



Higher Education Review of South Thames College

November 2014

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at South Thames College. The review took place from 24 to 27 November 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Frank Haddleton
- Mrs Polly Skinner
- Miss India-Chloe Woof (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by South Thames College 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 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 4.

In reviewing South Thames College 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 2014-15 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,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/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code

² Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106

³ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus.

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

Key findings

QAA's judgements about South Thames College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at South Thames College.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisations **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.

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to South Thames College.

By July 2015:

- ensure systems and processes are in place to address the distinct needs of higher education students and other higher education stakeholders (Expectations B3 and B4)
- develop and embed a process by which students can be informed partners in the assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience (Expectation B5)
- ensure that students are informed about the role of external examiners and external examiner reports (Expectation B7)
- clarify to students the relationship of the College complaints and appeals process with the awarding body complaints and appeals process (Expectation B9)
- make sure that all students can access definitive information about their programmes (Expectation C).

By September 2015:

- ensure that all academic staff use the *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and Subject Benchmark Statements appropriately in the development and delivery of programmes (Expectations A1 and A3.2)
- further align its processes for programme approval, monitoring and review with those of its awarding bodies (Expectations A3.1, B1 and B8)
- formalise processes for the design and development of new and existing programmes (Expectation B1)
- strengthen the overview of its higher education provision to develop and deliver a more coherent enhancement strategy (Enhancement).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The measures taken to train students for their role as student representatives (Expectation B5).

Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement is a key focus of higher education delivery. Students are encouraged to engage in critical evaluation of provision and contribute to the identification of enhancement initiatives through a range of mechanisms including College forums, course representative systems and module feedback. The College's Learner Involvement Implementation Plan identifies a number of actions to further strengthen student feedback systems and develop tutors' understanding of the learner voice and student involvement in the enhancement of the learning experience.

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

About South Thames College

South Thames College (the College) is a large general further education college located in London. Following merger with Merton College in 2009, the College has campuses in Wandsworth, Merton and Tooting. The College's aim is to deliver flexible, high quality, learner centred and business focused education and training that responds to the cultural diversity of the community, enriches lives and contributes to economic prosperity.

The College offers a broad curriculum from pre-entry to master's level. There are approximately 18,300 students of which 293 students are enrolled on higher education programmes funded through the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). There are also 66 higher education students from outside the UK and EU. The College has taken the strategic decision to develop its higher education programmes with a focus on employment and further professional development.

The College works with three university degree-awarding bodies for the delivery of foundation degrees, honours degrees, teacher training qualifications and master's programmes: the University of Cumbria; Canterbury Christ Church University and Kingston University. The College also works with Pearson for the delivery of Higher National qualifications.

Since the last QAA review in 2010, the College's partnerships with London Southbank University and St George's, University of London, have ended. The College has reduced the number of courses offered in partnership with Kingston University to two foundation degrees: FdSc Pharmaceutical and Chemical Sciences and FdA Early Years. The College's partnership with the University of Cumbria is due to end in 2015. In 2012, as part of its strategy to meet local need and increase the availability of full-time programmes, the College was awarded 45 additional directly funded higher education places by HEFCE. The number of international students has declined since the last review.

The College's self-evaluation identifies increasing competition in higher education delivery, uncertainties with regard to university partnerships, fluctuating international recruitment trends and the viability of existing provision as key challenges for the future. To mitigate risks and address these challenges, the College intends to seek further university partnerships, expand the range of higher education provision and explore the opportunities available through the management and professionally accredited qualification sector.

The College has responded effectively to the recommendations made in the last review report of May 2010.

Explanation of the findings about South Thames College

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 degree-awarding bodies and/or 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 works with three degree-awarding bodies and Pearson in the development and delivery of higher education. The roles, responsibilities and obligations of the College and the degree-awarding bodies are set out in partnership agreements. The awarding bodies and Pearson hold ultimate responsibility for the setting and verification of the standard of all of the College's higher education awards. The allocation of programmes and modules to the appropriate level of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) as well as the definition of learning outcomes and the appropriate use of Subject Benchmark Statements are also the responsibility of the Universities and Pearson.

1.2 The review team scrutinised relevant College, degree-awarding body and Pearson documentation, including quality assurance, validation and approval documents, and programme specifications. The review team also met teaching staff to explore their use and understanding of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements as a reference point in the maintenance of academic standards.

1.3 Programme specifications, curriculum documents and minutes from approval and validation events demonstrate an appropriate awareness of Subject Benchmark Statements

and the FHEQ and that programme outcomes are suitably matched to the FHEQ qualification descriptors. External examiner reports confirm that students are undertaking an appropriate volume of study to demonstrate their achievement of the required learning outcomes.

1.4 The College recognises and effectively manages the maintenance of standards by means of its own policies and procedures as well as complying with the requirements of its university awarding bodies and Pearson. Although some staff demonstrated awareness and understanding of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements it was not consistent across all programmes. The awareness and consideration by staff of the need to secure standards and the relevance of the FHEQ, credit frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements in securing standards by academic staff is not fully understood. It is **recommended** that the College ensure that all academic staff use the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements appropriately in the development and delivery of programmes.

1.5 The analysis of documentary evidence, supported by staff responses in meetings, shows that the ultimate responsibility for allocating each qualification to the appropriate level of the FHEQ rests with the universities and Pearson. The review team concludes that the College is effectively fulfilling its responsibilities for the maintenance of academic standards through close adherence to the awarding bodies' policies and programme specifications.

1.6 The close integration of the College with its university partners and Pearson in this respect leads to the conclusion that Expectation A1 is met. However, staff understanding of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements is not consistent across programme so the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

1.7 Programmes are operated in accordance with the academic frameworks and regulations developed and approved by the degree-awarding bodies and Pearson. Each partnership agreement defines mutual roles and responsibilities, the specific arrangements for the delivery of the programme and functions delegated to the College. The College's systems and procedures to implement its responsibilities within the terms of its agreements are tested during initial approval and validation activities and in ongoing review conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Universities and Pearson.

1.8 The College's approach to implementing its responsibilities was explored through discussion with staff, scrutiny of partnership agreements, the minutes of partnership meetings, documents relating to the management and recording of assessment and external examiner reports.

1.9 Records of review meetings with the degree-awarding bodies demonstrate appropriate consideration and ongoing review of governance and management arrangements to secure standards and the effective alignment of College systems and procedures with the requirements of the Universities and Pearson.

1.10 Appropriate assessment processes, approved by the Universities and Pearson, are in place to enable students to demonstrate learning outcomes. The documented assessment regulations of the degree-awarding bodies and Pearson are systematically and consistently applied.

1.11 The College operates a methodical system of Higher Education Assessment Boards to support the implementation of partner and College assessment processes and regulations. The boards, which meet four times a year, also provide a focus for the College to review programme operations, student progression and achievement. The process of feeding the decisions of the Higher Education Assessment Boards into the College quality cycle, and the ensuing action planning and aligning of the Assessment Boards with the College quality cycle are not clearly articulated. The review team concludes that well-documented academic frameworks and regulations as well as comprehensive monitoring and review arrangements operated by the College and its partners effectively contribute to securing academic standards. Expectation A2.1 is met and the associated level of 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

1.12 The definitive record of the programme is held by the degree-awarding bodies and organisation. However, the College is responsible for ensuring dissemination of this information. Programme specifications are uploaded to the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) and are made available to both staff and students.

