Institutional audit

Writtle College

November 2010

Preface

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

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

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

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

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews and on feedback from stakeholders.

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

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

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Writtle College (the College) from 29 November to 3 December 2010 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the College offers on behalf of the University of Essex.

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 about the ways in which the College manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is 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. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers on behalf of the University of Essex
- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

The audit team's view also applies to a joint delivery partnership in which the College was engaged at the time of the audit.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The College's approach to quality enhancement is characterised by a strategic commitment to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities linked to the College's own values and vision. The audit team found that the College takes deliberate actions at the College level to improve the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the College's procedures for the support, assessment and supervision of research degrees align with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by the QAA.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the College publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of the awards it offers on behalf of the University of Essex.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the way in which the curriculum is designed, developed and delivered to take advantage of staff research and professional practice
- the comprehensive student support system and the demonstrable commitment of staff to the support and enhancement of student learning
- the institution's strategic approach to staff development, including the reward and recognition schemes for academic and support staff
- the institution's strategic approach to enhancement

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- that the College takes effective steps to ensure that all students are aware of their rights of access to library resources at the University of Essex
- that graduate teaching assistants are given appropriate induction and training for their teaching role prior to starting their duties and receive regular formal feedback thereafter
- that the College ensures that comprehensive induction for all new postgraduate research students and training for new PhD supervisors is delivered in a timely manner.

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- that the minutes of committees should give a fuller account of matters discussed at meetings and record clearly the status of decisions taken and the follow-up to action points at the subsequent meeting.

Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

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

Report

1   An Institutional audit of Writtle College (the College) was undertaken during the week commencing 29 November 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the College's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers on behalf of the University of Essex (the University) and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2   The audit team comprised: Dr Colin Beeson, Professor David Heeley, Professor Kenneth Hurst, Professor Duncan Lawson and Miss Rebecca Watson, auditors, and Mrs Liz Thussu, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr David Parry, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3   The College is located near Chelmsford, Essex, and can trace its origins in land-based education back to 1893. In 2009-10, there were 970 full-time equivalent (FTE) higher education students, of whom 87 per cent were undergraduate and 13 per cent postgraduate, including a small number of postgraduate research students. The College employs 69 (56.9 FTE) higher education academic staff. It is one of the largest publicly funded institutions in England, serving the agricultural, horticultural and associated industries.

4   Its vision is to be 'a distinctive place to study and to serve the environment through science and the arts'. Its mission is '...Transforming lives and the environment through inspiring education...'. Since 1997 the College has enjoyed what it describes as a 'strong collaborative partnership' with the University of Essex, its validating institution.

5   The College provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and supporting documentation, including that related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The index to the Briefing Paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the College's approach to managing the security of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. The team had a hard copy of the majority of documents referenced in the Briefing Paper and access to the College's intranet. The Students' Union produced a student written submission setting out the students' views on the accuracy of the information provided to them, the experience of students as learners and their role in quality management.

6   In addition, the audit team had access to a number of QAA reports on the College, the College's internal documents and notes of the team's meetings with staff and students.

7   Since the last institutional audit in 2004, two major developments have taken place at the College. The first was the College's application for taught degree-awarding powers submitted in late 2004; the second the appointment of a new Principal in 2006.

8   In early 2006, the College decided to place its application for taught degree awarding powers in abeyance until matters of governance and management raised in the report had been fully addressed. The application remains in abeyance. It was beyond the remit of this audit to consider matters of institutional governance.

9   Following the appointment in 2006 of a new Principal, Professor David Butcher, significant changes were made to the management and structure of the College. A Senior Management Team of five replaced the larger eleven-person structure; a new Senior Management Team post, Head of Higher Education, was created; and the former structure of two higher education faculties and four departments was replaced with four schools with

devolved budgetary responsibility. In early 2010, the Senior Management Team agreed to a further academic restructuring involving the creation of two schools with effect from the start of the 2010-2011 academic year namely, the School of Sport, Equine & Animal Science and the School of Sustainable Environments, the latter incorporating the Writtle School of Design.

