



Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers

Application for taught degree-awarding powers
The College of Law
Institutional Assessor Report
February 2006

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THE COLLEGE OF LAW

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Institutional Assessors' Final Report to the Agency's Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers

INTRODUCTION

- 1 At its meeting held on 25 February 2005 (ACDAP/M (05)01, Item 12), the Committee considered an application for taught degree-awarding powers received from the College of Law (the College). Following consideration at its meeting on 24 May 2005 of an *Interim Report* from an Agency-appointed team of institutional assessors, the Committee determined that the application warranted further consideration by the Agency. The previously appointed team of assessors then carried out a full assessment to review the College's application. The three assessors for this TDAP scrutiny are Ms A E M Holmes, Professor J Hughes and Mr A Jones. The secretary to the team is Ms C Payne and the assessment was managed by Dr P J A Findlay, Assistant Director, Reviews Group. This report reflects the assessors' findings with regard to the criteria governing the grant of taught degree-awarding powers as at December 2005.

Process

- 2 The assessment was conducted through reading extensive documentation, submitted both with the application and throughout the subsequent period of the assessment. Documents included minutes and papers of the main College committees, agendas and papers for programme meetings and Boards of Examiners, external examiners' reports, internal briefing documentation for staff provided through the College Intranet, reports of programme approval and review meetings, and details of staffing and staff development activity. Over the period of the scrutiny the assessors held four full day meetings with members of staff of the College, which were conducted at the College's Birmingham Centre, and in addition the assessors observed a large number of the regular meetings taking place in the College. Individual members of the assessor team also visited each of the College's four other regional centres in York, Chester, Guildford and London, to observe centre meetings and to meet with members of staff and students. In total, the assessor team met with around 70 staff and 60 students of the College in the course of the assessment. The majority of observations have been carried out by individual assessors, with a small number attended by Dr Findlay, the Assistant Director.

- 3 The quality of the College's paperwork has been high. All meetings observed by the assessors have been well attended and efficiently administered. In general, the team formed the view that communication of information across the College is well managed and that discussion and decision-making is efficient and focused.

Structure of the report

- 4 This report addresses the four main criteria headings against which applications for degree awarding powers are assessed. While the report draws together the findings and views of the assessors in general terms, it should be noted that care was given in the course of the assessment to ensuring that specific reference was made to each individual criterion and its systematic evaluation.
- 5 In addition to the *Interim Report* previously presented to the Committee, the assessors have written reports on all of their formal interactions with the College. These reports, together with the documentation provided by the College, provide the evidence upon which this report is based. The assessors' individual reports on meetings and observations are listed sequentially by date and attached at Appendix A.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The College

- 6 The College was established in 1962 as a result of a merger between the Law Society's College and a private training provider. During the first decade or so of its life the College functioned largely as a division of the Law Society. The College was granted its Royal Charter of Incorporation in 1975 and the Charter lays down in its schedules the membership and proceedings of the College's Board of Governors and Board of Management. The Law Society continued to appoint the Governors until 1996 when the Charter was amended and the College became a fully self-governing institution. Today the College is therefore a legally independent corporation and its Board of Governors has ultimate responsibility for all its activities. The College is a registered charity with the Governors acting as trustees. A close relationship remains with the Law Society as one of the accrediting bodies for the legal profession. This development over a period of time has given the College a higher level of control over curriculum and assessment together with a greater freedom to develop its own regulatory structures. These are predominantly centralised, with the intention of ensuring consistency of teaching and assessment across the five regional centres which are a key part of the College's organisation.
- 7 The College's mission is 'to promote the advancement of legal education and the study of law in all its branches'. In discussion, senior officers of the College considered that the mission and character of the College was broadly similar in character to that of a university-level institution, always taking into account its single-discipline focus. The sole difference is that there is no explicit commitment to a research dimension, although there is a commitment to scholarship, particularly in relation to the professional needs and pedagogic skills pertaining to legal education. Discussions with staff reflected a high level of commitment to the aims of the College's mission. Students too, while not commenting directly on the mission, indicated that they believe the College performs at a high level academically, with

excellent teaching quality, that it is professional, highly organised, and vocationally focused, well thought of by employers and provides excellent support to students in securing professional placements through training contracts and pupillages.

- 8 The College's educational provision in law is wide-ranging. It offers three main programmes at its centres: a postgraduate Legal Practice Course (LPC), accredited by the Law Society; a Bar Vocational Course (BVC), accredited by the General Council of the Bar and currently solely offered in London; and a Graduate Diploma in Law (GDL) validated by the Joint Academic Stage Board. An undergraduate degree programme in Law has been developed by the Open University in close partnership with the College, using course units, materials and assessments designed by the College and leading to an Open University award; this is supported by both institutions. Finally the College provides a substantial professional development programme for the legal profession, delivered in part through a wholly owned subsidiary that develops and supports distance learning resources.
- 9 In December 2005 the College had a total of 5892 registered students, the large majority following its full-time programmes. In addition, over 12,000 delegates participate in the College's professional development programmes each year. The College has a total of 295 full time academic staff on its establishment, together with a further 20 professional development staff and around 20 part-time visiting lecturers. The College delivers its courses from each of its five regional centres in Birmingham, Chester, Guildford, London (Bloomsbury) and York, with its post-qualification provision at a second London site in Chancery Lane. The College's corporate services functions are based in Guildford. Each centre provides a full range of teaching accommodation, learning resources and academic and administrative support facilities.

The application for degree-awarding powers

- 10 The College discusses the possible future use of degree awarding powers (DAP) in its *Application* and the assessors also found detailed consideration in the minutes of the Board of Governors, and were able to explore the considerations in the *Application* with Governors and with members of the Board of Management. The College has stated that the initial use of DAP would be to build upon its existing qualifications, by assigning credit to programmes and courses offered to graduates so as to establish a framework of awards. Although post-degree level in terms of student experience, the College recognises that these programmes would carry credit at 'H' level. The assessors confirmed that the proposed qualifications, and the existing programmes offered by the College, were in line with the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ). The College would also envisage developing credit tariffs for its professional development courses 'within a coherent and demanding Masters programme'. With regard to undergraduate provision, it is envisaged that the College may wish to build on the existing close partnership to develop a joint College/OU Law degree. In this context the Governors stated that there is no intention at this time of establishing an independent undergraduate degree programme offered exclusively by the College. It is also worth noting that the College's Charter, in addition to granting powers to the corporation, specifically limits its objectives to the advancement of legal education. Thus, if the DAP application were to be successful, the Charter - as it currently exists - would restrict the awards that the College would be able to offer in future.

- 11 In a meeting with four members of the Board of Governors, the assessors explored further the wider potential use of DAP. They heard that the European context for legal education was particularly significant, and it was considered that degree awarding powers would assist the College in the marketing of its awards in view of the Bologna process. Another use might be in the context of a collaboration with the Sydney College of Law, with which the College has already established links. Finally, in discussion with the assessors, the Chief Executive Officer and the Chair of the Board of Governors suggested that the College might also at some point in the future seek to 'become responsible for' the undergraduate Law qualifications currently offered through the University of London External Degree scheme. These potential areas are necessarily speculative at the moment.

Previous audits and reviews

- 12 As the College is a privately funded institution, there are no previous audits or subject assessment outcomes to take into account. During the scrutiny, the reviewers read reports on the work of the College by its professional accrediting bodies (see below paragraphs 27 and 38).

Criterion A: GOVERNANCE AND ACADEMIC MANAGEMENT

Governance

- 13 The College's Royal Charter, granted in 1975, provides in its schedules detailed requirements for the constitution and meetings of the Board of Governors (BoG), and for the appointment of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and the Board of Management (BoM). The Charter confers authority to the Board of Governors for the oversight of the management of the College and its business, including its academic activities, with a strong line of accountability from the CEO. Until recently the membership of the Board consisted entirely of eminent individuals drawn from the legal profession. However, a recent review of governance (see below paragraph 15) recommended that membership be widened to include those with expertise in business and higher education. This recommendation was accepted and the current Board of Governors now includes individuals formerly occupying senior positions in business and universities as well as senior partners from the legal profession, including magistrates and judges. Over the period of the current review, the Board has been chaired by Ms Judith Hanratty, formerly Company Secretary at BP plc, where she was responsible for introducing a new model of corporate governance.
- 14 The BoG meets five times a year and attendance by external governors is generally good. The CEO and all other members of the BoM attend, thereby ensuring that whatever the topic or issue under discussion there is always someone with direct line management responsibility present to answer any queries or concerns that governors might have. The agenda for meetings is sectionalised, as is often the case for bodies dealing with a wide range of issues. First the CEO presents his report which concentrates on the main strategic issues facing the College and how developments since the last meeting impinge on these. In addition to providing progress reports on attaining business plan targets, recent CEO reports have covered: updating governors on Law Society issues, including changes in the monitoring regime for accredited programmes and developments in the Training Framework Review; international initiatives being pursued by the College (e.g. in India and China); and

progress on the Moorgate estates development. The second section of the agenda contains items relating to strategy, business and financial planning, appointments etc. which require BoG approval. There is often an overlap in these agenda items and those raised in the CEO's report. The final section of the agenda consists of information items on marketing strategy, quarterly financial forecasts, bank position, student admissions and actions against the College. Briefing papers are provided for each of these. As is customary, the BoG has a number of more specialised committees reporting to it. These are: Finance; Audit; Nominations; Remuneration; Strategy and Trust (which is responsible for the allocation of specific charitable funds of the College). Each of these has similar terms of reference to those of equivalent bodies in other HE institutions.

