



Quality Review Visit of West Kent and Ashford College

May 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about West Kent and Ashford College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at West Kent and Ashford 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 no **areas for development**.

Specified improvements

The review team identified no **specified improvements**.

About this review

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

- Ms Catherine Fairhurst
- Mr Benjamin Hunt (student reviewer)
- Ms Elizabeth Shackels.

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 West Kent and Ashford College

West Kent and Ashford College (the College) is part of the Hadlow Group, which is made up of West Kent and Ashford College, Hadlow College and Hadlow Rural Community School. The College is a single legal entity though has retained the names 'West Kent College' for its Tonbridge campus and 'Ashford College' for its Ashford campus and for their respective public identities. The College does not have degree awarding powers and provides a wide range of higher education provision through validation arrangements with three awarding bodies and an awarding organisation. The College delivers further and higher education, having 225 higher education students, with 22 students at Ashford and 203 students at West Kent. Approximately 67 per cent of the students are mature age students.

The College's provision falling within the scope of the Quality Review Visit consists of 22 programmes: one top-up degree and two foundation degrees awarded by the University of Greenwich; five top-up degrees, two foundation degrees, two HNDs and one HNC awarded by The University of Kent; one education and training award and two education and training diplomas awarded by Canterbury Christ Church University, and one HND and five HNCs awarded by Pearson. The higher education provision is in a range of subject areas within six faculties, namely creative studies, academic studies (including health and care and early years), education and training, sustainable technologies, sport, and retail and business.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 Oversight of the setting academic standards lies with the College's awarding bodies, who each have separate responsibility for ensuring that their awards align with those of the relevant qualifications set out in the FHEQ. The Memoranda of Agreement between the awarding bodies and the College outline the respective responsibilities of the awarding bodies and of the College. The processes by which the division of responsibilities are operated are specified in Academic Framework documents. Responsibility for programme design and approval rests largely with the awarding bodies and the College has responsibility for the delivery of programmes, for marking and moderation of assessment, and for ensuring that standards are met.

2 Support is provided on a regular basis to College staff and students by link tutors from each of the awarding bodies. The College makes use of external examiners to ensure that academic standards are maintained and their reports confirm that awards align with the FHEQ and with applicable Subject Benchmark Statements, and that standards are comparable with those of other providers. In addition, Hadlow Group higher education staff conferences encourage a dialogue between staff regarding teaching practice and academic standards.

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

3 The College's governance arrangements are effective in maintaining oversight of academic governance, with a clear demarcation of responsibilities. The College's Governing Board (the Board) is responsible to the Hadlow Group Board (the Group Board) for the academic standards of the College and for the setting and review of the curriculum. The College Principal is responsible for making proposals to the Group Board about the educational character and mission of the College and for implementing policies and decisions. The Board's Curriculum and Quality Committee considers and recommends to the Board the College's higher education annual Quality Improvement Action Plan (QIAP) and higher education annual Self-Assessment Report (SAR) and is responsible for advising the Board on the overall academic performance of the College.

4 The College has in place effective and transparent governance arrangements to respect the principles of academic freedom and collegiality. The Board demonstrates its commitment to academic freedom through the Higher Education Scholarly Activity Policy and the Hadlow Group Research Strategy, and to collegiality through allocating a governor biennially to a specific faculty, who meets students and participates in 'learning walks'.

5 Robust arrangements are in place for maintaining oversight of academic risk. The College's operational committees discuss and report on data such as student outcomes, admissions, progression, retention and achievement, which are then considered by the Board, which determines clear priorities. The Group Board's Audit Committee reviews all key compliance and performance indices termly, using the Group Board's assurance framework of red, amber or green status. The Group Board's Audit Committee informs the Group Board on the control systems, policy compliance and operation of the College. The impact is assessed through review of the Group Risk Register, identifying key trends in finance, quality and curriculum.

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

6 The College implements the frameworks and regulations of its awarding bodies to ensure that the standards of its provision align with these and with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). The mechanisms for programme approval are specified in the Memoranda of Agreement. Programme approval is overseen by the Board's Curriculum Planning and Review Group. All new programme approvals are stated in the Business Planning Cycle. Programme approval is for five years with periodic review undertaken to ensure standards are being met. Monitoring is undertaken by the link tutors and programme leaders to allow for interim amendments. A definitive list of the College's validated higher education programmes is maintained by each of the awarding bodies on its website.

