



# Quality Review Visit of Sussex Downs College

March 2017

## Key findings

### QAA's rounded judgements about Sussex Downs College

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

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.**
- **There can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.**

### Areas for development

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

- increase opportunities for higher education students to be represented on all deliberative committees (Code of Governance)
- further update and clarify the information made available to students regarding access to resources provided by the awarding body and the awarding body Students' Union (Consumer Protection)
- review terms and conditions to include explicit reference to awarding organisation programmes
- further develop the complaints policy in the light of student protection measures (Student Protection).

### Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any specified improvements.

## About this review

The review visit took place from 14 to 15 March 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Lynne Braham
- Gary Hargreaves
- Sarah d'Ambrumenil (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

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

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

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

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

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

## About Sussex Downs College

Sussex Downs College is a General Further Education College with campuses in Eastbourne and Lewes. The College's higher education provision is spread evenly across both campuses. The College has 216 higher education students the majority of which are full-time. The College runs Foundation Degrees in both arts and science subjects. It also offers top-up degrees and Higher National Certificate and Diploma programmes (HNC/D).

The College has one awarding body: the University of Brighton (the University). In addition, the College delivers three Higher Nationals validated by its awarding organisation Pearson. The College has largely used the University's academic regulations to manage the quality and consequent evaluation of its provision.

The College currently offers Foundation Degrees in the following areas: music production, digital media design, sports coaching and development, public and emergency services management, complementary health and person centred counselling. The College also offers top-up degrees in music production, digital media design and counselling. Higher Nationals are offered in engineering, hospitality management and health and social care.

## Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The review team confirms that the College has in place the documentation and arrangements to meet its awarding body and organisation requirements, and to ensure that the academic standards of the programmes the College provides meet the baseline regulatory requirements and the UK threshold requirements for the FHEQ. Other reference points include subject benchmarks and Pearson centre defined programme specifications.

2 The awarding body confirmed that requirements through its course approval and validation processes are met and adhered to. While validation processes meet the awarding body requirements, and are affirmed in programme approval documentation with clear explanations for the College's programme teams, the College's internal validation process prior to submission had been self-identified as a weakness. More robust and rigorous internal validation processes have now been developed and implemented, although they are yet to be fully tested and embedded.

3 External examiner reports, and a range of other well documented data and metrics, both regional and national, confirm that that the academic standards of the College's programmes are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers.

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

4 The College uses the AoC's Code of Good Governance for English Colleges. The review team found that the College had robust governance arrangements in place to maintain oversight of academic risk through a reporting structure with governors inputting into Curriculum Standards Committee in addition to consideration of formal reports. This structure provided a clear framework while enabling academic freedom and collegiality.

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

5 The review team confirms that the College meets the baseline requirements for the Expectations of the Quality Code, and operates within the requirements of its awarding body and organisation. The College follows the University's policy on programme specifications and the reviewers found evidence that arrangements for learning, teaching and assessment are clearly stated in programme specifications from both the awarding body and organisation. Students who met the review team were clear about what was required of them in their assessments, felt well prepared, and described assessment briefs that have clearly stated learning outcomes that indicate how to perform beyond the threshold.

6 The team examined evidence which confirmed that annual monitoring and periodic review processes are followed for University programmes and that systems are being developed to meet Pearson requirements.

7 Academic standards are assured through external examiner arrangements, internal and awarding body programme approval processes, and evidence of externality in approval, monitoring and review processes. Students are aware of the role of external examiners in

the moderation of assessed work and have access to external examiner reports via the College's virtual learning environment.

## **Rounded judgement**

8 Through its governance structures, internal processes and procedures and its adherence to awarding body and organisation regulations, the College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards. There are no areas for development or specified areas for improvement in this area.

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

## Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

10 The review team can confirm that the College meets the baseline requirements and expectations of the Quality Code. Students are well represented at programme level, and this is well documented in student feedback. Students are involved in programme design and delivery, and this involvement is underpinned by high quality teaching and support staff, providing academic and pastoral support.

