Quality Review Visit of North Lindsey College

April 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about North Lindsey College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at North Lindsey College.

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.**
- **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 Lindsey College. The review team advises North Lindsey College to:

- evaluate the measures being taken to improve the consistency and effectiveness of programme committees (Quality Code)
- make clear, and improve the consistency of, its policy on the requirement for academic staff to possess a teaching qualification (Quality Code)
- ensure that an introduction to quality processes is explicitly incorporated into the induction for new staff (Quality Code).

Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any **specified improvements**.

About this review

The review visit took place from 4 to 5 April 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Nicola Jackson
- Mr Conor Murray-Gauld (student reviewer)
- Miss Sarah Riches.

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 Lindsey College

North Lindsey College is a single-campus college situated in the industrial town of Scunthorpe in North Lincolnshire. It is the largest provider of further and higher education in North Lincolnshire. The College's mission is to deliver high quality education and training which enables and inspires individuals, employers and communities to develop their skills, unlock potential and realise their ambitions.

Higher education is delivered through a dedicated on-campus facility known as The University Centre. At the time of the review visit the College had 967 students; all were UK or European Union students. Sixty per cent of students are full-time and 40 per cent part-time.

The College's higher education provision is delivered on behalf of five awarding bodies and one awarding organisation: the University of Lincoln, the University of Hull, the University of Huddersfield, Sheffield Hallam University, Bishop Grosseteste University and Pearson Education. The provision includes full honours undergraduate degrees, as well as levels 4 and 5 Higher National Certificates and Diplomas and foundation degrees. Programmes are offered across three broad subject areas: Business, Education and Professional Studies; Engineering and Technology; and Health, Life and Social Sciences.

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 arrangements in place that meet its awarding bodies' and awarding organisation's requirements to ensure that the academic standards of the programmes offered meets or exceeds the UK threshold standard for the qualifications offered, as set out by the FHEQ.

2   Awarding bodies confirm that the College adheres to their course approval and validation processes and procedures, and College academic staff explained clearly their understanding and use of the FHEQ. External examiners' reports confirm that programmes are comparable with those of other UK 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

3   The College's Corporation Board seeks to conduct its business in accordance with the Association of Colleges' Code of Governance for English Colleges (the AoC Code). The Board works with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to set the College's mission and strategy. It receives specific reports about the performance of its higher education provision including recruitment, retention, progression and achievement and is kept up to date on developments in the external landscape through specific papers and training sessions. The Board receives and approves the Higher Education Summary Report to inform the Annual Quality Assessment accountability requirements of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

4   The College's deliberative committee structures are designed to ensure effective oversight of academic standards. The Higher Education Board of Studies (HEBoS) is the senior committee with responsibility for the strategic approach to the management of quality and standards and enhancement of student learning opportunities. HEBoS receives summaries of programme-level reports and action plans and monitors the Higher Education Development Plan. Teaching staff and student representatives meet at programme level three times a year in programme committee meetings (PCMs). Programme committee business includes reviewing annual monitoring plans, results of student surveys and evaluations, and consideration of external examiner reports. The College has identified areas it wishes to strengthen in the operation of PCMs and is taking several actions to ensure a more consistent approach, with improved levels of student engagement. However, at the time of the review visit, the actions being taken were at a relatively early stage of implementation and as a consequence their impact was not measurable. The review team advises the College to evaluate the measures being taken to improve the consistency and effectiveness of programme committees, identifying this as an **area for development**.

5   Collegiality is promoted through: the membership of staff and students on Corporation and College boards and committees; the designation of a Higher Education Link Governor who has attended the Student Society and the Higher Education Staff Symposium; and the development of student internships and collaboration between staff and students on joint research projects. Academic freedom is regarded as a core principle guiding the College's higher education provision, its policies and procedures. Oversight is vested in the Corporation Board, HEBoS and the University Centre Management Team. The College is

developing its approach to research ethics through its participation in the AoC Scholarship Project.

6   Academic risks are monitored by the SLT and reported to the Corporation's Audit and Risk Committee by way of the Risk Register. The effectiveness of the College's arrangements and controls are scrutinised by the programme of internal audits, which in 2016 included higher education. The auditors concluded that the College has appropriate controls in place to manage risks associated with its higher education provision.

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. Associated policies and procedures ensure that new programmes meet UK threshold academic standards. The College has effective internal arrangements that align with their responsibilities for the maintenance of academic standards. A College developmental consent process operates in the case of Higher National programmes, which are approved by Pearson UK.

