Quality Review Visit of North East Surrey College of Technology

October 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about North East Surrey College of Technology

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at North East Surrey College of Technology.

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.**
- **There is limited confidence requiring specified improvements before there can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.**

Areas for development

The review team identified the following **areas for development** that have the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at North East Surrey College of Technology. The review team advises North East Surrey College of Technology to:

- ensure that all students are made aware of the role of the external examiner and that all external examiner reports are made available to them (Quality Code)
- complete its review of the appeals against admissions decisions process and make it available to prospective students (Consumer Protection Obligations)
- ensure that prospective students are directed to a complete set of terms and conditions on the higher education web pages, and that students receive a complete set of terms and conditions in a non-changeable format at time of offer (Consumer Protection Obligations).

Specified improvements

The review team identified the following **specified improvements** that relate to matters that are already putting, or have the potential to put, quality and/or standards at risk at North East Surrey College of Technology. The review team recommends that North East Surrey College of Technology:

- ensures, through its deliberative committee structure, that it has strategic oversight of data that enables timely improvement to the student academic experience across

all of its higher education provision (Quality Code)
- ensures that prospective students are made aware of necessary expenses that will be incurred in addition to tuition fees (Consumer Protection Obligations).

About this review

The review visit took place from 10 to 11 October 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mrs Sally Dixon
- Dr Alan Howard
- Mr Benjamin Hunt (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

- provide the relevant funding body with an expert judgement about the readiness of a provider to enter, or continue to operate within, the higher education sector.

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

- ensure that the student interest is protected
- provide expert advice to ensure that the reputation of the UK higher education system is protected, including the protection of degree standards
- identify development areas that will help a provider to progress through a developmental period and be considered 'established'.

Each review visit considers a provider's arrangements against relevant aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements, and in particular:

- the reliability of degree standards and their reasonable comparability with standards set and achieved by other providers
- the quality of the student academic experience, including student outcomes where the provider has a track record of delivery of higher education.

About North East Surrey College of Technology

North East Surrey College of Technology (the College), whose mission is "To inspire our students to be the best that they can be", is a general further education college which was founded in 1953. It is situated in the borough of Epsom and Ewell on the border of Surrey and outer southwest London. The College specialises in vocational and technical education, with full and part-time courses and professional qualifications in subjects ranging from construction and performing arts through counselling to land-based courses.

At the time of the review, the College reported that for the academic year 2016-17 it had a total of 606 higher education students studying on 22 programmes across three subject clusters: those allied to medicine, healthcare and the environment; creative arts and technologies; and education and training support.

The College's higher education provision is delivered on behalf of University of Greenwich, Kingston University, University of Surrey, University of West London, and Pearson. The provision includes programmes across level 4 to level 7, including a foundation year programme with articulation to Kingston University, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, foundation degrees, full honours undergraduate degrees and master's degrees. Most programmes are delivered on a validated basis where the programmes are designed and developed by the College.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)

1   The College has in place arrangements that meet its degree-awarding body requirements to ensure that the academic standards of the programmes offered meet or exceed the UK threshold standard set out by *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

2   The College is responsible for developing programme documentation, including definitive programme specifications. Programme specifications include appropriate reference to the FHEQ and are subject to approval and validation processes agreed with the College's respective university awarding bodies, who are ultimately responsible for setting academic standards. Validated programmes are subject to periodic internal quality review led by the awarding body. Validation and review documents confirm due consideration of the FHEQ, including, for example, mapping module content to individual FHEQ descriptors in a 2015 review of MSc Perfusion Science. For Pearson awards, subject teams are tested at a College validation event and courses are subject to review through an Internal Quality Audit (IQA).

3   External examiners appointed to each programme confirm that academic standards meet the threshold standard, are appropriate for the level of study, and are comparable with similar programmes of other higher education providers.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

4   The review team found that the College has in place effective governance arrangements to maintain oversight of the College's higher education provision. The College has a defined structure for its governance meetings, which includes a Curriculum and Quality Committee (CQC) that reviews aspects of the College's higher education provision. The Committee, which includes representatives from the higher education management team, reviews data, student feedback and student performance.

