation in the external examiners' report forms.

50 Newly appointed external examiners are provided with a range of briefing documents which, depending on the exact nature of their role, include course and/or module information. They are also offered individual induction at the College. The audit team heard that comment from an external examiner about lack of training for the role had been noted by the College and that a more structured approach was being considered and would be discussed with the University. Given the importance that the College places on the role of external examiners in assuring the comparability of its standards, more structured opportunities for initial training and subsequent sharing of experience would appear to the team to be a potentially valuable enhancement.

51 The audit team had access to external examiners' reports for the previous two years and noted the generally very positive comments of examiners. Reports on course schemes leading to University of Essex awards are made on the University's forms, the most recent example of which asks examiners to comment on assessment instruments and teaching and learning methods, and whether appropriate use is made of the *FHEQ* and subject benchmark statements. The team heard that an examiner's comments about variability in the provision of marking schemes for examinations had led to outline answers being provided and that the Learning and Teaching Group had organised a staff development event to support this area of work.

52 The SED included a detailed flowchart of the procedure for considering external examiners' reports. Each report is sent to the Academic Registrar at the College, who distributes copies to the Principal, the appropriate Dean, Head of Department and Course Scheme Manager, the Assistant Principal (Academic) and the Director of Educational Development. A copy is also sent to the Academic Registrar at the University for any urgent action required by the Dean of Learning Partnerships. The College's deans are expected to take any immediate actions on faculty-specific issues via the relevant FDB, while the Assistant Principal (Academic) is expected to act on College-wide issues or issues affecting a number of courses via the ASC. The Course Scheme Manager is expected to deal with any course-specific issues through the

CSRC meetings and via the AMR to the FDB. These actions result in three documents: a report on quality and standards containing a summary of actions at course and College level to the Academic Board; a report to the Board of Studies for Learning Partnerships at the University; and a response to the external examiner from the Dean. The SED stated that ultimate responsibility for coordinating responses and ensuring 'that all points [had been] considered at the appropriate level' [lay] with the ASC. Given the apparent complexity of these arrangements and the number of people involved, the audit team was interested to investigate the extent to which the system worked effectively in practice and whether any issues might be falling between two areas of responsibility. The team was reassured in meetings with staff and through consideration of documentation that external examiner reports were dealt with scrupulously and comprehensively, and that the original reports, or summaries thereof, were given appropriate consideration at course, faculty, ASC and Academic Board level. The team was also able to confirm that the process for external examining in the collaborative arrangement with HAS Den Bosch was identical to that for entirely College-based provision (see paragraph 120 below). In the team's view the College is making strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment.

53 The College has produced clear assessment guidelines for its HE courses and useful supporting documents on assignments and on assessment criteria; there are also policies on double-marking and assessment of dissertations. All of these documents are available via the Staffnet. As far as the audit team could ascertain from the evidence available to it, the College does not have an explicit statement of assessment policy which draws together these separate but interrelated elements: the Learning and Teaching Strategy has little detail on approaches to assessment. The absence of such an overarching strategy may contribute to a lack of a College-wide approach to the role of formative assessment in learning and teaching which, in the team's view, was apparent from its consideration of feedback on assignments. Delays in the provision of feedback were raised as a major concern in the SWS. This was reinforced by some of the students whom the team met who reported examples of very late feedback on assignments although there were also instances where students reported that feedback was both full and timely. In meetings, the team was told that the stipulated College-wide target for the return of assignments did not take account of variations in module populations and that its

implementation was unrealistic on some modules with high numbers of students under current staffing arrangements. There appeared to the team to be little common recognition of the importance of formative feedback in learning, teaching and assessment and of the consequent importance of deploying staffing resources appropriately to provide feedback at the optimum time to aid students' learning. The College should consider the advisability of establishing and implementing clear requirements for the timely provision to students of formative feedback on coursework to bring the approach in all modules up to the level of good practice apparent in much of its provision.

External reference points

54 In the SED, the College sought to demonstrate 'active engagement' with the academic infrastructure while commenting that, being a small institution, this engagement had imposed a 'burden'. The audit team was told that the College had found the academic infrastructure useful, particularly in helping staff to engage with the progressive development of students' knowledge and skills. The team enquired about the College's interactions with each aspect of the academic infrastructure and the ways in which these had influenced the College's approach to the assurance of quality and standards and the development of its provision.

55 The SED claimed that the *Code of practice* had 'become a helpful external reference document in establishing new policy and procedures, and in the review of existing practice across the College'. In January 2002, the College established a series of working groups each led by a senior member of staff to evaluate its policies and procedures against the individual sections of the *Code*. According to the SED, the groups found variation in the degree of alignment with the *Code* with some sections requiring 'significant action'; overall progress was monitored by the ASC. In meetings with staff, the audit team heard that the wide range of academic and administrative staff from across the College who had been involved in the working groups had increased 'ownership' at user level and had led to a wider understanding of the *Code*. It was claimed that this had led to a move away from a 'compliance' culture, to a more mature consideration of an appropriate College response to the precepts of the *Code*. Although reports from the working groups were originally intended by ASC to be 'short life' and to produce 'clear recommendations for action and policy proposals before Easter 2002', at the time of the audit they

were still appearing as recurrent items on ASC agendas. This reflected the College's intention to retain the working groups so that the *Code* would be an ongoing reference document as its provision changed and developed. The groups would also be called on to consider revised drafts of the *Code* as they appeared. The team recognised the evident care and thoroughness of the Academic Services section's approach to consideration of the *Code* and the extent to which the *Code* and the progress of the working groups was now a feature on the Staffnet. The team also noted the commitment of many members of a relatively small College staff to the working groups and the way in which their work was now reflected in aspects of the College's provision. Nonetheless, the team was still concerned that ASC did not appear to set firm target dates for actions resulting from consideration of the *Code*. In the team's view this related to a wider concern about action planning and target setting within the College (see paragraphs 37 to 39 above).

56 According to the SED 'the College [had] followed the national debate on Qualification and Credit Frameworks with interest'. The College moved from a system of two academic levels to three in the undergraduate curriculum at the same time that it was planning a move from three terms to two semesters. To assist course teams in adapting their provision, the College produced curriculum guidelines which addressed *inter alia* module levels, and were accompanied by a set of level descriptors predating the *FHEQ*. The audit team sought to ascertain the extent to which course teams now engaged with the *FHEQ* when developing or reviewing courses, and the processes by which the College assured itself that its courses were consistent with the *FHEQ*. In so doing, the team was mindful that the 1997 Audit Report had recommended a College-wide debate on 'academic standards and "levels of study" leading to the formulation of a policy on academic standards'.

57 The audit team was able to confirm that the College had sought to assure itself that the three academic levels had been embedded and were being maintained appropriately. Consideration of levels of study is incorporated into the arrangements for course approval, module and course review, and external examining. In the team's view, more explicit cross-referencing to the *FHEQ* descriptors in the College's documentation might be helpful in the contexts of widening participation and progression. This will be particularly relevant as the College continues to review and develop its provision across the full range of the *FHEQ*, including most notably

the development of a range of new Intermediate level awards as Foundation degrees are developed and HNDs are phased out.

58 The audit team confirmed that the documentation supporting course approval, review and external examining also required reference to subject benchmark statements. Course teams are encouraged to investigate the full range of statements relevant to their courses and to map their learning outcomes against them. The team was told that programme specifications had been produced for all courses, made available in printed form to students, and had been published on the College's Staffnet. At the time of the audit visit, programme specifications had been withdrawn from Staffnet, apparently to allow revision and updating with the intention that revised specifications should be accessible through both Studentnet (the intranet site for students) and Staffnet. Review of programme specifications is part of the standard agenda of Course Scheme Review meetings and is monitored by FDBs. In the sample of printed programme specifications provided to the team, there had been little relationship between the intended learning outcomes at programme and module level. However, in the course of the DAT, the team was shown an example in which programme and module outcomes were being successfully integrated with due reference to subject benchmark statements. The team would wish to encourage the College in its stated intention to conduct similar exercises for all its programmes.