- 15 Through its Governors, the College has recently demonstrated its willingness to identify and manage organisational development and change by commissioning two in-depth reviews of the governance and management of the College, and implementing the major recommendations of each of these. The *Yates Report*, on college governance, resulted in widening the membership of the Board to include expertise in business. The *Randall Report*, relating to academic management and assessment arrangements, resulted in the establishment of an academic registry function and an acceptance of the need for a separate responsibility in the senior management team for the overall coordination of academic matters. Furthermore, in its *Application* the College stated that it would in the near future consider introducing two new committees to enhance the effectiveness of College governance: one a Standing Committee consisting of a small number of governors, the CEO and the Deputy CEO that would meet between BoG meetings; the other an Academic Audit Committee to oversee academic performance and, in particular, to monitor on behalf of the Governors all of the College's systems for managing academic quality and standards. By the time the assessors had begun their work both of these committees had been established. Indeed, in considering the business plan and the budget at its June meeting, the new Standing Committee agreed recommendations from the DCEO for changes to financial policy, with implications for the timing of additional pension contributions and future reserves policy. These amendments were subsequently approved by the full meeting of the BoG. The assessors judged that these committees would serve to strengthen the lines of accountability within an already effective governance structure

- 16 The assessors attended two BoG meetings (in July and October). These were effectively chaired, and once an agenda item had been introduced—often by one of the senior managers—the subsequent discussion was led by the external governors. All participated in the discussion and displayed a firm grasp of the underlying issues. The assessors formed the view that the BoG is a strong body and discharges effectively its strategic and financial responsibilities, including risk management. Furthermore, they believe that any proposal from senior management to deviate from agreed strategies and plans would need to be extremely convincing, with evidence of benefits clearly demonstrated, before the BoG would sanction such a change. In their meetings with members of the Board and through observation of Board meetings the assessors judged that the College benefited from a highly experienced and fully engaged Board.

Structures and Leadership

- 17 The College's organisational structure, together with the responsibilities of all office holders as well as all boards and committees, is clearly set out in the *Application*. The CEO is responsible for providing academic leadership, both within the College and without, as well as being responsible for the executive management of the institution. He is assisted by two senior officers: the Deputy CEO, who is responsible for finance and corporate services and also acts as College Secretary; and the Senior Academic Registrar (SAR) who is responsible for all curriculum and assessment-related activities, for the Registry, student services and widening participation. This post is analogous to that of Pro Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in a university and if the application is successful, the post-holder is likely to lead in this area, and to chair a proposed Academic Board which would oversee all matters relating to academic standards and quality assurance (see below paragraph 36). These three staff, together with the three directors of the College's main programmes, constitute the Board of Management. Additionally, the Director of Quality Assurance also has the title and status of director, but does not attend the BoM, in order, the College argues, to maintain her independence as a guardian of quality (see also below paragraph 29).
- 18 Each member of the BoM, other than the CEO, is responsible for a range of activities and for the line management of a team of directors and departmental heads who operate below BoM level, mainly in the College's regional centres. Through this structure the BoM therefore delegates the responsibility for the overall management and development of programmes to the three directors of programmes and their core teams. Programme directors in turn delegate responsibility for the management and delivery of the programmes at each of the regional centres to their deputies at these centres. Information therefore flows from the central management to local centres, and also across centres in order to support coherence of programme delivery.
- 19 In observing the work of the BoM, assessors noted that issues relating to the three programme areas figure prominently on the agendas of BoM meetings, and it was clear that the BoM collectively is very much in touch with what is happening on all College programmes. The lines of command and communication from the BoM down to programme teams within each regional centre are clearly defined and information flows freely up and down as well as across centres, via the deputy director meetings. At the implementation stage the annual business plan is monitored by the BoM which, at its monthly meetings, receives reports from programme directors on how each programme is progressing. The reports are themselves the result of the continuous monitoring that takes place across the College in deputy director meetings, supplemented by local monitoring at centre level. The BoM is therefore kept abreast of any emerging issues and progress towards meeting business plan targets.
- 20 In addition to the directors of programmes, each of the College's five regional centres has a regional director who is responsible for both the day-to-day management of the centre (delivery of programmes to a high standard, efficient use of resources and customer care) and for developing and managing links with the regional legal community and other organisations. The regional directors report back to the CEO or Deputy CEO as well as liaising with each other. The *Application* clearly regards these posts as having a crucial role in the organisation, describing them as "the guardians and advocates of the College Strategic and Business Plans within the centres and

regionally". Within each centre there is also a deputy director position responsible the management of each programme, and deputy directors with responsibility for administration, and for staffing and training. While responsible for the functional areas within their centres, these will also report to their respective directors within the central organisation. Under the chair of the regional director, the deputies in each centre constitute the membership of the Centre Executive Board. Thus the relationship between the central College authority and the regional centres is tightly managed in a matrix which provides strong support for central leadership, while also supporting programmes and staff across the regional centres.

- 21 The ownership of each of the College's programmes lies with a programme team, which will include all those teaching on the programme. These teams are college-wide, with the exception of the BVC programme which is only taught in London. Within each programme team smaller organisational units are established consisting of the teaching teams which are responsible for course design and delivery. The College attaches great importance to all aspects of course design - learning materials, assessments and classroom delivery - in ensuring that uniformly high quality programmes are delivered across all centres. While each programme is supported by a group of specialist designers, all members of the teaching team are involved in the design and evaluation process, and this is facilitated by a computer-based communication system (*Elite*) which allows feedback between designers and others to be generated easily and quickly.

Planning and resource allocation

- 22 Resource allocation decisions are determined primarily by the College's strategic objectives and business plans but are also influenced by norms imposed by professional bodies (e.g. prescribed student-staff ratios) as well as other norms established by the College. The BoM develops the College's strategic plan and business plan for submission to the BoG which is ultimately responsible for financial planning and resource allocation, advised by its Strategy and Finance Committee. Judged by the Annual Report and Accounts for the last two years (2004 and 2005), financial planning appears to be very successful. In this context the assessors noted that as a private institution, the College guards its financial information carefully, especially from its competitors. This also caused the assessors some difficulty, with the BoG reluctant, in the first instance, to divulge full information on business planning, though this was later rectified. The financial statements for the College for 2004-05, which in the view of the independent auditors give a "true and fair view of the state of affairs at the College", show a substantial operating surplus. They also show a very healthy level of reserves (general funds), although when account is taken of the FRS17 deficit on the defined pension scheme, the level of free reserves is lower than the College's target range of 4-9 months of normal expenditures. This is a not unusual position for a charity and neither the BoG nor the Auditors believe it will have any impact on the College delivering its Business Plan. During the current financial year the budgetary situation is affected adversely by capital and revenue expenditure on the new Moorgate premises. Notwithstanding this the College has no outstanding bank loans and has "sufficient liquidity to meet projected operational requirements including capital expenditures". The BoG has declared itself satisfied that the fulfilment of the business plan over this year and the next two will enable free reserves to recover substantially while at the same time allowing the necessary additional pension fund contributions. It should be added that, as it is in effect a

commercial organisation, the College has every incentive to ensure the probity and appropriateness of its own financial viability

- 23 In this planning process all proposed courses of action are designated as being of low, medium or high risk. In the overall business plan submitted to the BoG all projects and programmes within the plan have a risk factor attached. In addition, success criteria are also identified for each project and these are used for monitoring and evaluating the key strategies in the plan.
- 24 The College has robust procedures for matching academic planning to resource allocation. All its programmes, especially the three principal ones, are required each year to set out their resource needs. Resources are allocated to programmes in accordance with the approved business plans of those programmes. The planning process starts in the lower echelons of the organisation and follows an iterative process. The detailed plans for both academic programmes and service delivery are developed by programme teams of academics and support staff. Before being passed upwards to the BoM they are discussed with the Director of Quality Assurance. These are then considered by the BoM, with the Deputy Chief Executive, who is also in charge of finances, leading the discussion. The approved resource claims, mediated as necessary, become part of the business plans presented to the Board of Governors. Two assessors attended the meeting of the Governors which discussed the business plans and were able to confirm the appropriateness of the process.
- 25 Programme and course administration is facilitated by the work of the Academic Registry. A recent strengthening of its establishment has led to a number of improvements in the administrative systems underpinning such management. One example is the introduction of the *Elite* software system for student records and course data which is accessible by both students and staff. Another is the improvement in the quantity and quality of data used for monitoring and evaluating academic programmes. The College has also implemented a web-based system for electronic communication (email), documentation and record-keeping (*Groupwise*) which greatly facilitates efficient communication across its centres. Programme managers expressed satisfaction with the resources they receive to meet their programme objectives and academic staff are able to devote most of their time towards achieving these, with strong support for course administration tasks. The assessors found that the matrix system of management fosters good communications across the College as well as a clear sense of institutional identity and academic community.