1.13 In theory, the College's current processes meet the Expectation set out in A2.2, as there are clear processes for the standardisation of programme information and dissemination to students.

1.14 The review team held meetings with staff from the College and its degree-awarding bodies. The team also discussed programme information and its availability with students. The VLE was also explored to ascertain to what extent information is made available to staff and students. Finally, documentation was reviewed, including examples of programme specifications.

1.15 The College's standard template for programme specifications is used for Higher National programmes. Other programmes follow the requirements of the degree-awarding bodies. The College's template includes details of the programme's aims, assessment strategies, learning outcomes and additional requirements. The template makes specific reference to the National Qualifications Framework, but not the FHEQ.

1.16 Degree-awarding bodies hold the definitive record of the programme specification for their awards. The College is responsible for ensuring that its students receive definitive information about their programmes of study. Programme specifications are uploaded to the College's VLE and made available to students. However, this is not the case with all programmes and the majority of students met by the review team were not sure where to find definitive information about their programmes. The review team recommends that the College ensures that all students can access definitive information about their programmes. Programme handbooks for Higher National qualifications include a programme rationale, which details the structure of the programme and qualification. Students on programmes validated by degree-awarding bodies receive a programme handbook and a flash drive with programme information.

1.17 Therefore the review team found that Expectation A2.2 is met. The risk level is moderate, as the dissemination of definitive programme information to students is not consistent, and students the review team met were not aware of the existence of these documents.

Expectation: 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

1.18 The College follows well-documented approval processes operated by the awarding bodies and organisation. In addition the College has established an internal programme approval process as part of its quality assurance cycle. The College's Course Validation and Approval Panel meets once a term to approve new courses and re-approve programmes where there are significant changes. In combination, these processes allow the expectation to be met.

1.19 The review team assessed the effectiveness of the College's approval process, and the interaction with those of its awarding bodies and organisation, by meeting with College staff and representatives of awarding bodies, and analysing both the College's and the awarding bodies' course approval processes and associated approval documentation.

1.20 The universities and Pearson are responsible for the formal approval of programmes leading to their awards and for ensuring that the academic standards of qualifications are set at an appropriate level. All programmes are subject to rigorous approval and validation processes managed by the awarding bodies with College representatives to approve the delivery of their programmes by the College. Management and due diligence processes are specified in the partnership agreements.

1.21 The College conducts internal consultation and scrutiny of new and amended course proposals to ensure the validity and relevance of programmes and consider resource requirements to support programmes prior to seeking formal approval from the awarding bodies and organisation. In discussion with staff the review team found that in some cases, awarding body approval, in the form of a validation event, takes place in advance of the College approval process. In other cases, College approval precedes awarding body approval, and in others the two processes take place in parallel. As a consequence the College's internal processes and those of its awarding bodies and organisation are not always well aligned to support programme approval. The review team **recommends** that the College further align its processes for programme approval, monitoring and review with those of its awarding bodies.

1.22 The awarding bodies' and organisation as well as College approval processes are well embedded and understood by staff. The College follows the requirements of the awarding bodies and organisation for approval to deliver their programmes and undertakes its own internal scrutiny of new and amended programme proposals. The one recommendation in this area relates to ensuring that the College's internal processes more fully support programme approval. The review team concludes that Expectation A3.1 is met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

1.23 The College's responsibilities for the assessment of students are defined in partnership agreements and during the formal programme approval process. Arrangements concerning the development of assessment tasks, marking, moderation, external scrutiny and feedback vary according to the awarding body. Assessment processes are governed by the regulatory frameworks of the Universities and Pearson. In addition to following the requirements of the awarding bodies, there are a range of College policies and procedures to support assessment including the Assessment, Internal Verification and Malpractice Policy, Higher Education Assessment Boards and implementation of the Higher Education Assessment Forum.

1.24 The review team tested the College's ability to maintain academic standards through the assessment process in discussions with College staff, students and awarding body representatives, and by scrutiny of the outcomes of course approval, review and assessment board processes, including external examiners' reports and their resulting action plans.

1.25 The details of assessment within programmes are established at the point of validation, and are set in accordance with the regulations of the relevant awarding body. Documentation from approval events confirms the appropriate review of assessment. Assessment briefs are internally verified before publication to students and assessed work is both internally and externally examined according to approved grading criteria and the requirements of the awarding bodies.

1.26 External examiners appointed by the awarding bodies and organisation provide reports which offer opportunities for the College and partners to reflect on the consistency of marking and appropriateness of methods, and the extent to which academic standards have been satisfied. Higher education assessment boards, constituted and managed according to the requirements of the awarding bodies, meet regularly to oversee student progression and the award of credit. The College also implements its own Higher Education Assessment Boards to strengthen internal scrutiny of the assessment process, student progress and achievement.

1.27 In their discussion with the review team, staff knowledge and understanding of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements and how these reference points can be used in securing academic standards through assessment was variable. The review team **recommends** that the College ensure that all academic staff use the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements appropriately in the development and delivery of programmes.

1.28 The College assessment processes follow the requirements of the awarding bodies and are effective in demonstrating the achievement of learning outcomes and academic standards. The one recommendation in this area relates to further developing staff

knowledge of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements to further secure academic standards in the assessment process. The review team conclude that Expectation A3.2 is met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

1.29 The College's Quality Strategy, Policy and Framework, the Higher Education Curriculum Quality Manual and the College monitoring and review structure set out the College's processes for monitoring and review of its programmes. The maintenance of standards are considered in processes of ongoing and periodic review and revalidation undertaken by the College's university partners and by Pearson (for Higher National programmes) in accordance with their procedures for ensuring the currency of programmes.

1.30 The Review team considered the College's approach to course monitoring and review by talking to students, College staff and awarding body representatives. The team also scrutinised samples of College monitoring meeting minutes, review reports and associated action plans, along with a sample of the monitoring and review reports of awarding bodies.

1.31 All programmes are monitored on an ongoing basis, through the six-week cycle of the Meeting our Targets process, which informs the annual school and cross-college self-assessment review process. The annual College Higher Education Self-Assessment Report and accompanying quality improvement plan draws on data provided by the College on student enrolment, achievement and success, as well as student and external examiner feedback. The universities require the College to prepare an annual monitoring report on their programmes.

1.32 The degree-awarding bodies undertake longer term periodic review and re-validation of their provision delivered by the College using formal, documented procedures and including consideration of the achievement and maintenance of academic standards.

1.33 Overall, the review team found the College's approach to ongoing monitoring of its courses to be effective. Therefore Expectation A3.3 is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

1.34 The College works with its university partners and Pearson to ensure the use of external expertise in the setting and maintaining of standards. The respective responsibilities of the awarding bodies and the College for programme validation, conducting annual partnership reviews, annual monitoring and periodic reviews, are clearly set out in the partnership agreements and validation documents. These arrangements include the provision of external expertise in the design and review of programmes.

1.35 Most of the programmes delivered by the College have been initially designed by the universities and Pearson and approved using procedures which include the use of external expertise. In cases where the College has been involved in the development of programmes the awarding body validation arrangements and requirements for external involvement also apply.

1.36 Following initial approval of the College to deliver programmes, the awarding bodies undertake periodic review processes with the College which incorporate an external view. For example, the periodic internal subject review carried out according to Kingston University procedures is set out in its Academic Quality and Standards Handbook. The peer process comprises both subject expertise and those experienced in assessing the effective implementation of academic policies and procedures with a constituency of individuals from outside and within the University but not from the College subject team. Canterbury Christ Church University annually review the College provision, periodic reviews take place in the sixth year of operation of the programme and reflect the requirements of the other university awarding bodies. College and university partner programme leaders or liaison officers effectively work together to monitor programmes and implement changes arising from review activities.