59 The College has responded appropriately to the elements of the academic infrastructure which is now substantially embedded in its procedures for assuring quality and standards. The audit team noted with interest the College's view that this engagement was helping to develop opportunities for students to progress from one award to another. This will be particularly important to the College as it develops a suite of Foundation degrees but also more widely in considering progression from FE to HE. The team heard from a number of students of their successful progression across the FE/HE continuum, practical examples of widening participation of which the College is justifiably proud. The team considered that the College's use of the academic infrastructure in the context of its Widening Participation Strategy to develop structured opportunities for progression through the range of HE qualifications and across the FE/HE continuum was an example of good practice.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

60 HEQC and HEFCE collaborated in a joint visit to the College in November 1996 to conduct both a quality audit of institutional processes and a teaching quality assessment of the agricultural and leisure management provision. The visit resulted in two separate reports: one from HEQC on institutional processes and one from HEFCE on the specific subject areas. The quality of the education in the provision assessed was approved. The College also participated in a developmental engagement and a Foundation degree review in the academic year 2002-03.

61 There is a clear mechanism for responding to externally generated reports which includes consideration at department, faculty and institutional level committees. In brief, reports are considered by the relevant department and dean of faculty and the FDB. Minutes of the FDB are presented to ASC and to the Academic Board. In addition, the report is read by the Assistant Principal (Academic) and the AMG, which examines the resource implications of actions arising from the report.

62 The audit team considered that the College's approach to consideration of reports from external agencies was appropriate. The team formed the view that a positive contribution to the assurance of quality and standards had been made through the range of actions that the College had taken in response to the reports.

63 None of the College's HE provision is subject to public or statutory body scrutiny.

Student representation at operational and institutional level

64 The SED described the system of formal representation for undergraduate students that existed across the range of academic and non-academic committees within the College, particularly the Academic Board, APC, ASC, CSRCs and FDBs. In addition to membership of these institutional and faculty-based committees, the primary mechanism for student representation at an operational level is the series of staff/student liaison committees which are established by programme area in order to enable students to engage with course scheme managers and staff on issues relating to the detailed management and operation of their programmes of study. Staff/student liaison committees meet at least twice during the academic year, with the schedule of meetings phased to enable the relevant CSRCs to consider issues, views and suggestions arising from these forums. The Executive Group of the Students'

Union meets the Principalship on a monthly basis in a recorded meeting of the Students' Union Liaison Group, reporting to the College Executive, to discuss academic, social and student support issues.

65 The SED indicated that, despite the range of opportunities for students to participate in the formal system of representation at institutional level, it had not always been possible to achieve consistent student attendance, a difficulty recognised by students whom the audit team met. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students spoke positively about the generally systematic operation, effective feedback arrangements and responsiveness which characterised the work of the staff/student liaison committees.

66 The audit team explored the arrangements for students on taught postgraduate programmes and concluded that, although less formalised than those for undergraduate students, these were effective in practice. The postgraduate students whom the team met were highly complimentary about the opportunities available to express their views about all aspects of their programmes and the team was reassured about the level of responsiveness of the staff to any issues raised.

67 The SED referred to the system of training of student representatives having lapsed and acknowledged the need to reintroduce the training sessions in order to increase the effectiveness of the representative structures. While the SWS supported this commitment and had anticipated the resumption of training during the Winter Semester 2003, discussions with student representatives confirmed the need for the training to be formalised and made more systematic. The audit team noted that the current student representatives had not been involved in training sessions prior to taking up appointment. Recognising that this might have been a function of the mismatch between the timing of the students' appointment and the availability of training, the team nonetheless considered that the College should ensure that its intentions in this regard are implemented in practice and supported by suitable documentation.

68 Notwithstanding the frank reservations expressed by the College regarding the difficulties of securing the full and active engagement of students in the work of the range of institutional level committees, the audit team concluded that the system of student representation within the College was effective at programme and course level with clear processes of consultation, evidence of resultant change and generally good communication with students.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

69 The SED described a variety of mechanisms and processes to secure feedback from a range of key stakeholders. From the students' perspective, in addition to the system of representation through formal institutional level committees and boards, there are essentially three mechanisms which are used to secure feedback: module review questionnaires (MRQs); the staff/student liaison committees; and the College-wide Student Satisfaction Survey. Structurally, the staff/student liaison committees are valued by the students as a means of providing feedback to staff on their programmes of study. These committees are supported by a system of course representatives who serve the needs of their constituencies, including part-time students.

70 The principal source of student feedback at module level is the MRQ which provides immediate feedback for staff on the students' perception of a range of aspects of module delivery, teaching, assessment and resource support. The outcomes of the MRQ process feed into the annual monitoring system. In 2001, the APC established a College-wide system of module review. The SED acknowledged that while module review had been implemented for the majority of modules, the associated administrative burden had prevented its universal application. The audit team was informed of a small number of instances in which this form of module review had not been undertaken but was reassured that these were isolated cases explained by particular local circumstances. The deans of faculty stated that in the event of the MRQ requirements not being fulfilled explanations were sought in each instance.

71 In meetings, students confirmed that the MRQ process worked effectively and the audit team heard of actions in response to student feedback. The team was informed that APC was reviewing the MRQ to enhance its effectiveness. From discussion with students, the team was able to endorse the analysis in the SED and the reservations expressed in the SWS which identified a need to ensure that more timely feedback was provided to students regarding the changes which had resulted from their input to programme monitoring and review.

72 A Student Satisfaction Survey, conducted annually, is designed to evaluate the student experience through the use of 'importance' and 'satisfaction' ratings', providing a year-on-year comparison of institutional performance in key areas. Results are analysed centrally and are collated at

institutional and programme level. The latter are returned to the appropriate Course Scheme Manager for consideration and response as part of the AMR. At institutional level, the outcomes are considered by the CEG and referred as appropriate to Academic Board and/or AMG. The SWS drew attention to the progressively declining response rate to this questionnaire. Students whom the audit team met, with few exceptions, were generally unaware of this mechanism. Discussions with staff confirmed that the response rate was poor and the outcomes distorted as a result of the process of administering the survey. The questionnaires were distributed in batches by members of staff and it was apparent that not all the questionnaires had reached their target audience. In view of the significance placed by the College on the outcomes of the Student Satisfaction Survey, the team concluded that it would be desirable for the College to review the administration of the questionnaire in order to secure a higher response rate so that greater reliance might be placed in the views expressed, their significance and relevance across the College.

73 Although the SED did not make specific reference to formal approaches to securing graduate feedback, the audit team was informed of the existence of an 'Old Students Association' which was deemed by senior staff to be an effective means of maintaining contact with College alumni. The College plans to develop an alumni database to support these activities. The team noted extensive contacts maintained with graduates and diplomates through the First Destinations Survey.

74 The SED emphasised the strength of the College's links with employers which, at the time when the SED was written, were coordinated through the Industrial Development Unit (IDU). The IDU organised Industrial Consultation Panels (ICPs) and liaised with industrial representatives in the processes of programme approval, monitoring and review. The audit team was advised that the IDU had been disbanded in January 2004 with responsibility for industrial liaison reverting to the academic departments. The SED recognised the variability in the effectiveness of the ICPs used to secure employer advice and involvement in, for example, curriculum design but, in the context of the DAT, the team was provided with documentary evidence of the active engagement of the relevant ICP in the development of the Adventure Tourism programme.

75 At departmental level, the College operates a system of industrial liaison officers who contribute substantially to the process of development and maintenance of close and effective links with its industrial partners. In view of the explicit vocational

focus of much of the curriculum, the significance for the College of such links was evident.

Progression and completion statistics

76 According to the SED, at the time of the 1996 joint audit and assessment the College's system for collating, analysing and using statistics was found to be 'disappointing'. The SED went on to claim that the College's 'ability to monitor students' progression and achievement [was] being enhanced by developments to HEMIS and to the internal MIS system'. The audit team noted difficulties in the Information Services (IS) area highlighted in the SED and the view of senior staff that the Management Information System (MIS) had not always provided effective user-friendly analysis of student data for use in annual monitoring. The SED also identified 'increasing demands on IS to provide effective and timely Management Information at course, faculty and institutional level' as an issue 'requiring continued attention'.

77 Data on student progression and achievement at course level are collated by the course scheme manager and presented as part of the AMR. One of the intentions of the new AMR framework introduced in September 2003 was to enable managers to 'make use of a range of electronic data sources that previously were unavailable to them'. According to the SED, 'Course Managers still experience[d] certain difficulties with compilation of statistics and work in this area [was] ongoing.' Course managers whom the audit team met reported that the difficulties arose from differences between the formats of the data that they received and the AMR template. In the sample of annual reports that the team saw, the expected data were reported and were potentially informative but were not then analysed as fully as the accompanying guidance notes suggested that they might have been. The team recognised that for courses with relatively small student populations, and when individual students were well known to the course team, trends might be difficult to establish and staff knowledge of individual students' circumstances might be deemed to substitute for quantitative analysis.