5   Governors articulated the importance of academic freedom and the governing body has members with significant education experience alongside business and community representatives. The College has a whistleblowing policy and procedure.

6   The College has a detailed risk register which includes risks associated with teaching and learning and the student experience, which is monitored by the Audit and Risk Management Committee. The Senior Management Team (SMT) provides updates to the CQC on student and programme data and associated risk factors.

The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

7　　　Responsibility for formal academic approval of programmes rests with the College's awarding bodies and organisation. The processes in place for programme design, development and approval for programmes at the College are effective.

8　　　Assessment processes are followed in line with awarding body and awarding organisation requirements. The arrangements and discharged responsibilities are clear through transparent memoranda of agreement and checklists. College staff work effectively with university Link Tutors to ensure that the assessment and feedback strategies for awarding bodies are implemented in accordance with the respective academic frameworks and regulations. Students commented that their assessments and feedback are effective and that feedback offered informed future learning.

9　　　External examination processes are robustly followed, and external examiner reports confirm that academic standards and student achievements are comparable with those in other UK higher education providers. While the role of the external examiner is outlined in programme handbooks, students commented that they were not aware of the role of the external examiner or how to access external examiner reports. Academic staff confirmed that external examiner reports are not readily available for students to access outside of Board of Studies meetings, where reports are discussed and monitored. The review team advises the College to ensure that all students are made aware of the role of the external examiner and to ensure that external examiner reports are made available to them, identifying this as an **area for development.**

10　　The roles and responsibilities for programme monitoring and review between the College and validating bodies are clearly outlined in the relevant memorandum of agreement, and checklist documents. Staff at the College are aware of the responsibilities and processes in place for programme monitoring and review through, for example, annual monitoring and internal subject reports.

11　　The College's use of externality is proactive and effective. The College has taken actions to improve the use of external expertise and stakeholders during the validation of new programmes. For example, the Computing faculty at the College runs an industry forum that invites industry specialists to discuss the sector's skills so the College can develop its learning opportunities for students to reflect the needs of the sector.

Rounded judgement

12　　The awarding bodies and awarding organisation set the standards of the College's programmes through the application of their own academic frameworks and regulations, to which the College adheres. The College, through its adherence to its awarding bodies' regulations, its engagement with the FHEQ, the relevant code of governance and Part A of the Quality Code, has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards.

13　　The review team identified an area for development that advises the College to ensure all students are made aware of the role of the external examiner and that all external examiner reports are made available to them. No specified improvements were identified for this judgement area.

14　　The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

15 The College has an admissions policy that relates to its further and higher education provision. The College Advice and Guidance team is the primary point of contact for admissions and manages the overall process. Offers are made through UCAS, and College academics conduct interviews with applicants. Students who met with the review team were complimentary about the interview process and the range of processes utilised to support students through the application process.

16 The College follows the awarding bodies and awarding organisation's regulations and policies in respect of teaching, learning and assessment. The College has a higher education assessment moderation policy and assessment schedules policy. The College has a Teaching and Learning Academic Development and Strategy Group (TALADS) to support the development of teaching and learning and to disseminate good practice. The College provides support for the development of existing and new staff, and staff understand the differing requirements of the awarding bodies.

17 The College has specialist resources where appropriate. Resources are reviewed during the validation process, in line with the awarding body processes. The College has an annual cycle for the review of resources and staff can articulate the process for the development of additional resources.

18 The College follows the awarding bodies' monitoring and evaluation process, which includes analysis of external examiner reports, data and key themes.

19 While the College states that data is reviewed and discussed at TALADS, SMT, and by governors, such deliberation is not always clear.