1.37 External examiners, appointed by the universities and Pearson, provide impartial advice and recommendations as to whether assessment demonstrates that threshold academic standards are achieved in accordance with the awarding body's regulations. This is confirmed by the degree-awarding bodies whose relevant external examiners and College staff attend and contribute to examination boards. External examiners on Higher National programmes do not normally attend Assessment Boards and do not receive materials from the Boards.

1.38 The College relies on the degree-awarding bodies and Pearson at key stages to set and advise on academic standards. Externality and independent expertise in maintaining and achieving academic standards is monitored and evaluated through annual and periodic reviews. The review team concludes that Expectation 3.4 is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

1.39 In reaching its judgements about the quality of student learning opportunities the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. Overall, the College is effective in managing its responsibilities, in conjunction with the degree-awarding bodies and organisation, and maintaining academic standards.

1.40 Effective use is made of relevant subject and qualification benchmarks and external expertise in the development of programmes and their subsequent approval and monitoring. Effective use is made of input from external examiners and link tutors from the degree-awarding bodies. External examiner reports are made available to staff but, currently, not routinely to all students (see section 2). The review team recommends strengthening processes for longer term monitoring and review of programmes.

1.41 The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and awarding 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 and Approval

Findings

2.1 The College has an internal process for identifying new provision and approving the development and introduction of programmes. In most cases the College is responsible for delivering programmes which have been designed, developed and approved by the degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisation. The College has some direct involvement in designing and developing units on Higher National programmes. In all cases, programmed design and validation processes, and approval for the College to deliver awards, are managed by the awarding bodies and organisation according to their procedures and regulations. This delegation of responsibility is clearly articulated in the partnership agreements and validation documents.

2.2 The review team assessed the effectiveness of the College's approach to programme design, development and approval processes by meeting College staff and representatives of awarding bodies, and analysing both the College's and its awarding bodies' course design, development and approval processes and associated approval documentation.

2.3 The College's own programme approval procedure requires that employers and marketing staff are consulted during programme development and one of the underpinning principles of the College's Higher Education Strategy is programme development led by working with employers. Academic schools are expected to provide evidence of employer demand for proposed courses. However, in their discussion with staff, the review team found limited evidence of employer engagement in the course development process.

2.4 There is currently no requirement for students to be involved in the design and development process, although student feedback on the delivery of programmes is sought through surveys and end-of-module feedback. Student membership of the College's Course Validation Approval Panel was introduced in June 2014. The formal constitution of the panel has yet to be updated to reflect this, and the role of students on the panel is not fully appreciated by staff.

2.5 The Higher Education Curriculum Quality Manual 2014-15, which provides guidance to staff delivering programmes, does not provide advice on the process of design and development of new programmes or modules/units. In their meetings with staff the review team learned that such advice and guidance is informal. The review team appreciates that guidance on course design is less relevant where programme curricula are either developed by the awarding body, or the awarding bodies' own design and development guidance is used. However, in contexts where College staff are expected to develop parts of, or whole programmes for validation by the awarding bodies/organisation, the absence of formal College guidance may lead to variability in the advice given. In order to further strengthen the College's internal systems to support the design and development of programmes, the review team **recommends** that the College formalise processes for the design and development of new and existing courses.

2.6 The College's course approval process is pivotal to internal deliberation and approval of new programmes and significant changes to existing programmes. The Course Validation Approval panel, chaired by the Vice-Principal for Quality, reviews submissions and reaches decisions against set criteria. Heads of school are responsible for presenting documentation to the panel, with evidence of demand, resource availability, and that the programme will meet the relevant awarding body academic standards. If approved, the School is tasked with proceeding to programme planning. As noted in paragraph 2.5 there is little interaction between the College's internal approval process and the awarding bodies' approval and validation processes, and in particular the sequence of internal and external approval does not always work together to support the development process. The review team **recommends** that the College further align its processes for programme approval, monitoring and review with those of its awarding bodies.

2.7 In conclusion, the College's process for new course design, development and approval meets Expectation B.1. The risk associated with this area is moderate due to limited College guidance to its staff on the design and development of programmes or units where appropriate, and the need for greater alignment between its approval processes and those of its awarding bodies/organisation.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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*

Findings

2.8 The College has responsibility for admissions under the terms of its agreements with all partners, excluding Kingston University who recruit directly. Cumbria University and Canterbury Christ Church University stipulate the involvement of a University Admissions Tutor in the admissions process. The College Admissions Policy clearly states the College's strategic priorities in relation to recruitment, selection and admissions, including a statement on equality. The policy links with the College's Equality and Diversity Policy which refers to admissions and sets out the College's intention to ensure its admissions procedure is free from discrimination, and remains accessible to all. The College Complaints Policy is referenced in the Admissions Policy as a route for appeal of a decision. The policy document is reviewed by the Senior Leadership Team on a twice-yearly basis.

2.9 In theory, the College's current processes meet Expectation B2 as it has a policy relating to admissions which clearly define the role of the College and its awarding bodies within the recruitment, selection and admissions process.

2.10 The review team tested the College's approach to admissions through meetings with staff responsible for admissions and representatives from the awarding bodies, and scrutinised the policy documents relating to admissions, appeals and complaints. The team also met the College's Senior Leadership Team and discussed approaches to the review of relevant College policies, and examined minutes of relevant meetings relating to the review cycle for such policies.

2.11 There is clear evidence in the Higher Education Strategy, the Strategic Plan, and meetings with staff of links between strategic priorities and admissions targets. The Higher Education Enrolment Guidance stipulates requirements regarding student numbers, places reserved for full time students, and instructions for admissions officers.

2.12 The Admissions Policy refers to both further and higher education and does not specify how arrangements vary according to programmes with different awarding bodies. The College recruits non-EU international students directly and through agents, and provides a separate application process for international students. However, this process not detailed within the College Admissions Policy.

2.13 The Admissions Policy does not detail arrangements for non-standard entry. The accreditation of prior learning does take place within the College and in the their meetings with the review team staff were able to clearly articulate each stage of the process. However, there is currently no formal document which sets out this procedure for staff or prospective students.

2.14 The College Complaints Policy makes reference to admissions, and includes a timescale of 30 days between the submission of a complaint and a response. However, the Policy does not specify the various arrangements relating to different awarding bodies. It is also not clear how applicants are informed of their right to appeal and complain.

2.15 The Admissions Policy does not state how admissions data is monitored for the purposes of assuring the effectiveness of the process. However, the Equality and Diversity policy does state that the College Equality and Diversity Board should receive this data.

2.16 The review team found that Expectation B2 relating to recruitment, selection and admissions is met, as the College has clear policies which are consistently implemented. The associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

2.17 The College states that its work is underpinned by three core values that encapsulate its commitment: learning, excellence and teamwork. The College also seeks to improve the quality of teaching and learning by garnering additional detailed information about improving the overall College student learning experience through the quality cycle. A fixed characteristic of the quality cycle is the embedding of six weekly reviews of all College programmes known as Meeting Our Targets. The intention of embedding the reviews is to embrace the specific needs of the wide College constituency, including higher education, by engaging all staff, working alongside students, in a systematic and consistent quality review process. Additionally, course team meetings provide information about progress, interventions and confirm achievement and progress towards targets that are fed through from Course Leaders, to the Heads of Schools, the Vice Principal, Principal and Senior Leadership Team.