10   In 2004, QAA's Institutional audit team advised that the College should:

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

11   The Institutional audit team also recommended action it deemed desirable, specifically that the College should:

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

12   The current audit team confirmed that the College had addressed each of the above recommendations. It took the view, however, that further action is advisable in connection with the recommendation concerning rights of access to facilities at the University of Essex (see paragraph 49). In addition, the team took the view that further action is still desirable in connection with the minutes of the College's committees, in particular concerning the status of decisions taken and the follow-up to action points at the subsequent meeting (see paragraph 83).

13   The policies and regulations that provide the institutional framework for managing academic standards and quality are defined in the following College documents: the Higher Education Undergraduate Academic Regulations, the Higher Education (Taught Postgraduate) Academic Regulations and the Postgraduate Research Regulations. The College's Quality Assurance Manual identifies the procedures by which academic standards and the quality of the learning opportunities are managed and enhanced.

14   The College operates two independent and parallel sets of structures led by a Head of Higher Education and a Head of Further Education respectively. These two structures converge at the level of the Academic Board, which has oversight of, and responsibility for, the academic standards and quality of both. The Academic Standards Committee is one of three key, standing committees of the Academic Board, with delegated responsibility and authority for overseeing the operational management of academic standards and quality assurance. The Higher Education Learning and Teaching Group and the Research Committee are the two other key standing committees of the Academic Board.

15   Institutional responsibility for the management of quality assurance and enhancement rests with the holder of the post of Head of Higher Education. Heads of schools, who report to the Head of Higher Education, oversee the implementation of quality assurance and enhancement arrangements at school, scheme and module level. From early 2010, the heads of schools became full members of the Academic Standards Committee so as to have a more direct input to the development of quality processes. Central support for the maintenance of academic standards, quality assurance and the enhancement of learning and teaching is provided by the Centre for Academic Standards, Teaching and Learning, which was established in 2007.

16   The College's partnership with the University of Essex is managed by a Joint Management Board comprised of senior staff from each institution and chaired by the University's Dean of Academic Partnerships. The College operates in accordance with the University's Handbook of Validation and Review Procedures for Collaborative Partnerships and Rules of Assessment. The University is represented on the College's Board of Governors, its Academic Board and the Academic Standards Committee. Senior University staff chair College validation events and the University carries out an Institutional audit of the College every five years.

17   Procedures of the University of Essex provide the broad framework within which the College operates, and staff of the University are involved in key deliberative committees of the College. Nevertheless, the audit team formed the view that the relationship between the two institutions is now sufficiently mature for the College to feel confident enough to propose adaptations to University arrangements as they apply to the College, and for the University generally to be willing to accept such proposals. The team concluded that the College's framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities is comprehensive and operates effectively.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

18   New course approval comprises an internal review by a College course development review panel followed by a validation event chaired by a dean from the University of Essex and involving external academics and specialists as well as representatives from the University. The final stage of approval is granted by the Senate of the University, on the recommendation of the University's Academic Partnerships Board. The audit team concluded that academic standards are appropriately safeguarded through the process of validation as set by the University of Essex and as implemented by the College.

19   The College has adapted the University's annual monitoring report template by including additional sections designed to strengthen the action planning and monitoring cycle, to capture examples of good practice, and to celebrate student achievement. Annual monitoring reports are reviewed by the Head of School , who forwards them to the Centre for Academic Standards, Teaching and Learning, from where they proceed to the Academic Standards Committee and the University. At institutional-level, the annual monitoring report compiled by senior staff captures cross-College themes and is considered by the Academic Standards Committee and College's Academic Board before being forwarded to the Dean of Academic Partnerships at the University of Essex.

20   The Dean's response to the annual monitoring reports for 2007-08 raised a number of critical issues, mainly in relation to a lack of detail in some areas, selective engagement with student surveys and some absence of supporting data. Action taken by the College led to a more encouraging response to the annual monitoring reports for 2008-09, despite some lingering concerns over missing data. No issues were, however, raised in these reports that would bring into question the security of the academic standards of the awards offered in the University's name.

21   All taught courses are subject to a five-year rolling programme of Periodic Degree Scheme Review, which also serves as a means for the formal revalidation (re-approval) of the course concerned. These reviews follow University guidelines and are designed to contain sufficient detail for the University to assure itself of the academic standards being applied. Review panels are chaired by an associate dean of the University and include external academic members, professional practitioners and a student member. Panel reports

are received by the Academic Standards Committee and Academic Board as well as the University's Academic Partnerships Board whose role it is to recommend approval by the Senate of the University.

