



Higher Education Review of South Essex College of Further and Higher Education

May 2016

Contents

About this review	1
Amended judgement - July 2017.....	2
Key findings.....	5
QAA's judgements about South Essex College of Further and Higher Education.....	5
Good practice	5
Recommendations	5
Affirmation of action being taken	6
Theme: Student Employability.....	6
About South Essex College of Further and Higher Education.....	6
Explanation of the findings about South Essex College of Further and Higher Education.....	8
1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations	9
2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities.....	22
3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities	44
4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities	47
5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability.....	51
Glossary.....	52

About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at South Essex College of Further and Higher Education. The review took place from 3 to 6 May 2016 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Andrew Rogers
- Ms Maxina Butler-Holmes
- Mr Harry Williams (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by South Essex College of Further and Higher Education and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)¹ 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, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
 - the quality of student learning opportunities
 - the information provided about higher education provision
 - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 5. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 8.

In reviewing South Essex College of Further and Higher Education the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2015-16 are Student Employability and Digital Literacy,² and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.³ A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)⁴ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code.

² Higher Education Review themes:
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859.

³ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.

⁴ Higher Education Review web pages:
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review.

Amended judgement - July 2017

Introduction

In May 2016, South Essex College of Further and Higher Education (the College) underwent a Higher Education Review, which resulted in the following judgements: the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisation meets UK expectations; the quality of student learning opportunities requires improvement to meet UK expectations; the quality of the information about learning opportunities meets UK expectations; and the enhancement of student learning opportunities requires improvement to meet UK expectations.

Negative judgements are subject to a formal follow-up by QAA, which involves the monitoring of an action plan produced by the College in response to the report findings. The College published an action plan in July 2016 describing how it intended to address the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the review, and has been working over the last 11 months to demonstrate how it has implemented that plan. The follow-up process included three progress updates and culminated in a desk-based analysis of the College's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence with two reviewers.

The desk-based analysis confirmed that the recommendations and affirmations relating to the quality of student learning opportunities and the enhancement of student learning opportunities had been successfully addressed and the good practice appropriately disseminated. Actions against recommendations relating to the maintenance of academic standards and information about learning opportunities, which received positive judgements, had also been completed on schedule and contributed to the progress against the quality and the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

QAA Board decision and amended judgement(s)

The review team concluded that the College had made sufficient progress to recommend that the judgements be amended. The QAA Board accepted the team's recommendation and the judgements are now formally amended. The College's judgements are now as follows:

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisation **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

The review can be considered to be signed off as complete.

Findings from the follow-up process

The review team found that the College had made progress against the recommendations as follows.

Recommendation - Expectation B2

In respect of recruitment and retention there is effective institutional oversight of recruitment and retention. Responsibilities for overseeing recruitment and retention have been embedded in the terms of reference of key institutional-level academic committees such as the Higher Education Recruitment and Retention Task Group (HERRTG), the Higher Education Committee, the Academic Board, and the Curriculum and Quality Committee. The HERRTG takes an active interest in recruitment and retention activities at programme and subject level, and committees receive regular reports and updates. Monitoring of recruitment and retention is achieved in the annual monitoring reviews for Pearson programmes and through Programme Boards. The College has made good progress against this recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B5

With regard to the engagement of all students in the enhancement of their educational experience, the College engages a wider range of students to assure the quality of learning opportunities. Students are members of Programme Boards and student representatives are invited to attend key academic committees, but are not full members. An additional member of staff supports the Students' Union and communication between students and staff. The new Higher Education Strategy and the Higher Education Enhancement and Continuous Improvement Strategy currently provide no tangible overarching strategic institutional approach to student engagement and further strengthening is required to reflect the role of students in their implementation. However, the College has made sufficient progress against this recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B6

With regard to feedback to students on assessed work, the quality and timeliness of summative feedback has improved and formative feedback has been introduced into the assessment schedule. The College is in the process of implementing a model for the central oversight of the timeliness of assessment feedback and has made sufficient progress against this recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B8

In respect of the tracking of actions to maintain effective oversight of annual programme monitoring, processes have been strengthened. Preparation, completion and progress against actions of annual programme monitoring reports is checked three times per academic year at Programme Boards, with the participation of students. The quality of annual monitoring reports has improved and reports are formally approved by the Higher Education Committee, thus strengthening institutional oversight. The committee is in the process of evaluating the monitoring activities carried out by Programme Boards. The College has made sufficient progress against this recommendation.

Recommendation - Enhancement

With regard to the identification, implementation and evaluation of institution-level enhancement initiatives, the College has used its annual programme monitoring process to identify a number of areas to inform its enhancement agenda and for inclusion in strategic planning. A new Higher Education Strategy 2017-20, including a three-year implementation plan, was approved. This is underpinned by a Higher Education Enhancement and Continuous Improvement Strategy. The College has also devised terms of reference for the Higher Education Teaching, Learning and Assessment Forum. The Higher Education Student Support Strategy has been developed with some specific projects, which were

progressed. The BTEC Higher Education Quality Forum remains the arena for the sharing of good practice, informed by the Pearson Quality Monitoring Review and external examiner reports. Student representation and membership of committees involved with quality assurance has also been strengthened. Although there is further work to be done to ensure an effective and embedded model, the College has a more coherent and sustainable approach towards the enhancement of student learning opportunities. The College has made sufficient progress against this recommendation.

Affirmation - Expectation B10

With regard to the management oversight of placement learning, the College has strengthened practice learning through the appointment of a Practice Learning Coordinator. Further appointments including the appointment of a Work-based Learning Coordinator are planned. The College is making sufficient progress against this affirmation.

Good practice - Expectation B4

In respect of the integrated student support, a number of projects have been completed stemming from the College's Student Support Strategy. Potential areas for development surrounding student support are captured through the annual monitoring process, and the newly formed Higher Education Enhancement Task Group may also identify areas for enhancing student support. The College continues to monitor and disseminate good practice relating to student support through various mechanisms including the BTEC Quality Forum and Higher Education Student Support Forums. The College has made good progress disseminating this feature of good practice appropriately and effectively.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about South Essex College of Further and Higher Education

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at South Essex College of Further and Higher Education.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisation **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at South Essex College of Further and Higher Education.

- The integrated student support which facilitates the development of students' academic, personal and professional potential (Expectation B4).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to South Essex College of Further and Higher Education.

By September 2016:

- map programme learning outcomes to assessment and define the local context of the Pearson programmes according to Pearson's requirements (Expectations A2.2 and C)
- ensure that the organisational structures and processes maintain effective institutional oversight of recruitment and retention (Expectation B2)
- take deliberate steps to engage all students in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience (Expectation B5)
- ensure that meeting minutes consistently record decisions and actions to aid effective institutional oversight, monitoring, and evaluation of provision (Expectation C).

By December 2016:

- ensure that consistent levels of detailed and developmental feedback are provided to all students in a timely manner (Expectation B6)
- ensure that the processes for programme monitoring track the progress of actions effectively, to maintain effective oversight of higher education provision (Expectation B8).

By February 2017:

- ensure that the committee structure operates effectively to provide institutional oversight with regard to the monitoring and review of academic standards and quality (Expectations A3.3 and A2.1).

By June 2017:

- systematically identify, implement and evaluate institution-level enhancement initiatives (Enhancement).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions that South Essex College of Further and Higher Education is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The steps taken to strengthen management oversight of placement learning through the appointment of a placement coordinator (Expectation B10).

Theme: Student Employability

The Higher Education Strategy identifies employability as a strategic priority for the College. It has a number of processes in place to ensure that new and existing curricula are informed by contemporary industrial practice. Work-based learning is a feature of a substantial number of programmes offered by the College. A recent employability audit identified the employment-related activities undertaken by programme teams. The College's Careers Service offers support to students with CV writing and interview training. The College also runs an Employability Street event where students have access to employers and can explore potential job opportunities.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#).

About South Essex College of Further and Higher Education

South Essex College of Further and Higher Education (the College) is a large general further education college which was formed in 2010 by the merger of Thurrock and Basildon College and South East Essex College. It has become the main provider of college-based vocational education in the south Essex region. The College's mission is to be 'the first choice for achieving success through quality learning'. This is underpinned by six core values, which are outlined in the Strategic Plan and echoed in the Higher Education Strategy.

The College offers a curriculum in all subject sector areas and in most vocational areas, with around 16,000 students spread across its three main campuses in Basildon, Southend and Thurrock, and has 815 higher education students. It has a long established relationship with the University of Essex and Pearson Education, and has recently formed a partnership with the University of the Arts, London.

Since the 2011 Integrated Quality Enhancement Review (IQER) by QAA, a new Principal was appointed in 2012. The development of the College's higher education provision has remained a strategic priority. The College gained directly funded HEFCE numbers in 2013.

Since the merger, the College has sought to review its curriculum offer and develop appropriate provision in each of the communities it serves. This has led to the termination of partnerships with the University of East London and Anglia Ruskin University inherited on merger. A new partnership with the University of the Arts, London was agreed in 2015.

In response to employer demand and declining numbers on foundation degrees the College replaced them with Higher National programmes in Engineering, Construction and Computing. The College has also developed its performing arts provision, offering a HNC/HND since 2013.

Since the IQER, Southend-based higher education provision has moved from the College's main campus into a purpose-built centre with seven classroom spaces, open study centres with networked IT, a student services support centre and the combined council and college library collection. Thurrock provision relocated from an old, out-of-town campus to a new build in the centre of Grays, which provides access to new equipment, purpose-built teaching spaces and a library with a learning centre to support extended study.