2.18 In the quality cycle student and course achievement and progress is risk assessed by using Red, Amber and Green ratings. Senior managers play a key role in the cycle, by addressing any areas of concern emerging from the process, in particular from those programmes that are underachieving or underperforming and that include clear indications where the quality of teaching, learning and assessment should be improved.

2.19 The review team tested the effectiveness of the quality cycle in systematically reviewing and developing teaching and learning practices, by analysing the documentary evidence of the outcomes of this process and by talking to academic staff.

2.20 It is clear that a significant number of processes are integral to and inform the quality cycle, such as the consideration of key points from external examiners' reports, internal verifier reports, Learning Walks, and Peer and Developmental Teaching Observations. In particular Learning Walks provide a focused opportunity for discussions between teachers, learners and managers.

2.21 Staff appreciate the positive impact of the quality cycle which enables timely adjustment to the delivery of programmes and were able to provide examples of change resulting from student feedback gathered from the cycle. This includes the provision of hardware to meet specific technical elements in film and the provision of a higher education specific control room for the music studio.

2.22 The College quality cycle, the annual and periodic reviews held by the university awarding bodies and the College higher education assessment boards are broadly aligned so that the opportunity for information about teaching and learning can flow between the various groups. The immediacy of feedback and speedy identification of any issues are positive features of the process and contribute to its overall effectiveness.

2.23 A variety of College manuals and strategies convey supporting operational guidelines for staff. The College Higher Education Curriculum Quality Manual sets out an overview of those procedures necessary for the successful operation of higher education

programmes, such as the quality and academic cycle, lesson documentation requirements, internal verification, external examination and assessment at South Thames College.

2.24 The College's Teaching and Learning Strategy is largely based on the evaluation requirements in the Ofsted common inspection framework. The strategy refers to the promotion of a higher order of thinking skills, theoretically those that should emerge from a good practice learning framework, setting out the key elements of effective learning sessions. The framework process embeds the need to systematically review teaching and learning. However, the Teaching and Learning Strategy does not identify any specific and distinctive higher education demands, especially those needed in delivering differentiated teaching and learning at an appropriate FHEQ level.

2.25 In house professional development for higher education staff is provided and some staff participate. The College also offers an accredited Lifelong Learning Award module that could support an independent application to become a fellow of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) which eight members of academic staff have completed successfully with positive feedback. The College is considering offering the module again as a compulsory element of its professional development planning. Although the College encourages staff participation, membership of the Higher Education Academy is not widespread among staff.

2.26 The take-up of the professional development offered by the university awarding bodies is variable. Canterbury Christ Church University require all staff teaching on its programme to undertake the Associate tutor course. While some staff attend the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (Adults) at Kingston University, there has been no take up of the professional development training to improve teaching and the student experience offered by the Higher Education Academy or the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice offered by Cumbria University.

2.27 The College plan for learning is located on the College VLE and is shared with students at the start of their programme summarising the topics and assessments to be covered and completed. In their meeting with the review team some students reported that they find the VLE difficult to navigate and is not used consistently across all programmes. Other students confirmed that once they understood the VLE, it is a good resource.

2.28 In most higher education programme handbooks reference is made to the development of independent learning and critical analytical skills in research in order to complete assignments. In the HNC/D Travel and Tourism Handbook one section explains that the students will be expected to engage in personal research and reading and need to undertake a minimum of six hours a week of independent study on College premises.

2.29 In their meetings with the review team, staff explained that after a two day induction period, ongoing dialogue with students regarding learning continues through bespoke personal development programmes and that the development of the independent learning is embedded into the courses. Where appropriate students are also encouraged to make independent choices around assignments.

2.30 Awareness of the emphasis on independent learning to consolidate and improve skills is inconsistent among students. In their meeting with the review team, some reported that some courses over-emphasise the need for them to gain independent learning skills yet, on other courses, students say that they are 'spoon fed' and the distinction between level three and higher education levels is blurred. Business school students were less clear about any emphasis on independent learning while a creative industries student valued the opportunity to work independently and actively sought to praise the quality of teaching, learning and employability focus of their course. This is substantiated by the creative industries staff who say that students are enabled to be creative and critical thinkers.

2.31 There is a significant contrast between the different subject areas regarding the distinctiveness of the student's learning experiences. The review team **recommends** that the College ensure systems and processes are in place to address the distinct needs of higher education students and other higher education stakeholders.

2.32 The Head of Learner Support is a member of the Higher Education Forum and has a team of staff who actively support higher education students to achieve their learning goals. This includes working with delivery teams and support staff to make any reasonable adjustments to a learning programme, assessment methods or access to specialist resources as appropriate to the individual student needs especially those of international students.

2.33 The review team conclude that the College has the capacity to review its provision to develop the distinctiveness of its higher education level of provision therefore Expectation B3 is met with a moderate associated level of risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.34 The recently updated College Strategic Plan and the Higher Education Strategy together set out the College and higher education objectives. The College aims to be the leading provider of career focused education and training by motivating and challenging learners to achieve excellence, enabling progress within a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

2.35 Arrangements and resources are monitored and evaluated through the College's six weekly quality cycle which is thorough and encompasses all of the College provision. All external reviews, reports and internal quality improvement plans feed into and out of the process. Other College strategies align with the underlying purpose of the cycle. The degree awarding bodies monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources within their partnerships and any issues relating to the College are addressed in review reports which are shared with College representatives.

2.36 The review team investigated the operation of these processes through the examination of internal College documents, including its strategies, programme and careers information; relevant meeting minutes; statistical data and the student submission. The review team also met staff and students.

2.37 The Strategic Plan describes five strategic priorities to provide a strong link between learning and future skills needs for employment. This includes providing advice regarding career planning and jobs from first enquiry to post-study as well as high quality support and feedback. To support the achievement of these priorities, the College has achieved the matrix accreditation for its provision of careers information, advice and guidance and offers a comprehensive range of effective student support services. Course teams also provide support for learning and advice on employment. The College has taken steps to improve progression opportunities for international students through aligning the start and end dates and introducing appropriate bridging modules.

2.38 The College's Learner Support Policy outlines a range of support for higher education students. Initial diagnostic assessment is undertaken with all higher education students. Support is provided for students whose first language is not English. All students participate in an induction programme for their programme of study although students reported that there is variation across programmes in the thoroughness of the process. Additional modules in Maths and English are available to students in preparation for study. All students have access to higher education specific study support sessions, normally provided through the Higher Education Study Centre. Programme teams also provide support for study skills with additional learning sessions.

2.39 Higher education students who declare a disability are supported by the College learning support team, the Head of which is a member of the Higher Education Forum and actively supports students to achieve their learning goals. This includes working with delivery teams and College colleagues to make any reasonable adjustments to a learning programme, assessment methods or access to specialist resources. Student support staff say that the amount and type of support depends on the degree of any disclosure and diagnosis.

2.40 The College recognises the need to attract and develop a diverse and talented delivery team and ensure that staff maintain their industry links and practice and undertake staff development to become experts in their vocational disciplines. In their discussion with programme delivery staff the review team was provided with examples where industry links have been effectively developed in the School of Creative Industries and staff have maintained their practice. Exceptionally, one member of staff is recognised internationally with a high profile in the film industry. Evidence of professional industrial updating is also especially evident in management and professional studies, and games and engineering programmes where there is important liaison with industry and good subject employer links: the latter advise about new technologies to keep the curriculum updated and relevant.