78 The Information Strategy Group, a subgroup of the CEG chaired by the Assistant Principal (Business), is responsible for developing and monitoring the College's information strategy. The task of developing an effective MIS lies with the IS department which includes Computer Services, Media Services and the Library. The SED noted that IS had been subject to competing demands to deliver both an effective MIS and an effective IT system in the context of limited financial resources

and that 'the nature and scale of the changes to the IT systems [had] caused major disruptions over the summer in 2003'. The SED acknowledged that the resulting difficulties were 'constraining the ability of many individuals to operate at maximum efficiency'. At the time of the audit IS had recently been restructured and significant progress had been made.

79 The audit team agreed with the College's recognition, reported in the SED, of 'the need to refine processes for data capture and analysis to ensure systematic evaluation in the context of institutional strategies such as Widening Participation and provision for students with disabilities'. While the College appeared to be developing rapidly the systems that would enable it to do so, the team found only limited evidence of a College-wide, systematic approach to the application of management information and performance data to inform judgements about admissions policy, and teaching and learning arrangements. There were new developments, for example, Writtle Assessment and Marking (WAM) that would allow different groups to conduct individualised interrogations of databases and to obtain data illustrating longitudinal trends and which the College plans to use to inform its consideration of quality and standards and its enhancement agenda. The team strongly encourages the College to continue its efforts in this direction.

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

80 The audit team recognised that the College was facing challenges at the strategic level in the management of the staff profile to reflect the needs of a developing curriculum in response to the decline in demand for its historical areas of study. The SED identified difficulties in making appointments to certain key specialist posts but in discussion with senior human resources staff, and supported by documentary evidence, the team found a considered and well-managed process for determining the Human Resources Strategy and the matching of staff resources to the changing curriculum through the implementation of a process of capacity planning and forecasting undertaken by the CEG.

81 The process of advertising and recruitment of staff is managed through the College's human resources Department which ensures compliance with College's procedures and the Equal Opportunities Policy. College staff have a broad range of educational and professional backgrounds and the audit team confirmed that while selection procedures had evolved with different practices according to the nature of the post, all staff

appointed to HE contracts were subject to a single overarching set of procedures, albeit reflecting different priorities and skill requirements at departmental level. The team noted particularly a system of exit interviews which formed part of a review cycle informing aspects of the appointments process, and considered this to be good practice, reflecting the proactive approach of human resources staff committed to reflection upon, and refinement of human resource practices. The College holds Investors in People status which has been periodically renewed since March 1998.

82 Staff referred specifically to the value of a separate meeting with the Principal which is part of the probationary review process and takes place after the formal meeting with the relevant line manager after 10 weeks of employment. The conduct of these two meetings informs the confirmation of contracts. The audit team was able to confirm that a system of team teaching and timetable remission supports newly appointed staff in their induction and early employment with the College.

83 The audit team was made aware of the role of a small number of postgraduate students in supporting some aspects of laboratory work in the undergraduate curriculum. Postgraduate students are not employed as graduate teaching assistants nor do they have a formal involvement in the assessment of students.

84 In 2002, the College introduced annual staff review since the previous biennial cycle had resulted in sporadic operation of the system. Annual review addresses issues of staff performance but is predominantly developmental in focus. All reviewers and staff being reviewed receive training appropriate to their roles. Details of staff support, appraisal, grievance procedures and other rights and responsibilities are contained in a comprehensive and accessible Staff Handbook which is reviewed and updated annually.

85 The staff review process functions effectively in identifying development and training needs and a member of the human resources staff is charged with ensuring its systematic and universal application. The audit team noted an appraisal audit report produced by external consultants in January 2004 which identified a 76 per cent completion rate in 2002-03. Discussions with senior human resources staff confirmed that participation and other aspects of the system would be kept under continuous review by the Human Resources Strategy Group. Discussions with senior staff confirmed the statement in the SED that the system of staff review was unconnected to reward structures. The College considers the implementation of a policy for

recognition and reward for excellent teaching to be an important future objective, and discussions with senior staff confirmed that matters of differential reward and promotion would be subject to a process unrelated to annual staff review.

Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development

86 All new staff are subject to a probationary period during which time they benefit from an informative and comprehensive induction process at both institutional and departmental level. A semi-formal mentoring system exists for new staff that, where appropriate, involves a colleague from another department. Discussions with recently appointed staff confirmed that the approach to mentoring was highly effective and supportive. The audit team noted that there were no explicit mentoring guidelines and that this responsibility was not considered as part of annual workload monitoring. The College has recognised that this area warrants review as the institution refines its Human Resource Strategy and acknowledges the need to introduce a formal system of mentor training and guidelines in order to standardise the approach across the College in line with existing good practice.

87 While HE staff are not required to hold teaching qualifications as a condition of appointment, the audit team learned of arrangements to enable new HE staff at the College to join the programme for new lecturers at the University, which runs during the first term of each academic year. Discussions with staff confirmed that a postgraduate certificate in academic practice, being devised jointly with the University, would be introduced for both existing and newly appointed College staff. The College's recently established Centre for Educational Development is focusing its work on issues of pedagogical practice through internal workshops and conference activity. The team noted that, at July 2003, membership of the Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education within the College was 35, a relatively high proportion. The team saw evidence of an extensive range of staff development activities, external and in-house, undertaken both by academic and support staff in the period 2002 to 04.

88 The College has recently established a Learning and Teaching Group made up of 'Learning and Teaching Champions drawn from different sectors of the College to provide a major forum for discussion of issues relating to learning and teaching'. The Learning and Teaching Group reports to the APC. The Group administers a Fund for Learning and Teaching, created in 2002-03, to support staff in becoming more involved in pedagogic development.

89 The College has a system of peer observation of teaching which has operated sporadically and variably across the institution. Discussions with staff confirmed that a review of the system and institution-wide consultation was being undertaken by the newly established Learning and Teaching Group, and included an examination of the possible relationship of peer review to the appraisal process. The College proposes to establish a system of trained observers to operate across the institution to ensure consistency in approach. The audit team endorses the priority which the College clearly attaches to the establishment of a formal system of peer observation of teaching. The Learning and Teaching Group will coordinate the implementation of the revised policy which will be submitted for ratification by the APC during the academic year 2003-04.

90 Discussions with staff confirmed their awareness of, and involvement in, the newly established system of internships/fellowships and access to the Learning and Teaching Fund, which enables staff to undertake a period of secondment within the College, or to offer consultancy and training programmes to external professional clients, as a business development strategy to reinforce the external industrial links and to promote income generation activities. The audit team was made aware in discussions with senior staff and through documentation of the strategic context of these initiatives, including the creation of Centres of Excellence which were designed to promote staff development opportunities and, simultaneously, to support the management of the changing staffing and curriculum profile of the College.

91 The SED signalled a change in emphasis in the allocation of the staff development budget. The encouragement for staff to attain high-level academic qualifications remains an important institutional priority, reflecting the demands imposed by the increased volume of honours and masters level teaching, and the College has reaffirmed this by setting a target of 30 per cent of staff to hold doctoral level qualifications by 2010. The College is seeking to establish a balance between this approach and the need to encourage staff to enhance their technical competence through such activities as industrial secondments, exchange programmes and consultancy projects in support of organisational objectives. The audit team considered that the proposed establishment of a Staff Development Planning Group would assist the College in maintaining this balance between institutional and individual needs in staff development in the context of the process of managing the realignment of the curriculum.

92 The SED referred to a previous lack of continuity of practice in the management of staff development and the failure to achieve the targets for staff development for 2002-03. Recent revision of the College Human Resources Strategy has clarified the roles and responsibilities of senior staff and focused the attention of the College on achievement of the targets for staff development as an important objective. On the basis of its discussions with staff and the documentary evidence available, the audit team concluded that the College was taking a strategic approach to the management of staff development and afforded a high priority to the system of support for staff and the planned development of the College workforce.