22   Overall, the audit team concluded that the processes of the University of Essex in respect of programme approval, monitoring and review are appropriately implemented by the College in order to secure and maintain the academic standards of the awards offered.

23   The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are described in a University document entitled: External examiners at the University of Essex. Their primary function is to oversee the standards and quality of awards delivered at the College. They are appointed by, and report directly to, the University. The College persuaded the University to allow external examiners to include an interim visit to the College part way through the year in order to meet students, in addition to the end of year visit for the examination boards required by the University.

24   The audit team scrutinised the induction and reporting arrangements for external examiners and concluded that external examining was thoroughly and robustly embedded in the College's quality assurance processes and that staff not only adhered to the required procedures but regarded active engagement with external examiners as an important enhancement mechanism. Strong and scrupulous use is made of independent external examiners and the external examining process makes an effective contribution to assuring the academic standards of the programmes at the College.

25   All taught awards offered on behalf of the University of Essex have been developed in accordance with the relevant regulations established by the University and conform to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The University's framework informs the course design and validation processes in establishing the appropriate title and volume of credit for the level of an award. Members of validation and review panels are expected to evaluate course proposals against the expectations of the FHEQ.

26   Programme specifications, the use of subject benchmark statements in devising programme content, and reference to the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* are consistently considered across the College and have become embedded in the approach of College staff. The vocational nature of many of the College's courses is reflected in the close involvement of external practitioners in the development and review of its courses.

27   The audit team concluded that, overall, the College makes effective use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external points of reference in the management of academic standards across the College.

28   The assessment regulations for awards, which are reviewed annually through the Academic Quality Systems office within the Centre for Academic Standards, Teaching and Learning, apply to all taught programmes, and variations to these must be approved by the Academic Board. The College's approach to assessment is embedded in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy: A Framework of Approaches for Writtle College, 2010-2013. The procedures for, and the management of, assessment and its outcomes are defined within the College's Academic Regulations, which incorporate the University of Essex Undergraduate and Postgraduate Rules of Assessment and Assessment Policy. A representative of the University sits on the College's Academic Board.

29   The scheme level interpretation of the assessment strategy is considered at validation, giving rise to the principles of assessment defined in each programme

specification. Postgraduate research students at the College are registered directly with the University. The College adheres to and implements the regulatory framework as set out in the University's Higher Degree Regulations. The College's examination and assessment frameworks are supported by detailed and comprehensive policies and guidelines, including complaints, appeals and academic offences procedures.

30   The College is involved at the discussion stages when the University considers changes to regulations or assessment policy. Where appropriate, the College enhances the expectations set out in the University's assessment policy.

31   The student written submission identified some issues associated with assessment, particularly the timeliness and quality of feedback. The annual monitoring report process for each course scheme requires that mechanisms for monitoring the quality and timeliness of feedback to students be reviewed and any issues to be addressed or features of good practice be identified. Comments from students met by the audit team confirmed that the attention given to these areas is leading to improvements.

32   Statistical data produced by the College is used effectively in the annual monitoring process, quarterly business reviews and head of school staff reports. It is also used effectively in reports to the Academic Standards Committee, for example, to address College-wide issues such as retention rates and progression. Online access to course and module information and financial information for managers and staff is straightforward. Staff commented on the wealth of information available and its wide dissemination, particularly to heads of schools. The audit team concluded that management information used to inform processes and reviews is appropriate and accessible and is used effectively to monitor and enhance the student experience. The team also concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

33   The College undertook full reviews of its policies and procedures against the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)* in 2002 and 2009, as well as reviews when sections have been revised or when new policies were being formulated. A detailed report of the most recent review of the whole *Code of Practice* was published for stakeholders in June 2010, and is intended to be updated as appropriate and to serve as an ongoing working document. Other external reference points include professional bodies such as the Landscape Institute and the Chartered Society of Designers, which help to ensure currency of provision. The College demonstrates a high level of engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points.

34   The College's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review, based on those of the University, form the foundation for the delivery of a learning experience that is well defined, up to date and underpinned by appropriate teaching, learning and assessment. The templates and guidelines issued by the College clearly set out the supporting information required to inform debate and decision making and to ensure the vocational relevance of programmes. The membership of approval and review panels ensures a breadth of expertise for the proper completion of the processes. Published guidelines also require the submission of detailed information on resource implications, together with confirmation from the Senior Management Team of any additional resource provision, showing the level of costs involved.