Summary

- 26 The assessor team therefore came to the following conclusions under this section of the degree awarding powers criteria. The Board of Governors of the College is highly experienced body which is fully engaged; recent changes in membership, though slight, have provided an added dimension to the expertise that the Board brings to the governance of the College. The Board rigorously discharges its strategic and financial responsibilities; it has also initiated organisational changes, both in administration and management, that should serve the College well in future. Likewise, the senior management team (BoM) is strong and effective. Each member of the team has clearly defined responsibilities, which are effectively discharged

through a matrix network of deputies across all five regional centres. Discussions with staff made it clear that the management structures that are in place are not only well understood but are adhered to and used effectively in practice. The management of College wide communication is complex given the College's organisation around five regional centres - including two sites in London. However the team observed clear and effective channels of communication through the programme management teams and the Centre Executive Boards; the latter meeting on a fortnightly basis to review plans and discuss issues arising from the course meetings. Discussions with staff groups, programme managers and others indicated that the management arrangements that are in place work well and substantial attention is given to consistency of delivery. Senior staff of the College work effectively together, on academic issues such as curriculum management and development as well as on the delivery of programmes and student services. The result is a tightly managed set of academic programmes delivered at a uniformly high standard.

Criterion B: ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND QUALITY ASSURANCE

Introduction

- 27 The College's development of arrangements for assuring the quality and standards of its provision have derived from, and been shaped by, the regulatory frameworks of its professional accrediting bodies and the requirement to respond appropriately to these frameworks. Thus the professional bodies are responsible for the appointment of many of its external examiners and for the review visits and revalidations which serve to confirm the College's capacity to maintain the delivery of its programmes. Nonetheless, it now also exercises authority independently, through its design and assessment of courses and in the case of the GDL, by appointing its own external examiners. It has its own admissions process, and the development of an Academic Registry has been a crucial development, enabling the College to develop statistical information capable of ensuring comparable standards across the centres, and to monitor external examiners' reports.

The College's regulatory framework

- 28 The College's central regulatory systems include an admissions office and within the Registry a sophisticated system for dealing with matters relating to assessment and progress of students, albeit within the constraints of the professional bodies. Both work closely with centres and programmes. The assessor team was able to satisfy itself that this process is very effective, ensuring, for example, a high level of consistency across the five centres in assessment and progression of students. There is an effective moderation system for marking, a major role for external examiners, and the matrix structure across the centres ensures that all senior staff in the centres are in touch with, and in line with, each other. The local Centre Executive Boards play an important part in the transmission and coordination of policy and regulations, and their development, as the team was able to ascertain through a series of visits to the centres to observe these Boards in operation.
- 29 A major initiative taken by the College in 2002 was the establishment of a new Academic Registry, responsible, through the Academic Registrar, for assessment regulations and protocols, appeals and complaints. The Registry also monitors the

receipt of external examiners' reports, and produces a digest of issues raised by externals, which becomes a part of the action plan for the relevant programme. A further significant development undertaken by the Registry has been the production of course statistics on a comprehensive scale, covering, not only course achievement information, but also data on gender, ethnicity and disability. It also provides comparative data on each of the five centres. These cover all the different modes of delivery of the courses (see below paragraph 51).

- 30 The statistics are produced under the supervision of the deputy academic registrar. The Registry produces a guide to the production of annual statistics, covering annual reports, resit examinations, mid-session examinations, mock examinations and a number of LPC assessments. The assessor team agreed that these reports constitute an invaluable contribution to understanding the intricacies of student progression and achievement across the College, as well as identifying areas of weakness among particular categories of students. One caveat is that the cohort analysis for the three principal programmes does not include students withdrawing, intermitting or resitting, and so cannot capture the full complement of students, somewhat distorting the statistics. This, though, is a minor flaw in an otherwise excellent analytical tool for the course teams and managers.
- 31 In 1999 the College established a central committee responsible for taking an overview of quality assurance, the Academic Quality Council (AQC), which is chaired by the Director of Quality Assurance (DQA). This is a full time post reporting to the Chief Executive and the BoG. To secure a level of distanced independence, the DQA does not normally participate directly in BoM meetings. The Academic Quality Council is responsible for overseeing the quality assurance procedures of the College, with membership drawn from senior staff *ex officio*, a representative from each centre, and with four external members. It meets twice a year, though a recent development has been the establishment of a sub-committee to deal with matters between meetings. Reports will be made from AQC to the recently established Academic Audit Committee of the BoG, to inform and assure the governors on quality assurance matters, and strengthening existing reporting lines.
- 32 The team's initial assessment of these structures was that the link between quality assurance systems and management responsibilities might be insufficient for effective assurance and enhancement. The assessors were, however, ultimately reassured that the AQC carried out its business conscientiously and, within its remit, effectively, a view which was reinforced by their reading of the deliberations of the Council and from observing the meeting of the AQC held in December 2005. The principal business of this meeting was to consider the annual monitoring reports of the College's courses and to approve their action plans. This was carried out effectively and critically, despite voluminous, not to say excessive, documentation. The committee also considered reports from the various support services. The courses were primarily examined through their action plans, guided by the course directors to significant issues. The meeting was well run and, despite the length of the meeting extending over some six hours, well sustained and effectively chaired by the Director of Quality Assurance.
- 33 The development of the AQC and its work provides the College with the means to satisfy itself of the quality of its academic and professional provision and constitutes a valuable framework on which to build further, if granted degree awarding powers. In the view of the assessors, the current arrangements could be improved, by, for

example, holding more than two AQC meetings per year, and clarifying the reporting relationships between the DQA, the Chief Executive and the BoM. It will also be important that the division of responsibility between AQC and the newly constituted Governors' Academic Audit Committee be developed with a full recognition of the necessary boundaries of interest. However, these questions may well be overtaken by revised structures (see below paragraph 36). Overall, the assessors considered that the current regulatory framework is appropriate to the College's current status.

Appropriate plans for the granting of its own awards

- 34 The regulatory framework for the College's awards has obviously been strongly influenced by its relationship with the Law Society and the Bar Council since it has had to meet the requirements and standards of both these bodies. However, in recent years the extent of this external regulation has diminished and the College has assumed greater independence, as, for example, in the redesign of the LPC programme and its accompanying assessment strategy. As a result of the developments, which have flowed from this greater independence, together with the establishment of the Academic Registry, much of the framework required for the regulation of the academic processes that necessarily accompany the awarding of degrees is already in place.
- 35 In its *Application* for degree awarding powers, the College outlined some of the changes it intended to make when granted such powers. These included using the powers to create awards based on its existing programmes, to grant credit for this award to students with an honours degree in Law or a GDL and to develop credit tariffs for its professional development courses. In discussion with the assessors, the College further proposed establishing a College Degree Awarding Board, with internal and external membership, strengthening its Registry functions, and considering changes to its Academic Quality Council.
- 36 In a further development towards the end of the scrutiny, the Senior Academic Registrar produced a paper considering necessary developments and changes in more detail. He explored the issue of credit rating and credit transfer at various levels, based almost entirely on the existing qualifications, GDL, LPC and BVC, and proposing in future to offer an LLB or an LLM award. In terms of structures, the assessors saw an evolution in the College's internal discussions over the period of the scrutiny. The end result was a proposal to establish an Academic Board; the main function of the new Board would be to oversee and scrutinise the recommendations of two new sub-committees—one dealing with standards, the other with quality assurance. The latter would replace the current AQC. It was expected that the constitution of the proposed Academic Board would provide for a considerable increase in membership, including a preponderance of internal members, and that it would have a reporting line to the Board of Governors (this would be analogous to the Senate reporting to the Council in a university). Appropriate changes to the work of the Registry were also outlined. In the view of the assessors this revised committee structure would strengthen the existing mechanisms for quality assurance and extend the regulatory framework in ways appropriate for the support of the awarding function. There are remaining areas for attention: as already noted, the relationship with the Governors' Academic Audit committee will need to be formalised, and there are still issues relating to credit rating which will need to be resolved as the proposed new structures are further developed.