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

93 The College does not have any provision delivered through distributed and distance methods.

Learning support resources

94 The reports from the 1996 audit and review visit highlighted the need to ensure that resource provision matched the growth in student numbers and the diversification of the curriculum. New academic provision is now subject to a formal approval process that includes the consideration of learning resource implications including staffing, library, IT and other physical resources. Academic planning processes are facilitated by the direct involvement of learning resources staff in the work of FDBs.

95 The purchase of texts and journal subscriptions by the Library is made in accordance with the Information Resources Policy which is reviewed annually through a process that is informed by well-qualified staff who systematically monitor library usage, availability of stocks and user satisfaction. Feedback on user satisfaction is gathered through a comments box in the Library and through student representation at FDBs, Course Scheme Management Committees and senior College committees. The audit team saw evidence of considered changes to practice arising from these feedback mechanisms, notably the extending of opening hours to support postgraduate programmes, particularly the MBA, based on weekend delivery.

96 The provision of book and journal stocks has been challenged by a combination of curriculum diversification, expansion of student numbers and coincidence of assessment deadlines. The delivery of generic modules in business being delivered to large groups over similar timetable periods has on occasion led to library resources being over-stretched.

Nonetheless, the audit team considered library resources to be well managed and both full and part-time undergraduate students expressed general satisfaction with the Library provision. The team noted the College membership of UK Libraries Plus and the Association of Librarians in Land Based Colleges and Universities and the efficient and effective use made of interlibrary loan arrangements. The postgraduate students confirmed their dependence upon external resources and that they were well supported by the College to enable access to these facilities.

97 The SED stated that College staff and students had reading rights at the University. Furthermore, through the University's recent membership of UK Libraries Plus, borrowing rights are available to part-time students. The SWS made reference to students being unaware of the extent of the resources available at the University; this lack of awareness was confirmed in meetings with undergraduate and postgraduate students. The audit team considered that it was desirable for the College to review the information provided and the mechanisms for disseminating that information in order to ensure that students were made aware of their status, access and rights to the University's facilities.

98 The development of IT facilities, which are in heavy demand, is strategically planned and subject to a rolling programme of upgrade that, the students confirmed, provided effective IT support for their work. The programme of upgrade included the networking of halls of residence and would apply to the Library IT facilities during the summer of 2004.

99 The SED referred to major disruptions to IT facilities in summer 2003 and stated that the College was in the process of a restructuring of the IS department. While the students commented on intermittent difficulties experienced with remote access to the College network, the audit team was reassured that these had been resolved. There are dedicated facilities available for postgraduate students. The further development of the StudentNet was seen as a valuable additional support for students.

100 Specialist accommodation including studios, laboratories, and equine and farm facilities were considered by the students to be of a high order. The pressure on general teaching accommodation in some areas, although recently mitigated by the creation of additional teaching space and a programme of upgrade and refurbishment, was exacerbated by the system and timing of module choice and the construction of the student timetable. The audit team recognised the value of

enabling students to select module options in May of the previous academic year and allowing a two-week period at the beginning of the academic year to change module options. However, under these arrangements, student choice was, in effect, divorced from the inevitable timetable constraints. More significantly, in the context of teaching accommodation, the opportunity at the commencement of the academic year for students to change module choices made the allocation of suitable teaching accommodation an unpredictable process which, at times, resulted in a mismatch between the number of students registered on a particular module and the accommodation allocated to its delivery. The team considered that the College, and particularly the students, would benefit from a review of this approach to module choice and timetabling, and was informed of the plans to integrate a new timetabling system into the student record system explicitly to link student numbers with module choice.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

101 The SED stated that the widening student profile, the increasing diversity of the HE curriculum and range and levels of academic provision contributed to progressively heavy demands on staff involved in academic guidance and support. The College recognises the importance of developing and adapting its approaches to meet the needs of the growing number of mature and part-time students, including greater flexibility in timetabling, opportunities for future delivery by distance learning/remote access, negotiated assignments, and greater levels of tutorial support.

102 At an institutional level the Learning and Teaching Strategy, revised in July 2002, identified major objectives for teaching, learning and assessment which emphasised the increasingly large numbers of students taking generic modules, work-based learning, key skills development, mixed ability groups, part-time students and students with disabilities and/or learning difficulties and the additional demands which these activities and groups bring to the systems for academic guidance and support. In this context, the College has further developed a generic Semester 1 Learning Methods module to reflect the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. In addition, the audit team noted the successful approach to personal development planning. A Career Development module has been developed as an optional module across the entire HE curriculum and is the key assessment vehicle for personal skills development. The focused strategy for

skills development has also led to the systematic mapping of key skills in the undergraduate curriculum and the establishment of the Essex Skills Award providing a valuable opportunity for students to enhance and receive recognition for transferable and employment-related skills. The team considered this to be good practice.

103 At an individual undergraduate student level, the tutorial system within the College is designed to provide a regular review of overall academic progress and personal development and comprises group tutorials which operate on a weekly basis, organised by the course scheme manager and/or year supervisors, focusing on issues such as module choice, learning support mechanisms and work placements, and a system of individual tutorials, timetabled once per semester, which are designed to explore the personal development planning needs of the individual student. Many academic staff operate an open-door policy and encourage students to seek help with problems relating to their academic programmes. The system is highly effective and the opportunities for individual support that this affords are fully recognised and greatly appreciated by students. The audit team considers the academic guidance and support arrangements to be an example of good practice.

104 The course scheme managers play a key role in all aspects of the management of the students and their programmes from application to award, at times extending beyond graduation, and monitoring academic performance, often across large undergraduate schemes. The course scheme managers also play a significant role in provision of academic advice through production of the course scheme handbooks for their programmes and through the system of timetabled course tutorials described above (paragraph 103). The audit team noted the high quality of the student handbooks and the helpful and clear guidance on their construction provided in the Manual.

105 A significant strength of these arrangements is that the structure of tutorial support does not explicitly differentiate between academic guidance and pastoral support which enables course scheme managers and year supervisors to identify problems related to the students' academic performance. This level of support is highly valued by students, and the staff confirmed the effectiveness of the close interaction between academic tutorial staff and the range of central support services. The College recognises the potential for this approach to academic support and guidance to cause some students to become overreliant on the system and not develop the problem-solving and

self-development skills associated with autonomous learning. The Tutorial Policy Guidelines include information on the avoidance of inappropriate levels of dependence on tutor support. The audit team noted that training for the role of tutor was not formalised and considered that staff and students would benefit from more systematic preparation, particularly in view of the blend of academic and pastoral guidance offered within a single tutorial system.

106 Discussions with postgraduate students established that there were no formal tutorial arrangements for taught postgraduate students. Nonetheless, the students described an effective and highly supportive structure based on a flexible style of delivery, small groups and one-to-one contact. Students valued the open-door policy operated by the staff and were highly complimentary about the level of support this provided, reaffirming the 'culture of access' described in the SED.

107 The system of academic guidance and support for postgraduate research students was deemed by the College to be effective. The audit team was able to confirm that academic supervision was thorough and formalised, with frequent contact with both internal and external supervisors. The main formal academic support is provided by the internal supervisor by means of regular daily and weekly contact, with a biannual progress meeting. Each research project is also reviewed annually by evaluation of a submission from the student to a formally constituted Progress Committee, normally in the form of a presentation supported by a brief paper which is then examined orally. The team verified that the students had been made aware at enrolment of the academic and assessment regulations governing progression and award, and understood the involvement of the University in the management and, particularly, the external examining arrangements for their awards.

108 The audit team noted that the College's approach to academic guidance and support made demands on staff workloads which had a variable impact across the organisation, but predominantly affected course scheme managers. The SED referred to staff workloads as an issue which continued to receive attention as part of the overall academic planning process undertaken by the CEG. During the audit, the team was made aware of a Workload Planning and Workload Monitoring model which was under development as part of a Capacity Planning exercise. Senior staff confirmed that the model had recently formed the basis of the calculation of staff workloads. Discussions with staff showed a lack of shared understanding of the basis on which the calculations were made,

notably whether the model reflected student numbers registered on modules and, therefore, the effect on assessment loads, and the extent to which the model took account of the full range of teaching, research and administrative responsibilities. Staff expressed some doubt that the application of the model had led to greater equity in staff workloads. The audit team supports the view expressed by senior staff that institution-wide consultation and agreement on the workload management model would assist more effective and equitable management of workloads.

109 The audit team concluded that the College was justified in its confidence in the high quality of academic guidance and support provided for students, including part-time and postgraduate research students.