20 There is evidence of key performance indicator reports being submitted to CQC and the minutes indicate that higher education data is noted. However, the review team found that the higher education retention issues raised in November 2016 by CQC, which noted a low retention figure of 73 per cent, have yet to be addressed. While there has been some limited progress through internal quality audit in one programme area, the outcomes of the audit are not due to be reported to CQC until November 2017. The review team found that there is limited strategic oversight to address issues highlighted by data at an institutional level in a timely manner. The review team therefore recommends that the College ensures, through its deliberative committee structure, that it has strategic oversight of data that enables timely improvement to the student academic experience across all of its higher education provision, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

21 The College has an agreement in place with a provider in Oldham to deliver Pearson Higher National provision. The College completed a due diligence process before proceeding with the agreement and completed a formal validation of provision before delivery at the Oldham site commenced. The review team found evidence of monitoring of the student experience at the Oldham site and students spoke positively about their experience.

22 The College provides College-based placement opportunities for some of its higher education provision. Placement information is provided for both students and mentors where necessary. Where placement is undertaken on the teacher education provision, there is

evidence of monitoring and mentor feedback.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

23   The College has arrangements that encourage students to contribute to academic governance. The College has a HE Student Engagement Strategy in place, which encourages a proactive student voice. A higher education Student Governor sits on the governing board. Students are members of specific College committees including SSCC, HE Council, Board of Studies, TALADS and CQC. Students actively engage in these meetings and those met by the review team commented positively on the various opportunities they have to attend deliberative committee meetings. A National Leaders of Governance report noted that the way in which the students, who were present at the Board meeting, were included in discussions and their views sought is exemplary.

24   The College student representatives, Student Governor and HE Practitioner Representatives are effectively informed of, and trained in, their roles.

25   The Governing body receives and monitors a HE Assurance report that includes student feedback and National Student Survey results. The College has recently introduced an annual HE Engagement report, although this is limited in its review of activity. The College uses survey data to gain feedback from students and feeds back to students through 'You said, We did'.

26   Governance arrangements in ensuring that student complaints are effectively addressed are fair and appropriate. Programme handbooks contain links to the complaints procedures on the virtual learning environment (VLE). The College documents all complaints for monitoring in governors' meetings on an annual basis. Staff and students are aware of the governance arrangements in place.

Policies and procedures are in place to ensure consumer protection obligations are met (Competition and Markets Authority guidance)

27   Arrangements for the recruitment and admission of students are clear and transparent and are agreed at validation with each awarding body and with Pearson. The College is generally responsible for the recruitment and admission of students to its programmes and the approach taken is articulated in the College admissions policy and implemented by trained staff. More complex application decisions may be referred to the awarding body, in line with the terms of the individual operating agreements.

28   The College has an admissions policy that relates to its further and higher education provision. The admissions policy, which is dated 31 October 2016, states that the appeals against admissions decisions process is currently being reviewed and directs students to contact the Head of Advice and Guidance for further information or to make an appeal. The review team therefore advises that the College completes its review of the appeals against admissions decisions process and makes it available to prospective students, identifying this as an **area for development**.

29   The College website is the primary source of information for prospective students. A dedicated set of higher education web pages provide information for prospective students about the courses available, including programme specifications, embedded KIS data and a page for higher education tuition fees. A robust internal process exists for content management and sign-off of published information. Relevant marketing material is approved, in the case of Kingston University and University of West London, prior to publication.

30   While clear information is provided about annual tuition fees, provision of information on essential course-related expenditure is insufficient. Students on courses in osteopathic medicine and teacher training incur significant additional costs through the purchase of expensive clinical examination kit or payment for Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks, without which students would be unable to undertake their programmes of study. Information about these costs is not available from the College website, and students whom the team met said they were not told about them until they had started their course. Prospective students may not, therefore, understand the full financial implications of accepting a place at the College. Senior College staff recognise the importance of this issue and confirm that in the event of a complaint, necessary additional costs would be met or waived by the College for current students, where information had not been given at time of offer. The review team therefore recommends that the College ensures that prospective students are made aware of necessary expenses that will be incurred in addition to tuition fees, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