35 The College seeks to ensure the application of a variety of assessments, embracing assignments, seminars, essays, portfolios, presentations and reports as well as examinations. The range of assessed work produced by students has been commended by external examiners.

36 Completed annual monitoring reports were commended for their thoroughness and frankness and for the way that action plans from previous years are reviewed and new action plans for the year in prospect proposed. Students are invited to complete a module evaluation form at the end of each module, which feeds directly into the annual monitoring report process. While staff are encouraged to reflect and act on students' views gained in this way, the College expects that the wider implications of any proposed changes are considered and approved by the relevant committee before implementation. University regulations will permit the College only to amend reading lists without the prior approval of its Academic Partnerships Board.

37 The College's arrangements for the approval, monitoring and review of its courses are effective in ensuring the continuing availability of appropriate learning opportunities for students to help them achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programme and attain their award.

38 The College has in place a variety of formal and informal mechanisms to gain feedback from students, who are represented on a variety of College academic committees. The monthly meetings of the Student Union Liaison Group afford an opportunity for the Student Union Executive to offer feedback and raise issues of concern directly with the College Principal, Director of Finance and Director of Academic Standards. The College has enhanced academic feedback through the recent appointment of an elected Student Union Academic Sabbatical Officer to sharpen student engagement with academic issues and to communicate with students how the College has responded to their feedback. Students welcomed the new sabbatical post as a means of strengthening representation, and early indications suggest that the creation of this post is providing an effective means of enhancing student engagement with quality issues across the College. Although students confirmed that their views are taken into account by the College, it is not always evident from committee minutes how extensively students' views are solicited and recorded.

39 A summary report of module evaluation feedback is passed to the relevant head of school for immediate action, and then to the relevant course scheme review committee on which students are also represented. Students whom the audit team met confirmed that actions had been taken as a direct result of this process.

40 The College conducts an annual College-wide satisfaction survey for all those not eligible to complete the National Student Survey to collect student views on general College facilities and course-related matters. The College has acknowledged that the response rate to this survey has been disappointing despite a recent small improvement in the rate of return. Students whom the audit team met were, however, generally supportive of both the number and range of surveys of their views and confirmed that discussions regularly took place at meetings with student representatives, which include feedback on actions taken.

41 All final year undergraduate students are strongly encouraged to participate in the National Student Survey. Survey results are discussed at school level and an action plan based on National Student Survey data is produced, leading to enhancements in module or programme delivery. College-level issues identified through scrutiny at school level are incorporated into the institutional annual monitoring report submitted to the University of Essex. The institutional annual monitoring reports scrutinised by the audit team confirmed that 'loops' are closed and action plans are regularly monitored and reviewed by the Academic Standards Committee. The College makes effective use of management

information derived from student feedback in assuring the quality of student learning opportunities.

42   Each year group of each course is expected to nominate a student representative to attend meetings of the Student Staff Liaison Committee. Summaries of key issues from the Student Staff Liaison Committee are included as part of the annual monitoring report, and outcomes are monitored by the Academic Quality Systems Office. Annual monitoring reports scrutinised by the audit team demonstrate a significant level of student input to the process, and responsiveness to students' concerns on the part of the College.

43   Examination of action plans within annual monitoring reports since 2005-06 showed a year-on-year improvement in the timeliness of feedback in relation to assessments, and students expressed satisfaction that the issue had now been largely resolved. The College makes effective use of the views of students in its quality management processes.

44   The Principal has set out a clear strategic direction to raise the academic profile within the College in order to enhance its higher education provision. During recent years there has been a growing volume of research activity within the College. The College did not submit to the last Research Assessment Exercise, but intends to participate in the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework. The number of staff with PhDs has increased significantly in recent years through the development of existing staff and a change in recruitment policy.

45   Opportunities to include research-informed material in the curriculum are deliberately designed into courses. Final year dissertations are often linked to staff research areas and students are encouraged to produce outputs that can be presented externally at conferences based on their dissertations. In addition to the formal curriculum, presentations are given by research-active staff during Study Week. It was clear that staff enthusiasm for their research specialities had been passed on to their students through the teaching and learning experience. The audit team regards the way in which the curriculum is designed, developed and delivered to take advantage of staff's research and professional practice as a feature of good practice.