7 Teaching materials are based on the programme specifications and module descriptors approved at validation by the awarding bodies. The College is responsible for producing its own programme handbooks and these follow a standard pro forma. The handbooks outline what students can expect on their programmes, including learning outcomes and assessment. Examination boards are held annually as outlined in the Quality Calendar. External examiners with relevant subject knowledge ensure that academic standards are maintained and are comparable. Appropriate arrangements are in place for work placement with all being risk assessed and with contact, including visits, being maintained between the tutor and student throughout the placement.

8 Oversight of higher education rests with the Group Head of Higher Education. The Board is kept informed through the Board's Education and Quality Subcommittee and by governors from each faculty. Annual course monitoring reports are produced for each programme. These go to the respective Head of Faculty then to the Group Head of Higher Education, who then produces the College's annual higher education SAR and QIAP. These are approved by the senior management team, the Board's Education and Quality Subcommittee and by the Board. Key actions are passed back to the Heads of Faculty to enact. Monitoring of this process is overseen by the Board. Student participation in the process is achieved through the Learner Voice strategy.

9 Oversight of data monitoring resting with the Group Deputy Principal and Chief Executive Officer. The College uses a range of data, including internal surveys, TEF metrics and the National Student Survey, to monitor academic standards. Senior management and staff are informed of trends through daily and weekly reports.

Rounded judgement

10 Overall, governance and quality management of academic standards are effective and standards are comparable. The review team identified no areas for development or specified improvements.

11 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)

12 The College operates regular and systematic processes for managing and

monitoring the student academic experience. The Board maintains strategic oversight of these processes through the SAR. The College monitors effectiveness of programme delivery by feedback from students, tutors and assessors, by peer observations and by higher education focused observations. The College clearly demonstrates commitment to improving the student experience through thorough consideration of data at all levels. The Group Higher Education Management Team monitor monthly retention and attendance data, supported by the curriculum health check data and SAR. All data are reported to and overseen by the Board. The SAR and risk assessment processes also monitor recruitment trends. Programme leaders analyse student surveys and use the feedback to inform change for the following year. Academic and professional staff use College data consistently and frequently to track progress and improve the student academic experience.

13 The College has a clear strategic view of its approach to student involvement and takes deliberate steps to engage all students individually and collectively as partners in the enhancement of their education experience. Through the Learner Voice, students have contributed to positive change and are effectively empowered. Students contribute fully through surveys, focus groups and representation. All higher education programmes have active, comprehensively trained student representatives who are clearly identifiable by other students. Students are represented at programme level, on the Board and on all College deliberative committees. Student representatives also have formal meetings with external examiners and link tutors. Student support coordinators work closely with student representatives to encourage their full engagement.

14 Arrangements are in place to ensure that adequate learning resources are readily available. The College uses various sources of information to allocate learning resources, including requirements arising from the awarding bodies' and organisation's validations and reviews. The College is highly responsive to student opinion and actions taken by the College in response to student feedback include wider access to IT and the new higher education students' hub. There is evidence of significant investment in physical and digital resources solely to support higher education student learning. The College has a range of support mechanisms to provide all students with equal opportunity to achieve their personal and professional goals. These include pre-enrolment and induction support, personal tutoring and study skills development. Tutors refer at risk students to a pastoral mentor for further support and there are dedicated counselling, welfare and disability services. The Group Head of Additional Learning Support together with the Head of Quality regularly monitor and evaluate the impact of learning support.

15 The College has well-developed links with external stakeholders. All areas have Faculty Industry Liaison Meetings. The College's Business Advisory Council has strong links with the local communities, employers and local government agencies, and links have been established through forums such as Kent Further Education and the Mixed Economy Group. These links ensure that the curriculum meets local skills and labour demand. There are multiple opportunities for students to participate in external activities including visits, exhibitions, work placements and real-life projects. External guest speakers and groups are regularly invited to the College to speak to specific cohorts of students and to the wider student body.

16 Well-developed arrangements are in place to ensure that staff are competent in research, scholarship or pedagogy. The Higher Education Scholarly Activity Policy and the Hadlow Group Research Strategy underpin the extensive support and professional development opportunities that are available. Staff are appropriately qualified, have Higher Education Academy membership, maintain a continuing professional development portfolio and participate in systematic peer observation, staff development, including the staff development opportunities of the College's awarding bodies, and the Hadlow Group higher education staff conference.

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

17 The College has comprehensive arrangements in place to engage students in governance. Students are represented through elected student representatives who are invited to attend programme meetings and all of the College's deliberative committees. The College is in the process of appointing a higher education student governor. The higher education student representatives compensate sufficiently at present for the absence of a higher education student governor.

18 The College has an effective strategic approach to collecting and responding to student feedback. The Group Vice-Principal Student Support Services chairs Learner Voice meetings and reports to the Board's Curriculum and Quality Committee. The higher education student conference provides all higher education students with the opportunity to hear the College's governors and senior staff give an overview of their role and of the strategic plan for the College. The College's senior management team and Board receive annual reports summarising higher education student complaints, appeals and submissions to the Office of Independent Adjudicators (OIA). The reports are considered, trends identified, actions agreed, and the effectiveness of previous actions evaluated; these are then followed up by the Group Head of Higher Education.

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

19 The College has a bespoke higher education admissions policy that ensures its approach to admissions is effective and consistent. The policy clearly outlines the process for admitting and enrolling students, including the approach to equality and diversity, accreditation of prior learning, the arrangements for contacting prospective students in a timely manner if a material change is to occur, and the application route for students requiring disability support. In their meeting with the review team, students confirmed that appropriate procedures were in place during admission and enrolment, commenting particularly on the help available from the student support team during the process.

20 A transparent and easily accessible complaints procedure is in place for admissions. Prospective students making a complaint regarding admission can take this further to the programme leader or the Vice-Principal Quality, Standards and Performance if not resolved at the initial stage. The admissions' Complaints Procedure aligns with the College's Complaints and Compliments policy that operates across the College for internal complaints and which signposts access to the OIA. The College works with the relevant awarding body to deal with admissions appeals.

21 Prospective and current students can access information about the College and its programmes through various means, including the College website, which has links to various documents such as programme handbooks and to policies and procedures such as those for admission and induction, complaints, and terms and conditions. The information is accurate, consistent across all platforms, and aligns with Competitions and Markets Authority (CMA) guidelines. Terms and conditions are fair and transparent and easily accessible to students before, during and after the admissions and enrolment process. In their meeting with the review team, students articulated their awareness and understanding of the terms and conditions.

22 The College has thorough arrangements to audit all public information, including information for prospective and current students, to ensure it is fit for purpose, accessible, accurate and trustworthy. Oversight of public information lies with the Head of Marketing.

Information is cross-checked by academic and professional staff and is signed off by the Head of Marketing. An information pro forma is in place to ensure that information is consistent in layout, accuracy and accessibility. Information that details the relationship between the College and its awarding bodies is monitored by the relevant body before publication. Programme leaders are responsible for internal information such as programme handbooks, reading lists and the information on the virtual learning environment (VLE). Heads of faculty monitor this information and report to meetings of the Higher Education Managers to confirm the completion and accuracy of documents. Students access their programme handbooks through the higher education zone of the VLE, which is audited termly by the College's quality team.

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

23 The College has robust policies and procedures in place for student complaints and academic appeals. Complaints are the responsibility of the College and adjudicated by the Principal, the procedure is in line with the Good Practice Framework of the OIA and all higher education students are given an overview of the procedure during induction. Academic appeals are made directly to the relevant awarding body and in their meeting with the review team students demonstrated that they are aware of this. The complaints procedure can be located easily on the College website, on the VLE and from the College reception, and is signposted in student and programme handbooks and during induction. The procedure ensures that complaints are dealt with by the appropriate member of staff and that they are dealt with in a timely manner. In their meeting with the review team, students commented that issues are often dealt with informally and are handled appropriately in a confidential and timely manner. The information provided to students outlines the role of the OIA if a complaint is not resolved within the College. The College has an action plan in place whereby senior management monitor trends in student complaints and academic appeals in order to improve the student experience.

24 The College's higher education admissions policy includes a robust procedure to ensure that prospective and enrolled students are alerted to any material changes before, during and after enrolment. Students are made aware of material changes through admissions and academic staff, the VLE, emails, student/staff representative meetings, the higher education student conference, and meetings with link tutors. In their meeting with the review team, students confirmed that information of this nature is easy to access and that the implications are clear.

25 The College has comprehensive arrangements and policy in place to continue provision for students if a programme is to close, reflecting the agreements with the awarding bodies, which state that if a programme is to close, the College and relevant awarding body will work together to endeavour to ensure that students will be able to complete their programme, either through the College teaching out the current students or through working with the awarding body to place current students with another appropriate provider. The College has strong links with other local providers, its awarding bodies, Kent Further Education, and the Mixed Economy Group, which strengthens the robustness of this plan.

Rounded judgement

26 Overall, governance and quality management of the student academic experience are effective. Policies and procedures are in place to ensure that consumer marketing

guidance is met and there are effective student protection measures. The review team identified no areas for development or specified improvements.

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

QAA1992 - R9446 - Nov 17

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