2.41 Students are positive about the relevance of industry links on the creative arts programmes, finding these to be exceptionally beneficial to their experience and progress. Students on other programmes were less clear about the impact of staff industry links on the quality of their experience but appreciated the opportunity to undertake Personal Professional Development modules as part of their programme as a way of developing their employability.

2.42 The Higher Education Curriculum Quality Manual states that all tutors involved in the delivery of higher education should engage with the work of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the relevant subject centres in order to develop their discipline knowledge and remain in touch with current pedagogic theory and practice. Although the review team found that some staff had been involved with the HEA and found the experience worthwhile, most staff had not engaged and appeared to have little knowledge about this resource. The review team **recommends** that the College ensure systems and processes are in place to address the distinct needs of higher education students and other higher education stakeholders.

2.43 The College is responsive to student feedback and issues which arise in the context of ongoing review activities. For example, a dedicated higher education study centre has now been provided following student feedback, the benefits of which are enjoyed by students who find it an enormous support in an excellent facility that is well resourced.

2.44 External examiner reports confirm the appropriateness of the curriculum for the development of students' academic, personal and professional goals. For example, on the BA (Hons) Business Management the examiner notes that students are exposed to a variety of assessments, which provide opportunity for both the development of academic skills and transferable skills that prepare them for the world of work and, in the case of the enterprise and personal development module, that the examiner witnessed some good reflection from students. Positive comments and recognition of best practice are also made in the external examiner reports for HNC/D Business (Management) which highlight the excellent results of a particular unit of study which links real work and industry to what is taught in the classroom.

2.45 The College is further developing its links with employers to support the delivery of programmes to meet business and industry standards. The College is ambitious in growing its higher education provision in response to sector changes and is gathering information to inform the College strategy to develop in different ways such as higher level apprenticeships. The review team found some evidence at programme level in support of the claim where students had the opportunity to liaise with College employer contacts in the creative industries and programme staff attend the University of London Film Festival.

2.46 In their meeting with the review team and in their written submission students were positive about the support they receive from tutors and the opportunities provided by the College to develop their personal and professional goals. Students identified a wide variety

of reasons for studying at the College. Some had progressed within the College from level 3 to higher education and others had returned after a break, returning to learning to continue their studies at higher level. All students were clearly choosing the College as their preferred option for learning and valued the student experience.

2.47 The College shows a variable response to monitoring and evaluating arrangements and resources which enable the wide and diverse needs of the College higher education students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The review team conclude that Expectation B4 has been met, but the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.48 The College provides students with a range of opportunities to contribute to the assurance and enhancement of their programmes and experience at the College. These include Learner Experience Forums, Higher Education Learner Forums, College Learner Forums, and the opportunity to be part of an elected Student Executive. Alongside these bodies, students also contribute to learner voice surveys, end of module surveys and take part in a Student Leadership Conference. Students also have representation on the Equality and Diversity Board and the newly formed Multi-faith Group. In theory, the College does meet Expectation B5 as it offers students a range of opportunities to engage in educational enhancement and quality assurance, has a range of student forums which give the opportunity for evidence-based discussions, and offers training to student representatives.

2.49 The review team tested the College's approach through meeting students (including student representatives) and staff, including those working on student engagement. The review team also scrutinised documents relating to the engagement of students in quality assurance and enhancement processes, including the Learner Involvement Implementation Plan, Student Charter, and meeting minutes of relevant bodies involving students. The review team was not able to meet the Lead Student Representative during the visit.

2.50 The College has not developed a definition of student engagement, and does not have a clear mechanism for evaluating the various routes which are used to involve students in quality assurance and enhancement. The College has developed various documents, including a Learner Involvement Implementation Plan and a student charter, but it is not clear how these documents relate to higher education specifically, how students were consulted during the development of these strategy documents, or how students were made aware of the implementation of these documents.

2.51 The College has an elected Student Executive comprising nine students. The Student Executive represents the student body at the Equality and Diversity Board, the Learner Experience Forum and the Multi-faith Group. Involving higher education students in the Student Executive is identified as a priority within the Learner Involvement Implementation Plan, and clear progress has been made, with two higher education members of the Student Executive. However, this is recent and has yet to be embedded. Students who met the review team were not aware of the Student Executive.

2.52 A higher education-specific student representative system is also in place and each programme has at least one student representative. Programme-level student representatives attend three different forums. The College Learner Forum meets every six weeks and includes both higher and further education representatives. This Forum is attended by Heads of Schools and members of the Senior Leadership Team. Student representatives can also attend the Higher Education Learner Forum which meets three times a year and includes the Dean of School, Service Managers, representatives from learner support and the Information and Learning Technology team. The Learner Experience Forum is chaired by the Vice Principal for Quality, and receives minutes of the Higher Education Learner Forum and the College Learner Forum.

2.53 Student representatives who met the review team did not understand how the various forums relate to one another, or who should attend which meeting. College staff were also unsure as to how the various forums relate to each other and which students should attend which meetings. Nor is it clear how points raised are progressed between the various forums, or what the route for further progression of these issues is within the College. In order for students to be informed partners in their educational experience, the College may find it helpful to clarify the role of these various forums and how they relate to each other. The review team **recommends** that the College develop and embed a process by which students can be informed partners in the assurance and enhancement of the quality of their educational experience.

2.54 The existing process of student engagement is learner-led and the onus rests on students to find the appropriate forum at which to discuss any issues. There are currently no opportunities for student input to bodies at which staff routinely discuss the assurance and enhancement of educational experience, such as Meeting Our Targets meetings. At departmental level, while the College strongly advises programme leaders to invite students to Meeting Our Targets meetings, students are not routinely involved in this process, which the College sees as a key element of its six week quality cycle. Also, there are no opportunities for higher education students to contribute to College bodies across the higher levels of the organisation, including, for example, the Higher Education Steering Group or Senior Leadership Team meetings, although the College has expressed intentions to include student representatives as members of key College committees from next academic year.

2.55 Training for student representatives has recently been introduced, and although this is not yet delivered consistently across all courses, the College does intend to introduce training for all representatives during the next academic year. The review team **affirms** the measures taken to train students for their role as student representatives.

2.56 The Lead Student Representative played a key role on the panel of the New Course Approval and Validation Panel in June 2014. However, students are not routinely involved in the course validation and re-validation process, although the College does take into account student feedback throughout the academic year when considering changes to its provision.

2.57 A chapter of the Higher Education Curriculum Quality Manual is dedicated to learner voice surveys. These include unit/module evaluation questionnaires which use a new form which was developed during 2013-14. This information informs the annual monitoring process. However it is not clear how the results are used as part of the ongoing quality assurance and enhancement process throughout the year.

2.58 The review team concludes that Expectation B5 relating to the engagement of students in quality assurance and enhancement processes has not been met. This is primarily due to the lack of consistent higher education student involvement throughout all levels of the College; the confusion among both staff and students relating to the existing structures, for example the Higher Education Learner Forum and the College Learner Forum; and the lack of student engagement in what the College identifies as key aspects of its quality cycle. The associated level of risk is moderate.

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

2.59 Assessment is conducted according to the clearly documented academic frameworks and assessment regulations of the awarding bodies and organisation. College responsibilities for assessment are defined in partnership agreements. In addition to the frameworks of its partners, the College operates a number of policies and processes to assure assessment. These include the Higher Education Assessment Policy, Forum and Assessment Boards. In theory the College has equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, and therefore meets the expectation.

