



This review was conducted in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

# Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers)

College of Agriculture,  
Food and Rural Enterprise

Review Report

April 2024

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## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). The review took place from 16 to 19 April 2024 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Michael Cottam
- Dr Mark Langley
- Mr Rory O'Neil.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provision and to make judgements as to whether or not academic standards and quality meet UK Expectations. These Expectations (and the associated Core and Common practices) are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code),<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers), the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A check is also made on the provider's financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG) with the aim of giving students reasonable confidence that they should not be at risk of being unable to complete their course as a result of financial failure.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#)<sup>2</sup> and explains the method for [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code)

<sup>2</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviewing-higher-education/types-of-review/higher-education-review)

## Key findings

### Judgements

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations **meets** UK Expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK Expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice**.

- The partnership arrangements with the awarding universities, coupled with CAFRE's active engagement with employers and agri-food and land-based sector bodies, reflect a considered approach to ensure that award standards are credible and secure (Core practice S3).
- The responsiveness of CAFRE's curriculum to national educational and skills needs, and the strategic forward planning to ensure it continues to meet future needs (Core practice Q2).
- CAFRE's engagement with employers in the design and delivery of programmes to enhance professional opportunities for students (Core practice Q2).
- The way CAFRE works with its range of partners to influence and implement government policy and simultaneously enhance programme delivery (Core practice Q8).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes no **recommendations**.

### Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions already being taken to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to students:

- the steps taken to strengthen a unified student representative body to better enable student engagement in academic governance and strategic decision-making processes, groups and committees (Core practice Q5).

### Financial sustainability, management and governance

The financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG) check has been satisfactorily completed. The outcome of the FSMG check for CAFRE is no material issues were identified.

## About the provider

Based in Northern Ireland, the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) is a division within, and funded by, the Northern Ireland Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). CAFRE is responsible for the competence development of those entering, and those already working in, the agri-food industry through the development and delivery of lifelong learning programmes and knowledge exchange provision. CAFRE provides a range of full and part-time education as well as industry short courses.

CAFRE was established in April 2004 following rationalisation of three DAERA colleges (Enniskillen College of Agriculture, which had its first student intake in 1967; Loughry College of Agriculture and Food Technology, initially established as the Ulster Dairy School in 1908; and Greenmount College of Agriculture, initially established as an Agricultural College in 1912) into one college with three campuses at Greenmount (Antrim), Loughry (Cookstown) and Enniskillen.

Each campus focuses on a specific discipline with associated specialist facilities providing a 'practical classroom'. Agriculture and Horticulture programmes are based at the Greenmount campus; Food and postgraduate Business for Agri-food and Rural Enterprise programmes are based at the Loughry campus; and Equine programmes are based at the Enniskillen campus.

CAFRE's aim is: 'To be a knowledge centric organisation delivering high quality education, knowledge transfer and innovation programmes to those entering and those working in the Northern Ireland agri-food industry, to support its sustainable growth.' The programmes delivered by CAFRE contribute to the achievement of the DAERA Vision of 'sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone'.

Out of a total enrolment of 1,728 students on CAFRE courses in the 2023-24 academic year, 523 are on higher education programmes. There are 434 full-time (380.5 full-time equivalent (FTE)) students enrolled on courses validated by the University of Ulster (UU) (including Level 4 (certificate), Level 5 (foundation degree) and Level 6 (bachelor's degree with honours) provision; 89 full-time (69 FTE) students are on courses validated by Queen's University Belfast (QUB) leading to a Level 6 (bachelor's degree with honours), with CAFRE delivering years 1 and 2 only and QUB responsible for the third year work placement and delivering the final year, and a Level 7 (master's degree) qualification validated by QUB.

CAFRE's partnership with QUB is governed by a Memorandum of Agreement which dates back to 1971 when Loughry College was recognised by QUB as a recognised college for the delivery of provision leading to QUB awards. The partnership with UU was formally established with Enniskillen College of Agriculture in 1997 when the Honours Degree in Equine Management was validated. In 2005 CAFRE moved from higher national diploma courses to foundation degrees for Agriculture, Equine, Food and Horticulture, opting for UU as the validating partner. The partnership between CAFRE and UU has been strengthened by the establishment of the CAFRE and Ulster University Strategic Partnership (CUSP), an oversight board with a remit 'To keep under review and advance the College's portfolio of existing Higher Education provision and development of new programmes with increased opportunities for access to Higher Education'.

CAFRE has a total of 414.2 (headcount) staff delivering further and higher education, knowledge transfer and innovation programmes across four discipline areas (Agriculture, Equine, Food and Horticulture); 53.2 staff are employed as lecturers on the higher education programmes with a further six staff employed as higher education Course Directors.

All lecturing staff have a minimum of an honours degree in their specialist area and have relevant industrial experience.

This is the first Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) QAA has undertaken of the higher education provision delivered by CAFRE.

## Explanation of findings

This section explains the review findings in greater detail.

### **1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations**

**Core practice (S1): The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications' frameworks.**

#### Findings

1.1 CAFRE is not itself a degree-awarding body. As such, overall responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards and ensuring that threshold standards on its higher education programmes are consistent with the relevant national qualifications' frameworks lies with its awarding bodies - Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) and the University of Ulster (UU). However, CAFRE is responsible for ensuring the maintenance of academic standards set by QUB and UU for programmes offered by CAFRE leading to QUB and UU awards. Formal agreements are in place with each university.

1.2 A Memorandum of Agreement sets out the arrangements between QUB and CAFRE. Responsibilities checklists for QUB undergraduate and postgraduate programmes identify responsibilities shared by and delegated to CAFRE by QUB. As a collaborative partner of QUB, CAFRE shares responsibility for course design and delivery of a BSc (Hons) degree in Agricultural Technology, with years 1 and 2 delivered at CAFRE and students completing their third year at QUB. CAFRE is responsible for setting assessments, first marking of student work, moderation of student work and giving feedback to students on their work. CAFRE also has shared responsibility with QUB for the design and delivery of an MSc in Business for Agri-Food and Rural Enterprise. Students on these undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are deemed to be QUB students.

1.3 As a collaborative partner of UU, CAFRE is recognised to offer approved programmes of study leading to UU awards. The College delivers 13 UU-validated programmes, including one online Level 4 certificate, five foundation degrees in Science and nine Bachelor of Science degrees. A Memorandum of Recognition sets out the respective rights and responsibilities of CAFRE and UU. This is supported by a comprehensive partnership handbook, which details the arrangements for quality and standards for programmes validated by UU and delivered by CAFRE. The responsibilities checklist for UU-validated programmes indicates that CAFRE has a high level of autonomy and delegated responsibility in the delivery of its programmes awarded by UU. Students on the UU-validated provision are CAFRE students and UU associate students.

1.4 CAFRE's management and committee structure has shared elements for further and higher education provision, but with a clear focus on higher education which provides for effective lines of management and communication across the College. The Governance Group, consisting of Heads of Service within CAFRE (Education Service; College Support Service; and Knowledge Advisory Service) has overall responsibility for the strategic management of CAFRE. The College Management Team, comprising the Director, the Governance Group and 13 Branch Heads, provides leadership and management of CAFRE and coordinates and manages programmes across all campuses. The Education Management Team (EMT), whose core membership includes Heads of Agriculture, Equine,

Food and Horticulture and the Head of Learner Services, is responsible for the leadership, coordination, and management of the education programmes across all campuses. The Chair of the Higher Education Learning and Teaching Committee (HELTC) is designated by CAFRE's Deputy Director who is also the Head of Education Service. HELTC has a specific focus on higher education programmes and reports to the EMT. The six HE Course Directors each chair their own course team meetings and report into the HELTC.

1.5 CAFRE's internal policies for the quality assurance of programmes, assessment feedback, coursework submission, plagiarism, and other supporting documents, such as marking rubrics and conceptual equivalents scales/descriptors guidance, provide an appropriate framework for ensuring that students can achieve standards that are comparable with other UK institutions. CAFRE's procedure for the internal quality assurance of programmes validated by UU confirms that all assessments are submitted to the relevant Course Director for approval prior to issue to check that each assessment covers the module learning outcomes, content and grading criteria, complies with assessment guidelines and is at an appropriate level.

1.6 CAFRE follows the programme validation and periodic review processes of its awarding universities. This ensures that academic standards are set and maintained at an appropriate level in accordance with the regulations of the two universities. It produces definitive documents for validation purposes, including programme specifications and module descriptors, and an assessment strategy identifying different assessment types used that build across programme levels. Schemes of Work indicate where classes relate to learning outcomes and how the classes underpin the assessment process, and show that the assessment strategy considered during the validation process is implemented as intended. The Schemes of Work also confirm that programme design and delivery ensure that each programme uses a range of assessment practices and conforms to the principles and practices set out in the UU Assessment Handbook.

1.7 The revalidation and validation document for Horticulture higher education programmes sets out the arrangements for ensuring that programme learning outcomes can be met by students through their assessments and identifies how the assessment of each module is linked to the programme learning outcomes. Learning outcomes identified in programme specifications, indicating where programme learning outcomes are assessed by each module, and module descriptors are written using terminology that is appropriate to the level of the programme or module. Qualifications are mapped to the appropriate level of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

1.8 Periodic reviews of the provision also provide opportunities for CAFRE to monitor and review its programmes to assure the ongoing maintenance of academic standards. Scrutiny of the alignment of assessments with module learning outcomes at revalidation events every five years and in-year monitoring mechanisms such as student voice, module evaluations and external examiner activities and reports, provide assurance that the award of credit for programmes delivered by CAFRE meets the awarding universities' requirements. A periodic review of CAFRE's QUB programmes and a revalidation of the College's UU food programmes, undertaken in 2021 and 2023 respectively, were successful with all programmes being reapproved for a further five years, subject to specified conditions and recommendations being addressed.