Personal support and guidance

110 The SED described well-established and effective support systems which had developed significantly in recent years in line with the changing needs of HE students. Discussions with staff responsible for central support services confirmed the strategic commitment of the College to widening participation and the current and potential impact of the changing profile of students, and the increasing diversity of future learner needs on the work of student support and guidance. In recognition of the need for a coordinated approach to student support, the College has established a Learning Support Unit comprising a number of central support services including counselling, financial advice, disability support including dyslexia, careers guidance and English language support. The Student Support Manager provides effective coordination of personal support for students through liaison with academic and personal tutors, Student Services, the Students' Union and College chaplains. The Careers Service has its own professionally qualified manager and other areas come within the remit of the Student Support Manager.

111 The high quality and effectiveness of the student support arrangements were uniformly acknowledged by students commencing with the applications process and the conduct of open days for applicants, the system of personal interviews prior to admission, an informative induction process and continuing throughout a student's career with the College. The tutorial system is aligned closely with the central support facilities offering a blend of academic and pastoral support and students confirmed that the integration of the personal tutorial and course management systems works well. Student support arrangements are communicated by individual letter and through student handbooks

containing details on all College services.

112 The College produces a specific prospectus for international students, available in print and electronic formats which includes information on the application process, travel, fees and general finances, scholarships, English language requirements and support services and is linked to relevant web pages. Discussions with international students verified the high level of language tutorial support provided.

113 Consideration of the needs of students with disabilities is a priority for the College, assisted by dedicated HEFCE funding, with extensive improvements to the physical estate guided by the section of the *Code of practice* on students with disabilities, and the legal requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (SENDA 2001). Citing UCAS statistics, the SED stated that only 5 per cent of students who entered HE in 2002 indicated that they had disabilities, whereas the corresponding figure for the College was 15 per cent. The audit team concluded that the College was meeting the significant challenges in providing an appropriate and safe training for students with disabilities. The team was particularly impressed by the support for students with dyslexia, with each student offered a diagnostic assessment and excellent support provided by specialist dyslexia support tutors. The College also has support for hearing-impaired students.

114 The College offers a counselling service with professionally qualified staff with referral facilities and financial support available where necessary. General financial advice is provided by the Student Support Manager in addition the hardship loans, Access funds and funds to assist overseas and part-time students.

115 Students met by the audit team commented on a highly effective and supportive Careers Service, accredited by the Guidance Council and Guidance Accreditation Board, which provides an internet-based job vacancy service and a joint Students' Union and Careers Service Part-time Job Shop. The students valued the Career Development module and the career development sessions delivered within the tutorial programme which contribute to the high employability performance indicators for the College.

116 Support for students on industrial placements has recently been reorganised with the disbanding of the IDU and responsibility for managing the placement period reverting to the Industrial Liaison Officers for each academic discipline. The recent review of placement supervision had taken full account of the *Code of practice, Section 9: Placement learning*; students confirmed that support for work placements was effective.

117 The audit team concluded that the range of central student support services within the College were of high quality and, in many aspects, provided examples of good practice.

Collaborative provision

118 The SED stated that over many years the College had 'actively sustained links with other HE providers in the region and with colleges and universities overseas'. These links have provided opportunities for staff development, student and staff exchanges and collaboration in curriculum development. No College awards are available through any of these linkages.

119 The College delivers a programme leading to a University MSc in International Horticulture in conjunction with HAS Den Bosch. Responsibility for quality and standards resides formally with the University, and the responsibilities of the College in relation to the collaborative arrangement are defined in the Memorandum of Agreement between the College and the University. A Memorandum of Agreement also exists between the College and HAS Den Bosch. The collaboration originated in 1996 and predates the collaboration between the College and the University. Formal responsibility for the programme was transferred to the University when the two institutions forged an exclusive validation arrangement.

120 Students spend a 10-week period studying at HAS Den Bosch. This masters' award is one of a cluster of three related masters' courses in horticulture. The course is managed through the same mechanisms as for home provision. There are frequent reciprocal visits and contacts between the course scheme manager and staff from HAS Den Bosch. The external examiner is appointed in accordance with normal College and University procedures. The course is scheduled for quinquennial review in the academic year 2003-04; the audit team would encourage the College to give consideration to revising the Memorandum of Agreement as part of the quinquennial review to reflect fully the tripartite nature of the collaborative arrangement.

121 In addition to the long-standing collaboration involving HAS Den Bosch, the College makes arrangements for students who want to spend some of their time in study abroad. Arrangements, which are credit-bearing, are made by staff with institutions abroad which have a history of collaborating with the College. Such arrangements are considered by course scheme staff and approved by the Credits Approval Board, a subcommittee of ASC. The audit team noted

frequent references in the minutes of the Credit Approvals Board to the formation of a working group to consider issues surrounding periods of study abroad, although at the time of the audit no progress had been made as the group had only met once. The College will wish to ensure that the working group expedite its discussions in the interests of the students. The working group may find the revised *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision*, when published, a useful tool in its deliberations.

Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trail and thematic enquiries

Discipline audit trail

122 In the selected DAT, appropriate members of the audit team met staff and students to discuss the programmes, studied a sample of assessed student work, saw examples of learning resource materials, and studied annual module and programme reports and periodic reviews relating to the programmes. Their findings in respect of the academic standards of awards are as follows.

Courses in the Business Management Scheme

123 The DAT covered the following courses:

- HND Business;
- BA (Hons) Business Management;
- BSc (Hons) Marketing and Supply Chain Management;
- Certificate in Management Studies;
- Diploma in Management Studies;
- Combined Masters Programme in Management;
- Masters in Business Administration (MBA).

124 The documentation consisted of three SEDs which presented information from different perspectives at the departmental and course scheme levels. All the documents were written for the audit visit, except those for the MBA which used the document prepared for the most recent internal review of the provision.

125 Programme specifications were available for all courses and cited external reference points and indicated which subject benchmark statements had been used in their formulation. Reference to the range of relevant subject benchmark statements was encouraged, supporting a sophisticated approach to the use of the statements in relation to programme design. The assessment practices

outlined in the programme specifications were consistent with the relevant sections of the *Code of practice*. The relation of learning outcomes from the module to the programme level was implicit rather than being explicitly mapped within the programme specifications.

126 Admission, progression and completion statistics were included in AMRs and had the potential for use in supporting trend analyses. The evidence of such analyses was limited and focused mainly on pass rates at the module level. Consideration at the Module Boards of the module marks derived from WAM included consideration of the profile of marks within a module, and summary statistics were available. Any failure in particular modules was highlighted at this stage and there was evidence of appropriate remedial action.

127 The AMRs are written by the Course Scheme Manager on behalf of the team, and are considered and confirmed by staff and students during the first CSRC meeting in semester 1 of the following academic year. Action planning is refined and confirmed at this meeting prior to its consideration at the FDB alongside an analysis by the Dean of the points of effective practice and issues for action that arise from the reports of external examiners. There was clear evidence that matters of concern raised by students and external examiners were adequately resolved at the local level or referred to the appropriate body for action as necessary.

128 External examiner reports seen by the audit team confirmed that student attainment was in line with the requirements of the course scheme and that standards set and achieved were appropriate. In accordance with standard College practice, reports are considered at subject level by the CSRC as part of annual monitoring, and by the Dean who summarises the key features of these reports for consideration at the FDB and provides a considered response to each individual external examiner, indicating where and how the report has been reviewed and the nature of any action that is being taken.

129 As noted above (paragraph 53), the College does not have an institutional assessment strategy. At the local level, there was evidence of effective and consistent procedures that were explicit and understood by students. Assignments and examination papers are subject to formal internal verification and are signed off by the course scheme manager, prior to consideration by the external examiners. Informative 'assignment briefs' ensure that students understand the requirements for each assignment, including details of the task(s) to be completed, the timetable for submission and return of

the work and the assessment guidelines or criteria that will be used in marking. The assignment briefs are thorough and well-defined and students welcome and value them, and external examiners have commented favourably on them. Formative written feedback is provided to all students using a standard pro forma which indicates that sample double-marking is in operation and can contain comments from both markers. Students reported that assignments were sometimes returned later than the return date specified on the assignment brief. Assessment procedures were in broad alignment with the section of the *Code of practice* on the assessment of students.