31   Terms and conditions are made available to prospective students on the College website. Students also receive terms and conditions in hard copy at enrolment. In addition, a Student Information and Consumer Protection policy provides guidance about withdrawal of advertised programmes. Both documents include important information that prospective students use to fully inform their decision making, and should be made available to prospective students through the website and to students at time of offer. The review team therefore advises the College to ensure that prospective students are directed to a complete set of terms and conditions on the higher education web pages and that students receive a complete set of terms and conditions in a non-changeable format at time of offer, identifying this as an **area for development**.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) Good Practice Framework, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's (PHSO) Principles of Good Administration, and HEFCE's Statement of Good Practice on Higher Education Course Changes and Closures

32   Information on policies and practice in the event of course closure is included in the College's Student Information and Consumer Protection policy, terms and conditions for higher education students, and the student handbook. The College is currently working with other local higher education institutions to formalise mutual support and cooperation arrangements in the event of course closure.

33   The published Student Information and Consumer Protection policy sets out the circumstances under which modules or units could be withdrawn. College staff confirmed that this related to optional modules/units only and would not extend to core modules listed in programme specifications for current students. Changes to the programme specification requires approval from the awarding body and core modules for existing students would not be changed unless there were exceptional circumstances affecting the student experience, such as a change in professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) requirements.

34   In 2014, the University of Surrey gave notice that it was terminating its partnership agreement with the College, potentially affecting current students on the MSc Perfusion Science. The College agreed a teach-out plan with the University of Surrey and established a new validation agreement for the programme with Kingston University. Students were notified and given the option to continue to the end of their programme with the University of Surrey, or transfer to the new Kingston University validated course. The review team is satisfied that the College takes seriously its responsibilities for protecting the interests of its students in the event of course closure.

35   The College has clear and fair complaints and appeals policies for current higher education students, which set out the processes and timescales involved, and the respective responsibilities of the College and its awarding bodies. Formal complaints are dealt with through a timely two-stage process, with stage 2 being undertaken by the validating university, or by the College for Pearson provision. Prior to this, informal resolution of complaints is encouraged. Following completion of stage 2 of the formal process, the student is issued with a Completion of Procedures letter, allowing the student to refer the complaint to the OIA for independent resolution. Information about making complaints is made available to students at induction, and an explanatory information leaflet is available on the College VLE and website. The complaints process aligns well with OIA guidance and is understood by College staff.

36   Complaints are monitored termly and an annual report detailing numbers, categories and outcomes are presented to the governing body. College staff identified instances where complaints or concerns had given rise to improvements in information relating to tuition fees and to the provision of additional resources to enhance the student learning experience.

Rounded judgement

37   With respect to the quality of the student academic experience, the College has demonstrated through its various governance structures and internal policies and procedures that it meets the baseline regulatory requirements effectively in respect of both governance and student protection measures.

38   Under the Expectations of the Quality Code, the review team found that although the College draws upon qualitative and quantitative information and utilises this in programme monitoring and review, the College does not draw on this information to enable it to keep its strategic approach to learning and teaching under review, or to modify its approach as appropriate to facilitate development and improvement of the learning opportunities the College provides in a timely manner.

39   The review team found that insufficient emphasis or priority had been given to assuring quality, and the plans the College presented for addressing the issues around retention, through its use of data, were underdeveloped and not fully embedded in the College's operational planning, and could lead to a serious problem over time without action. This led the review team to recommend that, as a specified improvement, the College ensures, through its deliberative committee structure, that it has strategic oversight of data that enables timely improvement to the student academic experience across all of its higher education provision.

40   In addition, under Consumer Protection Obligations, the review team identified one specified improvement: that the College ensures that prospective students are made aware of necessary expenses that will be incurred in addition to tuition fees; and two areas for development: that the College completes its review of the appeals against admissions decisions process and makes it available to prospective students; and that the College ensures that prospective students are directed to a complete set of terms and conditions on the higher education web pages, and that students receive a complete set of terms and conditions in a non-changeable format at time of offer.

41   The review team concludes that there is limited confidence requiring specified improvements before there can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.