1.9 Progress Board and Board of Examiner meetings, and external examiner arrangements confirm that academic standards are maintained by CAFRE. External examiners appointed by QUB and UU confirm that the provision meets national benchmark standards and that academic standards are comparable with other institutions. For UU-validated programmes, the programme self-evaluation report and annual Faculty Partnership



Manager reports also confirm that standards have been met. Representatives from the awarding universities are satisfied that CAFRE maintains standards leading to awards of their universities. The review team's scrutiny of assessment documentation and discussions with students and staff confirm that assessments cover the module learning outcomes and that CAFRE's arrangements for marking of assessed student work, including co-marking and moderation, are robust and ensure that student work has been assessed correctly.

1.10 CAFRE ensures that understanding of the relevant academic standards is maintained and implemented at institutional level through, for example, team meetings and the HELTC, external examiner reports, alignment of programme documentation with the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements, internal quality assurance systems for marking and oversight of marking, and through the Land Based Colleges and Universities Aspiring to Excellence (LANDEX) peer review process.

1.11 The partnership arrangements the College has in place with QUB and UU, coupled with its internal structures and processes, enable CAFRE to ensure that academic standards are maintained. Programme definitive documents provide a secure framework for the allocation of qualifications at the appropriate academic level, consistent with the relevant national qualifications' framework. Staff have a clear understanding of the threshold standards required for the award of higher education qualifications by QUB and UU. The College meets the Core practice and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (S2): The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.**

## Findings

1.12 CAFRE's awarding universities have overall responsibility for the award of credit and qualifications delivered in partnership with the College. University staff check the marks and classifications. The degree algorithm is calculated in line with the requirements of each awarding university, and this is confirmed in Progress Board and Board of Examiner meetings. The systems in place for both universities are overseen by the universities which manage any CAFRE input into those processes. Collectively, these systems provide a robust foundation to ensure that students have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

1.13 Examination Boards are run by the College but attended by university staff. The universities provide training sessions for Chairs of Examination Boards, Course Directors, and External Representatives at Board of Examiner meetings. University oversight of Board of Examiner meetings and the detailed approaches to the delivery of classes through, for example, Schemes of Work, indicate where classes relate to learning outcomes and how the classes underpin the assessment process and confirm that CAFRE has opportunities in place for students to achieve beyond the academic threshold level.

1.14 Rubrics for assessment marking are included as part of each assessment brief. These clearly set out what is required for students to achieve standards at threshold level and beyond. The rubrics are also used in formulating feedback to students in person and via plagiarism-detection software (Turnitin). Detailed and constructive feedback linked to relevant grading criteria is given to students and areas for development and opportunities for improved performance are identified to enable students to achieve at a higher level.

1.15 Students were generally positive about the assessment of their programmes and understood the grading criteria used to assess their level of performance. They appreciated the marking rubrics provided with assignment briefs and confirmed that the use of formative assessment and submission of drafts for feedback was helpful in supporting their understanding of what they needed to do to achieve beyond the threshold level. Students confirmed that tutors directed them towards the rubrics. Students generally felt that feedback was good, detailed, constructive and timely (within 20 working days) and confirmed that individual and collective feedback was provided through a combination of class feedback and 1:1 sessions. They confirmed that feedback from tutors indicated why they had received the grade given and what they could do to improve.

1.16 External examiners scrutinise marked student work and provide feedback through their reports and at Subject Board of Examiner meetings to ensure that standards beyond the threshold are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers. External examiners provide detailed feedback for programme teams. They confirm that students achieve standards beyond the threshold level and have commented positively on the quality of feedback provided by staff to enable students to achieve and improve.

1.17 Through a standing item on CAFRE's HELTC agenda, the committee considers any actions or good practice identified by external examiners, and by the Course Directors on receipt of the self-evaluation review process. The UU Assessment Handbook also outlines

clear expectations while the College's Learner Support Policy details the range of support available for students to enable their achievement.

1.18 CAFRE uses student success data as part of its annual self-evaluation process to check that academic standards are being maintained at both threshold and beyond threshold levels. This was evident from its self-evaluation for BSc Food Degrees, which identified high levels of student retention and achievement and progression which were linked to commentary and action planning.

1.19 University oversight of Board of Examiner meetings, external examiners' reports, and the detailed approaches to the delivery of classes confirm that the processes managed by CAFRE ensure that students can achieve standards beyond the threshold level. Oversight by the universities also ensures that standards beyond the threshold level are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers. The Core practice is therefore met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (S3): Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.**

## Findings

1.20 CAFRE has well established partnerships with QUB and UUB dating back to 1971 for QUB and 1997 for UU. Formal agreements are in place with each university in the form of a Memorandum of Agreement with QUB and a Memorandum of Recognition with UU which recognises CAFRE to offer approved programmes of study leading to UU awards. A comprehensive partnership handbook sets out the arrangements for quality and standards for programmes leading to UU awards delivered by the College.

1.21 Responsibility for managing relationships with other partner organisations rests with CAFRE for its UU provision. QUB is responsible for managing relationships with other partner organisations (such as placement providers) for the undergraduate QUB provision. Placement provider partnership working is not applicable for the QUB postgraduate provision offered by CAFRE.

1.22 CAFRE is engaging in partnerships with international organisations and educational establishments, for example Michigan State University and the University of Kentucky, to ensure that the curriculum is responsive to international developments in the agri-food sector and to provide potential opportunities for sharing practice and student and staff exchange.

1.23 CAFRE works with employers in the delivery of its student work placement modules, and in supporting the delivery of higher level apprenticeship programmes. Placement employers confirmed that they had good engagement with the College regarding arrangements for student placements. CAFRE staff meet placement providers prior to and throughout placements for progress updates, and evaluations of students are completed at the end of placement periods.

1.24 Employers are not involved in the summative assessment of students on Higher Level Apprenticeships (HLAs). However, for other higher education programmes, they are sometimes involved in the assessment of students while on work placement modules through the completion of a placement competence report which carries no weighting for the grading of the module but must be passed by the student. Judgements about student competence while on placement are made by the academic supervisor in consultation with the employer's observations of a student's competence, achievement, and attendance on placement. Oversight by the academic supervisor, and the zero weighting of the placement competence report, ensures that where CAFRE works in partnership with employers in the delivery of student work placements standards remain credible and secure.

1.25 The review team's scrutiny of a range of internal and external documentation, including annual monitoring reports and minutes of meetings, including the UU Collaborative Partnership Forum, and discussions with staff and QUB and UU representatives confirmed that CAFRE follows the awarding universities' academic regulations and validation processes in developing and delivering its programmes. Responsibilities for programme design and delivery, assessment, marking and moderation are clear.

1.26 A CAFRE and Ulster University Strategic Partnership (CUSP), operating as an oversight board, was established between CAFRE and UU in 2019 and includes UU senior managers and the UU Faculty Partnership Manager for CAFRE and CAFRE senior

managers. CUSP's Terms of Reference show that it has a key role in keeping under review and advancing CAFRE's portfolio of existing higher education provision and development of new programmes with increased opportunities for access to higher education.

1.27 A UU Collaborative Partnership Forum for the University's collaborative partners meets three times a year and includes CAFRE representation. The Forum keeps under review matters relating to course planning, evaluation and revalidation, standards management, and quality assurance and enhancement. Information from the Forum, for example academic policy updates in relation to teaching, learning and assessment, is disseminated within CAFRE and discussed by the HELTC.

1.28 CAFRE is also subject to UU's Continuous Assessment of Quality Enhancement (CAQE) process through which UU seeks to align its approach to oversight of the management of standards and quality assurance in its partner institutions with the procedures in place for its own internal programmes. CAFRE uses the UU CAQE report on student outcomes data to inform CAFRE's end-of-year learning and teaching report and subsequent action plan. All the 2022-23 Faculty Partnership Manager reports for UU programmes delivered by CAFRE confirmed that academic standards had been met.

1.29 The submission of Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement (CAPE) documentation, which uses student outcomes data to develop an action plan, is also required for the provision leading to QUB awards. Annual monitoring reports on the collaborative arrangement with CAFRE include confirmation of adherence to the University's examination and assessment procedure and programme management arrangements.

1.30 Progress Board and Board of Examiner meetings and external examiner reports confirm that the standards of the awards delivered by CAFRE are credible and secure in line with the requirements of each awarding body. The formal and informal channels of communication established between CAFRE and the universities, including Programme Committee, Board of Examiner and Partnership meetings, attendance at meetings at the validating universities, and reporting processes, are effective and enable all parties involved to be clear about the standards expected by the universities.

1.31 The review team concludes that the partnership arrangements with the awarding universities, coupled with CAFRE's active engagement with employers and agri-food and land-based sector bodies, reflect a considered approach to ensure that award standards are credible and secure and is **good practice**. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## **Core practice (S4): The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.**

### **Findings**

1.32 The awarding bodies are responsible for the appointment of external examiners to provide independent confirmation that the assessment and classification processes that apply to the programmes delivered at CAFRE are reliable, fair and transparent. External examiners have oversight across all delivery, including the review of assessments, marked student work, moderation procedures and through their attendance at Board of Examiner meetings. CAFRE's assessment marking and classification processes are based upon the academic regulations and policies of the relevant awarding university.

1.33 CAFRE's internal policies for quality assurance of programmes, assessment feedback and plagiarism, together with supporting documents such as assessment rubrics, provide an appropriate internal framework for ensuring that assessments are reliable, fair, and transparent. Assessment rubrics enable students to clearly see what is expected of them with regard to assessment from the outset. Additionally, CAFRE's arrangements for co-marking and moderation of assessed student work, and review of marked student work by external examiners provide further opportunities to ensure that the grading and classification of assessments is reliable and fair.

1.34 In addition to external reference points such as the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements and the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), CAFRE's main sources of external and independent expertise in maintaining academic standards include external advisers, professional bodies such as the Institute of Food Science and Technology (IFST), external examiners, and industry and employer groups. Externality is integrated into the validation and reapproval of programmes through consultation with employer and sector bodies, and the appointment of subject academic experts on validation and revalidation panels.

1.35 Assessment design reflects the intended learning outcomes students are expected to demonstrate, and assessment activities include rubrics to enable students to understand the basis on which their performance will be measured and to support students' understanding of how they can improve. Module descriptors, the programme specification, course structure and some outline information on assessments, such as assessment pass marks and classifications, are provided for students in the Course Handbook.