130 The audit team reviewed a range of assessed student work which was designed to test attainment of the relevant learning outcomes, and matched the views of the external examiners which confirmed that students were attaining the specified standards for the awards. The team was satisfied that the nature of the assessment and standard of achievement were appropriate to the titles of the relevant awards and their location within the *FHEQ*.

131 Student handbooks were produced in accordance with the standard College template. The handbook included module and programme specifications and helpful guidance on the learning process, the programme of teaching activities, how to access members of staff and signposts to other forms of academic and pastoral support. The students confirmed that the value and utility of the course scheme handbooks.

132 Members of academic staff are appropriately qualified and students spoke positively about the support they received from staff who were readily accessible to them. The learning resources and facilities are adequate. Some students reported difficulties in accessing key texts in the library at times of peak demand, due to the relatively large numbers of students taking modules in this subject area. Creative use by staff of class handouts and the use by students of other local libraries through the UK Libraries Plus scheme has gone some way to alleviate this problem. In addition, the library uses a variety of loan periods in order to optimise access to texts. The recent extension to the weekend opening hours for the library did not appear to have been communicated to one small group of part-time MBA students who also reported some dissatisfaction with loan periods for books.

133 Both students and staff reported that flexible arrangements for choice of optional modules, at the start of a semester, could be associated with initial variations in the sizes of the classes and changes to

the location of the class in the timetable due to the need to change rooms, in order to accommodate students. The College is planning to re-examine this relationship via a continuing audit of room use and by reviewing the number of optional modules that are offered within courses.

134 Students reported that they enjoyed open, informal and effective communication with a highly supportive group of motivated staff. Formal channels for student feedback included the staff/student liaison committee meetings, MRQs and student representation at the CSRC. There was evidence that matters raised by students were being addressed and resolved by the staff, whether at local or institutional level. While it was clear that student views were taken seriously, there were instances where the resolution of some issues was not always communicated to the students who had raised the concerns in the first place.

135 Use of a standard agenda for Staff/Student Liaison Committee meetings ensures consistency of approach, with discussion under the following categories: course management and team operation, learning and teaching strategy, the assessment strategy, resources and support. Matters raised by MBA students included a request for greater use of the College intranet in support of learning and teaching, problems with remote access to the IT system and email, and a perception that the part-time students felt themselves to be an isolated group at their monthly weekend sessions. The use of this standardised approach based on a common agenda provides an excellent opportunity for the students on all course schemes to participate in the management of the quality of the provision. This is further supported by the subsequent consideration of matters raised through staff student liaison meetings at the CSRC meetings.

136 The audit team was satisfied that the quality of learning opportunities provided for students was suitable for programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Thematic enquiries

137 The audit team did not select any areas for thematic enquiry.

Section 4: The audit investigations: published information

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

138 Printed information sources available to the audit team included undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses, the Shuttleworth College Prospectus, the Fresh Start part-time courses prospectus, the Prospectus In-Brief for International Students, examples of handbooks and guides at College, programme and module levels, and examples of enrolment and induction packs. The team also viewed the College web site which has a wide range of information about the College, its academic provision, its arrangements for student support and its various facilities. The team was also given access to the student intranet site, Studentnet. The team discussed these sources of information with four groups of students: student representatives including relevant officers of the Students' Union; representative groups of undergraduate and postgraduate students; and students in the DAT area.

139 According to the SED, published information is subject to a 'production protocol that safeguards the accuracy and validity of information' which is published on Staffnet and is reviewed by the College's HE Admissions Committee. Recent development of this process appears to have been in response to the recommendations in HEFCE documents *02/15, Information on quality and standards in higher education* and *03/51, Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*. In discussion of the protocol with the responsible officers of the College, the audit team was told that the process involved the departmental admissions tutors working with the Publications Co-ordinator to ensure the accuracy of prospectus information. The deans are involved in a further check prior to publication. The University Board of Studies for Learning Partnerships has to give its approval before a new course can be publicised as 'subject to validation'. There are various instruments for evaluating the main prospectus, including a questionnaire and a survey of first-year students. The team considered that procedures for assuring the quality of published information were both robust and effective.

140 Course scheme managers are perceived by both the College and the students whom the audit team met as important intermediaries in the flow of information between the institution and its students and providers of course-related advice and

information. One of their roles is production of the course handbooks. As part of a recent drive to improve the quality of the printed electronic information available to students a standard template for course scheme handbooks for use by course scheme managers has been made available on Staffnet. In the team's view, the template provides a helpful means of facilitating the production of handbooks and ensuring consistent coverage of key areas.

141 Students confirmed that the information about the College that they had viewed before attending had been comprehensive and, as far as they could tell, accurate, and that their subsequent experiences matched their expectations. In particular, they reported that the College's claims of strong relationships with employers and a good reputation in industry were amply justified. The first meetings of CSRCs each academic year are expected to consider the 'quality, accuracy and type of information received by the students prior to the students arriving on the course'. The SWS confirmed that students found the prospectus gave them good information about courses and suggested that it was effective in marketing terms. The SWS expressed the view that it was less explicit about constraints on module choice and the incidence of generic, shared modules, and about the content and delivery of optional modules. The College has responded that it will seek clarification from the students on the precise requirements for further detail in this area. An area which might also benefit from further consideration is the provision of information to students on any rights of access to facilities at the University.

142 Students whom the audit team met were very positive about the handbooks with which they were supplied; in particular, they reported clear assessment criteria and learning outcomes. Programme specifications had been included in the course scheme handbooks - as inserts in some examples seen by the team - but had not made a strong impression on students who tended to relate more to module information. The College's plans to make closer links between programme and module information may make the programme specifications more relevant to students. Studentnet is a relatively recent addition and is not yet fully populated with information. However, despite what were reported as early access problems for external users, students commented favourably on this development: the on-line library services and email facilities were particularly welcomed. The team considered that Studentnet was an important and timely development in view of the College's plans to

increase the flexibility and accessibility of its provision. Overall, the team concluded that the College was producing helpful, accessible and informative published material in print and on-line, which appeared to meet the needs of a range of students and potential students, and which was subject to a robust, annual check on its accuracy.

Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information

143 The College has responded systematically and comprehensively to the requirements of documents *HEFCE 02/15* and *03/51*. Following the appointment of an HE Quality Assurance Manager who is the College's contact for teaching quality information, a Quality Audit Task Group was set up in November 2002. One aspect of the Group's work was an internal audit of locations and accessibility of each component of the required data set. The SED predated *HEFCE 03/51* and therefore indicated that the College was waiting for that guidance. Nevertheless, the College had clearly made appropriate progress by making considerable efforts to map the loci of its information, identify ownership and procedures for review, and to note any action required.

144 *HEFCE 03/51* had been published by the time of the audit visit so the audit team enquired in its meeting with staff responsible for teaching quality information about the College's reactions to the document and its plans for publishing the required information. On the basis of these discussions and those with other staff and with students, and the documentation available to it, the team took the view that the College's plans were well advanced and included discussions with the University to ensure consistency of approach and appropriate attribution of responsibility. The team took the view that the College was making appropriate plans to ensure the future accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the College's published information.

Findings

Findings

145 An institutional audit of the College was undertaken during the week 16 to 20 February 2004. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the University's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility for degrees of the University. As part of the audit process, according to protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK, one DAT was selected for scrutiny. This section of the report of the audit summarises the findings of the audit. It concludes by identifying features of good practice that emerged from the audit, and recommendations to the College for enhancing current practice.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

146 The framework for the assurance of the quality of provision and for the maintenance of academic standards is defined in the Memorandum of Agreement between the College and the University which validates the programmes delivered at the College. While the University retains formal responsibility for the academic standards of the awards, the College has accepted operational responsibility for the quality and standards of the courses that it delivers.

147 The SED stated that 'Academic Board [had] ultimate responsibility for Academic Standards and the Quality of Learning Opportunities across the institution'. Two subcommittees support the work of the Academic Board: the APC and the ASC formulate and disseminate policy and monitor compliance across the College. Cross-representation between College and University committees supports communication between the institutions. Internet-based provides guidance on policy and procedures.

Programme approval

148 All proposals for new courses must be approved by the College and the University before students are enrolled; until approval is confirmed courses may be advertised 'subject to validation', with permission from the Board of Study for Learning Partnerships at the University. Initial consideration of proposals within the College takes place at FDBs and requirements for resources to support the course(s) are considered by the CEG. Proposals are then forwarded to the Academic Board for approval in the context of the College's strategic planning.