8   Management structures are clear, with senior leadership including an Assistant Principal for Higher Education and a Director of Higher Education. The provision is divided according to subject into three cognate areas. Staff follow quality processes for their respective awarding bodies according to the relevant academic calendar, with designated communication contacts. Oversight is maintained through Monthly Operational Meetings (MOMs), the Quality and Standards Performance Group (QSPG) and HEBoS.

9   The College is effective in assessing that students have achieved the academic standards set. A clear outcomes-based approach is adopted for all academic awards. Students confirm that they receive learning outcomes for each module. Assessment processes are followed in line with awarding body and awarding organisation requirements, including internal and external verification. Performance is monitored through an effective central tracking process and deliberated at MOMs, with regular interim reviews.

10   External examination processes are robustly followed and external examiner reports confirm that academic standards and student achievements are comparable with those in other UK institutions.

11   The College is particularly effective in its use of data to monitor academic standards. Retention and achievement are effectively monitored across all programmes and targets are set and reported to HEBoS.

12   The College engages effectively in annual monitoring for all programmes according to an annual monitoring calendar and awarding body requirements. Annual monitoring action plans are considered at MOMs and a summary of issues and actions presented to HEBoS to enable a strategic overview of emerging issues, which are taken forward through a Higher Education Development Plan. Module Health Trackers are generated for each provision and displayed in staff rooms, allowing tracking through the year. Pearson confirms effective implementation of external assessment of BTEC provision. Programme committees are in place and the College has identified the need to strengthen their effectiveness (see also paragraph 4). Mid-year Programme Area Interim Review year meetings are used to consider any in-year modifications to programmes according to an agreed policy; a summary report is presented to HEBoS. Module evaluation is implemented, with a revised process currently being piloted to improve effectiveness (see paragraph 22).

13   Periodic review of programmes is carried out for all university programmes in line with awarding body requirements. For Pearson Higher National provision, annual review is

carried out robustly through Pearson's Quality Monitoring Review processes and internal Annual Review. However, the College recognises that there is currently no longer-term review cycle for Higher National programmes and has plans to introduce an approach similar to that operating for programmes awarded by its university partners.

Rounded judgement

14   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 UK Quality Code for Higher Education, has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards.

15   The review team identified an area for development that advises the evaluation of measures being taken to improve the consistency and effectiveness of programme committees. The College has recognised this as an area that it wishes to strengthen and is taking steps to address it. There are no specified improvements in this area.

16   The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

17   Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures are set out in the Higher Education Admissions Policy. The University Centre Leadership Team is responsible for the recruitment process, setting recruitment targets and entry criteria in accordance with the requirements of the College's awarding bodies/organisation. Programme leaders are directly involved in the recruitment and selection process. Staff are kept up to date through regular contact with UCAS.

18   The system of student representation is well developed and supported. Students' representatives are elected at programme level and attend PCMs. Representatives receive a handbook explaining their role and are given the opportunity to attend training workshops. There are student members of deliberative committees at all levels, including the Corporation Board. Student representatives have access to external examiner reports as members of programme committees. The reports are available to all students as part of the programme-specific content of the virtual learning environment (VLE). The Student Society provides a forum for student representatives to raise issues and provide feedback. Informal opportunities for the exchange of ideas and feedback is provided through the social spaces for higher education staff and students.

19   The College systematically monitors the quality of the student academic experience. Programme-level Annual Monitoring Reports (AMRs) incorporate reflections on, and responses to, external examiner reports, student feedback and student performance data. Groups of AMRs from a cognate area are considered by AMR Panels, chaired by the Director of Higher Education. Once approved by the Panel, AMR action plans are monitored at MOMs, chaired by Cognate Area Leaders. Summary reports by programme leaders feed into Cognate Area Reports, which are considered by QSPG and HEBoS, and in turn inform the annual Higher Education Development Plan and onward reporting to the Corporation Board and the College's awarding bodies. A QSPG panel of staff and students undertakes a formal mid-year interim review of clusters of programmes within a cognate area, considering recruitment and performance data, module evaluation results and progress with implementing higher education initiatives. The quality of the student learning experience is reviewed by university partners as part of their periodic review processes. The College has plans to develop a periodic review process for its Pearson provision (see also paragraph 13).