The 2011 IQER report made three recommendations: ensure a consistent level of detailed assessment feedback (1); review the Teaching and Learning Strategy (2); and continue to review the management and committee structure to ensure effective oversight (3). In response to the IQER, the College has continued to develop the Teaching and Learning Strategy to now include a learning cycle. To improve the quality of feedback to students on assessed work the College introduced an assessment tariff to ensure consistency in the volume of assessment. This is comprehensive and maps module credit volume to taught hours, assessment time, and assessment type. However, the quality and timeliness of feedback remains an issue (see Expectation B6). Management and committee structures have been revised and continue to be so, with a Higher Education Committee and Programme Boards being established to provide oversight of higher education at programme and College level. The effectiveness of these could be improved (see Expectations A2.1, A3.3 and B8). Faculties have been restructured into smaller departments to allow greater management oversight of provision and more effective line management of lecturing staff.

Explanation of the findings about South Essex College of Further and Higher Education

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

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

Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are met by:

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.1 The College is substantial and consists of 29 undergraduate programmes with 815 students enrolled in the present academic year. The College delivers its provision through partnership agreements with long-standing partners such as the University of Essex (UoE) and Pearson, and more recently with the University of the Arts, London (UAL). The growing relationship with UAL is motivated by the need to extend the range of creative arts disciplines offered at the College, supported by a university that has significant subject expertise in those subject areas.

1.2 While UoE, UAL and Pearson are responsible for setting the academic standards of the awards, and have overall responsibility for the maintenance of those standards, the College is responsible for delivering and assessing the programmes of study, and for maintaining the academic standards of the degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisation, as set out in the respective collaboration agreements and responsibilities checklists.

1.3 The College does not have its own programme approval process but relies on the awarding bodies' approval processes for ensuring that the programmes delivered by the College are aligned to *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), align with the specifications of the national credit frameworks and reference appropriate subject benchmarks. The Pearson programmes are aligned to the

FHEQ via the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). The College uses the relevant academic regulatory frameworks of UoE, UAL and Pearson for assessment and the award of credit. The approach would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.4 In considering this Expectation, the review team examined the College's and the awarding partners' procedures for programme approval and a range of programme specifications.

1.5 The College shares responsibility for developing new programmes with its degree-awarding bodies; however, programme approval firmly rests with the awarding bodies. In both cases, the setting, marking and moderation of assessment is the sole responsibility of the College. The College's higher education provision takes into account national benchmark statements through its working relationship with UoE and UAL. The content of the programmes and the requirements outlined in the Subject Benchmark Statements are contained in the programme-related documentation that students receive. Programme specifications articulate overall learning outcomes mapped against assessment criteria. Programme handbooks provide information relating to course content, delivery and assessment.

1.6 Pearson retains responsibility for the design and approval of Higher National qualifications; however, the College selects the units it wishes to deliver according to the awarding organisation's rules of combination and is responsible for the design of appropriate learning materials and assessments. All Higher National programmes delivered by the College follow the awarding organisation's rules of combination. The College produces definitive programme documents which collate unit learning outcomes into programme learning outcomes (see Expectation A2.2).

1.7 Academic standards are maintained through the use of external examiners and periodic reviews conducted by the awarding bodies and Pearson. The external examiner reports seen by the review team confirm that the programmes are assessed at the correct levels.

1.8 Overall, the review team considers that the College has in place adequate processes to ensure that threshold academic standards are met. The Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.

Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.9 The collaborative joint venture agreements between the College, UoE and UAL outline the academic governance arrangements and academic frameworks in place to secure academic standards. The College is responsible for maintaining academic standards through the implementation of the academic regulatory frameworks of the awarding bodies and Pearson. The College does not have its own academic regulations but conforms to those of UoE, UAL and Pearson.

1.10 The Academic Board is ultimately responsible for the maintenance of academic standards for all provision including higher education. The College's higher education provision is overseen by the Higher Education Committee (HEC), which is a subcommittee of the Academic Board. HEC has responsibility for monitoring of academic standards and the review and enhancement of learning opportunities, teaching and assessment. The terms of reference of this committee are cross referenced to relevant Expectations of the Quality Code. Pearson programmes are also overseen by the BTEC Higher Education Quality Forum, which in turn reports to HEC with the express purpose of implementing Pearson regulations. Assessment Boards oversee the award of credit. Programme Boards are responsible for the oversight and management of higher education programmes at departmental level.

1.11 UoE, UAL and Pearson have a wide range of policies that cover aspects of academic activity. These include assessment, examination and academic misconduct policies, regulations and guidance. They are supplemented by partner policies on Extenuating Circumstances, Accreditation of Prior Learning and Late Submission of Coursework.

1.12 Management responsibility for higher education at College level rests with the Head of Academic Standards, Validation and Quality and the Head of Higher Education Development and Delivery. They are responsible for ensuring academic standards and that quality management across the different parts of higher education provision is comparable. Both of these positions are line-managed by the Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality.

1.13 The awarding partners' academic frameworks are sufficiently robust and the College's supporting policies and processes are appropriately designed to allow Expectation A2.1 to be met.

1.14 In considering this Expectation, the review team considered the terms of reference, agendas, and minutes of deliberative committees, job descriptions of senior quality managers, and policies and procedures for teaching, learning and assessment, and met senior staff, academic staff and students to explore governance arrangements, management responsibilities, the implementation of academic policies and procedures and the application of academic regulations.

1.15 The Academic Board, Higher Education Committee and Programme Boards meet regularly but do not always discharge their responsibilities appropriately. The sizeable membership of HEC contains managers from each academic department, which enables

appropriate lines of communication. However, the remit of the Committee is very broad and lacks a clear focus on academic standards and quality. Programme Boards do not always adequately monitor academic standards at programme level. The minutes of both HEC and Programme Board meetings in many cases comprise brief notes with no evaluative commentary and vaguely stated actions (see Expectations A3.3 and B8).

1.16 The College's adherence to the academic regulations of each awarding body and awarding organisation ensures the transparent award of credit and qualifications. The College applies the academic regulations in a consistent way. Application is overseen by Examination and Assessment Boards. No credits or awards can be made until confirmed at the appropriate Examination or Assessment Board and with the approval and confirmation of the external examiner. Examination Boards for university-approved provision take place at the College. For Pearson provision, the College holds its own Assessment Boards following the awarding organisation's procedures. The latest external examiner reports generally confirm that assessments are appropriate and at the right level, and that there is adequate internal moderation or verification.

1.17 The review team concludes that the College has reliable processes in place for assessment, and is working within its policies and that of the awarding bodies and the awarding organisation to ensure that academic credit and qualifications are awarded securely. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.18 The College shares responsibility for the production, development and maintenance of definitive records in the form of programme specifications with awarding partners. These responsibilities are detailed in the formal governance documentation between the College and its awarding partners. The processes in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.19 To test the Expectation, the review team evaluated programme specifications, module and unit specifications, and course handbooks for programmes of study. The review team also met senior staff, programme leaders, and academic staff.

1.20 Programme specifications produced by the College in collaboration with their awarding partners provide a programme summary and state the level of the programme, with learning outcomes mapped against assessment requirements. Specifications also contain information relating to learning and teaching methods used in the delivery of the programme, assessment information, and a rationale for undertaking the programme. Meetings with programme leaders and academic teaching staff confirm that these programme specifications are used as the definitive record for each programme.

1.21 Pearson has clear requirements for the production of contextualised programme specifications and their contents. For the Higher National provision, the College provides information relating to unit learning outcomes in programme specifications, with information copied from Pearson unit documentation. In this case, specifications contain a brief programme overview, information relating to delivery and assessment of the programme, FHEQ, and grade descriptors. However, as confirmed in meetings with the staff, the College has not mapped programme learning outcomes to assessment criteria or defined the local context of its Higher National provision, contrary to the requirements set out by Pearson. In meetings, the College both accepted and rejected the need for contextualisation articulated within the aforementioned Pearson documentation. This leads to a risk that students are unaware of the overarching significance of their studies in the context of the local employment market and other such drivers. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College maps programme learning outcomes to assessment criteria and defines the local context of the Pearson programmes, according to its requirements.

1.22 The review team concludes that the Expectation is not met. While the programme materials provided by the UoE and UAL are of sufficient detail to be used as the reference point for the delivery and assessment of this particular part of the College's provision, this is not true for the College's Higher National programmes, which do not meet the standards articulated in Pearson documentation. The associated level of risk is moderate due to a lack of clarity surrounding the College's responsibility to produce definitive programme records with programme learning outcomes, in line with Pearson's requirements.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.23 Responsibility for ensuring that programmes meet threshold standards for the relevant qualification and that those processes are carried out effectively lie with the awarding bodies. The College operates within their approval frameworks. For university-approved programmes, validation panels test the organisation and validity of course proposals and ensure that they are in line with national academic standards and align with the FHEQ. Pearson has responsibility for the approval of Higher National awards and the College informs Pearson of the chosen units, observing the rules of combination.

1.24 The College has a Higher Education Programme Approval Process, which outlines the processes to be followed for programme approval by the two university awarding bodies. The College's Higher Education Committee (HEC) approves new proposals and considers these in alignment with the College's strategic objectives. The terms of reference were recently revised to adopt the same approach for the Pearson provision and a Pearson approval process has been introduced. This formalisation of internal programme approval is part of an overall strengthening of arrangements for Pearson programmes and covers the introduction and discontinuation of programmes, the changing of optional units and also the updating of programme specifications.