149 A Curriculum Development Group is formed to produce validation documentation which must include programme specifications, reference to the

FHEQ and consideration of the relevant subject benchmark statements. An independent CDR team examines the documentation to confirm whether it can be forwarded for validation. A validation panel, which includes external expertise and representation from the University, makes the decision on approval, attaching conditions and recommendations as appropriate.

150 The report is copied to the relevant FDB, to ASC and the Academic Board, and is received by the Board of Study for Learning Partnerships at the University. The validation process is complete when formal endorsement is received from the University Senate. The College undertakes formal evaluation of validation events to inform enhancement of the process.

Annual monitoring

151 The College has engaged in annual course monitoring since 1995, with a revision to the report pro forma having been introduced in the academic year 2002-03. For the purposes of monitoring and review, cognate programmes are clustered in groupings as 'course schemes'; an AMR is produced for each scheme. Courses are monitored on an ongoing basis by the CSRC which meets three times a year, working to set agendas to ensure consistency of coverage across the institution. An AMR is produced at the end of the academic year, drawing upon the meetings that the committee has held throughout the year. The AMR includes an action plan to address issues that have been identified. The AMR is considered by the FDBs and ASC. The audit team noted a lack of specification of timescales and individual responsibility in action planning both in the AMR reports and in ASC's oversight of the reports; the College may wish to give further consideration to its approach to action planning in its quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Review

152 All programmes are reviewed on a quinquennial basis using a DSR process. The process starts with the compilation of a Self-Assessment Report by a course manager or team. Guidelines for the Self-Assessment Reports are included in the Manual and specify that appropriate reference must be made to the academic infrastructure. A Review Panel, which must include at least two external members, student representation and a member of staff from the University, meets the course team to discuss the provision. Following the review event a report, which includes commentary on the effectiveness of the course scheme and details of any necessary modifications, is submitted to the CSRC, ASC and the Academic Board. Reports are then passed to the Board of Studies for Learning

Partnerships at the University for submission to the Senate for approval. As for new course approval, the process is subject to evaluation.

153 The SED described a variety of mechanisms and processes to secure feedback from a range of key stakeholders. The system of formal representation for undergraduate students that exists across the range of academic and non-academic committees within the College provides an important means of securing feedback on the quality of the students' learning experience and of their programmes of study, notwithstanding difficulties identified in the SED of securing the full and active involvement of student representatives and the acknowledged need for systematic training for those students undertaking this role. The primary mechanism for student representation at an operational level is the series of staff/student liaison committees which enable students to engage with course scheme managers and staff on issues relating to the detailed management and operation of their programmes of study. In addition to these formal structures, students complete MRQs to provide immediate feedback to module tutors on a range of aspects of module delivery, teaching, assessment and resource support and a College-wide Student Satisfaction Survey which is conducted annually and is designed to evaluate the student experience through the use of 'importance' and 'satisfaction' ratings, providing a year-on-year comparison of institutional performance in key areas. The College has had difficulty in securing a representative response rate to the survey which it attributes to the method of distribution through members of staff. The audit team would encourage the College to review the administration of the survey with a view to improving rates of return.

154 The College has an informal alumni association which provides an opportunity for graduate feedback, and the College also maintains close contact with graduates and diplomates through the First Destinations Survey. The SED emphasised the strength of the links with employers and a team of industrial liaison officers at departmental level contributes substantially to the process of maintaining and developing close and effective links with its industrial partners to support the explicitly vocational focus of the curriculum.

155 The SED stated that over many years the College had 'actively sustained links with other HE providers in the region and with colleges and universities overseas'. These links have provided opportunities for staff development, student and staff exchanges and collaboration in curriculum

development. No College awards are available through any of these linkages. The College has no courses which are delivered as distance learning.

156 The College delivers a programme leading to a University MSc in International Horticulture in conjunction with HAS Den Bosch in the Netherlands. Responsibility for quality and standards resides formally with the University, and the responsibilities of the College in relation to the collaborative arrangement are defined in the Memorandum of Agreement between the College and the University. The collaborative arrangement is subject to the College and the University's normal processes for the assurance of quality and standards, including monitoring and review and external examining arrangements.

157 The College's view, as expressed in the SED, is that it has in place rigorous, effective and appropriate procedures for the assurance of the quality of its provision. Referring to approval procedures, the SED stated that 'the College believe[d] that the process work[ed] very effectively' while a pertinent comment referring to the DSR was that 'a sound process ha[d] been established'.

158 Overall, the audit team concluded that the systems in place for assuring the quality of programmes were both appropriate and operating effectively. The effectiveness of the College's approach to the assurance of the quality of its programmes could be improved by more focused action planning with clearly identified responsibilities and timescales for actions. The findings of the audit confirm that broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's current and future management of the quality of the programmes.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

159 The College has deployed a range of approaches in exercising its responsibility for academic standards including the development of a curriculum framework and assessment criteria, reference to the academic infrastructure and the clarification and standardisation of assessment policies and practice. The College seeks to assure itself of the resulting academic standards through its procedures for the approval and review of courses and modules, and the judgements of external examiners.

160 A curriculum framework for undergraduate programmes was introduced in 2001 in preparation for simultaneous changes from terms to semesters and from two academic levels to three. The framework and associated assessment criteria are

now well embedded within the College. The College and the University are working on a framework to aid the development of Foundation degrees.

161 Current use of statistical information about academic standards is primarily at assessment boards and in annual and periodic course review. The SED alluded to the College's recent difficulties with its developing MIS and the effects these were having on monitoring student progression and achievement. During the audit visit the it became clear that the College was taking action to overcome the MIS difficulties and that potentially useful data were now available. The College recognised that the available data could be used more systematically at both programme and institutional levels to analyse and evaluate student progression and achievement, particularly in light of the College's aspirations for widening participation.

162 There has been evident improvement in assessment practices since the previous audit including the development and dissemination of generic and specific assessment criteria, the use of standardised assignment briefings and marking and feedback sheets, and the arrangements for conduct and reporting of key meetings, such as Award Boards. There was evidence of variability in the timeliness of formative feedback on students' assessed work, with instances of delayed return highlighted in the SWS and raised by some students during the audit visit; this reported experience was in contrast to that of other students who reported prompt and helpful assignment feedback. When problems had arisen, they appeared to be associated with modules with large student numbers, where the College's normal expectation of the turnaround time for marking and commenting on assignments was unrealistic within existing staffing arrangements. In adopting a more strategic approach to the role of formative assessment, the College will wish to consider how it can safeguard the students' learning experience by bringing the practice on such modules up to the level of the best.

163 The College nominates external examiners for appointment by the University and sees them as an important means of ensuring that it is setting appropriate academic standards as well as acting as the University's representatives at Awards Board. In identifying suitable candidates for nomination, the College has recognised the need to build in sufficient time to ensure suitable and timely replacements for retiring examiners. The College has procedures for inducting new examiners but there is currently no formal training programme, a matter that the College wishes to discuss with the University.

The College has evaluated its procedures in the light of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*.

164 External examiner reports seen by the audit team were generally very positive. There is a comprehensive procedure for consideration of these reports within both the College and the University intended to ensure that points requiring action are dealt with at the appropriate level. Composite reports of points raised and action taken are considered both at the College's Academic Board and the University's Board of Studies for Learning Partnerships. The deans are responsible for informing external examiners of the College's response to their reports. The team concluded that what initially appeared to be a complex process was fit for purpose and a demonstration of the College's strong and scrupulous use of external examiners in summative assessment.

165 The audit team concurred with the College's view of itself as a mature institution that is playing a full role in securing the academic standards of the awards of its University partner. As the College continues to develop its HE provision and seek participation from a wider section of the population, the team would encourage it to continue to refine and develop its practices, including more effective evaluation of statistical data and the more consistent approach to formative feedback referred to above.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

166 The audit team found evidence of an effective relationship between academic planning and the allocation of learning resources. The team was able to confirm that full consideration was given by the College to the implications of new curriculum developments, with the CEG assessing the strategic issues involved, and senior staff from key areas such as Library Services being actively involved, at all stages in managing the implementation of new developments.