2.60 The review team considered the College's approach to assessment by talking to students, College staff and awarding body representatives. The review team also examined a range of staff guidance, National Student Survey results, assessment board minutes, and external examiners' reports and their resulting action plans.

2.61 The Higher Education Assessment Policy forms Appendix 2 of the College Assessment, Internal Verification and Malpractice Policy, and is considered by the Higher Education Assessment Forum. In support of the Policy, the HE Curriculum Quality Manual has guidance for delivery teams on assessment plans, internal verification and assessment. At programme level, the assessment strategy is approved at validation, with reference to both the College Higher Education Assessment Policy and any awarding bodies' policies, including those for mitigating circumstances and academic malpractice.

2.62 The Higher Education Assessment Forum has been established to support staff in assessing at the right academic level, in generating appropriate assignments and in providing good quality feedback to students.

2.63 A significant number of College students have identified poor feedback on their assessments in the National Student Survey. In their meeting with the review team, staff explained that students are made aware of feedback schedules in course handbooks, and they are also discussed with students. The need for feedback schedules has been reinforced with staff by curriculum managers, and compliance with the 20 day feedback deadline is monitored at Assessment Boards. Students confirmed that feedback on their assessments, in terms of its timeliness and its usefulness, was variable and so the Higher Education Assessment Forum may benefit from monitoring this through the following cycle of the National Student Survey.

2.64 The VLE is used wherever possible to inform students of assessment schedules, and is intended to remind students of deadlines for the submission of assessments. There is also the facility to provide feedback to students on marked work. The various functions of the VLE to support assessment and feedback are potentially valuable, and the College plans to widen its use in future years.

2.65 The College's internal and external verification processes are effective. The Higher Education Curriculum Quality Manual and the Assessment, Internal Verification and Malpractice Policy provide detailed information on processes, and external examiners and

awarding bodies confirm that the standard of assessment and internal verification is secure. The College's policy supplements the guidance of awarding bodies, and the College confirms that it has been developed to complement rather than conflict with any external requirements. Similarly, College guidance on mitigating circumstances have been developed to the guidance issued by its awarding bodies.

2.66 College Higher Education Assessment Boards monitor compliance with the agreed assessment strategies, scrutinise external examiner reports, and review course-related operational matters and key data for quality assurance and improvement. Approval of student grades, progression and awards for university programmes are conducted through assessment boards managed by the awarding bodies according to their academic and assessment regulations. Assessment decisions for Higher National courses are approved by the College Assessment Board, subject to external examiner verification.

2.67 The review team concludes that the College is able to operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment. Expectation B6 is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining

Findings

2.68 The degree-awarding bodies and Pearson determine the external examining arrangements within programmes, including the appointment, training, support and the reporting requirements of examiners. External examiner reports are received by the universities, Pearson and the College, and considered at both programme and senior levels. Comments from the external examiners feed in to the annual programme review and action planning process.

2.69 In testing the College's procedures the review team met senior and academic staff and students. The team also read external examiners' reports and reviewed the minutes, reports and plans arising from the monitoring and review process.

2.70 External examiners attend assessment boards and committees, and sample students' assessed work, according to the regulations of the awarding bodies. The review team saw evidence of external examiner reports. These reports are shared with the College, and the awarding bodies and organisation. Following receipt of the reports, the College is required to forward comments and action plans to the universities. In the case of Pearson programmes, the external examiner report forwarded to the College includes agreed action points for the College to implement.

2.71 The College has a thorough and systematic process to formally record the receipt of the report and the progress of any ensuing actions. Initially the College quality team produces time based and Red, Amber and Green rated action plans to address any obvious concerns. The action plans are then confirmed and addressed by the heads of school and the course leaders who complete a formal action plan. The action plans are monitored through the quality cycle. A member of the quality team ensures that all actions are completed within the given timescale and that responses addressing the external examiner reports are dispatched to the appropriate awarding body.

2.72 The College is responsive to the recommendations of external examiners. The review team saw evidence that external examiners' reports form part of the College's monitoring and review quality cycle and was provided with examples of ways in which the examiners have assisted in the development of programmes. This includes, for example, changing the balance of academic and practical work on the HNC/D Game Animation programme, and recommendations on assessment on several other programmes. Staff appreciate the role of the external examiners and value their contribution to maintaining academic standards and developing best practice.

2.73 The awarding bodies and organisation and the College state that external examiner reports must be shared with student representatives. The College has agreed to use its VLE to make reports and associated action plans available to students. However, in their meeting with the Review Team, most students could not recall seeing the reports and were not clear about the role of the external examiner. Staff confirmed that the reports are uploaded to the VLE but further scrutiny by the review team revealed inconsistency in course managers' uploading of the reports and not all students are informed about the role of external examiner reports or know about the role of external examiners. The review team **recommends** that the College ensure that students are informed about the role of external examiners and external examiner reports. External examiner reports are considered at the university and in the College Assessment Boards and external examiners for the degree-awarding bodies attend the university examination boards.

2.74 On consideration of the evidence, the review team concludes that Expectation B7 is met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.75 The College has a system of programme monitoring and review which is overseen by its Higher Education Forum. Through the operation of this group, the College maintains oversight of the review process. At an operational level the Meeting our Targets meetings, self-assessment reports and quality improvement plans provide a means of ongoing monitoring and review of programmes. The university awarding bodies also monitor and review programmes in partnership with the College annually and over the longer term through periodic review. These procedures allow the Expectation to be met.

2.76 The review team evaluated the College's approach to programme monitoring and review by talking to students, College staff and awarding body representatives. The team also scrutinised samples of College monitoring meeting minutes, review reports and associated action plans, along with a smaller sample of the monitoring and review reports of awarding bodies.

2.77 The College operates a cross-college quality assurance cycle, with quality improvement processes which work alongside the validation, monitoring and review requirements of its awarding bodies. College review activities include six weekly Meeting our Targets meetings and the production of annual self-assessment reports and action plans. The process draws on data relating to student progression and achievement produced by the College, as well as student views obtained through surveys, student forums and module feedback. External examiner reports feed into these processes.

2.78 Targets for each programme, agreed at the start of the year by senior managers, are monitored during the year through the Meeting Our Targets meetings and the Higher Education Assessment Boards. The outcomes of the Meeting Our Targets process are reported to College senior managers and ultimately to the College Principal. This is a high-impact, responsive process, although one which is very demanding for all involved.

2.79 Each School completes an annual self-assessment report and then prepares a quality improvement plan which informs the activities to both maintain and share current good practice as well as identify targets for improvement for the next academic year. Schools update their self-assessment reports by producing a Position Statement using the actions and outcomes from the first two rounds of the Meeting Our Targets meetings. The Position Statements provide an effective means through which Heads of Schools and their curriculum managers can highlight progress over the course of the academic year as well as review and update the quality improvement plan. A cross-college higher education self-assessment report is completed in October, building on evaluation from each programme and School, which informs the preparation of a Quality Improvement Plan.