1.25 The oversight provided by external approval processes enables the College to ensure that academic standards are set at an appropriate level. The College states that the operation of its Higher Education Committee provides the framework for the systematic maintenance of the processes for approval of taught programmes. This would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.26 The review team tested the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining relevant university policies, partnership agreements, programme approvals documents and minutes of meetings. The team also met the Principal, senior staff including representatives from the university partners, teaching staff, and students.

1.27 Overall, the processes for programme approval work effectively and comply with the relevant academic frameworks and regulations. There is evidence of active involvement by several members of staff in recent programme approvals and validation events with University partners, and of updates on the progress of all validation events, which are reported to the HEC. The two-stage approval process of the University of Essex is made clear in a range of documents. College staff have also been involved in the revalidation of programmes under the University's Curriculum Review process.

1.28 The UoE degree scheme variation (DSV) enables the expedient achievement of minor modifications to programmes, which the College takes frequent advantage of. The DSVs, which may be influenced by student feedback or employer needs, are approved within the College by the Head of Academic Standards Validations and Quality (HEASVQ) before being submitted to the UoE Partnership Education Committee for approval.

1.29 The UAL provision was introduced for 2015-16, with one programme currently being approved. Proposals for the approval of new programmes are described in the validation guidance documentation. A schedule of administrative work defines the processes involved, milestones and respective responsibilities of both parties. The Programme Leader is involved in the validation process and design of the programme, having firstly received training from the University. Programme planning documents are produced by the College, including the development of the programme specification, with a validation log providing an auditable trail of dates and key meetings. Students were consulted as part of the process and specialists from industry were closely involved in the design of modules. At the time of the review, two other programmes were proceeding through the validation and approvals processes, with updates provided to the HEC.

1.30 Within the context of working with its awarding partners and the overarching academic frameworks they provide to meet the threshold standards for the qualifications they award, the team concludes that the College is fulfilling its responsibilities for programme approval in relation to academic standards. The College works closely and effectively with its awarding partners, which helps to ensure that Expectation A3.1 is met, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.31 The College relies on the academic frameworks of its awarding partners for ensuring the validity of assessment. The partnership agreements with the universities set out the mutual responsibilities in relation to assessment and the achievement of academic standards. Assessment strategies and grade criteria are determined by the awarding bodies.

1.32 For University of Essex provision, the College is guided by the Rules of Assessment and assessment policies. Assessment of learning outcomes are tested as part of the validation and approval processes. Assignment briefs and grading grids designed by the College, which align with programme handbooks, are provided to students. The College introduced an assessment tariff following an advisable recommendation in its Integrated Quality Enhancement Review (IQER) report to ensure consistency in the volume of assessment. For the UAL provision, the College observes the University's assessment regulations and guidance, including those for academic misconduct. The University's programme approval form requires the articulation of learning outcomes against learning, teaching and assessment strategies. For Pearson provision, the reference points are the BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment Levels 4-7, the BTEC Levels 4-7 Standards Verification process, and the newly introduced Quality Management Review. The College has its own assessment regulations and associated policies in relation to the Pearson programmes, including an internal verification procedure.

1.33 The programme specifications for the University-validated awards set out the assessment strategies to enable students to achieve module and programme-level intended learning outcomes. The College regards the student versions of programme specifications for the Pearson provision as providing the 'embedding' of levelness and constant assurance to both staff and students of assessment expectations. Programme handbooks provide clear reference to the academic regulations along with guidance relating to academic conduct and practice. These frameworks and approaches assure that the design, approval and monitoring of assessment satisfy appropriate academic standards, and would therefore allow the Expectation to be met.

1.34 The review team tested the effectiveness of the assessment arrangements through the examination of relevant committee meeting minutes, external examiner reports, programme handbooks, validation and approval events and the higher education internal verification policy documents. The team also held meetings with teaching staff, senior staff including representatives from the awarding bodies, and students.

1.35 The evidence reviewed showed the policies and procedures to be effective in practice. Teaching staff participate in moderation meetings and events, ensuring that the procedures are in line with the relevant awarding body's requirements. All staff, including those who are new to a team, feel supported in the assurance of 'levelness' through the

peer mentoring process and the internal verification activities that take place. Students whom the team met confirmed that they understand the requirements of assessment at all levels of study.

1.36 The BTEC Higher Education Quality Forum, led by the Head of Higher Education Development and Delivery, has introduced revised documentation to provide a consistent approach for the Pearson provision. Training sessions focused on assessment practices have also been conducted. Centralised assessment templates have been introduced, for example for internal verification, which makes explicit reference to the FHEQ and a comprehensive assessment planning spreadsheet. Assignment brief top sheets are included in student versions of programme specifications. These were all approved by HEC. The latest Pearson Quality Management Review report notes the 'centralisation of internal verification activities to enhance a standardised approach'.

1.37 For the University-validated programmes, assignment briefs and assessment sheets clearly state the learning outcomes being assessed, along with assessment criteria and grading descriptors for each level. Students confirmed that the learning outcomes and assessment criteria are explicit in their assignment briefs and in handbooks. External examiners confirm that the achievement of learning outcomes is reliably demonstrated through assessment. For Pearson provision, assignment briefs are scrutinised by Pearson's external examiners and appropriate levels of assessment are confirmed through external examiner reports after mid-year sampling and at the annual visits to the College. External examiner reports confirm that academic standards are satisfied and that there is sound internal verification practice.

1.38 Overall, the evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for the award of credit and qualifications. Therefore, the team concludes that Expectation A3.2 is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.39 The College's agreements with its awarding bodies define the responsibilities of both parties for monitoring and review of programmes. For the UoE provision, the College has shared responsibility for annual monitoring and review. Annual reports are completed at programme level and approved at the relevant Programme Board before receipt and approval by the College's Higher Education Committee (HEC) and transmission to the University's Partnership Education Committee (PEC). The Higher Education Annual Review Handbook outlines the process. Additionally, the College completes an Institutional Annual Review report for the PEC. The College's monitoring systems, through the HEC, will be used for the new UAL provision with the existing annual monitoring report template being submitted to the University's Academic Quality and Standards Committee. For Pearson provision, the College has adopted the use of UoE's annual review of courses template for programme-level reporting. Monitoring is supplemented by the awarding organisation's Quality Management Review process, which was introduced in 2015-16. The College's own processes, and those of its awarding partners, would enable it to meet the Expectation.

1.40 The review team tested the effectiveness of the College's arrangements for the monitoring and review of its higher education provision through the reading of documents including minutes of the HEC and Programme Boards, periodic review reports, and a range of annual course review reports. The team also met senior and teaching staff, representatives from the partner universities, and students.

1.41 Overall, the team found that the processes for programme monitoring and review work reasonably well but there are areas where their overall effectiveness could be strengthened. Internal oversight is provided through the HEC, which is chaired by the Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality, meets six times each year, and receives and comments on the annual course review reports.

1.42 The College confirmed that there is no process for the overall self-assessment of its higher education provision, as each awarding body and organisation has 'very distinct approaches to partner monitoring and review'. The HEC terms of reference were revised in 2016 to include the monitoring of progress of the Higher Education and Student Support strategies. There was, however, no indication of the strategic priorities for the year. The team also heard that despite the College's falling National Student Survey (NSS) satisfaction rates, and UoE's position to pause validations in new curriculum areas until the NSS scores improve, this had not been addressed in a formal institutional action plan. Senior staff explained that strategic aspects are naturally embedded in the committee structure, with Programme Boards that report to HEC having responsibility for addressing this issue. As such, these deliberative committees play a key role in the assurance of academic standards and the monitoring of quality of learning opportunities.

1.43 The team concludes that the annual reporting process does not synthesise key themes and areas for development to inform institutional oversight and planning in relation to quality assurance and quality enhancement. The team **recommends** that the College

ensures that the committee structure operates effectively to provide institutional oversight with regard to the monitoring and review of academic standards and quality.

1.44 In 2016, institutional oversight for Pearson provision was introduced through the BTEC Higher Education Quality Forum 'to assure consistent and effective maintenance of academic standards across departments'. This resulted in centralised approaches for programme specifications, assessment documentation and periodic review procedures. The latest Pearson Quality Management Review report confirms confidence in the College's arrangements for quality assurance.

1.45 The team concludes that overall the Expectation is met. The level of risk is moderate because there are weaknesses in the operation of parts of the College's academic governance structure regarding monitoring and review.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.46 The College's main source of external and independent expertise in maintaining academic standards is the external examiners appointed by the awarding bodies and Pearson. The roles and responsibilities of external examiners, including consideration of reports, are clearly defined in Pearson and university documentation. The awarding bodies ensure that external expertise is used to advise on whether UK threshold academic standards are set and maintained through their processes of programme approval and periodic review. The College uses independent external expertise in programme development and for modifications to existing programmes. The College's processes for the use of external expertise would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.47 To evaluate the College's use of externality to set and maintain academic standards, the team met with academic and senior staff. The team also scrutinised external examiner reports and the outputs of quality assurance processes, such as validation and periodic review reports, and degree scheme modification forms.

1.48 Overall, the College makes appropriate use of externality. For programme approval the College made extensive use of external expertise in the design of the UAL programme. The College also consults with external examiners when it proposes changes to University of Essex provision through the degree scheme variation process. Employers are also consulted. For example, industry feedback had informed programme changes and a change of programme title, the better to reflect the programme content. There is no evidence of formalised external input to the design of Higher National programmes, other than from Pearson itself.