11 Data and student feedback suggests, and the College has identified, that there is not a full university type experience, for example in their access to University resources and facilities such as the library and sport facilities. Nevertheless, students are well represented locally through Course Boards and forums. While the Board of Governors and College Committees play a key role in monitoring and reviewing the student experience including data analysis and responding to student feedback, higher education students are not fully represented and this is identified by the College as an area that it intends to improve.

12 There are well documented processes to ensure that assessment feedback is timely, however there is a lack of consistency across programme teams on the timeliness of assessment feedback and the way that assessment processes and policy are communicated to students and implemented by programme teams. Students advised the review team that following feedback to staff, there has been an improvement in the timeliness of feedback. Further, students also noted there was a lack in consistency in the application and review of module feedback across programmes. The College recognises this as part of its drive to improve response and application of feedback by higher education students across the entire College. The team are satisfied that the College is working to make these improvements.

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

13 The review team found that the College has in place governance arrangements which enable good engagement with students at course level as a result of an embedded course representative structure, which includes opportunities for all students to feedback using Student Forums. The team found that this level of engagement was not reflected in the wider governance structures; although student feedback is considered at all levels of the College there are limited opportunities for higher education students to be directly involved in decision making within all of the College's committees. As a result, the team advises the College to increase opportunities for higher education students to be represented on all deliberative committees, identifying this as an **area for development**.

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

14 The College follows a clear admissions procedure for full-time higher education courses. Students who met the team spoke positively about the information and guidance they received prior to applications, including several examples of higher education 'Taster Days' offered during Level 3.

15 Not all students were clear about the role of the awarding body or organisation in making their academic award. Some had expected to have more access to University facilities and resources at the awarding body, and some described out-of-date information on the College website regarding access to resources provided by the University.

16 The College has recently engaged the services of the University's Students' Union, which will allow students access to facilities as Associate Members. Access to University learning resources is also provided, although there is still the potential for confusion regarding levels of access for different types of student depending on funding models and consortium arrangements. The team advises that the College further updates and clarifies the information made available to students regarding access to resources provided by the awarding body and its Students' Union, identifying this as an **area for development**.

17 At the offer stage arrangements are in place for informing prospective students of relevant admissions information and a link is provided to terms and conditions for the University. The College recognises the need to continue to develop more comprehensive College-specific terms and conditions to fully meet CMA guidelines, and the review team advises the College to review its terms and conditions to include explicit reference to awarding organisation programmes, identifying this as an **area for development**.

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

18 The College has a Complaints Policy and Procedure which is available to the students and prospective students through the website. The review team found that students felt able to address issues informally with staff or through the student representation system. Students expressed some reticence in raising matters through a formal complaints procedure but were satisfied that they could approach the Higher Education Manager if they had any queries. It was noted that the College undertook consideration of complaints seriously and complaints were handled impartially and in a timely manner. However, the review team found that there were some aspects of the current policy that did not reflect the detail of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's Good Practice Framework. For example: defining who can use the procedure, confirming when the College will issue a Completion of Procedures letter following use of the College procedure, and assuring complainants of an appropriate level of confidentiality. The review team therefore advises the College to further develop the complaints policy in the light of student protection measures, identifying this as an **area for development**.

19 The College monitors complaints through reports that are considered by senior decision-making bodies including the Board of Governors and uses complaints to improve the wider student experience. While the annual report breaks down the type of complaint and provides some analysis around trends, neither this report nor the Higher Education Annual Report includes information about whether the complaint is justified or the resolution offered to the student.

20 The review team found that if a scenario arose requiring the College to close courses due to unsustainability, it would always teach out the remaining students or help to organise a nearby provider for the student to continue studying at if this is the student's preference. The review team noted that the College had examples of taking students from other colleges where programmes had closed.

## **Rounded judgement**

21 The College has demonstrated through its internal governance structures and its internal policies and procedures that it effectively meets all the baseline regulatory requirements for the quality of student academic experience. There are three areas for development in this area where activity is already underway or where there are minor omissions or inconsistencies. There are no specified improvements in this area.

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

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