2.80 At an operational level the Meeting Our Targets meetings, self-assessment reports and their quality improvement plans at College and School level provide an effective, regular and systematic means for the College Higher Education Forum to monitor the College's programmes. These work alongside the validation, periodic review and annual monitoring requirements of the relevant degree awarding bodies and awarding organisations. Courses validated by degree-awarding bodies are both annually monitored and periodically reviewed or revalidated, and College staff contribute to these processes. Higher National awards are

also annually monitored. The College does not currently have a process for the longer term review of academic standards on its Higher National qualifications. To strengthen the strategic review of standards on Higher National programmes the College may benefit from developing a longer term review process similar to that used by the degree-awarding bodies. The review team **recommends** that the College should further align its processes for programme approval, monitoring and review with those of its awarding bodies, to enable the College to take a longer-term view on the academic standards of its courses.

2.81 The review team found that the College's approach to ongoing monitoring of its programmes is effective. However, its processes for review of its Higher National provision over the longer term could be strengthened. Expectation B8 is met, but there is a moderate level of associated risk posed by a limited opportunity for a longer-term review of some programmes.

Expectation: 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 B8: Programme Monitoring and Review

Findings

2.82 The College has in place an assessment appeals procedure, a complaints procedure and a complaints policy. The assessment appeals procedure relates to internal and external assessment. The complaints procedure deals with all other areas of provision. The College complaints procedure is available on the College website, along with the College complaints policy. The College encourages early and informal resolution of complaints and uses complaints as another route for gathering student feedback.

2.83 In theory, the College meets Expectation B9 as it has clear policies and accompanying guidance in place, alongside clear routes for complaints and appeals to be handled effectively.

2.84 The review team tested the College's approach by scrutinising various documents including the complaints policy, the complaints procedure, the appeals policy and the appeals procedure. The team also discussed complaints and appeals with students to establish whether students knew where to access details of these processes. Finally, the process for appeals and complaints was discussed with staff, including the complaints officer, and representatives from the College's various awarding bodies.

2.85 There is a lack of clarity within the various documents produced by the College which makes reference to appeals and complaints. The College complaints procedure states that it 'does not cover complaints about academic assessment that is grades and marks which are covered by the Academic Appeals Procedure'. However, the HNC/HND Handbook template states 'appeals relating to unit results are dealt with via the College Complaints Procedure'. The complaints policy and procedure does not make it clear how students can submit a complaint without fear of disadvantage, and does not specify the various arrangements relating to different awarding bodies, including in relation to admissions. Students who met the review team were not sure how to make an appeal or complaint, or where to find information on the related processes. There was also confusion among staff regarding the appeals and complaints process. Information provided to students about appeals and complaints may also be confusing and misleading. For example, the HNC Handbook signposts students to the College's VLE for the College Appeals Policy and states that following consideration of an appeal there will be no further opportunities for review. This may mislead students as it does not allude to the multiple stages involved in the appeals process.

2.86 The Assessments Appeals Procedure does not clearly state to whom the procedure applies, but the College Complaints Procedure is clear on its scope. The omission of references to specific arrangements according to varying agreements with awarding bodies/organisations means that the College's current policies do not make the processes clear to all students, as arrangements do vary. References to awarding body appeals and complaints procedures are made within individual student handbooks. However, the central College policy makes no reference to these. It is **recommended** that the College clarify to students the relationship of the College complaints and appeals process with the awarding body complaints and appeals process.

2.87 The system for monitoring complaints and appeals at the College is not clear. The Assessments Appeals Procedure states that appeals will be monitored by the Quality Improvement Board. However this body has now been dissolved. The review team found confusion among staff regarding the process for reviewing appeals and complaints annually. The HE Steering Group states it has responsibility for monitoring complaints and appeals, and the College Complaints Policy states that an annual report regarding complaints is sent to the Board of Governors.

2.88 The review team concludes that the College meets Expectation B9 relating to appeals and complaints, as there are clear systems in place and processes are followed by the College. However, the policies relating to appeals and complaints do not detail the relationship and separation between the College's processes and those of the degree awarding bodies and organisation, which has the potential to cause confusion among staff and students. The associated level of risk is low.

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

2.89 The College has a range of responsibilities for the provision of learning opportunities delegated by its awarding bodies and organisation. This includes the provision of work-based learning opportunities on foundation degrees, teacher training qualifications and Higher Nationals. The College's Higher Education Strategy requires close association with employers and professional bodies in the design and delivery of programmes and this is undertaken through the provision of information to employers and work-based mentors, and ongoing contact with staff and the organisations, providing a setting for student learning. The College's Business Placement Centre assists in the identification of suitable work-based learning opportunities for students in accordance with programme requirements. The College's stated approach meets the Expectation in *Chapter B10* of the Quality Code.

2.90 The review team tested the College's arrangements for implementing and managing work-based learning opportunities through the scrutiny of programme information and guidance to employers and mentors, external examiner reports and meetings with staff and students.

2.91 The mutual roles and responsibilities of the College and Canterbury Christ Church University with regard to placement and observation of trainees on teacher training qualifications are clearly set out in partnership agreements and reviewed through annual partnership meetings. External examiner reports confirm the effectiveness of the assessment of practice and the provision of work-based learning on these programmes.

2.92 Students on the Foundation Degrees Early Years are required to be in a suitable workplace setting for at least 16 hours per week. The suitability of the setting is approved at the interview stage. Staff monitor the progress of students in the workplace through placement visits.

2.93 The Personal and Professional Development unit on the HNC/D Health and Social Care programme requires students to complete at least 200 hours of work experience. Students are risk assessed by the College before they enter into work placements. Employers offering work placements are provided with detailed information regarding their responsibilities as well of those of the students and the College. Students are provided with an extensive work experience logbook containing information about the role of placement and what is expected of them in the work setting. Assessment of work placement activities and learning contributes to specific Higher National units. However, assessment is not undertaken in the workplace.

The College delivers three compulsory modules on the Foundation Degree Pharmaceutical Sciences. Students must be employed and their manager acts as their mentor. The remainder of the degree modules, including the work placement, are delivered by Kingston University who, in this respect, is entirely responsible for the management of the work placement. Overall, the review team found that the College has effective procedures in place to manage work-based learning in collaboration with employers and the university awarding bodies and Pearson. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met

and the associated level of 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 does not offer research degrees, therefore Expectation B11 is not applicable.

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.95 In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. Overall, the expectations are met.

2.96 The review team recommends that systems and processes be put in place to address the distinct needs of higher education students and stakeholders and that a process through which students can become informed partners in quality assurance and enhancement should be embedded. Staff knowledge of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements and the guidance provided to staff on the development of new and existing programmes can be strengthened. It is also recommended that the College ensures that students are informed about the role of external examiners and external examiner reports and are provided with further clarification regarding complaints and appeals processes.

2.97 The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** 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 Information about the College, its courses, facilities, policies and procedures is made available to applicants, students, staff, and external stakeholders through the College website, the VLE and printed materials including a prospectus. The College's relationships with its awarding bodies and awarding organisation stipulates differing levels of involvement with the production and sign-off of information.

3.2 In theory the College meets the expectation set out in Chapter C, as it clearly understands the requirements of its awarding bodies in relation to the production and approval of information, and adheres to these requirements.

3.3 The review team tested the College's approach through meetings with staff involved in the production of published and public information, including those involved in marketing and staff involved in developing course information. The team also met representatives from the College's awarding bodies and awarding organisation.

3.4 The College provides a comprehensive range of information to its students and prospective applicants. The process for ensuring the accuracy of this information is clearly embedded within the College, although this is not formally recorded. Heads of School check information received from programme managers, which is then proofread by staff involved in marketing, if appropriate. The awarding bodies and organisation are then involved if relevant. The College has clear processes for developing new marketing material, in line with the requirements of its awarding bodies and awarding organisation. Within the prospectus, the information on programme levels and progression pathways is particularly clear. The logo of the relevant awarding body is displayed on the programme pages of the Prospectus. Information on additional costs for each programme is clearly stated in the Prospectus.