46   The College does not currently offer any awards delivered solely through distance and/or e-learning. It has, however, invested significantly in establishing an infrastructure for e-learning across the College, including the appointment of an E-Learning Developer. Where programmes involve 'non-standard' delivery patterns, particular rigour has been applied during the validation process to ensure proper consideration of the implications of these arrangements for learning and teaching, student support and resources.

47   A Heritage Library management system assists the Library in planning and prioritising new purchases in order effectively to meet the challenges of a changing student profile, new course developments and the increasing demand for online resources. The College's Information Resources Policy, most recently reviewed in 2010, reflects a shifting emphasis towards providing access to resources rather than collection building, in line with new patterns of demand.

48   Liaison between the Library and the College's Learner Services to facilitate additional support needs for disabled students is focused through a designated member of the Library staff. The Library is represented on a range of College committees and has assisted in developing College-wide policies on, for example, plagiarism and information literacy. Recent examples of action taken as a result of student feedback include an increase in loan limits, an improved open-access catalogue, an integrated database search and changes to the short-term loan arrangements.

49   Students on higher education programmes are entitled to reading rights at the University of Essex Library. It was clear from meetings with students, however, that these rights - especially for undergraduate and postgraduate taught students - are not fully understood. This same issue was raised during the previous QAA Institutional audit. The College's response included action to revise information published in College handbooks and review prospectus information. However, this issue remains one of concern to the student body. In the interests of ensuring that students are appropriately supported in achieving the desired academic standards, the College is advised to take effective steps to ensure that all students are aware of their rights of access to library resources at the University of Essex.

50   Since the last audit there has been a major revision of the College's website, a restructure and re-launch of the College's intranet, the appointment of an e-learning developer, and the replacement of the College's original virtual learning environment with Moodle.

51   Against the background of a generally supportive and appreciative view on the part of students of the facilities available, some students voiced concerns about the condition of some of the estate and its facilities; likewise, some external examiners have referred to the mere 'adequacy' of certain facilities. In the view of the audit team, however, the evident creativity and likely achievability of the new Estates Strategy 2010-20 should address some of these concerns.

52   Overall, and notwithstanding the need for greater clarity of communication with regard to access to the library facilities of the University of Essex, the audit team was encouraged by the College's clear commitment to the ongoing development of resources for learning, and in particular its intentions for the estate and associated facilities.

53   The College's Admissions Policy is mapped against the *Code of practice* and strategic vision of the College and monitored through departmental service level agreements. The admissions procedure is regularly evaluated, resulting in generally positive reviews on the accessibility and efficiency of the admissions process. The College Open Day is viewed favourably by students who praised the friendly atmosphere and approachability of staff on the day, while commenting on the lack of interaction with second and third year students. Staff involved in recruitment and admissions are supported through the College's use of the Supporting Professionalism in Admissions programme. The College's admissions procedures and their implementation are fit for purpose and effectively maintained by clear quality assurance and evaluative processes.

54   The College offers student support at school level and centrally, in particular through the Learning Services Unit and the Careers Advisory Service. Each student is allocated a personal tutor who is a key point of contact throughout their degree programme. The College's Higher Education Student Handbook contains a wealth of information regarding support mechanisms, admissions process, disability and international advice and support and is subject to review by the Student Sabbatical Officer. Subject-specific course handbooks are reviewed by course scheme review committees. Students commented favourably on the support offered by course scheme managers and the 'open door' policy of staff across the College.

55   Students also commended the College's personal development planning system and its value in securing future employment. The College has procedures in place to incorporate personal development planning into student learning and has shown itself to be supportive through the process.

56   Disabled students are supported on arrival with individual support plans, which are provided to relevant members of academic staff. Students who have specific access requests are provided with a confidential pro-forma, detailing the learning support needed and access arrangements to be implemented. The College has a support network for disabled students in land-based education, which is mapped to the relevant section of the *Code of practice*. There is dedicated support for disabled students in the College Library. Disability and access issues are incorporated within staff development programmes offered by the Learner Services Department. Students who met the audit team commented favourably on the support offered by the Learner Services Department, particularly for students with dyslexia.

57   Support for international students includes a range of language courses available prior to arrival, and ongoing language support, all of which is described in the Student Handbook. There is a dedicated international team of advisers, including an English Language Coordinator who is responsible for the language courses. An International Student Advisor advises international students on immigration matters, runs the induction for students undertaking English language courses and provides cultural support and advice. Students commented favourably on the ease of access to support offered on a needs basis and tailored specifically to each student.

58   The College offers careers advice through its Careers Advisory Service, including employment advice to students and to alumni for up to three years after graduation. The Service was MATRIX accredited in May 2010. The strategic objectives of the Careers Advisory Service contained in the Career Service Development Plan are mapped against the *Code of practice, Section 8: Career education, information, advice and guidance*.

59   The audit team concluded that the student support system at the College is comprehensive, and regards the demonstrable commitment of staff to the support and enhancement of student learning as a feature of good practice.

60   Staff support and development opportunities are described in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy which is updated every three years. Its implementation is monitored as part of the Human Resources Strategy.

61   All new staff members are offered a College mentor or 'buddy'. Staff commented favourably on the College's supportive mentoring system. Mentees appear to have considerable interaction with their designated mentor, helping to coordinate their lecture preparation, techniques and delivery.

62   All staff, both permanent and fixed-term, are subject to a six-month probationary period, during which time staff have at least two review meetings. The expectations of each meeting in the probation process are clearly outlined in the probation procedure.

63   Each staff member's personal development review is facilitated by the relevant academic line manager and centrally monitored by the Human Resources Department, which monitors Performance and Development Review activity against the Training Needs Analysis. However, this is not made clear in the Performance and Development Review introduction document.

64   Staff are expected to undergo peer observation of their teaching once a year; new staff are encouraged to undergo this in the first six months of their employment. The University offers a Postgraduate Certificate of Higher Education Practice, which forms the basis of professional accreditation in learning and teaching for new and inexperienced teaching staff, and is open to all staff involved in supporting learning. Staff who had recently completed the Certificate commented positively not only on its structure and content but also

on its usefulness in disseminating good practice amongst staff. Members of staff are required to work towards a Higher Education Academy Fellowship.

65   The College's strategic approach to staff development, including the reward and recognition schemes for academic and support staff (see paragraph 69), was considered by the team to be a feature of good practice.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

66   The College's approach to quality enhancement is embedded in its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy: A Framework of Approaches for Writtle College, 2010-2013. This confirms that the student learning experience will be enhanced and underpinned by a focus on student-centred approaches; employability; staff development and reward; research-informed learning; curriculum design and delivery; and learner feedback and evaluative frameworks. Each school action plan uses the aims of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Enhancement Strategy as its strategic objectives. The College does not, however, formally define quality enhancement or good practice and may wish to articulate more clearly the meaning of enhancement and good practice at the College.

67   The audit team formed the view that the College has succeeded in engaging a large number of staff and students in enhancement activities. Its integrated and strategic approach brings cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities such as the involvement of students and external examiners in enhancement, the links between periodic review and enhancement processes, the embedding of pedagogic research, the creative use of technology and various conferences and workshops to represent good practice.

68   The College views the professional development of all categories of staff as central to its approach to quality enhancement and has continued to develop and enhance its human resources processes in the light of structural and management change. There are joint staff teaching and learning development activities with the University, where good practice is shared, leading to enhancement of student learning experiences and a strengthening of the higher education ethos at the College. Through all these activities and through the approachability of staff, the audit team found there to be a demonstrable commitment of staff to the support and enhancement of student learning.

69   The College participates in several reward schemes that recognise staff who have contributed significantly to learning. A reward and recognition group was set up in order to develop reward initiatives, an outcome of which was the introduction of the annual College Excellence Award intended to recognise and reward both academic and administrative staff who demonstrate excellence in their teaching, assessment, guidance or support for those who contribute to the wider student experience. The reward and recognition scheme for both academic and support staff was considered by the audit team to be a feature of good practice.

70   The audit team considered that the College's approach to quality enhancement was characterised by a strategic commitment to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities linked to the College's own values and vision, and is a feature of good practice. The team found evidence that this enabled the identification of strategic enhancement opportunities and formed the view that the College has a planned, integrated and strategic approach to quality enhancement that underpins and brings cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities, and is also a feature of good practice.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

71   The College currently only has one partnership arrangement. This is with HAS Den Bosch in the Netherlands and involves joint delivery of postgraduate taught awards in Horticulture and Animal Science. The partnership is governed by a Memorandum of Agreement between HAS Den Bosch and the College and a formal agreement between HAS Den Bosch and the University of Essex. All the College's normal procedures for the oversight of standards and the quality of the student experience are applied in the usual way to these courses. Between the Briefing Visit and the Audit Visit, the College received formal notification from HAS Den Bosch that, for financial reasons, it intends to withdraw from this partnership at the end of the academic year 2010-11.

72   The College is currently exploring an opportunity to develop articulation arrangements with institutions in China. It is being guided by the University and using the University's handbook as a reference point for this development.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

73   The College has a strategic intention that research activity should make a major contribution to the maintenance of an appropriate academic culture. A periodic review of the College's postgraduate research provision carried out by the University in 2009 commended the efforts the College has made to establish a dynamic research culture. In furthering this strategic direction, the College has significantly increased the number of PhD enrolments, from 1 in 2006 to 23 in 2010.

74   A senior member of staff acts as Research Co-ordinator and chairs the Research Committee. Postgraduate research students are registered directly with the University. Induction events are available at both the College and the University. There are, however, problems with the timeliness of the College event for some students. Furthermore, communication difficulties have also resulted in some students missing the University event.

75   The University lays down the responsibilities of supervisors. At the College, a supervisory team normally consists of two staff, at least one of whom must have a successful completion. According to the Briefing Paper, the Research Committee should approve all supervisory arrangements. The audit team found no evidence in Committee minutes of supervisory arrangements being discussed. In particular, there was no evidence of the Committee giving approval to staff without a doctoral qualification being appointed as supervisors. It appears that these decisions may be agreed between the Research Co-ordinator and the Head of Higher Education and are not always formally reported to the Committee.

76   New supervisors are required to attend the University's course on supervising research students. They are usually paired with an established supervisor to ensure that the supervisory team has experience of the required procedures. This is not, however, always achieved. In some cases, for example, the second supervisor does not play a very active role. Research Committee minutes record that some supervisors were not aware of their responsibilities in relation to general supervisory arrangements and specifically supervisory boards.

77   Postgraduate research students' progress is formally monitored twice yearly by a Postgraduate Research Students Supervisory Board, which provides written reports to the students and the Research Students Progress Committee. The information in these reports is comprehensive, and the audit team saw examples of very useful Postgraduate Research

Students Supervisory Board reports. However, as noted above, it appears that some supervisors are not fully aware of their responsibilities with regard to supervisory boards.

78   During induction, and twice-yearly thereafter, students are required to undertake a self-assessment of their general and specific skills and, with the guidance of their supervisors, to develop improvements plans. Developmental activities and courses are available at both the College and the University. Since postgraduate research students are directly registered with the University, their formal assessment is governed by University regulations and procedures.

79   The Research Co-ordinator produces an annual report for the University. In addition, the University carries out periodic reviews of the College's postgraduate research provision. Following the 2009 review, the Research Co-ordinator and the Higher Education Quality Systems Manager developed an action plan that has been regularly monitored by the Academic Standards Committee. Research Committee minutes, however, record little discussion of the outcomes of the review.

80   Mechanisms for receiving feedback from postgraduate research students are largely informal. Students are encouraged to discuss difficulties with their supervisor or the Research Co-ordinator. There is an elected postgraduate research representative on the Research Committee, and participation by this representative has been generally good.

81   The 2009 Periodic Review recommended the establishment of a Student Staff Liaison Committee. Response to this has been slow; however the 2010 postgraduate research cohort has been proactive in creating its own on-line forum and the audit team would encourage the College to respond positively to this.

82   Committee minutes sometimes list issues raised without assigning actions. In addition, on some occasions where actions are assigned, no follow-up is recorded at the subsequent meeting.

83   In view of several issues regarding the Research Committee minutes noted in paragraphs 75, 79 and 82, the audit team considers it desirable that Research Committee minutes should give a fuller account of matters discussed at meetings and record clearly the status of decisions taken and the follow-up to action points at subsequent meetings.