1.49 The College follows the awarding bodies' and the awarding organisation's expectations for the use of external examiner reports. Recommendations and comments from their reports are expected to feed into the annual review of courses. However, external examiner comments have not routinely been referenced in the agendas or minutes of those meetings. The College has advised that changes to the annual review of courses system will address this.

1.50 The review team concludes that in line with the extent of its responsibilities the College makes appropriate use of external expertise in the maintenance of academic standards. Therefore, the Expectation is met, with a low level of risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations: Summary of findings

1.51 In reaching its judgement the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. Six of the seven Expectations in this judgement area are met. Of the Expectations that are met, five have a low level of risk. One Expectation has a moderate level of risk and gives rise to a recommendation regarding the effective operation of the committee structure for institutional oversight of the monitoring and review of academic standards and quality. One Expectation is judged as not met, with a moderate level of risk. This Expectation attracts a recommendation with regard to the content of programme specifications for Higher National programmes. There are no affirmations in this judgement area.

1.52 Despite some weaknesses in the operation of the College's academic governance structure regarding monitoring and review, and a lack of clarity surrounding the College's responsibility to produce definitive programme records with programme learning outcomes mapped to assessment criteria, in line with its awarding organisation's requirements, overall the College has appropriate policies and procedures for maintaining academic standards. The review team therefore concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards at South Essex College of Further and Higher Education on behalf of the degree-awarding bodies and organisation **meets** UK expectations.

2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval

Findings

2.1 The College states that the fundamental principle of programme design is to ensure alignment with the priorities of the Higher Education Strategy to produce employable graduates and to contribute towards economic prosperity. The responsibility for final programme approval lies with the awarding bodies and Pearson; however, the College operates an internal programme proposal approval process for all new higher education provision. The process includes standard documentation with proposals for new programmes progressing through the relevant Head of Department, having been discussed at Programme Boards, for consideration and approval by the Higher Education Committee. The terms of reference for the HEC were updated in early 2016 to include the formal approval of proposals for new Pearson programmes.

2.2 At the development stage, curriculum teams are established with their composition following a 'risk proportionate' approach. Guidance is provided to staff in documentation that includes the drafting of learning outcomes, assessment strategies and the production of programme specifications. This approach would allow the College to meet the Expectation.

2.3 The review team analysed the processes in operation through examining the terms of reference and meeting minutes of key academic committees; validation and approval reports, and background documentation. In addition, the team held meetings with senior staff, teaching staff, employers and students.

2.4 The team found that each awarding body's processes for the design and approval of new programmes are followed. The production of programme proposal documents in advance of university approvals are overseen by the Higher Education Quality Team with the final approval or otherwise being formalised through HEC. This process works effectively as aspects including viability, resourcing and staff expertise are taken into consideration. Teaching staff understand the formal pathway followed for programme proposals from Programme Boards to HEC and feel supported in the design, development and approval of programmes by subject peers, the Advanced Practitioners and the Higher Education Quality Team members. Students have input into the design of new modules and the team heard of examples in a variety of programmes.

2.5 There is evidence of effective practice in the design and development of a programme validated by UAL. In effective partnership with an industry partner specialist practitioners co-wrote modules that were specifically designed to meet the partner's needs as an employer. This development established a precedent for the next phase of programmes to be validated by UAL.

2.6 The College makes frequent and effective use of the degree variation scheme of UoE, which enables timely adaptations of modules in response to market changes. The team was given a number of examples that are approved by the Head of Higher Education Academic Standards Validation and Quality.

2.7 The College's responsibility for programme development and design for Pearson programmes is limited to the selection of units according to the awarding organisation's rules of combination to form a coherent programme. The process for the change of optional units is being captured more formally since the introduction of a new form in 2016.

2.8 Overall, the team concludes that the College is operating effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes in line with the requirements of its awarding bodies and awarding organisation, and is managing its responsibilities effectively in relation to Chapter B1. The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.

Quality Code, Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education

Findings

2.9 In collaboration with its awarding partners, the College is responsible for managing the recruitment, selection, and admissions process, ensuring that the students that it selects are able to complete their programme. The College has a Higher Education Admissions Policy, drafted following consultation on the Quality Code and Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) guidance. The Higher Education Recruitment Task Group (HERTG) provides institutional oversight of recruitment, selection, and admissions. Selection criteria are outlined within the Admissions Policy. Information events, such as exhibitions and open days, alongside written and electronic publicity, help to inform prospective students about the College's higher education provision. The processes in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.10 To test the Expectation, the review team assessed documentation that informed the recruitment, selection, and admissions process at the College. The review team also met senior staff, programme leaders, professional support staff, and students.

2.11 The Higher Education Recruitment Task Group (HERTG) is responsible for ensuring institutional oversight of recruitment, selection, and admissions at the College. HERTG is also responsible for monitoring student retention data. In this role, HERTG receives application and conversion data, market research, and the results from a questionnaire completed by applicants to the College, among other information. There is little evidence of HERTG effectively exercising its responsibility to monitor and evaluate emerging trends, especially with respect to the College's admissions and recruitment plan, despite application numbers falling and retention issues arising across a number of programmes. Feedback from applicants on the recruitment process is also gathered by the College, and information that HERTG receives. However, there is no evidence to indicate that this information is used for enhancement. Together, this indicates that HERTG is not presently exercising effective institutional oversight of the admissions and recruitment process. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the College ensures that the organisational structures and processes maintain effective oversight of recruitment and retention.

2.12 The College outlines selection criteria in marketing materials and the Higher Education Admissions Policy. In some cases, students are invited to present portfolios, participate in an interview, or perform an audition. Members of the Information Services team are responsible for delivering training for academic admissions tutors, distributing guidance as necessary. The College makes offers either through UCAS (for full-time applicants) or by letter (for part-time applicants). If the College decides to make an offer to a particular candidate, a Transition to Enrolment letter is issued to support the conversion from offer holder to enrolment. It includes information relating to accommodation, tuition fees, Disabled Students' Allowance and the next steps with respect to UCAS and confirming offers. Following application and interview, students are made an offer within a reasonable time. In the case that programmes are oversubscribed, the College will either close the course or provide students with an opportunity to change course; in either scenario, candidates are informed.

2.13 Staff from the central admissions team and academic tutors are responsible for guiding and supporting candidates through the admissions process. Students with additional learning requirements are identified at the point of application to the College by the Admissions Officer. Students may also disclose at the point of induction. Following this, Student Support is notified and subsequently organises an interview with the student to ensure that the appropriate measures are in place. The College provides support to students seeking to obtain the Disabled Students' Allowance. Students praised the application process, noting that it was straightforward and clear. Students also expressed appreciation surrounding the information provided as part of the College's pre-enrolment and induction processes.

2.14 Complaints, appeals and requests for feedback relating to admissions decisions are made directly to the College and follow their Higher Education Admissions Application Feedback, Appeals, and Complaints Policy. Feedback is provided to students upon request to unsuccessful applicants (if the individual applied through UCAS); feedback is provided automatically to candidates who are former students seeking re-admission, or part-time applicants where the candidate has applied directly to the College. While applicants cannot appeal against the academic judgement of an application decision, they may request a formal review (an appeal). The option to submit a formal complaint relating to a procedural error or irregularity in the recruitment process is also available to candidates.

2.15 The review team concludes that the College employs recruitment and admission policies that adhere to the principles of fair admission. These policies are broadly transparent and inclusive; however, a lack of clear and effective implementation and oversight of the admission and recruitment plan leads to a risk that the underpinning organisational structures impede rather than drive the selection and recruitment of students who are able to complete their programme. The Expectation is therefore met, with a moderate level of risk, because procedures are broadly adequate, but have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.

Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*

Findings

2.16 The College articulates its commitment to teaching and learning at strategic level, which has an emphasis on student achievement and aspiration. The College's aim is to deliver high quality teaching, learning and assessment. This is echoed in the Higher Education Strategy and the Strategic Plan. The College-wide Learning Framework and the Teaching and Assessment Strategy set out a clear and holistic approach to teaching and learning which 'promotes higher order thinking'. The learning cycle provides a structure for planning learning within sessions, which is based on a cycle of engaging students who have the opportunity to engage with higher order thinking skills.

2.17 The Director of Teaching and Learning oversees activity within the College. The College-wide Learning and Standards Committee has responsibility for ensuring that curriculum and student support quality is high across the whole College so that students can achieve their full potential. The Learning Observation Guidelines outline the process of observation of teaching, learning and assessment, which aims to evaluate teaching standards and identifies opportunities for staff development and the sharing of good practice. The College has policies and procedures in place that would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.18 In considering this Expectation, the review team examined relevant documentation provided by the College, including policies and guidelines on teaching and learning, peer observation and staff development; and met teaching staff and students.

2.19 The awarding bodies' staff approval processes ensure that teaching staff at the College are well qualified. Staff qualifications are checked by the partner University as part of the approval process and with Pearson as part of the approval process to run a programme. All new higher education teaching staff receive an induction. New staff are encouraged to undertake teaching qualifications although there is no requirement to do so. Staff workloads for those teaching in both higher and further education are carefully managed.

2.20 The College provides a range of support mechanisms for teaching staff. For example, Advanced Practitioners help to induct novice teachers and develop performance of existing members of teaching staff. In addition, the College has developed guidance materials to support professional practice. Students have a plethora of opportunities to provide feedback on the performance of teaching staff, which includes Programme Boards, evaluation forms and the National Student Survey (NSS). Students who met the review team commented favourably on the quality of teaching that they receive. External examiners reaffirm this view.