3.5 The design of the VLE is not higher education specific. It could be better developed to respond to learner needs and to better respond to higher education students through the inclusion of specific resources for them. Further consideration could also be given to how elements for recording assessment grades could be adapted to offer students an ongoing feedback record to enable continuing reflection on assessment outcomes.

3.6 The College uses standard templates for programme specifications and some handbooks. However, the dissemination of definitive programme information is inconsistent. The majority of students the review team met did not know where to access definitive information about their course, and while students on programmes validated by an awarding body have access to the University's VLE and handbook with programme information, students on Higher National programmes do not have clear routes through which to access such information. It is therefore **recommended** that the College make sure that all students can access definitive information about their programmes.

3.7 Information provided to prospective students is not always comprehensive. For example, there is no mention of the awarding bodies on the international student section

of the website. Although the international student programme list does mention the awarding bodies, no logos or further information are provided. Programme information provided by Unistats is not consistently displayed on College course information pages. The College website also does not detail processes for the accreditation or recognition of prior learning.

3.8 The enrolment page of the website is clear, describing what is to be expected during this time. Current students confirmed the helpfulness of this information. The prospectus also includes details of the Learner Support Team and there is a dedicated section of the website for disabled student support.

3.9 The review team concludes that the College meets Expectation C. This is primarily due to the consistency with which the processes for compiling and approving information are carried out. However, there are omissions in the information provided to students, particularly in relation to definitive information about their programmes. The level of risk attached to this Expectation is low, as the dissemination of definitive programme information to all students is a task which can be undertaken with minimal change to the College's current processes.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

3.10 In reaching its judgement about the quality of the information produced about the College's provision, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The review team scrutinised a range of documentation (both published in hard copy and via electronic media) made available to prospective, current and former students and other stakeholders.

3.11 The review team recommends action to improve the accessibility of programme information for students.

3.12 Overall, the review team found that the College has considered the formal requirements of Expectation C and has ensured that it can demonstrate its compliance with the broad expectation. The College has approval mechanisms in place for ensuring that published information is accurate. The quality of the information produced about its provision **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 College HE Strategy states a priority to 'nurture a high quality learning environment that fosters a culture of continuous improvement (enhancement) through, for example, the learner voice, the College quality cycle, peer observation, Learning Walks, collaborative partnership and HE-specific Continuous Professional Development'. College-level enhancement initiatives are directed by this strategy, supported by the Quality Strategy and the Teaching and Learning Strategy, and monitored through the College Higher Education Forum. This approach to the enhancement of the quality of students' learning opportunities allows the College to meet the Expectation.

4.2 The review team discussed the College's approach with students, College staff and awarding bodies, and scrutinised samples of Higher Education Steering Group minutes, monitoring meeting minutes, review reports and associated action plans, and records of Learning Walks.

4.3 The Quality Strategy provides a framework for the College to achieve ongoing quality improvement in its provision. It sets out how the College provides for consistent improvement across all provision. The associated Quality Policy explains that quality improvement procedures are linked to annual School and College Quality Improvement Plans which in turn are informed by annual self-assessment reports and reviewed through regular Meeting our Targets meetings. The Teaching and Learning Strategy identifies how the quality of the student learning experience is improved, primarily through three types of formal observation process: Learning Walks, developmental observations and peer observations. These strategies and policy do not distinguish between further and higher education provision.

4.4 The College Higher Education Forum has responsibility for reviewing the effectiveness of academic procedures and the quality of higher education provision, and so has some strategic involvement in quality enhancement. It does so through receiving, approving and monitoring the Higher Education Quality Improvement Plan. The College quality improvement cycle of Meeting Our Targets meetings, self-assessment reports, and quality improvement plans is an effective vehicle for enhancement, albeit with a lesser emphasis on higher education. Meeting Our Targets meetings in particular are effective in creating an enhancement culture.

4.5 Learning Walks and lesson observations attempt to ensure that the day-to-day experience of higher education learners is delivering the quality assurance and enhancement that will provide an enjoyable, fulfilling and successful College programme. Thematic Learning Walks take place regularly, where managers and occasionally College Governors undertake visits to a range of learning sessions focused on learning, teaching and assessment. A plan to include student representatives in Learning Walks has not yet been realised. Learning Walks provide opportunities for discussions between teachers, students and managers, and are used to identify and share good practice and identify development needs. Developmental lesson observations are conducted twice a year for each teacher by School managers. They are considered to be a useful developmental opportunity, particularly for new staff who require feedback to improve their teaching.

4.6 The HE Learner Voice policy also defines steps to improve the quality of students' learning, including opportunities for students to be involved in the course team review week, the HE Learner Forum and the cross-college Learner Forum. These provide a less formal, constructive environment for student engagement as a means of enhancement.

4.7 In their meeting with the team, staff described the intention to have a culture of identifying and sharing good practice across its higher education provision. This is partly evidenced through examples of good practice that emerge from College staff and students, along with an intention of the College to systematically improve its provision. However, this intention is focused on the College's further education provision, with the expectation that its processes will also lead to the enhancement of its higher education provision. Neither did the examples of good practice provided to the review team suggest a strategic approach to the enhancement of its higher education provision led by its senior leadership team. The College does not identify a specific enhancement strategy, but instead refers to the need for continuous improvement in its College Higher Education Strategy, Quality Strategy and Teaching and Learning Strategy. Two of these strategies are not specific to Higher Education, and it is not clear where strategic ownership for enhancement lies within the College. The review team **recommends** that the College strengthen the overview of its Higher Education provision to develop and deliver a more coherent enhancement strategy.

4.8 Overall, the review team found the College's approach to higher education enhancement to be effective, but this approach is essentially an extension of its further education continuous improvement strategy and the identity and distinctiveness of higher education is not supported. Therefore, although the Expectation is met, there is a moderate risk associated with the College's approach.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.9 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of learning opportunities the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.10 The review team was able to conclude that the College takes deliberate steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities while at the same time recommending the development of a more coherent enhancement strategy for higher education.

4.11 The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Findings

5.1 In 2013-14 the College made student involvement in quality assurance a key focus for its delivery teams. The College identifies itself as learner-led, and was able to provide several examples of strategic responses to learner needs, expressed through surveys and the broader learner voice. One of the key aims of the College strategy is for its student population to be inclusive, engaged and empowered. However, the students the team met during the visit did not feel empowered or engaged. Some of the students did acknowledge that there are appropriate mechanisms through which they felt able to raise issues which would be responded to appropriately, often by members of the senior leadership team.

5.2 The College has developed a Learner Involvement Implementation Plan which relates to further as well as higher education. The College has committed to broadening student representation on committees including the Learner Experience Forum, Equality and Diversity Committee, and the Multi-faith Group.

5.3 The College has a variety of forums and meetings for students to discuss matters with senior staff, and the College is developing a new methodology for student meetings with their programme leaders.

5.4 There is a College Conference which does not involve student attendees, but in 2013-14 included joint workshops between staff and students to address particular enhancement questions on learning engagement and the Learning Review website. Although this is not a higher education-specific conference, this is an innovative approach to involving learners in broader quality enhancement issues.

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 27-29 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* (FHEQIS).

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 for Higher Education Qualifications** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**. See also **academic standards**.

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

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

Widening participation

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

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