167 Within Library Services, the audit team was satisfied that the purchase and maintenance of texts and electronic references was managed effectively by well-qualified staff operating within the context of the College's Information Resources Policy. The staff were actively involved through a system of representation in the work of the academic departments and faculties and were assiduous in their monitoring of library usage and in gathering and responding to user feedback. The SED referred to the disruption to IT facilities in 2003, but the team was satisfied that the College had responded in an appropriate and timely fashion to the specific problems identified and, moreover, through the systematic planned development of IT facilities was

engaged in a rolling programme of upgrade of facilities and equipment which, in general, provided effective support for the work of students and staff.

168 The SED acknowledged recent pressures on the capacity of general teaching accommodation, notably lecture theatres and seminar rooms, although these had been somewhat eased by the creation of additional teaching space and a programme of refurbishment. The audit team noted that such pressures were exacerbated by the management and timing of option choices for students in which students were allowed to express option choices significantly in advance of the timetabling process. This, combined with the opportunity to change option modules within two weeks of the commencement of teaching, created unpredictable consequences for student module registrations which affected the allocation and availability of suitable accommodation. The team noted that the College was planning the introduction of a new timetabling system linked to the student record system to ameliorate the position.

169 The audit team was able to confirm the high standards of academic guidance and personal tutorial support available for all students within the College. Undergraduate and postgraduate students, full and part-time, were highly complimentary about the systems in place both at College level and at departmental level. On a College-wide basis, the team noted the particularly effective, well-established support systems organised within the Learning Support Unit coordinated by the Student Support Manager, including counselling, financial advice, disability support, careers guidance and English language support. In the realm of academic guidance and support, students referred particularly to the accessibility of those academic staff with academic and personal tutorial responsibilities. The team was advised of the pressures that these arrangements placed upon staff workloads but heard evidence from staff and students of the effectiveness of the current arrangements. In the view of the team the academic guidance and personal tutor system and the pastoral support provided for students within the College were features of good practice.

Outcomes of the discipline audit trail

Courses in the Business Management Scheme

170 The DAT covered the following courses:

- HND Business;
- BA (Hons) Business Management;
- BSc (Hons) Marketing and Supply Chain Management;

- Certificate in Management Studies;
- Diploma in Management Studies;
- Combined Masters Programme in Management;
- Masters in Business Administration (MBA).

171 From its study of students' assessed work and from discussions with students and staff, the audit team formed the view that the standard of student achievement in the programmes audited was appropriate to the titles of the awards in the *FHEQ*. Programme specifications set out appropriate educational aims and learning outcomes together with details of teaching and learning methods and assessment. Programme outcomes reflect relevant subject benchmark statements. Student evaluation of the programmes was positive. The team formed the view that the quality of provision was suitable to the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

The use made by the institution of the academic infrastructure

172 In its SED, the College claimed that it had actively engaged with the academic infrastructure and gave examples during the audit visit of ways in which it believed the elements of the infrastructure had helped staff with a range of issues in the development of its HE provision. The audit team confirmed that the academic infrastructure was now embedded in the College's procedures for assuring quality and standards.

173 The ASC set up 10 working groups in 2002 to evaluate and respond to each section of the *Code of practice*; the high level of staff involvement thus involved was seen as a positive means of ensuring wide ownership of the *Code*. Although the groups were originally intended to be of short-life only, the ASC continues to receive reports from them. The College claims that this ensures that the *Code* remains an ongoing reference document and reflects a mature movement away from a compliance culture. The audit team recognised the careful consideration that the groups had given to each section of the *Code*, various actions resulting from this and the high level of involvement of academic and administrative staff in these processes. The team was concerned about the continuation of a process that was expected to be completed within a year of the publication of each section of the *Code* and related this to a wider concern about action planning and target setting within the College.

174 The College was making appropriate use of subject benchmark statements. Programme teams are encouraged to consider all relevant benchmark

statements and their use is checked within the arrangements for course approval, review and external examining. The same procedures are used to assure the College that course descriptors are making appropriate reference to the *FHEQ* and setting levels accordingly. Level indicators, predating the *FHEQ* but consistent with it, were used to develop the curriculum framework for undergraduate awards. The College claims, justifiably in the audit team's view, that the academic infrastructure has helped its staff engage with the progressive development of knowledge and skills. This is central to its approach to widening participation, and already finds practical expression in students who have progressed successfully across the FE/HE continuum.

175 Programme specifications have been produced for all courses, are required for validation and are reviewed annually by CSRCs. Students had received them in course handbooks but tended to relate more to module information. The College intends to build on an example of existing good practice to make closer links in all its programmes between learning outcomes at programme and module level. This is a development that the audit team would strongly encourage and that should help to make the programme specifications more relevant to students.

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

176 The SED was helpful to the audit team in setting the agenda for the audit. The SED demonstrated an understanding of the strengths of the College and also the challenges facing it resulting in an open and honest presentation of the College during the period in which the document was produced. At the time of the audit visit, it was clear that progress had been made in a number of areas since the submission of the SED. These included the operation of the MIS and the functioning of the IT system as well as resolution of some matters of concern raised by students. At the time of the audit, it appeared that the tone of the SED had been overly self-critical in some respects and that the College had strengths that became clear to the team during the audit and which might have featured more explicitly in the SED.

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

177 The SED did not include specific information on the College's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards but signalled a number of

areas where the College was planning action which would contribute to an enhancement agenda. These included:

- greater flexibility in course delivery to meet the needs of growing numbers of part-time students;
- increasing the tutorial support for an increasingly diverse student population;
- developing autonomous learning within the mixed higher/further economy to support progression.

178 The College is committed to an active widening participation agenda: one of the mechanisms for achieving this is the development of a portfolio of Foundation degrees in association with the University, supported by the adoption of a sub-degree curriculum framework for implementation from October 2004. In meetings, the audit team heard of examples of the progression of students from FE courses to HE courses within the College, and formed the view that the College was actively and successfully implementing a widening participation policy.

Reliability of information

179 The College has responded systematically and comprehensively to the recommendations about published information in *HEFCE 02/15*. Its response included an internal audit of the location and accessibility of each component of teaching quality information listed in *HEFCE 02/15* and the establishment of procedures for review and a note of action required. The College has developed a prepublication procedure for checking the accuracy of its information that appears to be rigorous and effective.

180 Students commented very favourably on the accuracy of the information they received before entering the College, and the quality of their course handbooks which are produced with the aid of a standard electronic template. Other developments include Studentnet, the intranet site for students, and a range of publications aimed at specific groups such as international students and mature students. In the audit team's view the College produces helpful, accessible and informative published material in print and on-line, which appears to meet the needs of a range of students and potential students, and that is subject to a robust, annual check on its accuracy. An area which might benefit from further consideration is the provision of information to students on any rights of access to facilities at the University.

181 By the time of the audit visit, *HEFCE 03/51* had been published. The College's plans for responding to this guidance were already well advanced and

included discussions with the University to ensure consistency of approach and appropriate attribution of responsibility. The audit team took the view that were the College's plans to be fully implemented, confidence could be placed in the future accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the College's published information.

Features of good practice

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

- i. the use of Staffnet in the establishment, maintenance and development of policies and procedures for quality assurance and enhancement which fosters consistency of approach across the College (paragraph 22);
- ii. the use of the academic infrastructure in the context of the College's Widening Participation Strategy to provide structured opportunities for progression through the FE/HE continuum within the College's provision (paragraph 59);
- iii. effective human resource processes which are kept under review and are modified and updated in response to changing needs and environments (paragraph 81);
- iv. the academic and pastoral support and guidance provided to students (paragraphs 101 to 117);
- v. informative and user-friendly student information which is quality assured by robust procedures (paragraphs 139 to 142).

Recommendations for action

183 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- i. review the approach to action planning in the College's quality assurance processes to provide more clarity in the identification of responsibilities and timescales (paragraphs 37 to 39, and 55);
- ii. establish and implement clear requirements for the timely provision of formative feedback to students on coursework (paragraph 53).

20 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- iii. review the approach to the administration of its Student Satisfaction Survey to secure a higher and therefore more representative response rate (paragraph 72);
- iv. take steps to ensure that all students are aware of rights of access to facilities at the validating institution (paragraphs 97 and 141).

Appendix

Writtle College's response to the audit report

Writtle College welcomes the report's conclusion of broad confidence in its management of the quality and academic standards of its educational provision, and its confirmation of the reliability of the College's published information.

The College has considered the report and has started work in response to the findings of the audit.