2.21 Teaching and learning is reviewed on an annual basis as part of the annual review of courses. The actions identified in the review are monitored at Programme Board meetings. The College has enhanced the reporting process through the introduction of a section in the report that explicitly captures good practice. Good practice is also shared via the virtual learning environment (VLE).

2.22 The College recently introduced a professional practice process which consists of lesson observations, desk-based activity, reflection and an improvement plan. This is supported by a programme of management and peer observation. Advanced Practitioners subsequently meet teaching staff to identify good practice and areas for development. In case of underperformance the Advanced Practitioner provides additional support and bespoke training.

2.23 An extensive continuous professional development (CPD) programme is delivered across all campuses. Video conferencing allows members of staff spread across the various campuses at the College to engage with CPD. There is an annual plan for internal CPD for higher education teaching staff. The Higher Education Staff Development Plan for 2015-16 covers annual review of courses, programme specifications and curriculum design and digital literacy. Teaching staff who met the team reported that there is sufficient opportunity to develop and that they feel encouraged to do so.

2.24 The learning environment overall is fit for purpose. The College recently developed dedicated higher education space with state-of-the-art facilities, a library and loanable electronic equipment, which students appreciate. However, in some cases sharing with the larger cohort of further education students can cause friction. Learning resources are allocated strategically.

2.25 The College has effective systems in place for assuring, reviewing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, including processes for reviewing the learning environment and for supporting staff development. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement

Findings

2.26 The Higher Education Student Support Strategy is the strategic document that sets out the College's commitment for student support and encompasses all aspects of student experience, including academic study skills and learning support, careers and employability, health and well-being, student communication and engagement, support for international students, the student living experience and the provision of excellent student support services. The Strategic Plan and the Higher Education Strategy state the College's commitment for the provision of high quality facilities and resources. The Higher Education Student Support Forum has oversight of student support-related strategies and is the arena where good practice in student support is identified and shared.

2.27 Academic support is provided through a system of personal tutors and peer mentors. Student Services provide a range of support to students including disability support, support for students transitioning from Level 3 to Level 4, careers support and pastoral support. The Service is reviewed through an annual self-assessment. International students are supported in a number of ways by the International Office. The Learning Resources and Learning Technology teams support students and staff in the use of learning resources and technology. The College has processes and procedures in place that would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.28 In considering this Expectation, the review team examined relevant documentation, including student support policies and procedures. The review team met students, academic and professional support staff to explore the College's arrangements for the academic, personal and professional development of students.

2.29 The College supports its higher education students effectively. All students receive an induction and are allocated a personal tutor. Students feel very well supported by their personal tutors and appreciate the wide range of support that is available to them. The personal tutors link effectively with other support staff at the College. At induction students are provided with a range of useful information relating to their courses and the support available to them. The Higher Education Student Services Handbook gives a comprehensive overview of the support available and how to access it, and provides advice on student finance. In addition, programme handbooks provide brief information about support arrangements and link to the Student Services webpages. Resources to support academic skills development are promoted through the virtual learning environment and posters. Student Services has links with external agencies for referrals and an in-house counselling service is available for students requiring that form of intervention.

2.30 Support for students with disabilities is comprehensive. Students who are eligible for Disabled Students' Allowance funding receive detailed information and guidance through the application process by Additional Learning Services (ALS). Disclosures are identified at application stage and tracked. Students are supported financially to have an assessment. ALS staff liaise closely with academic staff over the support needs of disabled students and a range of support processes are in place including extenuating circumstances, special exam considerations and late submissions. ALS undertakes an annual higher education support review which analyses the performance of students with disclosed disabilities.

2.31 International students receive a detailed pre-arrival guide. This is supported with bespoke internet pages for international students. The Head of the International Office and programme team members also visit prospective students in their home country and outline expectations, the programme structure and the resources available. English language support is in place together with one-to-one support from tutors and learner voice meetings specifically for international students.

2.32 Students who progress internally from Level 3 to 4 are supported with a wide range of information and guidance. The careers programme for such students explores options for further study. The College also holds Higher Education Experience Days, which enable prospective students to gain exposure to higher education learning and teaching and receive guidance on application. First year students have access to a peer mentoring programme, which aims to support their transition to higher education, assist with the development of academic and personal skills and provide pastoral support. Students reported that these processes are effective at enabling them to make an effective transition into higher education.

2.33 The College has a careers support programme with a dedicated member of staff for higher education students. Students commented that the Careers Service could be better signposted as comparatively few students access it. The College acknowledged the issue and confirmed that it is addressing it. The College also provides trips to national career events and runs an Employability Street event where students have access to employers and can explore potential job opportunities.

2.34 The College commits adequate resources to the higher education programmes. It has recently developed a Higher Education Centre in the Forum building where students can access learning materials and use the dedicated study space. The Learning technology team provides induction sessions and walk-in support for students and staff. Learning Resources offer personalised support for students, including information literacy, information management and study skills. A Higher Education Resources Facilitator works with students on research and study skills. In 2015 the College made substantial investments into print-based and online resources, introduced a new library management system and developed learning resources pages on the VLE. Higher education students were also given access to the library of UoE. Students are generally satisfied with the resources and support available to them.

2.35 The Higher Education Student Support Forum, established at the end of 2015 with a view to explore opportunities to enhance all aspects of student support, has focused on issues concerned with enhancement, study skills and student wellbeing and developed associated action plans. Directed by the Student Support Strategy the Forum, although a recent initiative, has the potential of having strategic oversight of the support for higher education students within the College.

2.36 The College has an integrated student support framework which supports all aspects of the student experience and facilitates the development of students' academic, personal and professional potential. This is **good practice**.

2.37 The review team concludes that the processes and resources in place at the College designed to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential are used effectively. The Expectation is met, with a low level of risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.

Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement

Findings

2.38 The College aims to consult and involve students through various feedback mechanisms throughout the academic year, including module reviews, annual reviews of courses and questionnaires, such as the NSS. Student representation at course level and institutional level also aims to ensure students' views are taken into consideration. Student engagement is monitored by deliberative committees, such as the Higher Education Committee, which receives reports on student feedback and engagement. The processes in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.39 To test the Expectation, the review team assessed documentation that informed the recruitment, selection, and admissions process at the College. The review team also met with senior staff, programme leaders, teaching staff, professional support staff, and students.

2.40 The College does not have a formal strategy for developing student engagement and there are no plans to introduce such a strategy in the future. In meetings with the College, senior and teaching staff confirmed that their understanding and approach to student engagement is primarily about student engagement with teaching and learning, which is reflected in attendance rates and involvement with employers. Students confirmed that they are engaged with teaching and learning at the College but that engagement with quality assurance is limited.

2.41 Students are engaged at course level and institutional level through their attendance at Programme Boards and representation at the Board of Governors. Programme Boards are responsible for assuring and enhancing the quality of the student experience at programme level. Student representatives are invited to attend three of six board meetings on a rotational basis to provide feedback. Staff-only Programme Boards discuss and approve key documentation relating to quality assurance, such as draft annual course review reports. The review team found evidence that indicated that only half the student body had ever heard of Programme Boards and meetings with the College confirmed that the role of students at Programme Boards is to provide feedback rather than to engage as partners in the quality assurance process.

2.42 The Higher Education Committee, a subcommittee of the Academic Board, is responsible for monitoring and enhancing the student experience across all higher education programmes. The Students' Union President is the only student representative on the committee. The Students' Union President is also the student representative on the Board of Governors and the Curriculum and Quality Committee (a subcommittee of the Board). The College's Academic Board is the highest operational deliberative committee responsible for overseeing academic standards and quality at the College, and while students are invited to attend meetings of the Academic Board, they are not considered full members.

2.43 The lack of student representation at key meetings of course-level Programme Boards, which discuss items relating to quality assurance and enhancement of the educational experience, alongside an emphasis on the Students' Union President being the sole student representative at a number of committees and coupled with no direct student representation at the Academic Board and other senior committees, presents a risk that the College is not engaging all students, collectively and individually, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience. Furthermore, the review team

has elsewhere (see recommendation for Enhancement) commented on the perceived lack of institutional oversight inhibiting the enhancement of the student experience. With this in mind, the review team **recommends** that the College takes deliberate steps to engage all students in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.

2.44 Student engagement is assessed and monitored through questionnaires, the annual review of courses (ARCs), the higher education student survey, and the NSS. However, a College-led review of ARCs found that drafts seldom evaluated the impact of student engagement, and in most cases, entirely omitted data from questionnaires, the higher education student survey and the NSS, indicating that this monitoring process lacks robustness (see Expectation B8).

2.45 Students are supported by, and have access to, a Students' Union. In collaboration with the latter it is the responsibility of the Senior Management Team to support student voice initiatives at the College. The Students' Union runs a number of student awareness campaigns alongside national organisations based on local issues raised by student representatives. Student representatives are provided with an induction to their role and given ongoing support in conducting their duties.

2.46 The review team concludes that the Expectation is not met, with an associated moderate risk, because of weaknesses in the operation of part of the College's governance structures in engaging students as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*

Findings

2.47 The College's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy, which has recently been developed, outlines the principles of assessment and expected outcomes. This document, which relates to the whole College provision, requires varied assessment strategies and for students to take responsibility for their own learning and assessment. A specific outcome requires 'high quality, timely feedback'. The College is responsible for designing assessments and the marking of student work, for which it follows the awarding partners' assessment regulations and verification policies. These are supplemented by the College's customised Recognition of Prior Learning Policy for UoE awards. Assessment Boards ensure that students have achieved the intended learning outcomes before credit and qualifications are awarded. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.48 To test the effectiveness of the College's assessment processes, the review team examined the awarding partners' assessment regulations and guidance, College assessment documentation, internally verified and moderated assessment briefs, and external examiner reports. The team also met students, senior staff and academic staff.