84   At the time of the audit, four Graduate Teaching Assistants were funded to undertake six hours of teaching duties each week ranging from demonstrating to lecturing, in addition to their PhD studies. Graduate Teaching Assistants are required to attend the first module of the PG CHEP at the University. However, the timing of this means that some Graduate Teaching Assistants had not been given any training or induction to teaching prior to commencing their duties. Nor does there appear to be any formal observation of, or feedback on, their teaching until they take the PG CHEP module.

85   Consequently, the audit team considers it advisable that Graduate Teaching Assistants are given appropriate induction and training for their teaching role prior to starting their duties and that they receive regular formal feedback thereafter.

86   The College is to be commended for its creation of a research culture and the rapid expansion of PhD provision. It appears to the audit team, nevertheless, that in places the College's infrastructure has not kept pace with these developments. The College has been slow in responding to some of the recommendations of the March 2009 postgraduate research review involving, for example, the induction process for postgraduate research students, the training of Graduate Teaching Assistants and the establishment of a staff student liaison committee.

87   Although cognisant of the considerable amount of progress being made in the area of postgraduate research, in view of matters identified in paragraphs 74, 75, 76, 84 and 86, the audit team considers it advisable that the College ensures that comprehensive induction for all new postgraduate research students and training for new PhD supervisors is delivered in a timely manner.

Section 7: Published information

88   Published information is monitored by the College's Marketing department, with final sign-off from the University of Essex. Material is published using guidelines identified in the College's Student Recruitment Publications Approval Policy. This Policy is applied to undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses and other materials for circulation and to web-based material. There is a clear categorisation by level of editorial control, ensuring that the appropriate authority is consulted prior to publication.

89   Handbooks for students entering higher education and course schemes are readily available and are comprehensive in their coverage of academic and practical matters. This material is disseminated widely and is accessible in both hard and electronic format. Students commented favourably on the level of information provided in the handbooks. The College consults the student body when reviewing the material, as observed in minutes of several course scheme review committees.

90   The College has a robust process for disseminating external examiner reports to student representatives in line with requirements of the HEFCE *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: Phase Two Outcomes* (HEFCE, 06/45), through a range of representative and governing bodies and as part of the Annual Monitoring process. The College has provided an employability statement, which is now in operation, although students appeared not to be aware of this.

91   The website and online learning facilities are comprehensive, containing a range of information for staff and students. Students commented that Moodle is used variably by tutors, but provides a useful interface for document exchange, particularly lecture notes.

92   The audit team found that, overall, reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information the College publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas of good practice:

- the way in which the curriculum is designed, developed and delivered to take advantage of staff research and professional practice (paragraph 45)
- the comprehensive student support system and the demonstrable commitment of staff to the support and enhancement of student learning (paragraph 59)
- the institution's strategic approach to staff development, including the reward and recognition schemes for academic and support staff (paragraphs 65 and 69)
- the institution's strategic approach to enhancement (paragraph 70).

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- that the College takes effective steps to ensure that all students are aware of their rights of access to library resources at the University of Essex (paragraph 49)
- that graduate teaching assistants are given appropriate induction and training for their teaching role prior to starting their duties and receive regular formal feedback thereafter (paragraph 85)
- that the College ensures that comprehensive induction for all new postgraduate research students and training for new PhD supervisors is delivered in a timely manner (paragraph 87).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- that the minutes of committees should give a fuller account of matters discussed at meetings and record clearly the status of decisions taken and the follow-up to action points at the subsequent meeting (paragraphs 38 and 83).

Appendix

Writtle College's response to the Institutional audit report

Writtle College welcomes the outcomes of the Institutional audit and the judgements of confidence in both the soundness of our present and likely future management of the academic standards of our awards, and the quality of the learning opportunities available to our students.

We are pleased to note the highlighting of a number of areas of good practice. In particular, the way in which the curriculum is designed, developed, and delivered, the comprehensive support systems that are in place to enhance student learning, and the commitment of staff to support learners. The College is also pleased that the audit team recognised the institution's strategic approach to the enhancement of quality, linked to the College's own values and vision.

Writtle College appreciates the professional and courteous manner in which the audit was conducted and thanks the audit team for its helpful insights into the development of its Research profile.

The College considers the audit report to be a constructive contribution to the ongoing development and enhancement of our mission.

The report will be considered by the College's Academic Board and by the Senior Management Team and an action plan has been developed to take forward the recommendations.