20   Key principles of the College's Strategic Plan are the 'relentless pursuit of outstanding and inspirational teaching and learning and the use of technology to improve teaching and learning'. The College's approach to learning and teaching is set out in its Higher Education Learning and Teaching Strategy, the key themes of which are: providing learning opportunities which enable students from diverse backgrounds to achieve their potential; high quality, innovative teaching informed by student and peer feedback; and an emphasis on employability and lifelong learning. The jointly prepared Student Charter encapsulates the partnership between staff and students in the creation of a 'learning community'. The University Centre has adopted the Scholarship, Engagement and Employability (SEE) model as its guiding philosophy. The model encourages students to venture beyond the formal curriculum to seek opportunities to apply and develop their skills and knowledge, working in partnership with tutors, but gradually taking greater ownership of their learning. The dual concepts of Students as Partners and Students as Producers exemplify the College's aspiration to create a learning community in which students are fully engaged in the learning process. Emerging good practice from SEE includes: collaborative

staff-student research projects; a student research internship scheme, the Employability Bursary Scheme; and joint staff-student presentations through the Scholarship Forum programme.

21   Students provide feedback on their learning experience both formally and informally. Formal methods include module evaluations, internal surveys and the National Student Survey (NSS). The pilot of an innovative approach to module evaluation based on group feedback is producing richer feedback for staff. Summary reports are considered by HEBoS and by programme committees. Consideration of student feedback is incorporated into the annual monitoring process and actions incorporated into plans at programme or College level. Analysis of student surveys and module evaluations is undertaken by a higher education student intern. Students confirmed that their views are taken seriously and acted upon.

22   Higher education students benefit from a high quality learning environment, with discrete teaching, library and social space at the main campus, and access to specialist facilities for Science, Technology and Engineering provision. The College's VLE supports independent learning by providing programme-specific material, such as handbooks, module guides and assessment material and access to electronic library resources and the platform for the submission of assessments.

23   The College is committed to enabling individuals to develop their skills, unlock potential and realise their ambitions in a 'welcoming, caring, supportive, safe and inclusive environment' for learning. The support available to students is set out in the Academic Advice and Guidance Handbook provided to all students. The College places great emphasis on ensuring that students are prepared for their higher education studies. Short 'bitesize' modules are offered at the pre-entry stage, and offers to mature students are often made conditional on the completion of these activities. New students are invited to induction sessions, which, in keeping with the philosophy of students as partners, are jointly delivered with current students. A distinctive feature of the support available is the Academic Advocacy system, which provides students with subject-based academic support and pastoral care.

24   The progress of individual students is monitored formally by Progress Panels; interventions to support at risk students are monitored by MOMs. Students are encouraged to declare any additional support needs prior to entry and throughout their course. Funding is available for diagnostic assessments and the provision of assistive technologies. Support for individual students is provided in partnership with a specialist external organisation. Students experiencing financial hardship can access the Student Opportunity Fund. The University Centre Information and Advice Office tracks students' progress and provides information and advice on assessment-related matters, including reasonable adjustments to examinations and consideration of extenuating circumstances. Employability is built in to higher education programmes as part of the SEE philosophy. The College was one of 32 institutions participating in the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Strategic Enhancement Programme: Embedding employability into the curriculum. Students have access to careers advice and guidance both through their awarding body and University Centre staff and, in the case of two programmes, employability workshops delivered by an independent external specialist. Student satisfaction with academic support is very high. Teaching staff are well qualified academically, with a quarter holding or working towards a level 8 qualification. Approximately three-quarters of higher education teaching staff have a teaching qualification. The review team was informed that the College does not have an explicit policy on the acquisition of a teaching qualification by higher education teaching staff. However, contracts of employment for teaching staff specify a requirement to hold a teaching qualification, with a bespoke approach taken to the type of qualification and timescale for its achievement. Financial support is provided. The College also offers an HEA-accredited PGCE with the University of

Huddersfield. The review team concluded that while there are advantages to a bespoke approach, the criteria governing the type of acceptable qualifications and timescales for achievement could be clearer. The review team therefore advises the College to make clear, and improve the consistency of, its policy on the requirement for academic staff to possess a teaching qualification, identifying this as an **area for development**.

25   In 2015-16 the College introduced a revised teaching observation scheme which aligns with the UK Professional Standards Framework, the FHEQ and the Quality Code. The process, which includes discussion with students, provides opportunities for staff to reflect on their teaching and learning strategies and teaching practice. The College consistently performs above the top quartile for both teaching and assessment and feedback in the NSS. The College subscribes to the HEA and funds have been made available to support 20 staff to make fellowship applications in 2016-17. The College is a participant in the development of the HEFCE-funded AoC College Higher Education Scholarship Project. This project has provided funding for two Scholarship Development Manager posts, the development of a draft Scholarly Activity Policy, and activities associated with the adoption of the innovative Scholarship Engagement and Employability (SEE) model.

26   The College has built on the good practice in employer engagement identified in the 2012 QAA Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review report. Employers are involved in course development and design, the provision of work placements and opportunities for undertaking research. The work placement requirements of foundation degrees are set out in programme specifications, programme and module handbooks.