2.50 To strengthen assessment practice for University of Essex programmes the College introduced generic assessment criteria and marking standards. These are contextualised within appropriate disciplines and used to inform feedback to students. Assessment briefs clearly state module and generic learning outcomes. The latter are related to grading criteria. There are separate assessment grading criteria for each level. The University's Assessment Policy provides the reference point for staff.

2.51 For UAL provision the College uses the University's marking criteria. Assessment is guided by the University's course regulations on assessment.

2.52 The College developed a useful Assessment Instruments Handbook for students, which contains all of the assessment briefs, learning outcomes, assessment criteria and dates for submission and receipt of feedback. The assignment briefs provide explicit guidance that relates the tasks to the criteria.

2.53 The College recently developed its own Assessment Regulations for Pearson programmes, which are based on the BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment. It covers the various assessment types, submission and progression requirements, extenuating circumstances, academic offences, and sets out the operation of the Assessment Board. The regulations were approved at the Higher Education Committee in January 2016.

2.54 Assignment briefs for Pearson programmes clearly state the learning outcomes for pass, merit and distinction. The College rigorously follows the awarding organisation's standards verification process, which is confirmed by the external examiners in their reports. In accordance with Pearson requirements the College conducts Assessment Boards that operate effectively. These are chaired by the Head of Higher Education Academic Standards, Validation and Quality, and formal minutes are taken.

2.55 External examiners endorse the reliability and validity of assessment processes across both the Pearson and UoE programmes. The College produces a summary grid of external examiner feedback for the University of Essex degree programmes. This shows that the appropriateness of assessment strategies are confirmed and that grading criteria are applied consistently throughout the marking process. For the creative arts programmes, external examiners attend the end-of-year degree shows and note that some assessments see students working to briefs provided by external organisations. The most recent external examiner report for Counselling notes the inconsistent use of the grading matrix but also some good practice in the nature of assessment tasks. Action points from external examiners' reports are progressed at programme level and recorded in the ARC, which is then reviewed at the relevant Programme Board. The team established, however, that those programme boards where students are in attendance do not discuss and monitor progress on actions from the ARC. In the case of Counselling and Early Years Education, this is particularly significant, as there has been no formal monitoring for some months. This reinforces the recommendation made in Expectation B8 in relation to the effective tracking of the progress of actions.

2.56 The Higher Education Assessment Tracking system (HEAT) for the University awards is populated using the assessment schedules from programme and module handbooks. Marks are recorded throughout the year in preparation for the end-of-year examination boards. As part of the review of Pearson processes, the College is piloting a 'comprehensive assessment schedule', which reflects the approach taken for the University awards. This process is managed by the Information Services Manager for Higher education, who is a member of HEC.

2.57 Recognition of prior learning for UoE awards is governed by the College's Recognition of Prior Learning Policy. Applications are signed off by the Head of Higher Education Academic Standards, Validation and Quality and then submitted to the University's Academic Partnerships Office. Approvals are documented and entered on examination board grids. Applicants for prior learning for UAL awards are handled in a similar way. For the Pearson provision, applications are considered in accordance with Pearson's Recognition of Prior Learning Policy and Process. Applications are held by the Quality Team pending the external examiner visit.

2.58 There are different approaches towards extenuating circumstances, depending on the awarding partner. The Head of Higher Education Academic Standards Validation and Quality holds responsibility for ensuring that the processes are followed. Students on UoE programmes follow the locally devised policy, while UAL students follow the University's policy. Monthly panels, chaired by the Head of Academic Standards, Validation and Quality, are conducted for all extenuating circumstances requests across all the higher education provision. A special consideration form is completed for the Pearson provision, which will be discussed at the assessment board.

2.59 The 2011 IQER report for the College included an advisable recommendation to 'ensure a consistent level of detailed assessment feedback which supports improvement' is provided to students. The College introduced an assessment tariff to ensure consistency. There was no evidence of specific steps taken towards the enhancement of feedback. Internal CPD has been provided with a focus on assessment for learning and the College states that the enhancement of assessment and feedback practice has been a key feature. This is echoed in the Teaching Learning and Assessment strategy. The 2015 NSS still showed low levels of satisfaction for assessment and feedback across several programmes, for example in Early Years Education and Sport Studies. Actions raised in the annual review of courses to improve the monitoring of feedback have not been undertaken. In addition, there is no tangible plan to demonstrate how the overall NSS rate would be increased at institutional level.

2.60 Students with whom the team met spoke positively of the opportunities to receive formative feedback in tutorials or through peer feedback in arts subjects. However, students also confirmed that despite improvement in some areas there remains significant variability in both the quality and timeliness of feedback. This is confirmed in one examiner report that states that feedback varied immensely and that there was little developmental feedback. Timeliness of feedback remains an issue in some areas with a lack of monitoring of compliance for turnaround times. The team therefore **recommends** that the College ensures that consistent levels of detailed and developmental feedback are provided to all students in a timely manner. The review team was informed that internal staff development has recently been provided with an emphasis on assessment, and enhancement of assessment feedback practice has been a key feature.

2.61 Overall, the team concludes that the College is fulfilling its responsibility in relation to the assessment of students, and that the Expectation is met. There is one recommendation which echoes the advisable recommendation in the College's previous IQER and which also relates to the aspects of the National Student Survey that have not been addressed at institutional level. The associated risk is moderate as there is insufficient emphasis or priority given to assuring quality in the College's planning processes.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.

Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining

Findings

2.62 The College has limited responsibilities for external examining. The awarding partners are responsible for defining the role, appointment and recognising the work of external examiners. The College has delegated responsibility for the nomination and induction of external examiners using the awarding bodies' procedures. For Pearson programmes, this function is retained by the awarding organisation. The College is also responsible for putting into effect the recommendations of external examiners and making effective use of their reports in quality assurance and enhancement.

2.63 University-appointed external examiners are provided with a full range of information through the College's VLE, such as module descriptors, programme specifications, assessment instruments and student handbooks. External examiner reports for University programmes are sent by the respective awarding body to the College's Head of Higher Education Academic Standards, Validation and Quality, who highlights issues that require a response before forwarding them to Programme Leaders for consideration and action. Programme teams raise actions through the annual review of courses process and provide responses to external examiners on recommendations they have made. The Head of Higher Education Academic Standards, Validation and Quality keeps a record of all external examiner reports and actions. Actions are monitored through the Higher Education Committee. External examiner reports are available to students on the VLE.

2.64 External examiner reports for Pearson are uploaded to a portal where the College's Quality Nominee and Programme Leaders access them for consideration and action. No direct responses to issues raised in reports are required. The College's process for receiving, reviewing and responding to reports would ensure that scrupulous use is made of external examiners and would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.65 To test the effectiveness of procedures for the receipt of, and response to, external examiner reports, the team read external examiner reports and traced the use of these in the College's internal quality assurance documentation, such as annual review course reports and relevant committee minutes. The team also met academic staff, senior staff, and students.

2.66 The responsibilities for the nomination and appointment of external examiners are set out in the BTEC Quality Assurance Handbook 2015-16 and the universities' procedures on external examining. The College has input to the nomination for external examiners of university programmes, though the final decision and responsibility for appointment rests with the awarding bodies.

2.67 The review team examined annual review of courses reports and minutes of Programme Boards and the Higher Education Committee. These reveal that outcomes from external examination are noted by the Higher Education Committee and that issues emerging are considered. Annual review of courses reports routinely address the comments of external examiners. Programme Boards include actions plans and discuss progress to varying degrees.

2.68 Students who met the review team indicated that they are aware that external examiner reports are available to them on the VLE, but that few students access them.

2.69 The review team found that the College has generally effective procedures for using external examiner reports. The Expectation is therefore met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review

Findings

2.70 The College follows its awarding partners' processes for programme monitoring and review and has its own internal processes, previously described in paragraph 1.42. Under the partnership agreements, the College's responsibilities include the operation of annual monitoring processes and the provision of relevant information for periodic reviews. The College has adopted the UoE model for annual programme monitoring and review in the form of annual review of courses for all its higher education programmes. The College follows checklists originally devised by the University of Essex in compiling the annual review of courses and uses a standard reporting template.

2.71 Annual review of course reports are reviewed at institutional level by a panel chaired by the Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality before submission to the awarding body. Annual review of courses reports (ARCs) are reviewed annually at Programme Boards and the Higher Education Committee. They are published on the virtual learning environment and sent to external examiners.

2.72 Periodic reviews are conducted by the awarding bodies. For UoE provision periodic reviews at programme level take place quinquennially. Several successful periodic reviews have taken place since 2011 following the University's guidelines. UAL programmes are revalidated every three years. For Pearson provision, the College has recently introduced its own periodic review process, which will take place more frequently but adopt a lighter touch approach due to the limited changes that the College can make to Pearson programmes.

2.73 The College's processes for the monitoring and review of programmes, together with the awarding bodies' processes for periodic review, allow the Expectation to be met.

2.74 The effectiveness of the College's processes and practices was tested by the review team through examining relevant documentation including the annual reports for university partners, annual course reviews, and minutes of the Higher Education Committee, Programme Boards and course team meetings. The review team also held discussions with support staff, teaching staff, senior staff, awarding body representatives and students.