- 37 The assessor team was of the opinion that the College has pursued the question of determining appropriate new structures to support degree awarding powers with care, including the consideration and discussion in committee of well-informed proposals. The assessors understand that the College will make limited initial use of DAP if they are granted, and that by then the structural issues raised during the scrutiny will have been fully clarified. It seems likely, therefore, that the College will be able to develop an appropriate regulatory framework for its own awards. The Academic Registry's current and future strength will provide an important administrative machine supporting this framework.

The definition and security of academic standards

- 38 The academic standards for the majority of the College's provision, particularly the LPC and the BVC programmes, are determined to a substantial extent by the relevant professional bodies, and reinforced on a regular basis through periodic pastoral and assessment visits by those bodies to satisfy themselves of the standards of awards. A recent visit by the Law Society (September 2005) resulted in the LPC programme receiving 'commendable' in all six categories of assessment, an excellent outcome. The Bar Council also visited the College in November/ December 2005, and oral feedback, given to the December AQC meeting, indicated that the course would be given a 'confidence in provision' rating. In addition, however, the College has used its own procedures in a number of ways to secure standards. It has begun to carry out its intention, set out in the *Application*, to align its awards with the FHEQ, on which it places considerable emphasis in the context of the growing importance of European Law and the need for consistency across the European Union. Though the assessors did not explore the FHEQ with the College in detail, staff in a number of meetings demonstrated their knowledge of the framework.

QAA's Academic Infrastructure

- 39 The assessor team found that the College was making increasing reference to the QAA's *Code of Practice* in areas where it was relevant to its work and where it had independent decision-making authority. In general those aspects of the *Code* addressing academic quality assurance are at present secured indirectly through the requirements of the professional bodies, rather than through the direct and explicit initiative of the College. The assessors were able, however, to confirm that in some areas, notably the Library and Information Services, the Careers Service, and support for students with disabilities, the *Code of Practice* was significantly utilised. With regard to other aspects of the QAA Academic Infrastructure, the College has made use of the subject benchmark statement for Law, and has fully informative course descriptions and handbooks in place which generally cover the requirements for programme specifications.

Comparability of standards

- 40 The professional bodies as national bodies covering the whole of legal education in higher education institutions, provide through their review and revalidation procedures a major plank in ensuring the comparability of standards for the programmes offered by the College. While the College has no specific policy on ensuring comparability of standards with other providers, its external examiners, whether appointed by professional bodies (LPC/ BVC) or by the College (GDL) are expected to comment on comparability of standards, and do so in their reports (see

also below). In seeking to assure comparability the College has also made use, in the GDL, of the Law subject benchmark statement. The College has the benefit, in securing standards, of a high level of entry qualification in its students. Admission to all three of the College's main programmes (LPC, BVC and GDL) is by graduate entry and approximately two thirds of entrants have first or upper second class honours. Students were in a position to compare standards with their previous degree-level study, and were clear that the programmes were equally or more demanding.

- 41 Where the College shows particular strengths is in ensuring the standards of its internal assessment and marking, with a rigorous double marking and moderation process, which is capable of ensuring comparability between the different modes of delivery for the LPC and the GDL. In this it is assisted by the statistical analysis of results provided by the Registry. The College is continually seeking to improve its handling of comparability between centres, and the assessors noted, at the AQC meeting in December 2005, that an additional layer of moderation was added to the LPC process, involving three scripts taken from one centre, copied to all other centres, and used as a device for initially standardising marking. In similar vein, the GDL course monitors marking trends and warns individual markers if they deviate more than 3 per cent from the norm. There is also a rigorous system for concessions in the case of illness or other reason for absence from an examination which, the assessors found, was implemented scrupulously.
- 42 The assessors were able to observe both course team meetings and examination boards for all three main courses. As a result they were able to confirm that the college has sound and durable policies for the maintenance of the standards of its awards.

Programme approval, monitoring and review

- 43 The professional bodies also have a significant part to play in programme approval, monitoring and review. The College has developed its own systems to ensure that it can comply with, and add to, the external requirements placed on it. Programme approval is based on the design, curriculum and assessment strategies devised and established by programme teams. The three main programmes offered by the College have been in existence for some time, so while relevant updating and modification is ongoing, review and re-approval are the more significant processes.
- 44 The assessors were able to read the documentation for the re-approval of the LPC programme in 2004, and to satisfy themselves that the programme had produced an evaluative review of the previous five years and a coherent set of modules and associated assessments, for the approval procedures of the Law Society. Though this body gives the final approval, the College had arranged, as is its normal practice, an internal event, which included external members. The assessors were also able to read the documentation for an application to the Bar Council, in June 2005, for the validation of a part-time route with weekend delivery. Similarly, the GDL programme, which is due for re-approval on 2006/07, was found to have prepared effective supporting documentation for the process. There is an established link between course development and approval and resource allocation and all new developments have to be specifically approved by AQC. In discussion with members of the AQC, the assessors were told that it was possible for that body to require satisfaction on resources before approving a proposal, and gave an example of this occurring.

Overall the quality of the course submissions examined, together with the record of approval events, gave the assessors a high level of confidence in the College's internal processes for review and approval.

- 45 Programme monitoring, called annual monitoring reporting (AMR), is applied to all courses and modes of delivery, and requires each programme to produce an account of the year, including external examiner reports and an action plan for the programme. The AMRs are submitted to the AQC for approval and comment. The professional bodies also play a key role in the annual monitoring process, as reports also have to be submitted to them. There is a handbook available to all staff which provides a set of 'protocols for approval, validation and monitoring of courses' and this provides details of the policies and procedures for course design, monitoring & review. The SAR and the DQA oversee the implementation of the quality assurance processes; the latter in particular ensures that annual monitoring is undertaken across the College for each course including CPD programmes. Regular monitoring and planning takes place through the consideration of programme action plans which are considered at the course management meetings. These meet either weekly (BVC) or monthly (LPC & GDL). The GDL management team also has fortnightly 'virtual' meetings.
- 46 Two assessors attended the relevant meeting of AQC in December 2005, and were able to observe the monitoring procedures. The meeting focussed on the reports for each course offered by the College with particular attention being paid to centre and course action plans for the LPC and course reports for the GDL and BVC. The documentation was lengthy and detailed, and compiled to a high standard. The external members of AQC played an active part in discussions. However, the assessors noted that, in practice, it was the action plan, which was the main, even the sole, subject of examination. One external member of the Council noted the absence of analysis of student feedback from the action plans of two of the centres. Progress on the action plans is monitored at the May meeting of AQC as well as at the regular meetings of the course teams. However there does not appear to be a mechanism for communicating progress on the action plans to the students.
- 47 The assessors concluded that these relatively minor deficiencies did not qualify their overall view that the annual monitoring process was thorough and effective and is well handled by both the course teams and by AQC, though the College should consider its means of communicating actions to students.

Curriculum design and development

- 48 As indicated above, curriculum design and learning support are devolved to programme teams with oversight by the Directors BVC, Operational (LPC) and Academic (GDL) for the main programmes. Once again, the curriculum for these core programmes is to a large extent determined by the professional bodies. They also take a proactive role in the review and revalidation of the programmes and changes to the curriculum, as well as maintaining an overview, through this process, of the College's teaching and assessment strategies. Through the College's senior management there appear to be robust mechanisms for managing curricular development. Senior managers for course programmes have clear roles and responsibilities for design and development.

- 49 Meetings with directors, and observations of management meetings confirmed that curriculum design is determined by the respective programme management team although it may also be informed by programme leaders, tutors and students through feedback via *Elite* and student evaluation. Actual design of materials and assessment is undertaken by members of the programme design team who are specifically appointed for this task through promotion. Designers are provided with induction and training to support this role. Thus curriculum development and enhancement has a high level of recognition and reward in the College. The assessors felt that the approach taken by the College to the design and development of the curriculum was a commendable method which ensured a high level of consistency and control of its programmes across all centres.
- 50 There are clear protocols for seeking approval to modify existing awards and propose new awards. However in reality the College takes a very centralised approach to change and generally any proposed changes will be identified at a senior level either by the BoM or by the course management team, rather than at a local level. All such proposals are subject to scrutiny by the DQA and depending on the nature of the proposal may be subject to an internal and external validation event involving the Professional bodies. Proposals and action plans are then considered by the Academic Quality Council. The limitation here is that AQC only meets twice per year, so there can be a delay of some months between a decision to seek change and its consideration by AQC.
- 51 The College's programmes do not currently have multiple pathways. There are however multiple modes of delivery. For example, the LPC is delivered in full-time, weekend and part-time mode; the GDL in full-time, weekend and distance learning mode and the BVC full-time with a part-time mode under consideration. Each mode of delivery for the LPC is subject to the same evaluation and report to AQC as part of AMR. The quality assurance arrangements address consistency of delivery and evaluate student achievement between the different modes.
- 52 The College also awards certificates to participants in its Continuing Professional Development programmes which are delivered to a range of clients e.g. Land Registry; Personal Injury Lawyers. All courses in the College's professional development portfolio are evaluated and subject to annual monitoring review. It also is an approved deliverer of the Qualified Lawyers Transfer Test (QLTT), which allows lawyers from other jurisdictions to qualify to practice in the UK, the course being delivered mainly overseas. The Law Society approves all such providers of which there are currently three. At a recent review by the Law Society the College's accreditation for the QLTT was re-approved; the preceding internal review had noted that two external examiners had been in post for 14 years and had recommended a rolling programme for the appointment of its external examiners, a point which the Law Society review subsequently endorsed. As a result, the College had recently appointed two new external examiners. In similar vein, a course in Australian Constitutional Law was approved, though the assessors observed that one of the external assessors appointed to advise on the course was a member of the Open University, with which institution the College has a relationship for design of course material. These were however exceptional departures from a generally scrupulous use of external advisors and examiners.
- 53 The assessor team reviewed in some detail the support for the distance learning mode of the GDL programme. It found that the materials for this course are extremely

comprehensive, providing the student with a high degree of interaction with the text including reflective exercises, legal research etc. They are of an excellent standard and provide the student with an equivalent experience to full-time face-to-face programmes.

- 54 There are currently no mechanisms in place for managing programme closure; nor was there evidence within the documentation that programme closures had occurred. The lack of such a procedure is understandable, given the history of the College, its current provision, and its accreditation relationships.

Assessment strategies and external examiners

- 55 The strategies for learning & assessment are developed for each programme by the directors and deputy directors of that programme. They are therefore consistent within units and programmes across all centres. The College does not have an overarching teaching, learning and assessment strategy but again this can be found reflected inherently at course level in the definitive course documentation for each course, which is comprehensive and meets the requirements for validation by the respective professional bodies. The aims and objectives of each programme are set out in the programme handbooks. Each handbook contains the aims and detailed learning outcomes; the link between learning outcomes and assessment is clearly stated and assessment practices are designed to enable the student to meet the declared learning outcomes for each of the core programmes. Assessment practices for the vocational programmes and the GDL are approved by the respective professional bodies. Assessments are designed by course design teams and confirmed by the external examiners who are required to approve each element of assessment. Although there are as yet no programme specifications adhering fully to the QAA guidance, much of the information which one would expect to find in the programme specification can be found in the programme handbook e.g. aims and outcomes, assessment methods, teaching and learning strategies. The assessors found evidence that the course specific teaching and learning policies were well embedded; that assessment strategies were reliable, valid and reviewed on a regular basis.
- 56 The assessment procedures for each programme are monitored as part of AMR. Tutors are also expected to provide feedback to the assessment design team, usually via *Elite*, on how the assessment worked and whether changes are required for subsequent years. This feedback is also considered by the programme management team. They are also reviewed and revalidated as part of the cycle of review etc carried out by the College and the professional bodies.
- 57 External examiners are appointed to all courses. The respective professional bodies appoint the external examiners for the LPC & BVC. The College appoints its own externals to the GDL and these appointments are approved by a sub-committee of AQC. On appointment the external examiners receive an external examiner pack which provides details of the role and what is expected. However it was noted that there is currently no formal induction provided by the College (the Law Society briefs its appointed external examiners). All externals are expected to attend the appropriate examination board. There also is an expectation that the external examiners will visit the various centres independently of any assessment board to meet with staff and students and there is evidence from meetings and in the external examiners reports that this takes place. Some externals are also involved in

providing the staff development sessions for College staff as part of a 'summer core seminars' programme.

- 58 The GDL external examiners are appointed to moderate specific subjects within the programme. They are normally senior academics who have a high status within the legal academic community, and are well known in their particular legal field. The externals for the LPC are appointed to examine a subject at one or more particular centre(s). There is a high degree of moderation of examination scripts undertaken internally to ensure consistency between centres. Anonymous marking is practiced across the College. The College has undertaken its own review of marking practices on the LPC to ensure even greater consistency. The Academic Registrar has developed a set of assessment protocols for each programme to ensure a common practice at the examination boards and during the assessment process. Observations of examination boards by assessors suggest that the College takes great care to ensure consistency between centres and that students are treated with scrupulous fairness.
- 59 External examiners produce a report following a set template. It was noted by the assessors that the quality of these reports could be variable and in a few cases lacked detailed comment. On occasions where externals failed to submit reports there was no obvious procedure for taking action, but there was evidence that where an external had failed to submit a report for two consecutive years, the College would ask them to resign. In some instances it is difficult for the College to take timely action, as there can be a delay in receipt of reports as these are submitted in the first instance to the Law Society. It was reported to assessors by LPC external examiners that they did not receive individual feedback on their reports; however this is the practice for the GDL programme. External examiners' reports play a significant role in the monitoring of standards and inform the annual monitoring review. The Registry tracks external examiners reports and produces documentation highlighting issues raised by externals which in turn inform the annual monitoring process. This report is also received by AQC. The Registry has undertaken a satisfaction survey of externals on the GDL and LPC to ascertain whether they are satisfied with assessment procedures and this report was received by AQC. Assessors noted from the report that externals were generally very satisfied with the procedures and that where issues have been raised the Registry is addressing them.

Assurance of learning resources

- 60 Learning resources and learning support needs are identified in review and validation documentation which will include detailed statements covering careers, IT, Library, student support. and special needs. The annual monitoring review will also address learning support issues as they relate to the delivery of a particular subject within a programme or the programme itself. However the assessor team found that the detail contained in the annual monitoring reports was variable with some centres providing very detailed reports and action plans which include learning support and other centres providing little analysis of learning support; although in all cases an action plan had been produced. The inconsistency of approach in the AMR reports was identified by the College at the 2005 AQC meeting and this is to be reviewed.
- 61 Learning support services carry out their own evaluations of their service but such reviews are not necessarily undertaken annually. In respect of some services an annual report is produced e.g. information services; pro bono work, but it is unclear

how far these are informed by any feedback, although the team were informed that focus groups are used from time to time. The assessors were provided with the report of the review of the careers service in 2005 which was detailed and reflective.

- 62 The College has a director of each main support service who has responsibility for oversight of the service across the centres. Centre directors and deputy directors have an overview of the annual needs for the local centre, based on student numbers and course developments. The centre annual reports and business plans identify particular needs and how these are being met.

Quality enhancement

- 63 Course teams meet frequently to discuss course related issues. The LPC, GDL and BVC meet monthly, throughout the year. The GDL has also introduced virtual meetings in the interval between meetings, and the BVC has one meeting for all staff. These are all minuted and the records are available to all staff. Any action required is then delegated to particular staff, and reported back to the team. The Regional centres also play a part in self-assessment. The matrix structure through the Centre Executive Boards encourages cross-fertilisation across courses. A recent example noted by the assessors was the careful planned approach to the use of on-line delivery through 'i-tutorials' which involved a clearly targeted programme of evaluation and staff development support in transferring innovative good practice across programmes.
- 64 There is a range of strategies in place for encouraging both internal and external expertise to be employed in programme design, approval and review. Internal College staff are represented on internal panels to review courses before formal visits of a professional body, and play a full part. Such panels also include at least two external members. Internal members are well represented on the AQC, both ex officio and as representatives of the five regional centres. There is also considerable involvement of external practitioners and academics on this body. The assessors found that the four external members of the Council played a full part in its deliberations. External examiners also provide a resource as advisers which the college can utilise when courses are being reviewed. It is also worth noting that many members of the College's staff are themselves external examiners for the professional bodies and their knowledge of other courses in universities can be of considerable value to the College.
- 65 The College addresses enhancement through a range of strategies and activities mentioned elsewhere in this report. Among these are: the planning meetings of programme teams and Centre Executive Boards; the work of AQC; the analysis of quantitative indicators provided by the Registry; the range of external contacts and positions taken by staff; the support to staff in gaining membership of professional and pedagogic bodies; the close links with the legal profession; and provision of a strategic staff development programme and summer workshops.
- 66 On the basis of this analysis, the assessors are satisfied that the College has secure structures in place for quality improvement and enhancement in the interests of students. It has the benefit of effective programme teams who meet regularly, Centre Executive Boards that encourage the sharing of good practice across the

programmes and centres, and staff who are well integrated with their wider community.

Summary

- 67 There is a commendable culture of evaluation and review of all aspects of teaching, learning and assessment. The College has particularly strong structures in place for curriculum design and development. The procedures for the management of assessment, including approval and moderation by external examiners, are effective and robust. External examiners are fully involved and play a key role in the process. Standards are reviewed and evaluated through annual monitoring, the professional review of programmes, and by examination boards. Thorough attention is given to ensuring consistency of standards across the College's programmes and centres. The combination of College procedures and the level of scrutiny internally and externally is demanding and may well exceed standard expectations of an institution with degree awarding powers. The assessors concluded that the College has in place robust arrangements for reviewing and maintaining academic standards across all of its programmes.

Criterion C: SCHOLARSHIP AND THE PEDAGOGICAL EFFECTIVENESS OF STAFF

Introduction

- 68 There are approximately 295 academic staff across 6 centres, of which 264 are lecturers. In addition the College has 20 staff involved in its professional development subsidiary, and a pool of 90 part-time visiting lecturers of whom around 20-30 will be employed in any particular year. There are robust arrangements in place for the appointment of academic staff with published recruitment criteria including a statement of core competencies. This includes a 'characteristics' statement for the role of a College lecturer; requirements include a first degree in law or a first degree in a non-law subject, normally at upper second class level or above, plus the CPE/GDL qualification. In addition staff must possess a professional qualification, either the LPC or BVC; some staff also have a postgraduate qualification. An analysis provided to the assessors showed that in addition to a first degree or GDL and professional qualification, 36 staff had a masters degree and four had been awarded a PhD; 22 staff had a teaching qualification, a proportion which is broadly in line with other institutions which have degree awarding powers. The assessor team confirmed from the CVs which were provided for each centre the high level of both professional and academic expertise. CVs of staff also showed a relatively high level of external engagement with 27 staff currently undertaking an external examiner role at other higher education institutions. Some staff act as assessors appointed by the Law Society or Bar Council to undertake review and assessment of their professional programmes. Some staff were also active in the legal learned societies, such as the Society of Legal Scholars, and on national legal review bodies.

Staff induction, development and appraisal

- 69 On appointment, staff have a detailed and comprehensive programme of induction to the work of the College. Staff who are new to lecturing attend, additionally, an extensive programme in teaching and learning designed by the Director (Staffing) or at some centres may attend a teacher training course at another institution if appropriate. In addition a mentor is appointed for each new member of academic staff who will then support them for a period of two years. The team noted that the College had a clear policy on the mentoring process and newly appointed staff reported on the value of this support.
- 70 The management of staff development and support is led by the full-time appointment of Director (Staffing); in addition there is a deputy director staffing post in each of the five centres, with responsibility for collating the staff development needs, for organising in-house workshops and monitoring attendance at external workshops/conferences. The College's staff development policy demonstrates a clear commitment to supporting all aspects of staff development including subject updating, pedagogy and engagement with legal practice. Staff development support generally focuses on pedagogic effectiveness and advanced scholarship rather than research, in line with the vocational nature of the programmes offered by the College. All staff are required to undertake scholarship in their particular discipline on an annual basis. Staff development needs are identified in part at the annual Career Management review although staff may make a request for staff development at any time. The College organises a programme of workshops in the summer at each centre which teaching staff are expected to attend. The team noted that the content of the programme was focussed on particular subjects within the GDL curriculum and therefore directly informs teaching. New initiatives in teaching and learning are also supported by staff development e.g. i-tutorials are being supported by staff development for the design team and for the teaching staff. Further recent examples of in-house development are a workshop on large group teaching for LPC staff and one on problem based learning for GDL staff, both of which underpin changes in the teaching of these programmes. The GDL is also in the process of introducing i-tutorials, following their successful introduction to the LPC. The assessors confirmed that the staff development opportunities available to staff were a valuable and commensurate support for the level and character of the awards being offered.
- 71 Evidence of the College's strong commitment to quality of teaching was corroborated by the CVs of staff. These require staff to provide a current statement on pedagogic development. The team noted that a high proportion of staff (194 in total i.e 65 per cent) were members of the Higher Education Academy (HEA); staff also have membership of the Society of Legal Scholars; membership of these bodies is encouraged and supported financially by the College. It is expected as part of career progression that all those staff progressing from lecturer to senior lecturer will become members of the HEA. Attendance at external workshops and conferences is also encouraged and supported financially. The current spend on external training is £94k per annum. Centre staff reported that all requests for staff development had been supported. In addition many staff maintain membership of their respective professional body and are encouraged to engage with practice. In meetings with centre staff, the assessors were informed that LPC teaching staff are expected to engage with practice for a minimum of 10 days per year.

- 72 The College carries out systematic observation of teaching with accompanying support arrangements. Classroom observations, which are seen as developmental in purpose, are also used to identify staff development needs where appropriate. Every member of academic staff is observed twice in each year by trained peer observers. The Director (Staffing) organises peer observations across the College for the LPC and produces a detailed report which highlights staff development issues which are addressed through an in-house programme. In addition each deputy director (Staffing) organises peer observation within the centre for the GDL programme. Feedback from staff to the assessors confirmed that staff found all aspects of the staff development process from recruitment through to CMR and peer observation to be effective and supportive.
- 73 All staff undergo an annual Career Management Review (CMR). The CMR is also regarded as a developmental activity and is conducted by trained staff at each centre, who are not necessarily the line manager of their appraisee. CMR is designed to review career development, particularly progression to the senior lecturer grade, and also to identify any staff development needs. There are transparent criteria for progression from lecturer to senior lecturer; the latter being the career grade at the College. Further promotion is to Director level or to Associate or full Professorships. Meetings with staff confirmed that CMR took place annually and was welcomed by staff as an integral part of identifying career progression needs. There is a staff development handbook on Training, Development, and Career Progression. Also such policies can be accessed by staff via Groupwise and the College's intranet.
- 74 Support staff can avail themselves of both in-house and external opportunities for training and professional development. In-house activities might be specifically tailored to meet individual needs, or might involve centre-based programmes that are open to all staff (e.g. Equality and Diversity training). Examples of external opportunities available to support staff might range from advanced Excel training to part-time MBA study. Although a global figure for training and development of support staff is not available, the Academic Registrar informed the assessors that the annual budget for Registry staff is £500 per head.

Summary

- 75 The assessors found that the College's staff are appropriately qualified to teach on the professional degree level programmes offered by the College and they are given a high level of support on appointment, and in the progression of their career. The assessors found a substantial commitment on the part of the College to staff development and scholarship. The assessors believe that staff development needs are readily identified and are well supported. The College's medium term plans in respect of awards do not include research-based higher degrees, and therefore assessors did not consider that the relative weakness of higher level research activity was an issue for significant concern at this time; indeed it is balanced by a higher level of commitment to pedagogic development and scholarship relevant to the professional vocational context. This dimension of staff expertise should, however, be kept under review in the light of any future developments in the College's portfolio of qualifications.

Criterion D: THE ENVIRONMENT SUPPORTING THE DELIVERY OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES

Introduction

- 76 The teaching and learning infrastructure for the College is based on its regional centres, each of which has a regional director overseeing its operation. Each centre has a library, IT facilities, a careers and pro bono centre, and access to student counselling. Each centre also has an administrative office which supports general programme management. The material resources (accommodation, PCs, software, intranet) seen by the assessors at the College's regional centres were of a very high standard and were praised by students. Students often made positive comparisons regarding the library and IT facilities offered by the College and those experienced in their undergraduate programmes in other higher education institutions. There were no evident weaknesses identified by the assessors in respect of student support services.
- 77 The assurance of the learning environment is devolved to each of the College's Centres, and is managed by the Regional Director supported by the Deputy Director Administration who is responsible for 'the delivery of an efficient and effective infrastructure within College policies'. Each centre produces a business plan which is used to support and develop the learning environment and meet identified needs. In addition, in the central College management there are Directors of Information services, Careers and Pro Bono (although aspects of these functions are also devolved to the centres) and the Academic Registrar, all of whom determine college-wide policies and practices and contribute to evaluation and planning.

Student support

- 78 Students on the LPC are sent detailed pre-enrolment information which provides a very detailed explanation of what is expected in studying on the course. All programmes have formal detailed induction programmes which effectively introduce students to their studies. In meetings students expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the induction arrangements. All students on the GDL, LPC and BVC receive not only a course handbook but also subject handbooks/manuals and are given access to a range of learning resources and pre-entry preparatory materials in advance of the commencement of their courses. Materials are also available on *Elite*. In meetings with assessors students expressed a high level of satisfaction with all aspects of the quality of the course material and on several occasions favourable comparisons were made with their previous experience at university.
- 79 The College has a special needs policy and also a policy for managing the assessments of dyslexic students. Each centre has a designated special needs tutor. A learning contract is agreed between the tutor and the student. There is also a concessions system which allows students to claim a concession in respect of assessment on grounds of health and personal circumstances. In meetings with the assessors the few students who had accessed the student support service and made use of concessions felt that the system had worked well.

- 80 The College operates a free and confidential counselling service that is available to all students and staff in all centres. The service is run by specialist counsellors whose services are “bought in” from the Open Door organisation. When the counsellors are not available during evenings and night time students can call a confidential telephone advice line (Nightline), a service available at all centres as a result of the College entering into collaborative arrangements with local universities.
- 81 Personal tutors are provided with information on counselling and are reminded that part of their role as ‘front line’ staff is, when appropriate, to refer students with personal problems to the Counselling Service. Students can either ring the counsellors direct to make an appointment or ‘drop in’ to the counselling suite that exists in each centre. There is no waiting list for appointments at any of the centres. Discussions with students revealed that while most are aware of the existence of the Service, very few had personal experience of it. However, the few who had spoke highly of it.
- 82 Although there is no formal monitoring of the counselling service, the counsellors report directly to the local deputy director (Administration) who deals with problems and takes requests for additional resources to the Centre Executive Board. Two years ago additional resources were allocated to the Service as a result of a request from the counsellors. As far as the assessors are able to judge the service works well. There is no excess demand for the service and all seeking help are readily catered for.

Careers Service, pro bono, and employer liaison

- 83 The College has a strongly vocational commitment to preparing its students for the legal profession and accordingly the careers service provides excellent support to ensure that as many students as possible secure training contracts. The careers service staff in each of the College centres interact with the local profession who support the student mentoring programme for the LPC and GDL, and the Pro Bono work at each centre. In this context, the assessors were informed that, in the case of each centre, regional links cover a widely defined geographical area. Thus, for instance, the Guildford Centre offers a Legal Advice Service which is used by the public both locally and more widely in the South of England. The careers service, with 23 staff, is the largest specialist careers service for law in the country, and was judged by the assessors to be both developmental and dynamic. On the evidence of student views it was responsive, highly supportive, and used its extensive links with the profession to good effect.
- 84 The College has also recently established a range of pro bono legal services, now extended across all its centres. This offers students the opportunity to give free advice to members of the public and to develop their experience of practical work pre-pupillage or pre-training contract. It is widely recognised as the largest and most successful programme of its kind, contributing to the regional strategy of the College and serving to enhance local links. While the assessors were not able to evaluate the service in detail, they noted the interest and appreciation of students, and the positive comments from members of the profession and from College staff.
- 85 The assessors found a high level of engagement with the local profession. In the centres there were programmes with guest speakers, and for the BVC some lecturing was undertaken by practising barristers. Practitioners were also involved in extra

curricular activities such as judging moots and mock trials. Each centre has a Centre Advisory Board, on which local practitioners sit. These meet twice per year and whilst they are informal, they are used to gain feedback on the College and its students. Professional practitioners who met with the assessor team confirmed the high regard with which the College and its students are held in the regional community and generally how impressed local practice is with the quality of the College's students when they undertake training contracts in firms. It was noted that such is the standing of the College within the legal profession that it has been contracted to develop a City LPC programme providing for three of the major City firms.

Equal Opportunities and Diversity

- 86 The College is committed to equal opportunities and complies fully with all legal requirements, including those under the Race Relations Act, Sex Discrimination Act and Disability Discrimination Act. It is also committed to assisting the Law Society and the Bar Council to achieve a diverse legal profession and to this end the College has a diversity strategy, one of the main planks of which is its Diversity in Law programme, which is organised by its careers service.
- 87 Equal opportunities impinge on all of the activities of an organisation and in the case of the College they are particularly important in:
- the recruitment and selection of students
 - the provision of careers information and guidance
 - the management of staff, including recruitment.
- 88 In all of these areas the policies of the College are exemplary. Selection of students is 'blind' at the time of application (at least for the LPC and GDL programmes). Once admitted LPC and BVC students at the London centre—where ethnic minority students are concentrated—are able to apply for a place on the Diversity in Law programme organised by the careers service. The College has identified the failure of ethnic minority students to obtain training contracts and pupillage as one of the main impediments to the achievement of a diverse legal profession, and the Diversity in Law programme aims to combat this.
- 89 As has already been noted, the appointing system for new staff is impressive, based as it is on objective criteria that are linked to the job description and a candidate's performance in making a formal presentation. Once appointed all staff have access to a wide range of training and development opportunities—including the compulsory Equality and Diversity training—a programme designed specifically for College staff by a specialist HR Training and Consultancy organisation.
- 90 The profile of student entry for 2004-05 shows that for all centres, on all programmes and for all modes of delivery, females exceeded males. In addition, ethnic minorities were well represented, accounting for 24 per cent of full-time enrolments on the LPC and 29 per cent of total enrolments on the BVC. Sixty five per cent of staff were female in 2005, but there is no reliable estimate of the number of ethnic minority staff.
- 91 On the basis of several meetings with staff and student groups and their reading of a wide range of documentation, the assessors formed the view that equal opportunities do pervade all areas of the College's activities and that through its diversity strategy it

is making a valuable contribution to the achievement of a more diverse legal profession.

Information to students and feedback on assessment

- 92 The College produces a general prospectus for its vocational awards which provides prospective students with general information about the programmes on offer (GDL, LPC and BVC) and details about the centres. A separate prospectus is available for professional development programmes. The information contained in the publications is 'signed off' by the appropriate director or deputy director. In addition, the College publishes useful information on its website, makes presentations at universities and organises open days. Students that the assessors met were entirely satisfied with the accuracy and detail of information contained in this material and found the open days particularly useful.
- 93 Detailed assessment criteria are published in all of the course handbooks and each programme has a published assessment schedule. However this focuses on hand-in of work and scheduling of examinations; there was no reference to formal arrangements or deadlines for the return of work. The College provides feedback on formative assessment through a range of approaches. However, the College's feedback policy for the LPC, GDL and BVC states that feedback on summative assessments will only be provided automatically to failing students and on request to all other students. In meetings with students the assessors heard that, whilst students thought this practice was at odds with their experience at University, generally where they had passed their assessment they did not see it as a major issue. Meetings with students also indicated that there was a significant delay in providing feedback (at least 7-10 weeks in some cases) which was explained by the need to ensure that all marks are released at the same time. The timing of feedback to students was an issue that had been raised by external examiners. In discussion, staff cited logistical pressures and traditional arrangements stemming from the professional body relationship as the background to the current practice on return of assessed work. From the feedback sheets seen by the assessors, the quality of feedback on assessed work was generally high and students expressed positive appreciation of helpful comments on their performance. Notwithstanding this, the assessors are of the view that the timing of feedback to students may be a weaker area of the College's practice.

Administration and Student Records

- 94 The Registry maintains a comprehensive database of student information, particularly in relation to student performance in assessments. The College has a software system for efficiently tracking and monitoring student performance and achievement. As already noted, this produces a very substantial range of data for the monitoring and review of programmes and examination boards, and allows comparisons of levels of pass to be made across centres and programmes and by mode of study and ethnic origin. In their discussions with management and staff groups—as well as their observations of management meetings and examination boards—the assessors formed the view that the provision of information is adequate to satisfy current and anticipated future management needs.

Student feedback and evaluation

- 95 The assessors found that the effectiveness of the teaching and learning activities in respect of the stated academic objectives was monitored effectively through the annual monitoring process (see above paragraphs 45 and 46). In addition the review and revalidation of programmes either internally or by the respective professional bodies will address the effectiveness of its learning and teaching environment. Students provide formal feedback on all subjects within programmes using the Teaching Quality Evaluation forms (TQEF), which ask specific questions about the teaching, learning and assessment process. These regular student evaluations inform annual monitoring and are scrutinised by the deputy directors for each programme. In meetings with students it appeared, however, that there was no clear mechanism for providing feedback to the students. For example some students had expressed concern about i-tutorials but were unsure what action, if any, had been taken. The assessors also found that there was no formal system in place for ensuring that the TQEF feedback is evaluated and reported on in a consistent way in the programme annual monitoring reports and subsequent action plans. Whilst the assessors were satisfied that informative and evaluative feedback was obtained from students, and students were generally appreciative of the responsiveness of the College to their needs, the level of engagement and mechanisms for 'closing the loop' in the TQEF process will benefit from review.
- 96 In addition to the information gained through the TQEF, there are also student/staff liaison committees in each centre which meet on a termly basis. Student representatives, either volunteers or elected from tutorial groups, sit on these committees. Meetings are used to capture student views on all aspects of a centre's work. Students communicate any concerns to their representatives via e-mail and after the committee meetings the representatives receive e-mailed minutes which they are expected to communicate back to their groups. The *Elite* system also summarises any recommendations emanating from the committee. Progress on action plans from previous meetings is considered at each meeting. Students confirmed to the assessors that the system works well and that management was very responsive to their needs.
- 97 The assessors were informed that focus groups have also been used to obtain feedback on various support services, such as careers. Surveys of student views on the centre facilities are carried out on an ad hoc basis and results are analysed by the Registry research department. The assessors noted that as part of annual monitoring review, reports with action plans were submitted by Careers, Library and IT services to AQC for review. However the team considered that the feedback process used by the support services was in some areas less systematic and transparent than that in place for programmes.
- 98 It was unclear whether the College had in place formal mechanisms for capturing feedback from staff on general matters. However, the assessors noted the many less formal routes for conveying staff views, through the many centre and College meetings and virtual conferences. There were many positive indications that the College works well as a self-critical academic community.

Student complaints and appeals

- 99 The student-staff liaison committees can provide a forum for dealing with student concerns and complaints. The College also has in place formal procedures for dealing with individual complaints of a more personal nature. These are dealt with by the regional director who is expected to respond to the student within fourteen days. If not satisfied with the response the student can ask for the complaint to be heard by another regional director.
- 100 Student appeals against assessment decisions are handled by the Registry, although academic judgements per se are not subject to appeal. The only valid grounds for an appeal are when it can be shown that an examination board has not followed its own procedures or, despite having done so, its decision is not one that a reasonable body would have reached. In short, the only grounds for an appeal against academic assessment are similar to those found in other institutions of higher education with which the assessors are familiar.

Summary

- 101 The College's students benefit in their studies from high quality learning resources and generally excellent support from academic and administrative staff. The full range of support services is available to students, with particular strengths in the work of the careers service. There are strong links with employers in the profession, and the placement and employment record of the College is very good. The College operates an equal opportunities policy which promotes diversity in the profession. The necessary administrative systems for student records are fully established, and there are procedures for complaints and appeals which are comparable to those in other higher education institutions. The College uses a range of approaches to gain feedback from its students, and acts upon this information, although subsequent confirmation to students of actions taken is not yet in place as a matter of course. Some aspects of the College's arrangements for providing timely feedback on assessment may be open to further improvement. Overall the quality of support provided by the learning environment is high, and it compares well with that available to students in providers of similar programmes in universities.

CONCLUSIONS

- 102 This report broadly confirms the positive evaluation made in the assessors' *Interim Report* of the College's application for degree awarding powers. The College of Law is an incorporated charitable trust and does not receive public funding. It has a long history of delivering education in Law in the UK, and a long-standing association with the profession's main accrediting body, the Law Society. Over recent years the College has become considerably more independent in its governance, academic management and curriculum development. Appropriate organisational systems have been put in place to support the quality assurance of its provision and to strengthen academic administration, and new senior posts have been established to lead in these key areas. The College has an appropriate regulatory framework for its current status, in collaboration with its professional bodies, including a Registry which provides excellent support. The College has a clear view of how its systems and procedures will develop to address the responsibilities of degree awarding powers. The College clearly views itself as an evolved and evolving institution, which recognises that the acquisition of degree awarding powers at this time will enhance its programme development and its competitive status as a market leader in vocational legal education.

- 103 Over the period of the assessment, the assessors identified many strengths in the College's management and in its academic provision. It benefits from a highly experienced and fully engaged Board of Governors which meets regularly and has a well-informed overview of the academic provision. The management structure of the College is most effective, and succeeds in providing clear leadership and direction along with a high level of co-ordination between the five regional centres. Financial management and the targeting and allocation of resources are soundly based. The assessors found that the College is an open and self-critical organisation, with sound systems for course management (frequent meetings, effective action planning); that it has productive relationships with professional bodies and the wider profession; and that it makes good use of external contributions to evaluation and review. The College's centres are well equipped with appropriate learning and support resources for degree level study; a distinctive feature is the organisation of pro bono placements. Students were found to be highly appreciative of the quality of provision.
- 104 In close partnership with its professional bodies, the College has sound mechanisms for securing academic standards, and makes full use of the advice of external examiners. Boards of Examiners are scrupulously thorough, and very well administered. Many of the academic staff have also contributed to external examining or have worked closely with other higher education institutions, so that the necessary comparison of standards is achieved. Although not subject to QAA audit and review, the College has shown a good level of awareness of the various components of the Academic Infrastructure, and is already following some parts of the QAA *Code of Practice*. Its internal arrangements for programme approval, and in particular its monitoring and review processes are robust, though somewhat time consuming in the case of annual monitoring. The College has distinctive and commendable arrangements in place for supporting the development and enhancement of the curriculum, with specially qualified and identified staff supporting the development and improvement of programmes across its centres. In general the various processes and procedures contributing to quality assurance, including regular review, feedback, data management and action planning, are well established and were found to operate effectively; in some aspects of the monitoring activity, the assessors found variability in reporting on learning resources, that will benefit from further attention. A notable positive feature is the care taken to ensure consistency of learning and assessment across the centres. The professional bodies have confirmed, in their reviews, that the quality of the College's work is commendable.
- 105 The College has a highly qualified academic staff base, and its arrangements for the development and support of staff work well and are appreciated. The College places an emphasis on teaching excellence and does not claim to be a research institution; accordingly a large proportion of staff are involved in pedagogic scholarship and have membership of relevant bodies such as the Higher Education Academy. The College has strong systems for mentoring, staff appraisal and peer observation, and these are linked to the strategic planning of staff development. Communications between staff teams across the College are good, with full use made of computer-based information systems. Should the College in future offer taught Masters degrees with a research element, it may be necessary to adjust its staff development strategy so as to strengthen the research dimension of its activities, although this potential weakness is balanced to some extent by the involvement of many staff in high level professional practice.

- 106 In giving careful consideration to all the criteria for degree awarding powers, the assessors identified very few areas where these were not met fully or substantially by the College, and these exceptions, while requiring attention, were not of a decisive character and often involved issues more widely familiar in higher education. Thus the assessors found that the reports of external examiners were occasionally variable in quality, and while recognising the constraints inherent in its accreditation relationships, considered that the College will benefit from putting in place procedures relating to the appointment and reporting of external examiners and to ensure that the reports are consistently fit for the agreed purposes. There is also a potential for strengthening the formal arrangements for feedback to students on actions taken as a result of programme monitoring and student evaluation. Another area of some concern to the assessors was the apparently rather unsatisfactory arrangements for providing feedback on assessment to students, and the uncharacteristic lack of formal procedures to support this. The assessors found that the work of the Academic Quality Council in assuring quality has in many ways been admirable, for instance in the scope and thoroughness of its monitoring and in its involvement of external members. But nevertheless the team had some reservations in this context regarding the lines of accountability, the relative infrequency of meetings of the Council, and the volume of the material requiring review in those meetings. The assessor team therefore welcomed the proposals currently under consideration in the College for modifying and extending the committee structure for assuring academic quality and standards.
- 107 The assessors were keenly aware at the outset of their scrutiny of the College of two distinctive features of the organisation which would, in some degree, shape their enquiry. The first of these was the position of the College outside publicly funded higher education, and therefore, at least potentially, a lack of experience with regard to the requirements of some of the criteria for degree awarding powers. The second was the structure of the College, distributed across its five regional Centres, and the consequent challenges in terms of management and communication, and the establishment of a true academic community, that such a structure might suggest. On both of these broad questions the assessors were fully reassured in the course of the scrutiny. On the first, the assessors have found that the College has a high level of awareness of the higher education environment in which it operates, has well-established procedures for assuring quality and standards which are comparable to those in other higher education institutions offering degrees in Law, and maintains a quality of provision which is praised by its professional accrediting bodies and its external examiners, and highly valued by its students. On the second aspect, the assessors found in place sophisticated management arrangements which support clear direction and positive co-ordination, and are highly effective in assuring consistency of operation across the College's different locations. The combination of strong local teams and regular cross-College meetings, together with the innovative use of electronic communications, provide for a strong sense of a vibrant and developing organisation with a commonly shared academic focus.
- 108 The Committee is invited to receive and consider the contents of this report.