27   Individual policies, procedures and templates for the management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement are held on the staff intranet. The University Centre has not produced a guide to quality processes, although following the recent appointment of a Quality Assurance Co-ordinator there are plans to develop a summary document. Programme Leaders, Academic Advocates and Academic Subject Leads have responsibility for quality included in their respective role descriptors. While the team heard that these roles support new academic staff through their probationary period, the review team did not find evidence that the structured induction of new higher education staff explicitly covers the College's or awarding bodies'/organisation's quality processes. The review team advises the College to ensure that an introduction to quality processes is explicitly incorporated into the induction for new staff, identifying this as an **area for development**.

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

28   Students are encouraged to contribute to academic governance. A higher education Student Governor sits on Corporation. A new Higher Education Performance and Quality Committee (HEPQG) is to involve student input. Governors receive a regular Quality Report, including reference to student satisfaction as expressed through the NSS. Students are involved in a Governor link process, and an annual student/SLT/Governor workshop. Governors attend student focus groups and curriculum area team meetings. The College has put in place steps to strengthen student engagement and confidence at Corporation, and sees student engagement as embedded throughout College governance, through student representatives, programme committees, and reports to HEBoS and the Corporation.

29   The College has a complaints policy, although no formal complaints have been received for several years. A tracker is used to log informal complaints and the College is working to strengthen the capture of this type of concern (see also paragraph 32).

Corporation receives a report on complaints and the effectiveness of the complaints process. Students know where to access the complaints procedure, and can describe examples where an informal complaint has achieved a positive outcome.

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

30   Appropriate arrangements are in place to ensure that consumer protection obligations are met in relation to Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) guidance, as evidenced by the changes implemented at the most senior level of the College. The College has acted to align its admission guidance and documentation provided to students. Students feel well informed, and found that information they accessed both online and in person was useful and clear in helping them to make an informed decision about studying at the College.

31   The College makes providing information to prospective students in a personal and bespoke way a significant focus of its work. This has resulted in some prospective students, who felt they 'couldn't see themselves studying a degree,' being supported to realise this as a legitimate option of study. This approach is recognised by students as something that makes a difference, enabling them to make an informed decision and feel supported in doing so. Students are sent all relevant information in relation to becoming a student prior to them accepting their offer.

32   The College has a clear complaints procedure and students are made aware of the process at several different points. The documentation is easily accessed through the VLE and is also included in the student handbook. Students are aware of where to access the complaints procedure should they require it. The complaints procedure aligns to the guidance set out by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). Although the College has a formal complaints procedure, the focus is on intervening early to avoid escalation to the formal stage. There is a process of informal resolution in place and students highlighted the open-door policy and responsiveness of staff as being generally effective. The provider has highlighted in its submission and at the review visit that there is a need to strengthen its processes for tracking the informal resolution of issues. It has acted by creating a new tracking document to ensure that such informally raised matters are logged and reported to the senior staff and Corporation.

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

33   The College provides clear information before, during and after enrolment on a course. There is a clear policy for course closures and steps are taken to ensure, through its recruitment process, that only courses with a clear demand are offered There is no record of any student being enrolled onto a course that did not run but there are policies in place to ensure that students are protected if this should happen in the future.

34   The College cited an example where it has assisted the wider higher education sector to protect the experience of students by accepting the transfer of students from another provider. In this example, a course mapping exercise was undertaken to secure academic standards and students were then transferred, allowing them to continue study with no loss of learning. The team was assured that the processes and scope of issues that may affect courses/students are well thought out and account for a wide range of factors drawn from wider sector experience.

35   All students have course handbooks as well as an Academic Advice and Guidance Handbook that detail the processes for making a complaint or appealing a grade. The production of this booklet has been created in a student-focused way and it is available to all students through the VLE and website. The Corporation Board ensured that the OIA Good Practice Framework, outlined in its letter sent to the College, was mapped against relevant policies and procedures of the College. The mapping resulted in some changes, including a revised complaints policy and procedure (see also paragraph 32).

36   Students registered with partner universities are covered under the respective academic regulations in relation to academic appeals, and consequently have access to the OIA route for escalation of both complaints and appeals.

Rounded judgement

37   The College has demonstrated through its various governance structures and internal policies and procedures that it meets all the baseline regulatory requirements in this area effectively. There are two areas for development in this area. One relates to clarifying its policy in respect of the requirement for teaching qualifications. The second relates to a minor revision through which staff understanding of the broader quality assurance framework can be enhanced. There are no specified improvements in this area.

38   The review team concludes that there can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.