2.75 The team scrutinised ARCs from across the wide range of provision; these are drafted by Programme Leaders and follow the UoE reporting template. The College has enhanced the annual course-reporting process through the introduction of a good practice and enhancement section to the template in early 2016. Feedback from the University of Essex Partnership Education Committee indicated that a number of reports fall short of the reporting expectations and could be more evaluative. In response an initial analysis of the latest ARCs had been conducted at senior leadership level; however, the notes lacked sufficient rigour in relation to the corrective actions required and subsequent approval of changes.

2.76 The team found that Programme Boards are not operating effectively in monitoring in-year progress on action in some ARCs and in maintaining ongoing oversight of the provision. Minutes of Programme Boards are not consistently comprehensive and lack evidence of actions being monitored. Although a 'RAG rating' (red, amber, green) approach has recently been implemented to continually review the appropriateness of actions and

monitoring, the team found that actions were not always being overtly updated in a timely way. For example, for Early Years Education there had been no discussion of progress on some of the significant actions. Although first drafts of ARCs were reviewed at a senior level, the revised versions were not formally brought back to HEC for final approval. The review team heard that the UoE is contemplating the introduction of a formal mid-year review mechanism.

2.77 The College stated that students are invited to Programme Boards, where the ARCs are discussed. The January 2016 HEC meeting raised an urgent action in relation to a lack of student engagement in the process and reported that half the students were unaware of Programme Boards. Some students who met the team confirmed that they were unaware of their existence. The review team heard that this might be due to confusion with Assessment Boards and that Students' Union representatives are now playing a role in promoting Programme Boards.

2.78 The College has an appropriate infrastructure in place to promote a comprehensive approach towards annual programme monitoring and review; however, evaluation of the quality of reporting and the ongoing review of updates on actions through the Programme Boards lack rigour. The review team **recommends** that the College ensures that the processes for programme monitoring track the progress of actions effectively to maintain effective oversight of higher education provision.

2.79 The College responded adequately to the recommendations arising from the recent periodic reviews. The outcomes of periodic reviews are captured in ARCs and feedback from the periodic review is discussed at HEC. The College introduced a periodic review process for Pearson programmes in March 2016. Although the resulting reports were quite brief, the team noted this as a positive step.

2.80 The review team concludes that, given the central role of the Programme Boards in quality assurance, the processes for monitoring and review are not operating effectively in ensuring the oversight of the College's higher education provision. The Expectation is, therefore, not met and the associated level of risk is moderate as, although broadly adequate, there are shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which quality assurance procedures are applied.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.

Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints

Findings

2.81 The College has separate non-academic complaints, academic appeals, and admissions appeals policies. Students, regardless of the awarding partner, may submit non-academic complaints and appeals in relation to admissions decisions directly to the College. Information about complaints and appeals is accessible through the College website. Academic appeals for university programmes are dealt with jointly by the College and its awarding bodies. Academic appeals for Pearson provision are handled by the College. The processes in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.82 To test the Expectation, the review team examined the College's academic appeals and complaints procedures and assessed documentation that informed the recruitment, selection, and admissions process at the College. The review team also met professional support staff, and students.

2.83 The College's Compliments and Complaints Procedure, which applies to all higher education students, outlines the process of submitting a non-academic complaint to the College. Separate policies exist for submitting academic appeals and appeals relating to admissions decisions. Complaints and compliments may be submitted directly to the College; however, in some cases academic appeals are submitted to the degree-awarding bodies. Academic appeals relating to Pearson provision are normally submitted directly to the College.

2.84 The differences between complaints, appeals and the various processes are made clear in the relevant policy document. Similarly, the due process to move between levels of complaint is also explained. Students are encouraged to resolve issues informally through dialogue before instigating a formal complaint. In each case, the role of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) higher education scheme in appealing the outcomes of internal complaints is made clear. Students are aware of the difference between academic and general complaints, the process behind submitting complaints and appeals, and the role of the OIA higher education scheme.

2.85 Support for students submitting complaints and academic appeals is provided by the College's higher education student support team. Students may also approach the Students' Union to provide support and guidance. Members of staff investigating complaints are supported by members of the human resources team. Information relating to the submission of complaints and academic appeals is included in the student induction process and contained within student handbooks. In 2014-15 there were 16 academic appeals from students studying for UoE awards. This is a slight increase in comparison to 2013-14 when there were 14 appeals. In the same year the College received 20 complaints.

2.86 The review team concludes that the College has appropriate policies and processes in place for handling academic appeals and student complaints. The Expectation is met, with an associated low level of risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.

Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others

Findings

2.87 The College delivers a number of programmes that include an element of work-based or work-related learning which contributes to the programme learning outcomes. For these programmes, the College has responsibility for overseeing the arrangements with placement providers. The College is required to follow the University of Essex Guidelines for Work-based and Placement Learning. Placement Handbooks set out the rights of students and placement providers. Formal placement agreements are in place and there is an obligation to carry out health and safety checks, risk assessments and DBS checks. The processes and procedures that the College has in place would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.88 In considering this Expectation the review team examined relevant College documentation, including guidelines, handbooks, placement agreements and risk assessment forms and met teaching staff, students and employers.

2.89 Students undertaking work-based modules are responsible for finding their own placements, but are supported by staff in this process. Other groups of students have their placements found for them.

2.90 The programme-specific Placement Handbooks set out comprehensively the responsibilities and purpose of placements. This is augmented by placement learning agreements. In accordance with the UoE Guidelines for Work-based and Placement Learning the College keeps a record of each placement. Placement agreements, work experience employer assessment forms, placement risk assessments and health and safety records examined by the review team demonstrate that the College manages work-based or work-related learning activities responsibly and follows relevant policies and procedures.

2.91 Placement management and monitoring currently occurs at local level, overseen by Programme Leaders. One department has a dedicated placement coordinator to support the Programme Leaders. Teaching staff visit placement providers before the commencement of the placement to outline the placement requirements and learning outcomes that students have to meet. During placements students engaged in practice-based learning are normally monitored and supported through staff visits and observations, but not all placement providers confirmed this. The review team heard that the College is in the process of appointing a placement coordinator with the remit to monitor higher education placement activities across the College. The review team **affirms** the steps taken to strengthen management oversight of placement learning at institutional level.

2.92 The College is also strengthening its links with placement providers for programmes that have extensive placement requirements. For example, stakeholder meetings elicit employer guidance on relationship management and operational protocols. One programme has established a dedicated steering group with the aim to identify and implement best practice and employment progression opportunities for students.

2.93 The review team concludes that at programme level the College has adequate processes in place for the delivery and management of learning opportunities with others.

The College's awareness of the need to strengthen institutional oversight of placement learning led to an affirmation of the steps taken to achieve this. Overall, the Expectation is met and the level of associated risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.

Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*

Findings

2.94 The College has no research degree provision, and therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

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

2.96 Of the 11 Expectations in this judgement area, 10 Expectations are applicable to the College. Out of these 10 Expectations, eight are met and two are judged not met. Expectation 11 is not applicable to the College as it does not offer research degrees.

2.97 Six Expectations have a low risk and four Expectations are judged to have a moderate risk. This is reflected in the recommendations made by the review team, which concern the organisational structures and processes to maintain effective institutional oversight of recruitment and retention (Expectation B2), the engagement of all students in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience (Expectation B5), the provision of consistent levels of detailed and developmental feedback to students (Expectation B6), and the effective tracking of the progress of actions in programme monitoring (Expectation B8).

2.98 The review team identifies one feature of good practice in this judgement area. This concerns the integrated student support which facilitates the development of students' academic, personal and professional potential and is located in Expectation B4.

2.99 There is one affirmation in this judgment area, located in Expectation B10, which relates to the steps the College has taken to strengthen management oversight of placement learning.

2.100 The review team notes that all but two of the Expectations in this judgement area are met. While the majority of the Expectations have a low risk rating there are a number with a moderate level of risk due to insufficient emphasis being given to assuring quality, or shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which quality assurance procedures are applied.

2.101 Applying the criteria specified in the published handbook, the review team therefore concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at South Essex College of Further and Higher Education **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

Findings

3.1 The College is responsible for the production of information for the public, prospective students, current students, and other stakeholders that is fit for purpose, accessible, and trustworthy. The College has a Published Information Policy which articulates the process and responsibilities for the production and distribution of information. The processes in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

3.2 To test the Expectation, the review team evaluated documentation informing the production, distribution, and maintenance of published information at the College. The review team also met senior staff, programme leaders, teaching staff, professional support staff, and students.

3.3 Information relating to academic programmes, such as module briefs or programme specifications, are approved at department level, in collaboration with the Higher Education Recruitment Task Group (HERTG) and the College's awarding partners. In contrast, information for public viewing, such as the prospectus or programme brochures, are produced by academic staff and are subsequently approved by the Information Services Manager and Head of Higher Education for Academic Standards, Validation, and Quality. These responsibilities and the role of various committees and groups in the stewardship of published information are articulated in the College's published information policy. The College's marketing department, in collaboration with HERTG, conducts an annual audit of information with ongoing monitoring of published information to ensure that the information published by the College matches the information published by its awarding partners. Prior to the publication of marketing materials, such as the prospectus, content is physically signed off by departmental staff.

3.4 Information for prospective students is primarily conveyed via the College's website; however, the College also has a number of open and transition events to ensure that students have all the information required to make an informed decision about their decision to undertake higher education. Exhibition events for current students are also used as marketing events to promote courses to potential applicants.

3.5 Programme specifications and course handbooks are provided to each student that outline course of study, relevant policies, resources available and assessment information. Programme specifications produced by the College in collaboration with their awarding partners contextualise the course, confirm the level of the programme and map learning outcomes against assessment requirements. The review team found that the programme specifications for courses validated by Pearson lacked the mapping of assessment requirements to learning outcomes and the contextualisation required by Pearson, leading to a recommendation in Expectation A2.2. Students confirmed that they use programme specifications as one of the many signposts that they can use in order to find other information.