1.36 CAFRE's arrangements for the verification and moderation of assessments leading to UU awards are outlined in an internal quality assurance document. Module managers submit all assessments to the relevant Course Director for approval and to external examiners for their comments or suggested revisions to enable any changes to be made prior to being released to learners. The review team's scrutiny of assessment records confirmed that these arrangements are implemented as intended. Assessment briefs are also provided for external examiners for comment/suggested revisions. The internal quality assurance document also confirms that all assessments are moderated and that a sample of completed assessments are co-marked/double marked, including dissertations.

1.37 The awarding universities provide training for Chairs of Examination Boards, Course Directors, and external representatives at Board of Examiner meetings. CAFRE'S own Head of the relevant subject chairs Board of Examiner meetings for UU programmes which are attended by the relevant UU subject partnership manager. This ensures that the meetings are held in accordance with UU's requirements for the classification and award of credit. QUB Examination Boards ratify outcomes for students on QUB programmes.

1.38 CAFRE sets out arrangements for providing feedback to students in its assessment feedback policy, which includes a requirement that feedback should be transparent and directly related to the grading criteria. Assessment samples scrutinised by the team confirmed this, showing that the marking and provision of feedback to students was transparent, with the use of rubrics identifying how marks had been allocated, and through the use of Turnitin to provide feedback, which is used for formal written assessments. Where assessment rubrics are published for students as part of the assignment brief, they are clear and enable students to clearly see what is expected of them with regard to assessment from the outset.

1.39 The assessment samples, external examiners' reports and Subject Board of Examiner meeting minutes also confirm that CAFRE's arrangements for moderation of assessed student work ensure that the grading and classification of assessments by CAFRE are reliable, fair and transparent.

1.40 The student submission indicated that students fully understand the grading criteria and the criteria are laid out in a format which is straightforward to understand. Students were appreciative of the marking rubrics provided with assignment briefs and confirmed that they were made aware at induction of assessment policies, such as plagiarism and the use of artificial intelligence, and that information regarding arrangements for appeals was included on assessment feedback forms. They also confirmed that feedback from tutors indicated why they had received the grade given and what they could do to improve.

1.41 External examiner reports are discussed at Staff Student Consultative Committee (SSCC) meetings and minutes are sent out to students and made available on the virtual learning environment (VLE). Academic staff also indicated that external examiner reports are made available for students on the VLE and this was confirmed in a demonstration of the VLE provided for the review team.

1.42 The review team concludes that CAFRE uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent. This was confirmed through revalidation documents, external examiner reports, Examination Board meeting minutes and scrutiny of assessment documents. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Common practice (Standards 1): The provider reviews its Core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.**

**Findings**

1.43 CAFRE's awarding universities have ultimate responsibility for setting academic standards. CAFRE is aware of its responsibilities for maintaining these standards and follows the requirements of the awarding bodies to maintain academic standards effectively. These processes are supported by CAFRE's own internal monitoring procedures and guidance.

1.44 CAFRE reviews its approach to academic standards in partnership with the awarding universities which provide training opportunities for Chairs of Examination Boards, Course Directors and external representatives at Board of Examiner meetings. There are open, formal and informal lines of communication and arrangements for providing information on updates to university policies and procedures, and visits by university representatives to CAFRE ensure a shared understanding of standards.

1.45 CAFRE monitors and reviews its policies and procedures to ensure that they continue to be robust, transparent, fair, and fit for purpose. Policies are reviewed initially by its Quality Management Team in conjunction with the relevant CAFRE staff, and take account of the requirements of the relevant awarding university and changes affecting higher education, including the use of artificial intelligence (AI) generative tools in assessment. CAFRE uses external expertise to ensure that its policies and procedures for the maintenance of academic standards are consistent with other institutions and sector expectations.

1.46 CAFRE uses key performance indicators (KPIs) to drive improvement through UU's Continuous Assessment of Quality Enhancement process which includes reporting on student outcomes data, through QUB's School-level Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement reporting process, and through the provision of associated commentary on outcomes and standards attained, in programme self-evaluation reports and action plans. These are discussed at CAFRE's HELTC. A summary of the KPIs is included in the annual report for the HELTC and outcomes are used to inform the Committee's subsequent action plan to drive improvement and enhancement. The review team concludes that the Common practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Common practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**



## The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.47 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.48 All of the Core and Common practices for this judgement area are met and the associated level of risk is low in all areas. The relationships between CAFRE and its awarding universities are well established and working effectively. CAFRE is committed to developing strategic partnerships with international universities and has also established strong links with employers and other bodies involved in the agri-food and land-based sectors. These arrangements ensure that qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications' frameworks and provide opportunities for students to achieve the requisite standards. The partnership arrangements with the awarding universities, coupled with CAFRE's active engagement with employers and agri-food and land-based sector bodies, reflect a considered approach to ensure that award standards are credible and secure and represent **good practice**. There are no recommendations or affirmations in this area.

1.49 The review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations at the provider **meets** UK Expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

### Core practice (Q1): The provider has a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system.

#### Findings

2.1 CAFRE offers a range of resources for prospective applicants to learn about their programmes through its website, bi-annual open days at each of the campuses, applicant taster sessions, external recruitment fairs and industry events. CAFRE takes a whole college approach to supporting these recruitment events, with students, student ambassadors, teaching and professional support staff involved in the coordination and delivery of these events.

2.2 For undergraduate programmes, prospective students apply through the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Applications for UU-validated programmes are received and decided upon by Course Directors of CAFRE with UU oversight of the process. Applicants must meet the general entry requirements and programme entry requirements agreed by UU. Admission standards are guided by UU for the programmes it validates, subject to ongoing annual review, as outlined in its Partnership Handbook. Students are made aware of the resources available to them from UU through a detailed email at the beginning of the year.

2.3 For provision leading to QUB awards, students apply directly to the University, which is responsible for confirming the offer of admissions as outlined in its Memorandum of Agreement, with occasional discussion with CAFRE about applicants who have prior experience.

2.4 Contact details for each of the Course Directors are advertised for potential applicants to discuss individual entry requirements. Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) applicants apply directly through CAFRE's website. They must have the support of their employer and they have a conversation with the HLA Course Director to confirm arrangements to study.

2.5 Prospective students with disabilities are encouraged to contact CAFRE's Student Support Officers to discuss reasonable adjustments before submitting an application, and once confirmed on a programme the Student Support Service will liaise between the student and teaching staff to ensure that reasonable adjustments are accommodated before the student starts. Students can declare a disability at any point of their study.

2.6 The Learner Recruitment and Admissions Policy – Higher Education sets out the overall requirements for entry onto undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes. While CAFRE does not hold a Student Sponsor licence, it can accept applicants from citizens of the European Union (EU) (including citizens from Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) who have been granted limited leave to enter or remain ('pre-settled' status) or indefinite leave to enter or remain ('settled' status).

2.7 The Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) Policy indicates that two forms of accreditation of prior learning are recognised, namely Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) or Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL). Course Directors or Programme Managers assess prior learning and map this against programme requirements, liaising with the validating university, as required, through their regular communication. An Internal Verifier moderates the completed APL evidence before circulation to the relevant validating/awarding university for final approval before the start of the programme/module/

unit. Where courses lead to qualifications governed by a Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB), APL cannot be applied without prior consent from the relevant PSRB.

2.8 CAFRE's Learner Recruitment and Admissions Policy – Higher Education includes provision for students to appeal in the event of refusal of a place on a CAFRE programme. Appeals must be submitted in writing (by letter or email) within 10 working days of the decision leading to the appeal and are considered by an independent Head of Branch, supported by a panel of CAFRE Education Service Staff. For students who do not secure a place on a higher education programme, CAFRE also provides alternative qualification routes through further education and foundation courses. In consultation with students, CAFRE has developed a Widening Access and Participation Plan (WAPP) (2023-26) outlining its commitment to improving access across all programmes, as evidenced by the introduction of additional higher education provision in Agriculture and Horticulture at honours degree level, validated by UU, creating additional choice for widening participation students and progression opportunities for foundation degree students.

2.9 The processes and expectations set out in relevant policies provide the framework for a reliable, fair and inclusive admissions process with clear information provided to students about their application and the decision-making process. Therefore, the review team concludes that the Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## Core practice (Q2): The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.

### Findings

2.10 CAFRE's strategic objective, as stated in its Strategic Plan, is to ensure that course development meets the needs of industry. CAFRE aims to support the development of foundation and honours degrees across the range of agriculture/food disciplines and to produce graduates with the knowledge and skills to commence employment at junior management level.

2.11 CAFRE's unique position within DAERA enables the College to ensure that its curriculum is highly responsive to national policy and the associated educational and skills needs through working with industry contacts and other research institutions. The College is continuously engaged in horizon-scanning to determine future industry and curriculum needs. This is articulated as a 10-year rolling strategic plan for both the curriculum and resources which is reviewed and updated on an annual basis. This highly effective strategic forward planning promotes an insightful approach to the planning for future innovations, policies, and initiatives, such as sustainability, robotics, and livestock genetics, which will be needed by the industries served by CAFRE and, in doing so, help prepare future students to be at the forefront of developments.

2.12 CAFRE has an overarching three-year curriculum development plan for 2023-24 to 2026-27 which sets how the provision is aligned to the DAERA Knowledge Framework and the education needs of the Northern Ireland agri-food industry. A long-term strategy has also been developed for the Loughry Campus and proposals for curriculum development at the campus were discussed and approved at a Loughry Planning Group in December 2022.

2.13 CAFRE has its own process for new programme proposals, which starts with curriculum development plans being developed by all curriculum areas for consideration by the Education Management Team (EMT). New programme proposals are then taken to the College Advisory Group (CAG) for consideration and then to the DAERA Knowledge Framework Project Management Board. A curriculum development committee is then set up at the College to take the proposal forward for approval by the relevant awarding university.

2.14 Academic staff confirmed that they have opportunities to bring forward new course proposals through team meetings and that employer engagement and establishment of industry need is fundamental to any new programme proposals. For example, a new Level 4 Online Certificate in HE Equine Science and Management programme was developed and is now running, in response to a need identified by industry contacts of the academic team.

2.15 Programmes are revalidated every five years to retain their currency and ensure that they are achieving the expected outcomes. Programme validation and revalidation documentation confirms that CAFRE works effectively to ensure that its provision is aligned closely with the Quality Code and other external reference points. For example, the validation and revalidation document for horticulture programmes and the report from the revalidation of food programmes confirmed that external reference points that had informed the course design included the Quality Code, Subject Benchmark Statements and QAA's Foundation Degree Characteristics Statement. CAFRE also works with representatives from the awarding universities to enhance the curriculum through the CAFRE Ulster Strategic Partnership and through programme development meetings for QUB provision.

2.16 Validation and revalidation documents confirm that CAFRE consults widely with stakeholders, including students, in the design and development of programmes. For example, in preparation for the 2021 revalidation of CAFRE's horticulture programmes,

CAFRE consulted on the programmes with members of its advisory group, which comprised representation from a range of industry sectors. Feedback from current students, including module evaluations, informal discussions with year groups and contributions at Staff Student Consultative Committee (SSCC) meetings also inform programme design and development. Programme revalidation reports include a section on innovations and revisions which outline how CAFRE has built upon previous good practice regarding programme design and content.

2.17 CAFRE has effective arrangements in place to continuously review its academic programmes to enhance the student learning experience. These include analysis of student data, student feedback mechanisms such as module evaluations, SSCC meetings, and student surveys, internal meetings such as course team meetings and the HETLC.

2.18 Outcomes from a periodic review of CAFRE's QUB programmes in 2021 and a revalidation of its UU food programmes in 2023 confirm that CAFRE has effective arrangements in place for the design and development of high-quality programmes in line with the requirements of the relevant awarding university. Both reviews were successful with programmes being reapproved for a further five years. Good practice identified in the reports included CAFRE's strong engagement with industry through the design and delivery of the provision, and the applicability of the programmes to professional practice. Confirmation of the effective design and delivery of the food programmes is also evidenced through certified accreditation with the Institute of Food Science and Technology. CAFRE develops action plans in response to conditions and recommendations arising from course approval and review events.

2.19 Employers contribute extensively to programme design and delivery through, for example, employer meetings at revalidation events where employers contributed suggestions for the inclusion of graduate attributes which were incorporated into the programme. They are also engaged as guest speakers, via industry visits and placements. In addition, as part of their programme, agriculture students give presentations to employer advisory board members and have opportunities to engage in mock interviews with industry representatives and to go out and interview industry representatives. Annual careers days, including speaker panels and mock interview opportunities, are held within each subject area providing further opportunities for students to meet employers. This highly effective engagement with employers in the design and delivery of programmes ensures that programmes are industry-informed and provides students with extensive industry links and networking opportunities that enhance their professional opportunities.

2.20 CAFRE systematically reviews and evaluates student outcomes data and student feedback at programme level as part of its annual self-evaluation process. Matters arising from the analysis are included in a quality improvement plan. Student data generally shows very high levels of student outcomes and high levels of satisfaction from student feedback mechanisms. For example, outcomes for progression for 2022 graduates were >93%, and in the 2022-23 learner voice survey 90% of students were satisfied with the overall quality of their course. Additionally, the self-evaluation report for food programmes identified outstanding (>97%) levels of student retention and progression with very good (>91%) outcomes achievement and student satisfaction.

2.21 External examiner reports confirm the effectiveness of CAFRE's approach to programme design and delivery, and commented on the mix of relevant industry modules containing strong academic content balanced with applied vocational skills, and the inclusion of more theory and underpinning research which challenges the concept of sustainability of agriculture systems in honours programme modules.

2.22 The student submission was generally positive and indicated that the programmes offered by CAFRE exceeded student expectations. While the student submission did not comment specifically on overall course design, the submission referred to the high value students placed on work placements and indicated that students would also like more hands-on practical experience built into courses. The review team tested course design in meetings with students, who were overwhelmingly positive about their course structures which they considered to be well balanced and structured, enabling them to progress through the different levels of study. They also highlighted how well the curriculum provides opportunity to put theory into practice and the usefulness of placements provided as part of their course. HLA students commented on the relevance of the science content on their course to the workplace and observed that research activity enabled critical assessment of current working practices. Students also commented on their involvement in programme development and confirmed that their views are valued and taken into account as part of this process.

2.23 CAFRE operates effective processes for the design and delivery of high-quality programmes, which are closely aligned to national educational objectives, informed by highly effective long-term strategic planning, and underpinned by strong employer engagement. The responsiveness of CAFRE's curriculum to national educational and skills needs and the strategic forward planning that ensures it continues to meet future needs, as well as CAFRE's engagement with employers in the design and delivery of programmes enhancing professional opportunities for students are features of **good practice**. The effectiveness of programme design and delivery is evidenced by high student outcomes and positive feedback from students and external examiners. Therefore the team concludes that the Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

### **Core practice (Q3): The provider has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience.**

#### **Findings**

2.24 CAFRE's Governance Group is responsible for ensuring sufficient staff are available for the delivery of each programme. As stated in the responsibilities checklists, CAFRE is responsible for the recruitment of staff. As part of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS), staff appointments reflect the NICS People Strategy 2019-23. CAFRE also observes the NICS People Strategy statement, which covers a breadth of staffing scenarios, but aims to create diverse and high-quality staffing teams. The NICS recruitment service oversees recruitment and appoints staff based on their qualifications. Both universities offer relevant staff access to Recognised Teacher Status. Given its status as part of the NICS and through its partnership with the universities, CAFRE's oversight of staff recruitment ensures that all appointed staff are qualified to deliver higher education at the appropriate level.

2.25 The Governance Group determines staffing levels in relation to student numbers, which informs funding requests to government, enabling CAFRE to recruit sufficient staff. The greater issue for CAFRE is accessing the required range of qualified and skilled staff with relevant expertise. It has, in part, addressed this by recruiting former graduates, who enjoy 'giving back' to CAFRE, but also recognises the personal development needs of staff new to teaching with guidance from the College. The other part is how the continuing professional development (CPD) process upskills staff. CAFRE is financially enabled by government and works hard to ensure the sufficiency of staff.

2.26 For undergraduate programmes, CAFRE requires all lecturing staff to have a minimum of an honours degree in their specialist area and relevant industry experience. For postgraduate programmes, it prefers staff to have a higher degree but accepts that some specialist staff may only have an undergraduate degree. However, such staff will be part of a team comprising colleagues with higher degrees. CAFRE's staff qualifications list indicates that, of the 99 people who make up the 53.2 staff that teach on its higher education programmes, nearly half have a higher degree: 7% have a postgraduate certificate or diploma; 32% have a master's qualification; and 10% have a doctorate. To assure both universities about the suitability of staff, Course Directors complete annual notifications of teaching staff including staff resumés. UU also requires these for its validation process. Both universities confirm that they are satisfied with how CAFRE informs them about the staff it appoints. University approval of staff appointments and the data provided indicate that CAFRE engages appropriately qualified staff and proactively develops staff to increase their expertise.

2.27 CAFRE's CPD Strategy 2023-2025 defines how it encourages and monitors staff development. Launched by CAFRE's Education Service in December 2023, the strategy built on an earlier iteration of a developmental strategy for CAFRE's technical staff but broadened it to fulfil CAFRE's commitment to all staff. Senior managers review the effectiveness of the strategy in formal committees and management meetings as part of CAFRE's cyclical review process for all policies.

2.28 The CPD Framework Guide in the strategy states CAFRE's priorities for staff development, including improving staff qualification levels, and all academic staff have a personal development plan culminating in an annual Personal Performance Agreement. This process centres on a dialogue between staff and their line manager to identify any training needs and areas for CPD over a three-year cycle. Annually, Course Directors

draw this information together to identify short and long-term training needs which Branch Management team meetings then discuss to identify any training needs and balance these with available resources.

2.29 The CPD Strategy emphasises the need for staff to access appropriate training and development to maintain and enhance their own knowledge and skills, and to provide a professional service to customers. The College also encourages staff to join a professional body appropriate to their professional and technical grade and post. CAFRE's record of professional body membership indicates that, of its 192 staff members, 187 have professional body membership. Fifteen members of staff are also members of the BASIS FACTS scheme, a group of qualified advisers who work throughout the UK to maintain standards of excellence in farm management and advice. The implementation of the CPD strategy ensures that staff maintain their academic standing and subject-specific professional status.

2.30 CAFRE offers a range of opportunities to develop staff teaching skills, including professional teaching qualifications and other events offered by both universities. It has worked with LANDEX, a representative body for Land-based Colleges and their associated industries, on several recent training events. Training includes mandatory DAERA training, health and safety, and technical training including pedagogical training. Staff update their training records on a centralised training and development database. A report from this database indicates that staff training over the last four years has been delivered and attended consistently across each subject team. Staff have also attended LGBTQ+, safeguarding, and assessment training activities provided by the validating universities. CAFRE's commitment to supporting staff development through ongoing training is robust and considered.

2.31 Staff confirm that CAFRE supports their development, providing many examples of higher degrees and training courses undertaken financed by CAFRE. With each member of staff having a personal plan that CAFRE finances, the process is supportive. The strategic oversight of staff recruitment provided by the NICS and the strategies CAFRE has developed to manage staff development allow the Core practice to be met.

2.32 Academic staff have specialist expertise, but CAFRE also draws on industry contacts to reinforce the currency of delivery. Industry experts and employers enhance teaching in all discipline areas, including guest speakers who deliver lectures; for example, within the Higher Level Apprenticeship and the Advanced Food Safety and Fraud Management module. College social media posts demonstrate the range of industry connections. Second year BSc Agricultural Technology students make annual study tours as part of their Agrifood business, marketing, and management module, such as one to Brussels. The use of industry-based activities and speakers ensures that programmes retain their vocational focus.

2.33 On appointment, all new staff undertake a formal induction programme to familiarise them with DAERA and CAFRE overseen by their line manager. CAFRE job descriptions for Programme Manager and Course Director Year Managers, Module Coordinators, and Lecturers clearly define the duties of each role within the College.

2.34 Recent discussion at the HELTC of the need for a checklist to enable line managers to support all new staff has led to the development of an induction checklist and identified a need to appoint academic mentors to support new staff, especially around assessments and feedback. The result is a bi-fold process combining DAERA and CAFRE induction processes. The DAERA process has six and nine-month probationary check-in points before completion but focuses on staff becoming members of the NICS. The CAFRE process inducts staff into teaching and assessment practice and runs for about two years to ensure



that staff are fully aware of the expectations of their role. Processes include opportunities to be observed and to observe teaching practices. The joint process separates induction from probation, enabling CAFRE to focus on developing its teaching staff.

2.35 All lecturing staff engage in peer observations each semester. These aim to share good practice, but also identify weak practice in a supportive manner. CAFRE's Further and Higher Education Learning and Teaching Committee Reports include the outcomes of the observations. The Peer Support Policy, Peer Observation Form and a checklist outlining what to look for in good practice indicate a considered and engaging approach to peer observation. The checklist is a very helpful guide of what to look for when observing a session, ensuring that the observation comments entered are contextualised and follow a college-wide standard. The peer observation process is entirely focused on peer review and does not feed into any management review process. Staff genuinely value the process as part of their personal development, but also the ability to acquire teaching status and qualifications. Peer observation within CAFRE contributes to the development of the educational community in a supportive and positive manner.

2.36 Students describe the teaching teams as going above expectations to support students with their studies. The most positive responses in the Learner Voice Surveys are about the students' ability to talk to lecturers. Over a three-year cycle this has been consistently above 90%. Overall, students are satisfied with lecturer knowledge in subject areas, citing some staff as 'outstanding'. Senior staff recognise the difficulty of recruiting and retaining the breadth of staff expertise CAFRE requires. However, by deploying staff across three campuses and using CPD to upskill staff, CAFRE ensures the delivery of the programmes. Students also regard the student support staff as highly professional, and they are clear about how to contact them. Positive student feedback about academic and support staff indicates that the recruitment and deployment of staff is considered and responsive to student needs and expectations.

2.37 CAFRE is a member of Advance HE and 11 staff have recently attained fellowships, one senior fellowship, and one Associate Fellowship. A further 10 staff are in the process of applying, including one principal fellowship and one senior. Staff also attend Fellowship Awareness Webinars. In Autumn 2023, Advance HE provided ethics training for staff, after which CAFRE developed the Ethics Policy it is piloting in this current academic year with its postgraduate students. CAFRE does not take part in the Research Excellence Framework, but enters international partnerships, such as the one with Michigan State University, to inform staff of current research outcomes. As part of DAERA, CAFRE is also connected to industry at a national level, both in terms of understanding the needs of industry, but also in developing new approaches for industry to adopt. Through its membership of Advance HE, through its engagement with industry, and through its international strategy, CAFRE expresses a clear commitment to remaining cognisant of current developments in pedagogy, research, and industry engagement.

2.38 Through the combination of a carefully monitored recruitment process, staff induction, development, and engagement with industry, CAFRE has sufficient appropriately qualified and skilled staff to deliver a high-quality academic experience. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (Q4): The provider has sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and student support services to deliver a high-quality academic experience.**

**Findings**

2.39 CAFRE shares responsibility for facilities, learning resources and student support services for provision leading to QUB awards and has sole responsibility for facilities, learning resources and student support services programmes leading to UU awards. Presently, campuses comprise staff offices, classrooms, student accommodation, and specialist agriculture, horticulture, food, and equine buildings and each campus focuses on a specific discipline. For instance, the Greenmount campus has cutting edge horticultural and dairy facilities which function as teaching spaces, and the activities underpinning that teaching inform government policy. Therefore, the spaces are also showcase facilities for people from industry to visit to consider how they can upgrade and re-focus their own sites. For instance, the forthcoming refurbishment of the Greenmount campus will make it an entirely fossil fuel free environment, becoming an exemplar for all future government developments as it aims to achieve carbon neutrality.

2.40 CAFRE's strategy indicates that it aims to be 'one of the most sustainable colleges of its kind in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland by utilising the latest sustainable building technologies and renewable energy sources during its development'. Accordingly, CAFRE aims to ensure its facilities continue to meet the requirements of students both pedagogically and socially, so it is progressing the development of modern, fit-for-purpose, energy-efficient facilities. Simultaneously, as government-funded sites, each campus is a standard bearer for industry, therefore it must lead the sector by adopting and showcasing new technologies for the agri-food industry.

2.41 The realisation of that aim is evident in CAFRE's long-term strategy and a £157m capital investment programme for its Loughry and Greenmount campuses for new teaching, learning and residential facilities. The Food and Farming and Rural Affairs Group approved this plan and the accompanying curriculum development of a sustainable agri-food degree. Minutes of the Loughry 2030 Strategy Planning meeting (December 2022) and a presentation to the College Advisory Group illustrate the CAFRE Governance Group's clear oversight of the plans. Student engagement in the planning process has been through Campus Redevelopment Student Focus Groups, while the College Advisory Group has also been consulted, ensuring the engagement of multiple stakeholders. Government approval and CAFRE's internal monitoring and consultative processes indicate that CAFRE is managing this major project with great care.

2.42 CAFRE maintains an ongoing 10-year estates strategy that it updates annually. The Approved Capital Budget March 2023-24 demonstrates how CAFRE records requests through business case approval and the progression of each project and item. Similarly, College Management Team meeting agendas and Governance Group minutes demonstrate a very clear and considered approach to resource demands from staff or student feedback, while simultaneously responding to government and industry demands. CAFRE's Loughry 2030 plans will provide new science, teaching, office, and student accommodation at its Loughry campus and new teaching, office, and student residential accommodation at its Greenmount campus. The development of the Enniskillen campus will follow in 2035. In terms of providing higher education teaching and learning, CAFRE's specialist teaching facilities allow students to engage with the latest technologies in a safe, accessible, and suitable manner appropriate to their learning needs.

2.43 The new campus project reflects CAFRE's general approach to resources. Course Committee Team and SSCC meetings feature agenda items about resources, giving

students and staff opportunities to highlight any improvements required. Staff teams can discuss any finance demands with their respective line managers, who then convey these to each Head of Branch. CAFRE discusses any capital demands, prioritises, and approves them at the monthly Facilities Development Group chaired by a Deputy Director. These findings then progress to Governance Group meetings for further oversight and clearance prior to being communicated to monthly College Management Team meetings. This rolling programme of facility development is critical to CAFRE's need to remain ahead of sector developments and to be able to showcase them.

2.44 CAFRE's physical infrastructure includes broadband coverage and eight dedicated student computer suites across all campuses. Many classroom suites are fitted with tracking cameras and interactive screens to facilitate inward and outward remote delivery. Learners have access to printers and scanners in central locations. Through the library, students can access electronic resources and programme-specific software. Staff-student communication occurs on the Office 365 suite to which all students have access. Separately, the CAFRE online VLE provides a storage and interactive learning space for all courses where students can access policies and information. UU students can access learning materials here too. Students on QUB programmes can access College information and policies on CAFRE Online, but to access learning materials, they must log on to the QUB's VLE. A demonstration of CAFRE Online indicated a carefully planned and controlled platform that serves as a hub for all students, with which students are highly satisfied.

2.45 The Student Support Service team was established in 2021 when individual campus teams were brought together under one management structure in CAFRE's Learner Services Branch. Students are made aware of the support services available to them during their induction to their programme, which is contextualised according to discipline area. Induction familiarises students with their peers and staff, the campus, and the support services available, which includes student health and wellbeing services and student counselling services, and support for students with additional needs. The Student Support Service team also delivers events at each campus to promote awareness of health and wellbeing. The Student Support Service team considers feedback from students in the annual review of its services and action planning for the following year.

2.46 CAFRE's Learner Support Policy focuses on the whole learner journey from programme design to the learner attaining the required attributes for a successful career. The policy covers both further and higher education students, and students provided examples of progression from further education through to doctoral studies, indicating that CAFRE's approach to progression is strong and effective. Although a college-wide policy, it clearly delineates the legal right to confidentiality for its higher education students. Students confirm that CAFRE's approach to student support is detailed and highly engaged. The Learner Support Policy is thorough in the way it establishes a solid support framework for all learners.

2.47 In line with its Learner Support Policy, CAFRE's Student Support Officers provide guidance and advice to all staff about supporting students. Staff can undertake training on mental health issues, autism and supporting students with additional needs. When a student declares a learning need, Student Support Officers provide recommendations for reasonable adjustments. When required, learners complete an assessment with an external educational psychologist funded by CAFRE. Once completed, a Student Support Officer shares any recommendations for reasonable adjustments with the relevant Course Director, who will then update their staff. For staff, the learner management system notes any reasonable adjustments. Students describe the quality of learning support, adjustments to assessment, and additional learning support offered as being helpful and deeply supportive. Staff are equally clear that the help and support provided is clear and enables them to support students. CAFRE's provision of learning support is detailed and considered.

2.48 Of CAFRE's higher education enrolments in 2022-23, 18.3% of students required assistance from the Student Support Service. Such increased demand for mental health support has increased pressure on the student support provision, but CAFRE is pro-active in tracking data from the compulsory education sector to determine the next generation's long-term demands. CAFRE also tracks its own internal data to address increased demand for student support. Mindful that it is working within a constantly changing environment, CAFRE keeps its Student Support Services under almost constant review to ensure that they meet the demands of the student body. Student support is an agenda item at Branch and Education Management Team meetings, ensuring CAFRE maintains oversight of student support needs. CAFRE's responsiveness to student support through its policies and committees ensures that it can meet the demands of the student body. CAFRE's strategic and committee oversight of facilities and Student Support Services allow the Core practice to be met.

2.49 CAFRE's Library Policy outlines the College's aim to be a knowledge-centric organisation delivering high quality education and details a determination to provide a comprehensive stock of print and electronic resources. CAFRE undertakes to prioritise the purchase of digital resources over hard copies. The College's libraries are members of a consortium of Northern Ireland Civil Service libraries including DAERA and share an online catalogue system that allows students to virtually access material 24 hours per day through CAFRE's VLE and library database. QUB students can access hard and digital copies of texts at the University's Belfast campus and are given a tour of the University library. For UU, which is a greater distance from CAFRE, the University confirms through its validation processes that the CAFRE library meets all learning resource needs. The way CAFRE's library policy interacts with the expectations and additional support offered by the two universities ensures students have access to learning resources.

2.50 All students are entitled to membership of the library and receive an induction covering the use of library resources and Harvard referencing. Students value the induction at the beginning of each year. Higher Level Apprenticeship students and those living off-campus appreciate the remote access to digital resources. All students appreciate the speed and quality of the advice provided by the librarian, and student responses surrounding how library resources meet their learning needs have risen steadily from 80 to nearly 100%. Access to material on CAFRE Online, its VLE, has remained consistently high, and while there has been a slight drop over three years in response to the learning material available on the VLE, it is still over 90%. The responsiveness of the library to student learning needs fully reflects the diversity of the student population and their different subjects.

2.51 CAFRE provides sufficient and appropriate facilities, learning resources and Student Support Services to deliver a high-quality academic experience. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (Q5): The provider actively engages students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience.**

**Findings**

2.52 The CAFRE Learner Agreement and Learner Engagement Policy set out the shared responsibilities for fostering student engagement, involving both staff and students. The aim is to encourage active participation in educational quality, with students expected to take charge of their learning and appreciate contributions from peers, faculty, and industry experts. All full and part-time learners at CAFRE are encouraged to play a part in enhancing and assuring quality, which encompasses representing student interests through formal and informal channels, through their personal tutor and with student support. Students have praised the support provided by academic and student support staff, acknowledging the crucial role they play in their educational journey.

2.53 CAFRE provides various avenues for student engagement, such as individual feedback through module evaluations, the Learner Voice survey and focus groups centred on strategic aims of the College such as Campus Re-Development and the Widening Participation Action Plan. At the end of each module, students complete evaluation forms for focused enhancements at the local level. Students are also asked to complete the annual Learner Voice Survey, open to all students, for anonymous feedback. The results are analysed by the Quality Management Team, discussed with the Student Representative Councils (SRCs) and Staff Student Consultative Committee (SSCC). Minutes of these meetings are circulated to the wider student body and discussed with teaching teams to improve programme delivery. Student feedback is also sought in developing new programmes and amending existing ones, with student representation included in the validation and revalidation process by the awarding universities. Staff and students provided the review team with numerous examples of student feedback positively influencing the student academic experience.

2.54 At the beginning of the academic year, Year Managers explain the roles and responsibilities of student representatives, leading to student elections. CAFRE coordinates these elections, allowing students to choose their representatives for the SRC and SSCCs. SSCCs are led by the Head of Branch for each discipline, follow a standardised agenda and are a platform for constructive feedback, discussions on external examiner reports, and consultations on College policies or campus developments. These committees meet twice a year, with meeting minutes shared on CAFRE Online and through Teams.

2.55 For part-time, distance, master's, and higher level apprenticeship learner representatives, staff ensure SSCC meetings are scheduled during times of higher CAFRE interaction, providing sufficient time for representatives to gather peer feedback. SSCC actions are communicated to programme teams and shared with the broader student body via various channels, including teams and 'you said, we did' posters. While student representatives generally understand their roles and the support available to them, they indicated that they would welcome additional training in leadership skills and other development or training opportunities.

2.56 The validating universities confirmed that CAFRE's SSCCs are effective in identifying best practices and areas for improvement, with proper reporting between these meetings. Representatives attending SSCCs can share feedback across different academic years, providing continuity and insight into the student experience. For QUB programmes, minutes from SSCC meetings are circulated through the QUB Education Committee.

2.57 CAFRE has three SRCs, one for each campus, overseen by an elected Student President. All students automatically belong to the SRC and pay an annual membership fee to support its activities. The SRC gathers student opinions, supports social and charitable activities, and ensures a platform for student voices. Student Support Services liaise with the SRCs, providing secretarial assistance and attending meetings to introduce students to the SRC's role and constitution.

2.58 The review team learned that, from the upcoming academic session, CAFRE plans to unify the three SRCs into a single central body with a view to strengthening the student voice in decision-making. Students view the proposed SRC unification as a promising step towards fostering a greater sense of community and stronger academic connections among the three campuses. However, logistical challenges arise due to the geographical distance between the Greenmount and Enniskillen campuses, with the proposal to include a rotating Student President pooled from three campus-based Vice Presidents, ensuring equitable representation across campuses. With this new approach to SRC, CAFRE is re-evaluating its current methods of engaging students in higher level committees, strategic decisions, and overall quality management of the educational experience. While the new structure is continuing to evolve, CAFRE is encouraged to continue its efforts to review the SRC's role, ensure effective student involvement in governance, and maintain momentum in engaging students throughout the academic year.

2.59 SRC representatives meet the Education Management Team (EMT) four times per academic session at one of the college campuses. Before each meeting, the EMT provides an agenda and questions that guide feedback collection on both academic and non-academic matters. Student Services Managers work with students to ensure they understand the agenda and clarify any questions. The review team scrutinised the feedback and actions from these meetings through an action tracker and minutes, which reflected a range of matters raised, from common-room facilities to cross-campus events, assessment and feedback, employer engagement, and enrolment procedures. Students appreciated the EMT's visits to each campus to discuss these matters.

2.60 Student representatives are invited to join College Advisory Group (CAG) meetings, where they can offer insights on the strategic and operational levels of CAFRE's programmes. Student feedback and questions are also sought during CAG meetings to ensure that CAFRE is responsive to their needs and that students have a voice in the operational and strategic activities of the College.

2.61 Individual students are encouraged to give feedback through module evaluations at the end of each unit or course and through the annual Learner Voice Survey. These feedback tools allow students to comment on a range of issues, including course content, quality of teaching, and timeliness of feedback. The Learner Voice Survey, managed by the Quality Management Team, runs across two weeks with the opportunity to extend depending on participation. The questions are reviewed each year to ensure they align with CAFRE's learning and teaching priorities. They do not mirror the National Student Survey questions. Findings from the Learner Voice Survey are discussed at SSCC meetings and used to inform college-wide improvements through the HELTC. Time is allocated during class for students to complete these anonymous surveys. Reminders and briefing sessions are also given, emphasising the importance of student input and providing examples of where feedback from students has resulted in enhancement of the student experience. Students on placement provide feedback on their placement experiences during progress reviews with their employers and CAFRE representatives, as well as through their student representatives who attend SSCCs.

2.62 Overall, the review team **affirms** the steps taken to strengthen a unified student representative body to better enable student engagement in academic governance and

strategic decision-making processes, groups and committees. There are a variety of opportunities for students to engage in the quality of their educational experience, individually and collectively. The Core practice is therefore met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## **Core practice (Q6): The provider has fair and transparent procedures for handling complaints and appeals which are accessible to all students.**

### **Findings**

2.63 As CAFRE is part of DAERA, service-related complaints are governed by DAERA's customer complaints procedure. The procedure is accessible, inclusive, publicly available and applies to every CAFRE student equally. Where complaints relating to CAFRE are submitted to DAERA, these are communicated to and investigated by CAFRE's Education Service, which is responsible for handling complaints and appeals, with oversight by the Governance Group. CAFRE maintains a complaints register, approved by the College Director, ensuring governance and accountability. The EMT gives quarterly reports on the complaints register to DAERA.

2.64 Complaints from students on the first and second years of QUB's BSc (Hons) Agricultural Technology programme, delivered by CAFRE, are dealt with by CAFRE. Responsibility for handling complaints from students on the University's MSc in Business for Agri-Food and Rural Enterprise is shared between QUB and CAFRE. CAFRE is responsible for handling complaints for students on the UU-validated programmes but can escalate complaints to UU if matters are unresolved. The UU Partnership Handbook details Student Discipline and Complaints, emphasising that CAFRE applies its disciplinary code and procedures, including rules on cheating and plagiarism, but must consult UU before imposing penalties. Complaints relating to UU awards should be directed to the relevant institution, depending on the issue. For joint complaints involving CAFRE and UU, both institutions must be informed, following either one institution's process or the other, but not both.

2.65 Policies relating to complaints and appeals are available on the CAFRE website, and students are provided with links to online resources, with additional mention during induction and throughout the academic year. Students confirmed that complaint and appeals forms are easily accessible through the VLE, with regular guidance and support offered by staff. Despite detailed policies being in place, some students, especially those on placements, were unaware of where to direct complaints, but indicated that they would approach either their personal tutor or student support for guidance.

2.66 CAFRE's Higher Education Academic Appeals Policy applies to all CAFRE higher education programmes except the QUB award-bearing programmes, which follow the University's processes with relevant guidelines provided to students via the VLE. The Higher Education Academic Appeals Policy stipulates that students must first informally address their concerns with the relevant decision-maker such as the Course Director or Programme Manager. If the issue remains unresolved, a formal appeal process begins.

2.67 A formal appeal requires learners to present evidence confirming their current CAFRE status and provide a basis for the appeal. Valid reasons include extenuating circumstances, or procedural irregularities with forms available for each of these grounds of appeal. Staff and students confirmed that, typically, complaints are handled informally rather than being escalated through formal processes. Formal appeals are assessed by an independent Head of Branch from the complainant and a panel of CAFRE education staff.

2.68 Students on UU-validated programmes, as associate students of the University, are allowed to appeal to UU by a set deadline after exhausting CAFRE's academic appeals or complaints processes. This final appeal can only be made on the grounds of procedural irregularity, with information on the right to complain to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman provided to the student. If CAFRE disagrees with the University Appeals Panel,



the College Director must refer the matter to the UU Pro-Vice-Chancellor, who will then convene a meeting with key staff for resolution. Unresolved disputes can be escalated to the UU Senate, whose decision is final.

2.69 The team's discussions with staff and students indicated that, although the majority of appeals are submitted through CAFRE's Extenuating Circumstances process, where appeals on the basis of procedural irregularities have taken place, these have been socialised and staff provided examples of irregularities which have resulted in enhancement to policies.

2.70 CAFRE's Learner Agreement Policy defines both CAFRE's and its students' responsibilities for ensuring an inclusive and safe environment. Its Learner Discipline Policy outlines how violations of the Learner Charter and Learner Code of Conduct are addressed and investigated, along with the disciplinary appeal process. Similar to the appeals process, disciplinary appeals are investigated by an independent Head of Branch from the complainant, supported by a CAFRE Education Service staff panel.

2.71 CAFRE has clear procedures for handling student complaints and academic appeals with clear signposting and support available for students through these processes and students confirm the accessibility of these. The Core practice is therefore met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Core practice (Q7): Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments.**

**Findings**

2.72 CAFRE does not currently offer any research degrees. This Core practice is therefore not applicable.

**Core practice (Q8): Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the academic experience is high-quality irrespective of where or how courses are delivered and who delivers them.**

## Findings

2.73 Strategically, the DAERA Knowledge Framework shapes CAFRE's delivery of education, skills training, and knowledge exchange. A key principle of that framework is partnership and collaboration, and as part of DAERA, CAFRE seeks to work with other providers to achieve DAERA's strategic objectives. As noted in S3, CAFRE's partnerships with both awarding universities are strong. Ulster University regards its partnership with CAFRE as an exemplar for its collaborative provision. However, CAFRE's position within the NICS enables it to respond rapidly to any new or emerging DAERA policies. Strategically, therefore, CAFRE's role is to form knowledge transfer partnerships nationally and internationally, then to connect with industry to disseminate sector-leading, often world-leading, practice. For example, through an international partnership with The Hiroshima Atomic Survivor Tree project, CAFRE has become the European centre for dispersal of tree seeds, linking it to seedbanks and botanical gardens across the continent. The drivers of CAFRE's partnerships are therefore about academic delivery or the embedding of employability within the curriculum fuelled by knowledge transfer. This is central to CAFRE's role within the NICS. CAFRE's strategic objectives are driven by the notion of partnership, and these are in turn driven by its status within DAERA.

2.74 CAFRE was subject to an independent report, Investing in a Better Future: The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland. This concluded that CAFRE is successful in linking qualifications to employment and works closely with industry and with its awarding bodies. University representatives confirmed this. Likewise, in its Peer Review Report 2024, LANDEX, the sector body for land-based colleges, also recognised CAFRE's good practice in careers and industry engagement, highlighting how it aligns with government policy and supports the industries served. These three elements of external scrutiny confirm that CAFRE fulfils its strategic role for government as a knowledge transfer hub for industry.

2.75 CAFRE regards international partnerships as a means of enabling student and staff exchange, such as its partnership with Michigan State University. As detailed in its strategic plan, CAFRE works with many partners to engage in knowledge transfer that brings internationally focused research into teaching; for example, the transfer of vertical gardening methods imported from the Netherlands, explored by CAFRE, and then rolled out to industry across Northern Ireland.

2.76 CAFRE does not make submissions to the Research Excellence Framework but does use research findings to inform the projects it develops on behalf of DAERA. This creates an eco-system of imported research, its application by CAFRE, and the transfer of the outcomes to industry on behalf of government, but with students being wholly involved in the process. CAFRE's international outreach additionally allows government to promote ideas to Northern Ireland's agri-food industry, for example the College's work with the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA). Through partnership, CAFRE plays a key role in drawing on world-wide research and government policy to inform its delivery.

2.77 Facilitating this practice is CAFRE's considered approach to a range of partnerships. This is in large part defined in its strategic plan and how it interprets the DAERA Knowledge Framework. The key driver is a focus on CAFRE's ability to 'acquire, assimilate, and deploy knowledge' that equips the entire agri-food industry, employers and students. Central to this

approach is the College's Advisory Group that fulfils the role of a governing body, which being a government department CAFRE does not require. Advisory Group minutes indicate that meetings cover a broad range of subjects and offer CAFRE advice and insight into its many projects. The focus of the Advisory Group is to strengthen the connections between education and industry. This oversight is considered and supportive of CAFRE's aim 'to design and deliver knowledge transfer, innovation and co-operation programmes'. CAFRE's realisation of its strategic aims through international, research and industry partnerships and the role of its Advisory Group to act as a sounding board allow for the Core practice to be met.

2.78 The review team explored how the partner relationships work in practice by exploring CAFRE's strategic plan and related government policies, by considering minutes from the College Advisory Group, and by examining placement-related paperwork and agreements with its partner universities. The team also spoke with senior staff, university representatives, members of the Advisory Group and employers.

2.79 Through its ongoing relationship with the sector, CAFRE connects students to industry throughout their studies. Employers spoke highly of the way CAFRE informs their businesses and the quality of students they accommodate on placements. For example, there was commentary about the way that horticulture students bring new knowledge into settings like the Royal Palaces. Students who have undertaken work placements regard them as highlights of their studies, linking their placement to potential career opportunities on graduation. Employers of Higher Level Apprentices (HLAs) are equally clear about the value of the education CAFRE provides. HLAs value their employers' partnership with CAFRE and the delivery and resources they can access as students. CAFRE's partnerships with employers are responsive and highly regarded by all parties.

2.80 Several policies and handbooks support student work placements. The Health and Safety and Welfare Policy for Students on Work Placement details the work placement policy. CAFRE recognises and values the benefits, both educational and experiential, to students of undertaking a period of planned, supervised work placement as part of their course. This policy is rigorous and detailed in outlining CAFRE's commitment to supporting work placements and the value to student learning. The attendant Work Experience Handbook for Students ensures that students focus on the purpose of a work placement and its contribution to their learning. The Handbook for Work Experience Providers gives clear instruction and guidance to employers about the requirements of a positive learning experience. It also explains that employers are not involved in any assessments, including the HLA programmes and employers value the clarity of the documentation. The quality of placement materials and the opportunities offered, confirmed by student and placement providers, demonstrate that CAFRE manages placements with care.

2.81 CAFRE has in place effective arrangements for partnerships to ensure that students receive a high-quality learning experience. The way CAFRE works with its range of partners to influence and implement government policy and simultaneously enhance programme delivery is **good practice**. The Core practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## **Core practice (Q9): The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.**

### **Findings**

2.82 Through its Learner Agreement Policy which includes the Learner Charter, CAFRE commits to promoting a learning community that enables students to develop as independent learners. CAFRE provides a range of support arrangements for all students to enable them to succeed and achieve their academic and professional aspirations. CAFRE's overarching arrangements for student support are outlined in the Learner Support Policy and the Safeguarding Policy and Procedures.

2.83 As noted in paragraph 2.45, student induction is contextualised according to their discipline area, enabling students to familiarise themselves with their peers and staff, the campus, the range of support services available to them, including health and wellbeing, counselling, and additional needs support. The Student Support Service team also delivers events at each campus to promote awareness of health and wellbeing.

2.84 Students are assigned an academic member of staff as a personal tutor. A minimum of one individual tutorial each semester is undertaken with each student to discuss their performance, study support skills, any wellbeing, disability or other non-academic issues that may affect progress, provide advice and assistance on progression to further study and employment, and agree targets for the following tutorial session in line with CAFRE's Higher Education Professional Standards Rubrics for Target Setting. Professional development is also embedded in Schemes of Work to encourage students to develop a range of skills including referencing, personal effectiveness, examination techniques, assignment writing, and study skills. HLA students have a Personal Training Plan, which is reviewed with the student, employers, and CAFRE's year manager twice per year. Academic staff receive training for the pastoral elements of their personal tutor role and new personal tutors have informal mentoring from more experienced colleagues. Personal tutors also signpost students to the Support Service team, where appropriate.

2.85 The academic staff:student ratio, which is approximately 1:10 and an open-door policy for students, enables academic staff to know each individual student, and students have flexible access to and close working relationships with tutors. This provides a collaborative environment that supports each individual student towards successful academic outcomes. Feedback from students in Learner Voice Surveys confirmed high levels of student satisfaction (>90%) in relation to the support they received from course teams and access to additional support for learning needs. This is further supported by college data, which indicates that approximately 18% of students access student support.

2.86 Careers advice and guidance is provided mainly through curriculum activities. Careers Coordinators, who have a wide range of industry experience to pass on careers advice to students, are available in each subject discipline area. They also manage some of the careers activities within the subject discipline area, including careers days when employers are invited to CAFRE and students can undertake mock interviews. Other careers activities for students include professional development classes and careers discussions as part of individual tutorials.

2.87 Careers Coordinators also manage the online careers hubs for each subject discipline. The Careers Hubs are an information communication tool with different Teams channels for each subject discipline. Content for students, which includes job opportunities, careers events, progression opportunities, alumni events, student achievements and careers surveys, is uploaded by careers coordinators in each subject area on a regular basis. In addition, CAFRE provides an industry support programme which includes successful

students being awarded bursaries and scholarships each year to provide an opportunity for students to liaise with prospective employers and to find out more about the wide range of careers available. The industry support programme also gives students the opportunity to apply for work placements and graduate roles through internship opportunities.

2.88 Employers confirmed that CAFRE has a proactive ongoing relationship with industry, giving examples of how the College works with them to develop career opportunities for students, including presenting at careers days, which also provide a showcase for students, and through industry bursaries and internships as well as employing previous placement students.

2.89 The effectiveness of CAFRE's arrangements for supporting students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes is also evidenced in reports on review and revalidation activity undertaken by QUB in May 2021 and by UU in December 2023. The QUB report included commendations relating to the strong links with industry and the 'learning by doing' approach to teaching adopted on the undergraduate provision. The relevance and applicability of the postgraduate provision to professional and business practice was also commended. The UU revalidation report on food programmes included commendations relating to the facilities and redevelopment plans; the development of partnerships and strong engagement with industry; and students' positive feedback about the provision and teaching staff, and professional development opportunities available to them, including tutorials on CV writing, practical interview sessions, additional qualifications in specialist areas, self-ranking on a professional skills rubric and setting targets for improvement.

2.90 Although student support is not explicitly included in external examiner reports, the reports include commentary which confirms the quality of the assessment marking and the supportive and constructive feedback given on assignments to enable students to improve their understanding of what is required to achieve higher standards.

2.91 Student outcomes confirm the effectiveness of CAFRE's arrangements for supporting students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes. For example, the CAFRE self-evaluation document identified very high overall student outcomes (>90%) for retention, achievement, and progression for the most recent cohorts. Furthermore, very high student outcomes (typically >90%) were reported at subject level in the end of year Learning and Teaching Committee reports for 2021-22 and 2022-23 and, in the self-evaluation report for food programmes, which identified outstanding (>97%) levels of student retention and progression with very good outcomes (>91%) achievement and student satisfaction.

2.92 All students are surveyed about their destination six months after graduation. The results of the destination surveys for 2020-22, indicated that, while there has been a fall in employment rates since the 100% rate recorded in 2020, some of which can be attributed to the impact of the pandemic and increased progression into education, overall employment rates of over 80% are strong. Although HLAs are already employed, some see the engagement with the careers team as an opportunity to progress their careers.

2.93 Students feel supported in their learner journey, commenting positively on extra revision classes in the lead-up to examinations, and support they receive towards achieving successful academic and professional outcomes, although they also commented that student support would be improved by having a full-time member of staff on each of the three campuses. Furthermore, they welcomed wellbeing days and other activities aimed at supporting mental health and wellbeing. Comments from students in SSCC meetings were also positive regarding the support arrangements CAFRE provides and confirmed that students feel that staff are always available to support students when they need it.

2.94 The review team considered that CAFRE provides a range of effective processes for supporting students towards achieving successful academic and professional outcomes, which are proportionate to the size of the College. Students were overwhelmingly positive regarding the support they received for their studies, the careers guidance and opportunities available to them, and confirmed that they have been provided with good academic and pastoral care. The team concludes that CAFRE supports its students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes. The Core practice is therefore met and the associated risk is low.

**Core practice: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## **Common practice (1): The provider reviews its Core practices for quality regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.**

### **Findings**

2.95 CAFRE has a system of committees that focus on regularly reviewing and improving the quality of its educational practices to ensure continuous enhancement. The EMT has overall responsibility for maintaining the quality of its higher education provision and oversees the work of the HELTC, receiving and approving annual reports from the Committee.

2.96 Chaired by the Head of Food Education Branch who also sits on the EMT, the HELTC meets at least three times a year and consists of the HE Course Directors across all disciplines and CAFRE's Quality Manager. The HELTC evaluates CAFRE's HE provision and identifies and shares good practice and innovation in higher education delivery and assessment; Course Directors discuss the respective self-evaluation reports; and the Quality Manager cascades updates, for example learning and teaching policies to be implemented by CAFRE, from the UU Collaborative Forum. Good practice identified by external examiners, through peer observation, and from Course Directors as part of the self-evaluation review process is also disseminated across CAFRE through the HELTC. CAFRE's Quality Manual Index is regularly updated to reflect any policy changes before the start of the academic year.

2.97 Course Directors hold at least two Course Committee meetings each semester, when they discuss academic standards, policy changes, and other relevant issues through a standardised agenda. These meetings also serve as a platform for staff to propose new programme developments based on industry needs. The minutes of these meetings and responses to external examiners' reports are sent to University Faculty Partnership Managers and University Coordinators. Sample agendas and minutes from course committee meetings demonstrate that the process is clear to follow and observed in practice.

2.98 External oversight of the quality of provision is provided by the awarding universities which monitor programmes on an annual basis; through institutional KPIs through the UU Partnership Forum; and by LANDEX (Land Based Colleges and Universities Aspiring to Excellence), the sector body for land-based colleges, which conducts annual reviews of CAFRE. CAFRE develops action plans in response to monitoring and review outcomes.

2.99 The review team concludes that CAFRE has effective systems in place to review and improve quality. The Common practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Common practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**



## Common practice (2): The provider's approach to managing quality takes account of external expertise.

### Findings

2.100 CAFRE maintains academic standards through adherence to the standards set by its awarding bodies, UU and QUB, and alignment with relevant UK academic frameworks. Programme documentation uses external reference points such as the Subject Benchmark Statements and the Quality Code. External members are appointed to validation and re-approval panels established to consider the higher education provision offered at CAFRE. External expertise is also provided through consultation with employers and relevant sector bodies.

2.101 CAFRE engages external expertise through its Advisory Group, an independent body that provides advice at strategic and operational levels to the College Director and College Management on the delivery of CAFRE programmes. Additionally, consultation with employer sector groups and professional bodies is undertaken, and well established partnerships with awarding bodies contribute to the overall management of quality. Given the intersectional role CAFRE plays between education and industry, this approach is thorough and has positive impact on the local education and industry communities.

2.102 External examiners are appointed for all programmes and by the relevant awarding body. External examiner reports relate to both academic standards and quality of student experience, as well as forming part of the evidence considered during the periodic review processes. Examiner feedback includes comments about content, teaching mode, assessment, and marking standards and demonstrates effective use of external expertise. CAFRE seeks advice and feedback from examiners, for example on the skills knowledge and qualities of students/graduates; employers' expectations; and the currency and appropriateness of the curriculum, assessment, knowledge, and skills. External expertise also informs periodic reviews of academic provision for the QUB provision. The use of externality to support CAFRE's higher education activities is rigorously applied.

2.103 External government reviews, for example Investing in a Better Future: The Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland and the LANDEX Peer Review process, provide sector-specific external viewpoints. CAFRE welcomes externality as a key means of managing quality.

2.104 The utilisation of external reference points, advisory groups, external examiners, and partnerships with awarding bodies aligns with established standards in quality assurance. The level of associated risk is low, given the well documented processes and reliance on external expertise. Overall, CAFRE's approach demonstrates a commitment to quality assurance and standards maintenance in line with industry best practice. The Common practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Common practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

### **Common practice (3): The provider engages students individually and collectively in the development, assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.**

#### **Findings**

2.105 CAFRE implements a range of mechanisms to ensure that students are actively engaged in the development, assurance, and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience. Students have opportunities to participate in programme design, annual and periodic reviews, as well as other key quality enhancement processes such as campus redevelopment, providing feedback on course content, structure, and delivery. As part of the revalidation process, students offer insights that help shape the future of the programmes they are enrolled in. Student feedback is also incorporated into Self-Evaluation and Quality Improvement Plans as well as HELTC reports, both considered by the EMT. Although currently no students are full members of these deliberative groups, this is under review as part of developing the cross-campus Student Representative Council.

2.106 CAFRE collects student feedback through various methods, including through online module evaluation forms, completed at the end of each module. These evaluations allow students to rate their learning experience and provide specific comments on what works well and what can be improved. The results feed into the overall course review process, informing course teams about student satisfaction and areas for enhancement. CAFRE also conducts the Learner Voice Survey, an anonymous survey sent to all students, providing a broader perspective on the student experience. The results are analysed by the Quality Management Team and discussed during SSCC and course team meetings.

2.107 Student representatives participate in the governance of CAFRE through meetings with the EMT and the College Advisory Group (CAG). These meetings provide students with a platform to discuss academic and non-academic issues, share feedback, and contribute to strategic and operational decisions. The EMT provides students with topics of interest ahead of meetings, and pre-meeting support is provided through the Student Support Manager with follow-up on action items taken to ensure that student input is addressed. Campus redevelopment student focus groups demonstrate active student engagement in campus redevelopment consultation activity.

2.108 Students at CAFRE have been actively engaged in the HE Review (Alternative Providers) process. Lead Student Representatives have produced a student submission document reflecting the views and experiences of the wider student body. This document was supported by focus group meetings and cross-referenced with trends from past Learner Voice Surveys, providing the review team with a thorough understanding of student opinions about the quality of their educational experience.

2.109 Through these various mechanisms, CAFRE demonstrates a commitment to involving students in quality assurance and programme development. It encourages student feedback and ensures that their voices are heard and acted upon, contributing to enhancement of the student learning experience. The Common practice is met and the level of risk is low.

**Common practice: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.110 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.111 All relevant Common and Core practices are met and the associated level of risk is low in all areas. There are three areas of **good practice** relating to the responsiveness of CAFRE's curriculum to national educational and skills needs, and strategic forward planning to ensure CAFRE continues to meet future needs; its engagement with employers in the design and delivery of programmes to enhance professional opportunities for students; and its work with a range of partners to influence and implement government policy and simultaneously enhance programme delivery.

2.112 There is one affirmation of action being taken to strengthen a unified student representative body to better enable student engagement in academic governance and strategic decision-making processes, groups and committees. There are no recommendations in this area.

2.113 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the provider **meets** UK Expectations.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given in the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) handbook](#).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer Glossary on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/glossary](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/glossary)

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

### Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

### Awarding organisation

An organisation authorised to award a particular qualification; an organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

### Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

### Common practices

Practices included in the UK Quality Code that will be applied by providers in line with their missions, their regulatory context and the needs of their students. These are practices common to the underpinning of quality in all UK providers but are not regulatory requirements for providers in England (registered with the Office for Students).

### Core practices

Practices included in the UK Quality Code that must be demonstrated by all UK higher education providers as part of assuring their standards and quality.

### Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

### Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

### Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'. See also **blended learning**.

### **Dual award or double award**

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### **e-learning**

See technology enhanced or enabled learning.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** which clearly and succinctly express the outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards, and for managing the quality of their provision.

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

### **Learning outcomes**

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

### **Programme specifications**

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

### **Quality Code**

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** (and associated, applicable, Core and Common practices) that providers are required to meet.

### **Reference points**

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

### **Self-evaluation document**

A report submitted by a higher education provider, assessing its own performance, to be used as evidence in a QAA review.

### **Subject Benchmark Statement**

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

### **Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

### **Threshold academic standard**

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

### **Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

### **Widening participation**

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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