3.6 The VLE is used as a learning tool. Programme teams are responsible for the content found on the VLE, and the College's Information Services Manager and the Head of Higher Education for Academic Standards, Validation, and Quality are responsible for auditing that information to ensure that it is reliable, current and valid. Students were broadly positive in discussing the range and quality of learning materials contained on the VLE. Students also noted the usefulness of the VLE in signposting different services within the College.

3.7 Following the conclusion of their study at the College, each student is provided with a transcript that outlines their achievements while at the College. Degree certificates are issued by the relevant awarding partner, rather than the College.

3.8 The review team has elsewhere commented on the brevity of committee and meeting minutes (see Expectation A2.1 and Enhancement), identifying cases where minutes are incomplete or missing. Indeed, one set of minutes from the Higher Education Recruitment Task Group (HERTG) finished halfway through the agenda. This presents a risk as those notes cannot then be used by anyone who was not present at the time, nor can they be referred back to. This impedes the ability of the College to track, monitor and evaluate actions and is hindering its ability to exercise effective institutional oversight of quality assurance processes. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the College ensures that meeting minutes consistently record decisions and actions to aid effective institutional oversight, monitoring and evaluation of provision.

3.9 Notwithstanding the recommendation within this Expectation, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met, with an associated moderate risk, because processes are broadly adequate, but have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

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

3.11 The Expectation is met, and the associated risk is moderate, as there is a recommendation concerning the consistent recording of decisions and actions in meeting minutes to aid effective planning and monitoring of provision. There are no affirmations in this judgement area.

3.12 Given that the Expectation is met, the review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at South Essex College of Further and Higher Education **meets** UK expectations.

4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Findings

4.1 The Higher Education Strategy 2014-2019 aligns with the College's Strategic Plan core values. The College states that the strategy is informed by partner university practices, the demands of employers, governmental and local priorities. The College does not have an enhancement strategy but states that mechanisms are in place to reflect on the quality of learning opportunities and identify and share good practice through the recently introduced good practice and enhancement section of the annual review of courses report, with 'a focus on maintaining good practice, making further improvements and enhancements and assessing the impact of doing so'. The BTEC Higher Education Quality Forum is presented as an arena for sharing good practice and informing enhancement, along with the Higher Education Student Support Forum. Responsibility for enhancement is spread among staff, students and deliberative committees. The College's position on enhancement, articulated in the self-evaluation document, also includes 'building the vision' through investment in buildings and the introduction of an institution-wide initiative, The Learning Framework, which is designed to enhance learning, teaching and assessment and to measure its impact on student performance. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

4.2 To evaluate the effectiveness of the enhancement procedures and activities, the review team scrutinised the terms of reference and minutes of relevant committees and groups. The team also held meetings with senior staff, academic staff, support staff and students, and considered quality assurance documentation, such as annual review of courses reports.

4.3 The College states that the enhancement of students' learning opportunities is planned at programme level, both as a result of projects initiated at College level and as a result of sharing instances of good practice. Most staff who met the team perceive enhancement to be the sharing of good practice. The review team heard examples from teaching staff of individual enhancements to the learning experience, including 'students as teachers' and the embedding of employability into the curriculum within their programmes. There is no evidence of these being actively shared across the higher education community, although there are staff development days for the dissemination of practice. While the 'nurture groups', which would see staff and students working together on action research projects to improve the student experience, have not been progressed yet, the principle of 'students as teachers' presents an opportunity to progress the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

4.4 The College does not identify strategic enhancement priorities on a year-on-year basis and there is no development plan to demonstrate enhancement-led activities at institutional level. Senior staff stated that strategic aspects are naturally embedded in its committee structures and that the responsibility for identifying good practice rests with the Programme Boards and is progressed through the annual review of courses reports.

4.5 Linked to its strategic vision, the College made significant investments in premises across its campuses through which higher education students have benefitted. The building of The Forum, in partnership with the UoE and the local authority, resulted in a higher education space with bespoke teaching spaces, learning centres, breakout areas and access to two libraries. Students and staff spoke positively about the impact this has had on

student learning, although the student submission to this review indicated that some students perceive the resource as not always adequate for their needs. Further developments at other campuses are planned.

4.6 Another strategic initiative was the introduction of The Learning Framework, a College-wide initiative which is designed to enhance learning, teaching and assessment and to measure its impact on student performance. The review team explored with staff how this is being developed for higher education. The College claims that the introduction of The Learning Framework has contributed to improved lesson observation outcomes and more positive feedback on teaching and learning in student surveys. However, the team was not presented with coherent evidence as to how The Learning Framework is informing the enhancement of higher education learning opportunities. Academic staff gave individual examples of enhancements at programme level. Senior staff referred to the positive impact The Learning Framework has had on retention rates; however, as the team has noted elsewhere, there remain some significant issues in relation to retention (see Expectation B2). The team concludes that overall, although well intentioned, the initiative is currently underdeveloped with regard to the enhancement of the learning opportunities for higher education students.

4.7 The recent introduction of the BTEC Higher Education Quality Forum and the Higher Education Support Forum are beginning to provide the avenues for the sharing of good practice at institutional level. Both are still in the early stages of development and no clear impact yet can be demonstrated. The BTEC Higher Education Quality Forum was established in early 2016 and only involves a small part of the provision. Its focus is on strengthening the quality assurance processes for the Pearson provision rather than on promoting an institution-wide enhancement agenda.

4.8 The Higher Education Student Support strategy was approved in April 2016. The strategic objective is 'to enhance the overall student experience' of every higher education student throughout the student journey. Staff spoke enthusiastically of the intentions to bring together pockets of good practice. There will be project plans with key milestones being implemented once the strategy comes into practice. At the time of the review those plans were still in the early stages of development.

4.9 There is insufficient evidence that core quality assurance processes at programme level inform an institutional level evidence-based strategic approach towards enhancing the student experience (see recommendation Expectation B8). The College identified Programme Boards as the mechanism for strategic planning and discussion of enhancement. However, the review team found that the operation of the Boards currently does not encourage a wider academic gathering for the sharing of academic practices and, although these are all chaired by the Head of Higher Education Development and Delivery, the current focus has been on the monitoring of actions through the introduction of a RAG rating system. In addition, students are excluded at Programme Boards from the discussion of key enhancement vehicles such as the annual review of courses reports (see Expectation B5), and student attendance at Programme Boards is generally low (see Expectation B8). Similarly, the introduction of a good practice and enhancement section to the annual review of courses reports is fairly recent and its impact cannot yet be evaluated, but the College envisages that this will lead to a stronger focus on maintaining good practice at programme level. Completed examples presented demonstrate programme level activity but it is unclear how these would be summated at an institutional level. The team noted that HEC would in future approve and monitor the development, implementation and maintenance of good practice and enhancement, and refers the recommendation in relation to the effectiveness of committee structures (see Expectation A3.3).

4.10 In the absence of an annual strategic-level self-assessment review process for higher education (see paragraph 1.45), which might present the opportunity to agree enhancement-led initiatives and priorities, it is difficult to establish how the individual examples of enhancement come together to provide an overall higher education perspective in a systematic and planned manner at provider level, as there is little evidence of a coherent approach at institutional level. The team therefore **recommends** that the College systematically identifies, implements and evaluates institution-level enhancement initiatives.

4.11 In summary, the review team concludes that there is a lack of a clear trajectory to realise the stated ambitions in the College's Higher Education Strategy, The Learning Framework and the Student Support Strategy. While acknowledging these as being apposite pillars upon which to construct a strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities, these are mostly in the early stages of development and are not yet evidenced in a robust and evaluative way. There is little evidence of a coherent approach at institutional level. In addition, most staff understand enhancement to be the sharing of good practice. While some staff provided evidence of enhancements in their own areas there is no sense of a holistic view and engagement across the wider higher education population.

4.12 Overall, the team concludes that there is insufficient evidence for a strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities. The Expectation is not met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Not met

Level of risk: Moderate

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

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

4.14 The Expectation is not met and led to a recommendation with regard to the systematic identification, implementation and evaluation of institution-level enhancement initiatives. The associated risk is deemed moderate. There are no affirmations in this judgement area.

4.15 Applying the criteria specified in the published handbook, the review team therefore concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at South Essex College of Further and Higher Education **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

Findings

4.5 The Higher Education Strategy identifies employability as a strategic priority for the College. To that end it has a number of processes in place to ensure that evolving and existing curricula are informed by contemporary and relevant industrial practice. Following curriculum review each programme leading to an award of the University of Essex has an action plan and targets to increase employability. Recent programme developments in the Arts subject area have been developed with employer input, with a strong focus on employability, and combine work-related learning with input from industry professionals and delivery in real life work environments.

4.6 An employability audit identified the employment-related activities undertaken by programme teams. These range from field trips, live briefs and projects and industry guest speakers to work placements. Work-orientated learning is a feature of a substantial number of programmes offered by the College.

4.7 The Careers Service offers support to students in CV writing and by simulating interview environments. The College also runs an Employability Street event where students have access to employers and can explore potential job opportunities.

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 on pages 30 to 33 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx

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.

Blended learning

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

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.

Enhancement

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

Expectations

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

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.

Public information

Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

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** that all providers are required to meet.

Reference points

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

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.

QAA1720 - R4650 - Sept 16

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2016
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557 050
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk