



Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) of Arden University Ltd

November 2017

Contents

About this review	1
Key findings.....	2
Judgements	2
Good practice.....	2
Recommendations	2
Affirmation of action being taken.....	2
Financial sustainability, management and governance	2
About the provider	3
Explanation of findings.....	5
1 Judgement: The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards	5
2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities	17
3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities.....	41
4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities	44
Glossary	47

About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Arden University Ltd. The review took place from 14 to 16 November 2017 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Helen Corkill
- Professor Anne Peat
- Professor Anthony Whitehouse
- Mr James Perkins (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provision and to make judgements as to whether or not 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 (Alternative Providers) 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
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A check is also made on the provider's financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG) with the aim of giving students reasonable confidence that they should not be at risk of being unable to complete their course as a result of financial failure.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#)² and explains the method for [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).³ For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.

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

² QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk.

³ Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education.

Key findings

Judgements

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision.

- The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities is **commended**.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice**.

- The highly effective ongoing and personalised support provided to prospective students at all stages of the admissions process (Expectation B2).
- The systematic embedding of the Arden Learning Model, which facilitates a high level of active engagement by students in their learning (Expectation B3).
- The high level and shared understanding by staff and students of graduate attributes, which are fully embedded in the intended learning outcomes and assessed through modules of study (Expectation B4).
- The close working relationship between the professional support team and academic staff, which facilitates the wide-ranging and individualised support provided for students (Expectation B4).
- The value placed by the University on student engagement and its contribution to the enhancement of student learning opportunities (Expectation B5).
- The highly effective and systematic involvement of staff at all levels in the enhancement of students' learning opportunities (Enhancement).

Recommendations

The QAA review team made no recommendations.

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions already being taken to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to students:

- the steps being taken to ensure that blended learning students are successfully engaging with induction activities prior to enrolment (Expectation B2)
- the work being undertaken to further extend the use of technology to enhance the student voice (Expectation B5).

Financial sustainability, management and governance

The financial sustainability, management and governance check has been satisfactorily completed.

About the provider

Arden University was formerly known as Resource Development International Limited (RDI). In December 2013, RDI was subject to an Adapted Review for Specific Course Designation by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). Following the 2013 review a process of annual monitoring by QAA has taken place. The annual monitoring visit in February 2016 deemed that the University had made commendable progress in implementing the action plan following the 2013 review.

In 2014, following a process of scrutiny by QAA, the University was awarded taught degree awarding powers and in July 2015 was granted university title by the Privy Council. It changed its name to Arden University in August 2015.

The University is an established higher education provider with more than 27 years of experience of successfully working within the UK higher education sector and provides specialist online distance learning and blended learning at study centres. The University's vision is to make higher education more accessible, engaging and beneficial for prospective students, with a strategic purpose to unlock the potential in every student. The University has four core values, articulated by its staff, and embedded into its academic programmes, and through the recent development of the Arden 'graduate attributes'. The University has identified four core values of support, integrity, innovation and ownership.

During the period 2011-16, Arden University was owned by Capella Education Company (CEC), a US provider of distance learning delivered by Capella University. In August 2016, Arden University's ownership transferred to Global University Systems (GUS), which owns a number of providers of UK higher education. The only material change to Arden University following the change of ownership was the appointment of a new Board of Directors.

The University is governed by its Board of Directors and Academic Board and is managed by an executive and senior management team. This management process is supported by a network of committees and groups with a wide range of membership which contribute to the development of policy and its implementation. The Board of Directors is responsible for the strategic direction of the University, the financial and legal aspects, and for the annual performance management process. The Academic Board has ultimate responsibility for the setting and maintenance of academic standards and delivering higher education within the academic framework established by the University.

A legally binding Memorandum of Understanding exists between the Board of Directors and Academic Board to ensure that the latter has complete autonomy in decisions relating to academic standards and programme delivery. A separate service agreement exists between the Board of Directors and shareholders of the University. This agreement is intended to prevent shareholders from diminishing the academic freedom and integrity of the University, with the intention of ensuring that commercial considerations will not be allowed to override academic integrity or the quality of education offered.

Alongside its own validated programmes, the University is currently working with a number of awarding bodies in a variety of validation and franchise arrangements. These include Anglia Ruskin University, Birmingham City University, the Royal Agricultural University, Sheffield Hallam University, the University of Sunderland, and the University of Wales. The University is, however, no longer recruiting to any programmes it offers on behalf of its awarding bodies. There is a detailed and planned process for exiting arrangements for the University's partnerships with its awarding bodies. Exit arrangements are set out on the basis of a phased closure of modules of study with supported delivery for the remaining students. The University is continuing to work closely with its awarding body partners to ensure smooth transitional arrangements. The University also works with one awarding

organisation providing Higher National programmes, Pearson Ltd.

The University has established a broad range of academic programmes, many endorsed by professional bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Marketing, the Chartered Management Institute, the Association for Project Management, and the British Psychological Society, as well as a Qualifying Law Degree.

The University opened its first blended learning study centre in Ealing, West London in October 2016 and at Tower Hill, East London in February 2017. The University currently supports 5,700 students, of whom 2,500 are enrolled on Arden University-validated awards following the launch of the University's own awards in January 2016. Around 40 per cent of these students are studying through campus-based blended learning. Nearly 25 per cent of students are studying on postgraduate programmes. Fifty-six per cent of students are based in the UK.

Explanation of findings

This section explains the review findings in greater detail.

1 Judgement: The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards

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 (FHEQ)* 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 University's Academic Board has overall responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards. Academic Board ensures that all programmes leading to awards of Arden University are set at an appropriate level on *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*. Programme outcomes are mapped to Subject Benchmark Statements and qualifications characteristics. External examiners are required to confirm that these criteria are met. The University's Regulatory Framework contains all regulations relating to assessment, the award of credit, and the naming and conferment of awards. The University complies with the regulations and academic standards which govern awards conferred by its awarding body partners and by its awarding organisation, Pearson. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.2 The team reviewed the effectiveness of the published practices by considering a range of documentation including minutes of Academic Board and the Quality and Standards Committee, validation, external examiner and periodic review reports, Memoranda of Cooperation, and the University's Regulatory Framework. The team also met with senior staff, academic staff, and students.

1.3 The University has an effective deliberative structure in place to assure threshold academic standards. Responsibility for the approval and maintenance of the detailed policies and procedures that underpin the University's Regulatory Framework is devolved to four subcommittees of Academic Board: Learning and Teaching Committee, Admissions Committee, Quality and Standards Committee (QSC) and the Research Committee.

1.4 The University regularly reviews its policies and procedures for the setting and maintaining of academic standards. The detailed policies set out requirements, specifying their level, credit value, award titles, and permitted combination of subjects. The Regulatory Framework has been extensively reviewed and updated, having been a standing item on the agenda of the QSC since 2014. After the framework has been operational for a complete cohort of Arden University students graduating, the process will change to an annual review.

1.5 The University also works in accordance with the requirements of its awarding bodies, external reference points, and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) considerations. All the University's provision is mapped and updated regularly against the Quality Code. Alignment with the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) Standards and Guidelines is maintained through adherence to the Quality Code.

1.6 The validation processes ensure that academic standards of all taught programmes are set a level which meets the University's academic regulations and UK threshold standards as set out in the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements, the Master's Degree Characteristics Statement and the Higher Education Credit Framework for England. These also include sectoral and professional body reference points, where relevant.

1.7 The University's validation principles and detailed procedures are set out in its Validation Handbook and include the requirements for alignment with external reference points. In addition, the University issues detailed and useful Validation Approval Event Briefing documents for each event. The responsibilities of the approval panel for ensuring that all awards meet the requirements of the FHEQ are clearly specified. Panels are also asked to provide comments in advance, including on the FHEQ. Staff have a clear understanding of validation procedures and many had participated in approval events.

1.8 Validation reports are thorough, and comment specifically on alignment with the FHEQ, and the qualification characteristics. The QSC reviews all validation reports and makes recommendations to the Academic Board. Academic Board has the authority to approve new programmes leading to the award of the University's degrees. Validation panels, chaired by an external member of Academic Board, are carried out following the University's detailed procedures.

1.9 The programme specification template requires a statement of alignment with relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, which is tested at validation. Panels also test the new provision to ensure that it is based on the achievement of relevant programme learning outcomes, and their associated levels and credit values. Entry criteria for awards are specified in line with the intentions of the FHEQ. Continued alignment to, and currency of, external reference points is addressed through the external examining system. In due course, alignment will also be addressed through the University's periodic review processes. To date, the University has only been involved in periodic review through its collaborative partner provision.

1.10 The University has well-considered policies and procedures that ensure alignment with appropriate external reference points, as well as with those of sectoral and professional bodies. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.11 The Regulatory Framework provides the academic structure for the University. Academic Board is responsible for all aspects of academic standards, with its subcommittees assisting in discharging its responsibilities. Commercial, financial and contractual issues are separately and independently managed by the Board of Directors. This process is formally underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding. For collaborative provision, the University follows the academic regulations of its awarding bodies, as set out in the collaborative agreements. The arrangements in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.12 The team considered the University's Regulatory Framework and documentation relating to arrangements for academic governance with its awarding bodies and organisation. Exit and other arrangements for programmes delivered in partnership with awarding bodies were also considered. The team held discussions with senior and academic staff and students.

1.13 The University's comprehensive Regulatory Framework sets out the policies and procedures for taught programmes of study. The document makes appropriate references to external reference points and internal regulations. These include regulations for degree titles, the award of credit and the recognition of prior learning, assessment, progression, and awards. Also included is the conduct of assessment boards and the role and use of external examiners. The Regulatory Framework is reviewed regularly, and is a standing item on the agenda for the QSC.

1.14 The University follows the academic frameworks of its validating partner universities, as the awarding bodies, where it delivers programmes on their behalf. The University conducts boards of examiners on its own behalf, on behalf of its validating partner universities, and for Pearson programmes. The University offers exit awards, and interim awards at the end of each level.

1.15 The University operates a tiered examination board structure with subject, award and progression boards. These boards make recommendations to Academic Board in terms of levels, progression and the conferment of awards. With multiple entry points during the year, the rationalisation of multiple examination boards has been discussed by Academic Board. To date the University has not conferred any of its own awards but expects to do so for the first time in Spring 2018.

1.16 The review team concludes that there is a comprehensive academic framework for awarding academic credit and qualifications. This framework is supported by effective governance arrangements, which meet the requirements of both the University and its awarding bodies and organisation. The Expectation 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

1.17 The University Quality Department is responsible for maintaining the definitive record of each programme. Comprehensive programme handbooks are produced for each validated programme. Programme specifications are created using the University's template and changes made to the programmes are considered and agreed using the University's mechanisms. These processes would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.18 The review team tested the Expectation by considering examples of the definitive records and programme specifications. Meetings were held with senior staff, and academic and professional support staff, to confirm that they were aware of their responsibilities and of the processes to be followed for developing and maintaining definitive records. The team also met students and viewed a demonstration of the VLE.

1.19 Programme specifications are used by staff in the delivery of programmes and are made available to staff and students in the form of programme handbooks through the VLE and on the website. Students confirmed that handbooks contain relevant and provide useful information.

1.20 Definitive records are made available to students at the beginning of their programmes through programme and module descriptions, which are articulated in student handbooks. Programme descriptions detail the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected achievements of each programme of study. They also articulate the assessment policy and approaches to teaching and learning. Assessment methods for each module are articulated within module descriptors and further described within the programme handbooks. Students found the information received to be accurate and helpful.

1.21 Students studying on partner awards receive transcripts from their awarding body. Those studying for an Arden University award receive transcripts which include all modules taken and all University activities undertaken during study.

1.22 The programme handbooks provide a definitive record of the provision delivered and records are fit for purpose and easily accessible for students and staff. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and that the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.23 Prior to obtaining degree awarding powers, the University offered programmes under validation and franchise arrangements with 12 UK Universities, each of which was responsible for securing its own academic standards. Following the grant of taught degree awarding powers the University began validating awards using its own policies and procedures as outlined in its Validation Handbook. The University's Academic Board has overall responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards in accordance with its Regulatory Framework. Programmes submitted for validation utilise a standard programme specification template which includes a statement of alignment with relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. The processes in place would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.24 The review panel scrutinised the evidence supplied, including the University's regulations, validation reports, programme specifications, minutes of the QSC and of Academic Board. Meetings were held with senior staff, academic staff, professional support staff and students.

1.25 Since obtaining degree awarding powers, the University has successfully validated 72 of its own awards in accordance with its validation procedures, 52 of which are currently offered. External input to the approval process is assured through external subject expert members of validation panels. Panel chairs are normally external members of the University's Academic Board, all of whom are experienced current or former senior academics from other universities. The University seeks to work in close alignment with professional and industry expectations and has successfully gained accreditation from a range of professional bodies.

1.26 Validation reports confirm that panel members consider the design of programmes to ensure that they meet both institutional and national expectations in respect of academic standards and the quality of the learning opportunities provided to students, as set out in the Quality Code and in the FHEQ.

1.27 The QSC scrutinises validation reports and undertakes a rolling review of the University's alignment with the Quality Code.

1.28 Academic Board minutes confirm that it receives reports from QSC together with validation reports to consider for approval of new or modified programmes which lead to University awards. Senior managers and academic staff confirmed that they were involved in the design, development and approval process. Students are involved through representation on Course Committees, the QSC and Academic Board.

1.29 Overall, the review team found that the current process for the approval of taught programmes is appropriate and robust, and operates consistently across the University to ensure that academic standards are in accordance with internal and external frameworks. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and that the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

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

Findings

1.30 The Regulatory Framework provides explicit guidance for the award of academic credit and qualifications. The Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) presides over the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and has oversight of assessment practice. The key features are that assessments verify the achievement of learning outcomes, that they are at an appropriate level of the FHEQ, and that there is a consistent application of assessment criteria across modules and programmes. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.31 To review the effectiveness of these processes the team examined documents from the various review activities, committee papers and minutes, information on assessment, external examiners' reports and programme specifications, and discussed their operation with teaching staff, senior staff and students.

1.32 The University is in the process of withdrawing from a number of partnership arrangements, and no longer recruits to programmes offered through these awarding bodies. The University is committed to ensuring that the current students' experience is maintained until completion. The design, approval and monitoring of assessment strategies for continuing students are the responsibility of the awarding body. Memoranda of Agreement (MOA) clearly describe the responsibilities of both parties, with the awarding body having ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of all awards.

1.33 The QSC ensures that academic standards are maintained through programme validation and through regular monitoring and review. The committee receives validation reports together with annual monitoring reports. QSC ensures that programmes have been mapped against the Quality Code and that academic standards are being maintained.

1.34 All new programmes are subject to validation to ensure that the programme meets institutional and national expectations. New programmes are developed by a team of tutors, the module leader, external examiner, employers and, where appropriate, professional body representatives. This involvement ensures that standards are set at the appropriate academic level and meet UK threshold requirements, and confirm the appropriateness of the programme. The assessment process is clearly linked to ensure that intended learning outcomes can be achieved.

1.35 The recently updated Validation Handbook provides clear criteria, and programme teams must ensure that curriculum content takes account of relevant subject and qualification benchmarks, the FHEQ and the University's strategic aims and policies. The validation process is described in the handbook, and is required to ensure that module learning outcomes are assessed and that learning outcomes are appropriate for the award. Validation panels are responsible for ensuring that students have the opportunity to achieve the learning outcomes of the programme. Validation reports, and team responses to

conditions and recommendations, are discussed at QSC and reported to Academic Board. Staff whom the review team met have experience of being on both the programme proposing team and validation panels at different times.

1.36 The assessment strategy, once approved, is published and made available to students through programme handbooks, which contain the programme specification and assessment details. Assessment briefs provide clear information on the method, learning outcomes to be addressed in each module, and the assessment criteria. Students confirm that the assessment information provided is clear and helpful when completing their work.

1.37 All programmes are subject to annual monitoring and review to ensure that standards are maintained. External examiners' annual reports feed into the Programme Annual Report. External examiners are required to provide assurance that learning outcomes are appropriate, that they are covered by the assessment, and that the type of assessment is appropriate for the subject and level of study. Examiners are also asked to confirm that module learning outcomes are clearly defined. A detailed pro forma is available for the external examiners' report and details of responsibilities are found in the External Examiner Handbook.

1.38 Overall, the review team concludes that the University has in place robust frameworks, policies and procedures, supported by guidance and training. This ensures that academic credit is awarded only where the achievement of learning outcomes is demonstrated through a wide variety of assessment methods, and the University's and threshold standards are met. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.39 The University's process for annual monitoring and periodic review includes reflection on comments from external examiners and external advisers. Review processes and procedures are in place both for provision which it validates, and for provision which is delivered on behalf of the University's awarding bodies and awarding organisation.

1.40 Following the acquisition of degree awarding powers and university title, the University now has its own portfolio of programmes and is no longer recruiting to awards offered through its awarding body partners. For programmes delivered in partnership arrangements the University follows the awarding bodies' and awarding organisation's processes for annual and periodic review of its academic programmes.

1.41 Academic Board has overall responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards and the Regulatory Framework. The Regulatory Framework is reviewed in light of experience and changes, with the intention that it will be reviewed annually. The QSC develops, monitors and evaluates the regulatory framework with the Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) advising the Academic Board on the regulatory infrastructure in relation to the monitoring and review of programmes.

1.42 A detailed mapping of policies and procedures against the Quality Code, including elements related to Expectation A3.3, has recently been undertaken by QSC to ensure that academic standards are achieved and maintained through programme monitoring. These arrangements would allow Expectation A3.3 to be met.

1.43 The review team tested the effectiveness of the monitoring and review processes by scrutinising documentation provided, including partnership agreements, annual monitoring reports, minutes of a range of committees, external examiners' reports and programme handbooks. Meetings were also held with senior staff, academic, professional support staff, and with students.

1.44 The University has sound processes for the monitoring and review of programmes. Programmes are subject to annual evaluation with the programme leader responsible for producing the annual monitoring report, which takes account of feedback from students, staff and external examiners. Systematic monitoring processes ensure the currency of programmes and that academic standards are being achieved and maintained. The University considers these processes both to provide a quality assurance check and to allow a focus on enhancement. Monitoring and review processes are clearly set out in the Quality Assurance Schedule.

1.45 Annual monitoring reports are received and discussed at relevant course committees before going to QSC, whose annual report goes to the Academic Board. A range of academic, professional service staff and students are members of the committee. Course committees meet quarterly and conduct cyclical monitoring, to review the continuing effectiveness of operations and the maintenance of academic standards and learning opportunities. Student feedback, module performance data and external examiners'

feedback is considered, and changes made on an ongoing basis. Formal written feedback is given in relation to actions taken. The University receives consistently positive feedback from external examiners on the standard of assessment and the transparency and appropriateness of the assessment process. Examiners confirm that these processes demonstrate alignment with UK threshold academic standards. External examiners are required to submit a detailed annual report to the Head of Quality in addition to interim assurances through email and iSystem that threshold standards are met.

1.46 Students are informed about the importance of their feedback and how this informs annual monitoring and review, at induction and in the Student Handbook. Students confirm that they are involved in the annual monitoring process through module evaluation and membership of the course committees.

1.47 The views of external subject experts are considered in a number of ways and at different levels. External examiners are appointed for all programmes either by the University or by its awarding bodies and awarding organisation. A number of programmes are subject to professional body accreditation. There is sound evidence of external experts, including employers, making judgments on curriculum content and assessment strategies. The University intends to engage more fully with key employers and alumni in the future.

1.48 The University intends to conduct periodic reviews of its own programmes every five years, with the first event scheduled for 2019. QSC will manage the scheduling and operation of periodic reviews on behalf of Academic Board. The periodic review process has been discussed at QSC and a Periodic Review Handbook is being developed for implementation prior to the start of the first cycle of the University's review processes.

1.49 The University monitors and reviews the maintenance and achievement of academic standards effectively at a number of levels and through a number of processes, including validation, annual monitoring and planned periodic review. Students' achievement is measured against the expectations of the Quality Code, and appropriate external reference points. Students are aware of the annual monitoring and review processes and how their feedback contributes. Where partnership agreements are in place, monitoring and review processes are carried out in line with the Memoranda of Understanding, and are ultimately the responsibility of the awarding bodies and organisation.

1.50 Overall, the review team considers that the processes for programme monitoring and review are rigorous, with clear oversight and monitoring of actions arising at institutional level. Relevant University committees receive detailed reports and monitor action plans effectively. This process enables Academic Board to have a clear view on the outcomes of the processes and action plans arising. The team concludes that the Expectation is met and that 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

1.51 The University makes appropriate use of independent external expertise to ensure that academic standards are appropriately set and maintained for both the awards it offers, and those it delivers on behalf of its awarding bodies and awarding organisation. Employers inform the strategic direction and development of many of the University's awards. The University requires the inclusion of external examiners and other relevant external expertise and stakeholders in programme design, development, approval and review. Approval, monitoring and review panels include an external academic member. An increasing number of the University's programmes are aligned with the requirements of PSRBs. The Employer/PSRB Engagement Strategy is a standing item on the agenda of the Learning and Teaching Committee. Alignment with the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements, qualifications characteristics and UK threshold standards are tested at approval and review stages. The University's own periodic reviews, when they begin in 2019, will include alumni on the panel. The University's approach would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.52 The review team considered how external expertise is used by scrutinising validation reports, external examiner reports, and annual monitoring reports. The review team also discussed with University staff the use of external advice in the module and qualification approval processes. Meetings were held with senior and academic staff, and with students.

1.53 Ideas for new programmes originate from all areas and levels of the University. In many cases views of employers and alumni are sought from the outset, and help to determine the nature and content of programmes, although this procedure is not as yet formalised. There is close involvement with professional bodies and employers such as the British Psychological Society (BPS), SRA for Law and Ipsos Mori for the data analytics programmes. Staff design modules and help to shape the overall programme. New programmes are designed using the standard programme specification template to ensure key stakeholders and reference points are considered. Ideas for new programmes are proposed to the Programme Development Group.

1.54 The University is on the Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers and is developing its apprenticeship portfolio with employers. One degree apprenticeship programme for chartered managers is being delivered and developed in conjunction with the professional body, the CMI. Other degree apprenticeships are in development. These are governed by the relevant apprenticeship standards, along with PSRB or individual employer involvement.

1.55 Academic Board, the University's most senior academic authority, includes in its membership three independent external members who are senior members of the higher education community. The Board of Directors includes in its membership two former Vice Chancellors of UK universities. The Academic Board, which includes student representation,

receives, reports on, and approves all new programmes.

1.56 External expertise in programme design is ensured through the constitution of validation panels to include external subject experts and experienced panel chairs. Input from employers is an item listed on pre-validation event documentation. At validation events, external subject expertise is included as part of the panel membership. External participation provides assurance that the University is meeting UK threshold standards. Periodic review panels, the first of which will be due from 2019, are being designed to take account of the same subject expertise and external information as validation panels. In addition, periodic review will include consideration of detailed feedback from students, graduates and external examiners as well as employers.

1.57 External examiners are appointed to all programmes. The procedures and processes for nominating, appointing, inducting, supporting, training, and responding to external examiners are clear and detailed. These are described under Expectation B7. A Register of External Examiners is maintained centrally by the Head of Quality. Annual monitoring procedures take account of feedback from external examiners.

1.58 Overall, the review team concludes that the use of external expertise is fully embedded at appropriate stages, and in key processes for setting and maintaining academic standards, including within curriculum development, monitoring and review, and through the oversight exercised by key committees. The Expectation is met and the associated risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

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

1.60 All seven of the Expectations for this judgement area are met and the associated level of risk is low in all areas. There are no features of good practice, recommendations or affirmations in this area.

1.61 The team notes that responsibility for setting academic standards within this judgement area lies with the University as a degree-awarding body, and that additionally the University has responsibility for maintaining standards of the awards it delivers on behalf of its awarding bodies and awarding organisation.

1.62 The review team concludes that the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered at the provider on behalf of itself, its 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, Development and Approval*

Findings

2.1 Strategic oversight for programme design, development and approval for its own awards lies with the University. However, the University shares responsibility for the design and approval of higher education programmes it delivers in partnership with a range of awarding bodies and with its awarding organisation, Pearson.

2.2 Academic Board, supported by the Quality and Standards Committee (QSC), maintains strategic oversight of the processes for programme design, development and approval to ensure institutional mechanisms are applied systematically and consistently. The University's Validation Handbook clearly sets out the procedures to be followed.

2.3 Initial information is provided through the New Course Proposal Form, which is considered by senior managers. Once approved, new programmes are designed and developed using standardised templates which ensure that comprehensive information is available during the validation process. Programme information is collated into a programme handbook which includes a full programme specification and module descriptors. The QSC considers reports of validation events before these are passed to Academic Board for final approval. A procedure is in place for the approval of minor changes to programmes.

2.4 The review team considered a range of evidence, including the Validation Handbook, panel briefing notes, validation panel reports, programme handbooks, and minutes of meetings of the QSC and of Academic Board. The team also met with senior staff, teaching staff, support staff and students.

2.5 New programmes may be proposed by staff at all levels, by external specialists or by the board. Initial proposals are considered by the senior management team to confirm the potential market and ensure that resources are available. Critical reflection on existing processes has led to the formation of a Programme Development Group. This new group has responsibility for operational management of all new development activity from concept through to launch. Reports are submitted to the senior management team.

2.6 The University obtains comments from teaching staff, external examiners, industry and professional bodies during the design of programmes. Staff and students confirmed that they have been involved in the development process. Consideration of relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code, Subject Benchmarks Statements, qualification characteristic statements, the FHEQ and professional body frameworks are built into the programme development procedures and validation agendas. The FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements are directly referenced in the programme specification template, which ensures that academic standards are set at an appropriate level. External expertise is ensured by having external subject experts on validation panels. Panels are provided with programme documentation, briefing notes and a template for comments prior to attending validation events. Panels are normally chaired by an external member of the Academic Board to provide further external scrutiny of programmes. Reports of validation events

indicate that the process for the design and approval of programme is thorough and effective. Minutes of Academic Board and of the QSC confirm validation reports, and minor modifications to programmes are appropriately ratified.

2.7 Overall, systematic processes are in place to ensure effective design, development and approval of programmes, and the responsibilities around these, are clearly articulated and are effectively implemented. The University, its awarding bodies and organisation, have well-established processes to ensure that the design, development and approval process is rigorous and effective. The Expectation is therefore met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

2.8 Admissions policy and procedures are managed by an Admissions Committee, a subcommittee of Academic Board. Entry criteria for programmes are agreed at the point of validation. Applicants are identified as either standard, where students meet the entry criteria and specifically trained admissions staff can make offers, or non-standard, which are considered by academic staff. The University considers applications for accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL), allowing for entry with advanced standing. Decisions on APCL are taken by an academic admissions tutor. A full mapping of awards is considered as part of APCL and approved by the Admissions Committee and QSC. These policies and procedures would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.9 The team reviewed the University's admissions policy and other relevant documentation and met with senior staff responsible for the management of the admissions and induction process, teaching staff, and with a range of students.

2.10 The University adopts an open and inclusive approach to recruitment. Enquiries and applications are received directly through the website, UCAS and referrals through recruitment agents. Admissions procedures are published on the website, including programme specifications, prospectuses and policies. All students who meet the entry criteria are eligible for admission, and applicants may enrol at varying entry points. For distance learners there are four entry points, with two for those enrolled as blended learning students.

2.11 Students are assigned an admissions counsellor who supports them throughout the admissions process, providing advice and guidance to ensure that the courses suit their aspirations and signposting key information. To support students' transition into higher education they receive an induction, covering a range of areas, including regulations, processes and policies, and study skills. For blended learning students, this induction is provided on-campus.

2.12 The University utilises recruitment agents and articulation agreements, which are ratified by a Partnership Approval Group (PAG). Agents are approved to a number of levels, and a limited number of agents are able to advertise programmes, advise prospective students, and engage sub-agents, subject to approval. Marketing and publicity materials used by agents are appropriately approved.

2.13 The University's marketing and admissions policies and requirements are clear and detailed, and are used effectively. Processes for the accreditation of prior learning (APL) are understood by staff and students. Standard applications are approved subject to entry criteria being met, and non-standard applications supported by references and evidence of broader experience.

2.14 Students are provided with feedback on the outcome of their applications by the admissions department. Offers of a place identify the scheduled entry point for the student and are accompanied by an extensive applicant offer pack of key documentation. Decisions

are expected to be made within two working days, and students are satisfied with the speed of response. The University operates admissions on a quarterly basis.

2.15 The role of the admissions counsellors, who record ongoing communications with applicants, is regarded as central to the admissions process. Admissions counsellors remain in contact with academic teams, and the University highlighted the strength and positivity of this relationship in supporting applicants and admissions. Students consider their admissions counsellors to be highly effective, noting the high levels of ongoing support and signposting of key information for all aspects of their admissions experience. Having noted that distance learning applicants tend to take longer to make decisions than campus-based applicants, admissions counsellors work with applicants throughout the process to ensure that they are engaged and committed. The review team considers the highly effective ongoing and personalised support provided to prospective students at all stages of the admissions process to be **good practice**.

2.16 The University is strategically committed to widening access to higher education, while recognising the additional challenges for applicants. The majority of students study on a modular basis, which allows for flexibility in their engagement with study but impacts upon student progression rates. The University keeps under review the demographics of its applicants and students, and intends to begin monitoring student success in relation to graduate outcomes.

2.17 The University's thematic review of the blended learning study mode highlighted a need to improve student success rates in the first year, and to review the scheduling of assessments. The review recommended that the induction provided for blended learning students should be improved, and continues to monitor this development. Blended learning students are now required to engage fully with the induction activities prior to being able to complete their enrolment. If the programme is not considered suitable, students have their fees refunded. Students and staff consider the induction process to be a vital element in ensuring that students are enrolled to an appropriate programme and have a clear understanding of its requirements and expectations.

2.18 Induction programmes are tailored to the different requirements of both blended and distance learning students. Students confirmed that their inductions prepared them to begin their studies and on completing their induction programme, students are tested to ensure that they have understood the content. Blended learning students are inducted into the pedagogic model of the University's campus-based delivery, as well as the expectations for attendance and engagement with the programme. The review team **affirms** the steps being taken to ensure that blended learning students are successfully engaging with induction activities prior to enrolment.

2.19 The Admissions Committee acts in accordance with its terms of reference to review and develop admissions policy, to oversee its implementation and monitor and report on internal and delegated admissions activity. This review has included revising the admissions policy to ensure that it is accurate and fit for purpose. Admissions audits are undertaken by the committee and highlight the basis on which admissions decisions are made.

2.20 The PAG is responsible for managing and reviewing the effectiveness of recruitment agents, and referral and articulation agreements. Articulation agreements are subject to ratification and agents are approved subject to due diligence being undertaken. Agents are provided with clear training and guidance on the approval of marketing information, and the University is proactive in auditing materials. The University reviews agents on an annual basis, and considers the success rates of students recruited by agents.

2.21 Overall, the review team concludes that the University has effective, transparent and well-embedded processes for supporting student recruitment, selection and enrolment.

Students are provided with personal and wide-ranging advice and guidance which is valued by all stakeholders. The processes in place ensure that recruitment, selection, and admission decisions adhere to the principles of fair admission. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and that 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

2.22 The University's approach to learning and teaching is articulated in the Learning and Teaching Action Plan. The Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC), a subcommittee of Academic Board, is responsible for oversight of the University's strategies. The LTC is also responsible for advising Academic Board on the regulatory infrastructure for learning, teaching and assessment, along with development and innovation in learning and teaching. The University's customised virtual learning environment (VLE) is effectively designed to support learning and teaching for both distance and blended learning modes of study. The mechanisms in place to support learning and teaching would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.23 The team considered the University's learning and teaching strategies, the use of the VLE, and the academic development support for students and staff. The team also met with students, senior staff, academic and support staff to discuss the University's approaches to learning and teaching.

2.24 The University employs a core of permanent academic teaching staff, together with a wide range of part-time tutors. This allows for flexibility and responsiveness to programme demand as well as supporting a breadth and depth of subject expertise. Most tutors are employed on rolling contracts with an expectation that they take responsibility for their own subject development. The University has recently taken the strategic decision to increase the proportion of permanent academic staff.

2.25 The University has well-defined processes for the mentoring and ongoing support of staff. All full or part-time staff are given clear contractual requirements and written guidance, and provided with induction and mentoring. New tutors undergo a thorough induction and are supported by an experienced mentor who oversees their work throughout the first two delivery cycles. New staff are also supported by programme leaders, who may also be mentors.

2.26 There are comprehensive processes for peer and performance review. An annual appraisal is undertaken for all tutors which incorporates a peer review process. Small groups of staff are allocated to peer review each other, often within learning triangles, focused around a strategic theme such as assessment or feedback. The outcomes of peer review feed into staff development. The appraisal and peer review processes are effective in allowing the academic leadership team to identify any significant development needs and agree individual and group staff development plans. An annual tutor development day provides opportunities to share good practice, provide regulatory or procedural updates and discuss learning, teaching and assessment strategies and actions.

2.27 All staff are allowed opportunities for professional development. The currency of subject expertise and pedagogical skills is monitored through the annual appraisal process. The University supports academic staff development by funding, in whole or in part, higher degrees, research and scholarly activity. The University has recently taken up institutional membership of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Engagement with the HEA is

encouraged, and 43 per cent of staff hold membership. The University encourages academic staff to work towards higher degrees, particularly doctorates, and this is explored at staff interviews. The University also sets publication targets for permanent academic staff.

2.28 Building on published research, and the work of senior members of the academic team, an iterative learning approach has been developed and implemented. The Arden Learning Model forms the basis from which all the learning materials to support the University's programmes are produced. Online content fits into a coherent, consistent structure that directs the student through an iterative four-stage learning model. The model provides support for students, and for learning to be scaffolded through modules. Students are enthusiastic about their learning, and acknowledge the contribution that their systematic engagement with the learning model contributes.

2.29 Evaluation undertaken through learning analytics suggests that the Arden Learning Model facilitates a fuller student engagement. Feedback shows that the model has provided substantial enhancement to the students' learning experience. Blended learning students are conscious of how the model informs the structure of the modules on the VLE. Implementation of the approach across all University programmes has been strategically prioritised, including within academic and non-academic staff teams such as academic resources and student support. The review team identifies as **good practice** the systematic embedding of the Arden Learning Model, which facilitates a high level of active engagement by students' in their learning.

2.30 Student learning opportunities are evaluated through the annual monitoring process. The reports resulting from these procedures are detailed and enhancement-orientated and include feedback from students. The University complements its monitoring and review activities with regular quality audits and enhancement-focused reviews. Oversight of tutors' contributions to programme monitoring and review is managed by programme leaders and programme directors. Regular programme meetings take place to consider initiatives and annual reports and the subsequent action plans are developed with input from all colleagues.

2.31 Overall, there are comprehensive procedures in place to support staff development, and there are well-considered approaches to learning and teaching. The University, working with staff, students and other stakeholders, articulates and systematically reviews and enhances the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, to study their chosen subject in depth and to enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and that the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement

Findings

2.32 The provision of resources is considered at many levels within the University. Academic Board advises the Board of Directors on resource requirements and approves the business case for programme development and the resources required. The Planning and Resources Committee has a strategic overview of requirements, with course committees reviewing specific requirements. Students' comments on resources are considered at Staff Student Liaison Committee (SSLC), course committees and Academic Board. These arrangements would permit the Expectation to be met.

2.33 The team explored a range of documentation including minutes of committee and board meetings, information on library and physical resources, the VLE, student and learning support, and study skills. The team discussed these matters with students, senior managers and academic and support staff.

2.34 The majority of the University's learning resources are provided online. The extensive and well-developed VLE is the focal point for the student experience for both distance and blended learning study. Physical library facilities are provided on campuses where blended learning is delivered within study areas with access to the University's online library. All students access the online library resources, the careers portal and study skills mini modules through the VLE. Students commented that the careers section on the VLE has improved dramatically. Students studying for awards validated by partner universities may additionally have access to the partner's online library resources, depending on licensing agreements. Students comment positively about the University's online resources.

2.35 In line with the University's vision to remove barriers to participation in higher education, appropriate mechanisms are in place to support a diverse study body from initial enquiry through to completion. Students value highly the significant help and support provided for them starting at the enquiry stage, which is effectively supported by admissions counsellors through the application and registration processes. Students are also appreciative that support does not stop at the point of admission, and consider that they are highly supported at study centres, by telephone, virtual meetings and other online mechanisms. The interaction between the admissions and student support teams is very close, which enables a high level of seamless support to be provided to applicants and new students. Once registered, students receive information about support services through handbooks, and the VLE. Students are very clear about what support is available for them.

2.36 Study skills guidance is provided to students online and is included in an online induction session. The My Study Skills area on the VLE is the main source of academic support. A series of study skills mini modules is available on the VLE and skills content has been embedded across many programmes, including, for example, the MA HRM. Students find the wide selection of mini modules very helpful, and there is a high participation rate in those which support research and avoiding plagiarism. Mini modules are introduced during induction, with additional help on a one-to-one basis provided by the student support team and information technology staff. Study skills provision is supported by a recently appointed study skills tutor, with an overarching remit to support its development. The team considers as **good practice** the close working relationship between the professional support team and academic staff, which facilitates the wide-ranging and individualised support provided for students.

2.37 The University has developed a set of Arden Graduate Attributes which are applied across the whole organisation. These attributes are intended to ensure that students exit with a range of professional competencies to complement the range of academic skills and knowledge which they will develop through their programmes of study. The Arden Graduate Attributes are embedded fully into each programme, and assessed through the learning outcomes of relevant modules. The attributes are communicated to students in programme handbooks, and through the Student Charter and the VLE. Academic staff, professional staff and students all demonstrated a clear understanding and appreciation of the Arden Graduate Attributes. The review team regards as **good practice** the high level and shared understanding by staff and students of graduate attributes, which are fully embedded in the intended learning outcomes and assessed through modules of study.

2.38 Overall, the review team considers that the University has effective arrangements and resources to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The embedding of the Arden Graduate Attributes and the cohesive and comprehensive online and personal support for students assists students in developing their potential. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and that the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement

Findings

2.39 Students are engaged as partners through effective student representation and feedback processes. The University formally captures student feedback through end-of-module evaluations and surveys, and a student representational structure. Student representatives are members of a range of University committees and are able to submit reports as appropriate. Each programme has elected representatives, with lead student representatives forming the student membership of senior academic committees. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.40 To assess the steps taken to engage students individually and collectively, the review team met with senior staff, academic and support staff, and with students. The review team considered a range of evidence including guidance for student representatives, committee papers and minutes, and the VLE.

2.41 Online training is provided for student representatives, which is supported by a lead academic tutor. Since 2016, student representation has been further supported through the use of an online student voice platform. This gives students the opportunity to feed back and to engage with discussions anytime and anywhere. For blended learning programmes student representatives are also able to engage face to face with their peers at study centres. Students play an important role in SSLCs, which address matters relating to programme management and the student experience. The effectiveness of student representation is regularly considered at senior academic committees.

2.42 There is ongoing dialogue between staff and students, enabling informal and formal feedback to be captured and acted upon. Information about student feedback and representation, as well as the Student Charter, is provided in the Student Handbook. The Student Charter describes the mutual expectations for students, the University, and the Student Association, to deliver a valued learning experience. The Student Charter is approved by Academic Board, kept under annual review, and students are aware of its purpose and availability. For blended learning students, the Student Charter is publicised within study centres. Distance learning students confirmed that the charter is made available to them within programme information and electronically, and that students use it as a point of reference.

2.43 Module evaluation questionnaires enable students to reflect on the quality of online learning resources, assessment, support and their personal development. Response rates to these questionnaires have been generally low. However, the University is working to improve responses and initiate other feedback mechanisms. Students are clear about the purpose of questionnaires and surveys and how data is considered by course committees. Students provided examples of areas where they considered feedback had led to enhancements, including in assessment, the scheduling of modules, changes to teaching approaches, and the review of programme materials.

2.44 The University analyses the outcomes of their internal and external student survey data at all levels to identify trends and areas for enhancement. Informal issues raised by students, for example related to academic appeals and complaints, are reported to the senior management team. Reports identify themes for consideration, and action plans are created in response.

2.45 Representatives' roles are clearly defined as acting as the link between students and the University. Student representatives are happy with the training provided about their remit, which equips them to engage effectively with the University. Lead representatives are elected by the student body to be members of Academic Board, Learning and Teaching Committee and the QSC. Students use a report template to submit items for consideration at committees, and issues raised by representatives are appropriately discussed and acted upon.

2.46 The University reviews student engagement on an annual and ongoing basis at the QSC. Following the University's initial participation in the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2017, the Academic Board aligned the timings of internal and external surveys. Students reflect on the effectiveness of student representation as part of annual surveys. A recent development has been the establishment of a student satisfaction group, which is responsible for analysing survey outcomes and making recommendations concerning delivery. This group is working to improve survey response rates.

2.47 Feedback from students has impacted positively on enhancements made to the development and implementation of an online student voice platform. Student representatives had found it challenging to collect student feedback through the VLE, and the University introduced the online platform as a means of improving the collection, consideration, and responses to student feedback. Students are provided with training on how to use the platform, which allows them to feed back anonymously or identifiably, and for student representatives to respond or take forward points on their behalf. The platform has improved the quality of interactions between students and their representatives. This has resulted in raising the quality of feedback, as well as improving the engagement of lead representatives on senior committees. Students are supportive of the new system, which they consider demonstrates how the University listens and responds to feedback. Distance learning students are able to raise issues at any time from anywhere in the world using a range of electronic devices.

2.48 The University has prioritised the development of processes for engaging students on blended learning programmes. The development of SSLCs at all new campuses has been responsible for providing more extensive feedback on the student experience. Students are confident that their views are taken seriously and responded to. The review team **affirms** the work being undertaken to further extend the use of technology to enhance the student voice.

2.49 All staff regard the involvement of students in quality enhancement as a priority. Students consider themselves to be partners in the enhancement process. Feedback from student-led forums, including SSLCs and course committees, demonstrates the extent to which matters raised are considered and addressed. The online student voice platform has improved the engagement of student representatives, raised the profile of student representation, and facilitated the gathering of quantifiable feedback. The University continues to develop its student association, having been established following the grant of university title. The role of the association and the student president has been considered and developed through discussion at University committees.

2.50 The student voice is valued throughout the University, and there are clearly defined opportunities and appropriate structures for all students to engage in quality assurance and enhancement. Student feedback is used to inform discussions about provision, and the effectiveness of student engagement is reviewed regularly. The University has successfully developed and enhanced its processes for engaging students, and the student voice is a core facet of the University's academic infrastructure. Academic and administrative support is provided, which enables students' views to enhance the learning experience. The review team considers the value placed by the University on student engagement and its

contribution to the enhancement of student learning opportunities to be **good practice**.
The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and that the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

2.51 The University's assessment strategy has evolved through its experience of working with partner institutions. However, the University also delivers programmes whose assessment is overseen by its awarding bodies and organisation, which have ultimate responsibility for ensuring that assessment maps to learning outcomes. The University is committed to ensuring that students are assessed within a framework that is equitable, transparent and reliable, and designed to ensure that all assessments link to intended learning outcomes. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.52 The team reviewed a wide range of documentation provided by the University and its awarding bodies and organisation, including quality manuals, policies and procedures for assessment, minutes of assessment panels and boards and external examiners' reports, and held meetings with staff and students.

2.53 The University's Academic Board has overall responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards of awards and for establishing the Regulatory Framework. New programmes are subject to a rigorous validation process which ensures that they meet institutional and national expectations. Comprehensive information about assessment is published in programme handbooks. All programmes are subject to annual monitoring and review to ensure the currency of curriculum and that standards are maintained.

2.54 The Student Offer Pack and programme handbooks include student-related policies and procedures in addition to information on assessment. The Student Handbook contains clear information about learning outcomes and assessment methods, and information about assessment briefs and plagiarism. The University encourages a broad range of assessment types, including a combination of examinations, course work, portfolio and research projects. Assessment methods are normally the same for both blended learning and distance learning study modes. All assessments are subject both to internal approval and externality by the relevant external examiner. The Regulatory Framework is also published on the website and on the VLE. Programme handbooks and assessment briefs contain clear information on module specifications, learning outcomes to be assessed, and the assessment criteria.

2.55 Students receive information about study skills during induction through the mini module available to all students. Blended learning students also undertake an additional face-to-face induction week, which provides further information on referencing and plagiarism. Students confirm that the induction process is very clear and helpful.

2.56 The Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) requires formative assessment opportunities to be available in every module in preparation for summative assessment. Students report that there are well-established schedules for formative and summative assessments and confirm that formative feedback helps them to develop their work and make improvements.

2.57 Distance learning students are normally restricted to studying two modules at any one time, with blended learning students allowed to undertake a maximum of three modules

simultaneously. The University recognises that assessment scheduling for students on distance and blended learning needs to be differentiated. The poor results of the first cohort of blended learning students at the Ealing campus led to a thematic review by the University. Clear recommendations for improvements to the blended learning assessment strategy have included a change in the number of assessments per module, the rescheduling of assessments and changes to the academic support provided. Initial feedback from students is that these changes have effected a significant improvement to their learning experience.

2.58 Assessment briefs are given to distance learning students at the start of the module and to campus-based blended learning students early in the teaching cycle. Distance learning students who defer are not allowed to register for another module until they have completed the deferred module; this avoids an assessment overload.

2.59 The University has a well-established process for granting exemption based on Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL). Admissions advisers are experienced at handling such cases and non-standard applications are referred to the academic admissions tutor. The University does not accept applications for entry with advanced standing on the basis of experiential learning, which is only considered to support entry to the programme. The APCL is clearly articulated in the Regulatory Framework, which refers to Recognition of Prior Learning policy. Students confirm that this is clear in the information provided at the point of admission.

2.60 Permanent academic staff support other less experienced part-time tutors in supporting and assessing online learning. New tutors are required to undertake an induction programme to familiarise them with assessment and marking procedures, and are mentored by an experienced member of staff for the first two cycles of delivery and assessment. The annual peer observation of academic staff includes a review of marking and feedback. All academic staff are required to attend regular staff development events to update them regarding policies, guidelines and assessment practices.

2.61 The majority of assessments are submitted online, with details included in the programme handbooks and as part of the induction programme. Students are encouraged to use plagiarism detection software to check their work before final submission. Assessments are marked, internally moderated and externally examined. The Regulatory Framework stipulates that all assessments which contribute towards the classification of the final award are subject to moderation by an external examiner.

2.62 External examiners have full access to all student work, the detailed student feedback and internal comments by markers and moderators. External examiners provide quarterly reports, which are combined into an annual programme reports which are available to students on the VLE. External examiners for programmes delivered in partnership with awarding bodies are subject to the policies of the partner universities and reports are made available to students in line with the relevant policy. Students are aware of external examiners' roles and how to access reports.

2.63 The responsibilities of examination boards are clearly identified in the terms of reference. Award Boards receive module marks and examine individual student profiles, review progress and assess eligibility for an award. The University is currently considering reducing the number of examination boards following discussion at Academic Board. There has been no Arden University award board to date, with the first meeting planned for January 2018.

2.64 Detailed written feedback is provided to students following summative assessment, and links to specific study skill resources can be included if appropriate. The University's bespoke assessment system provides markers with access to an online comments bank from which they can pick generic feedback points. Detailed feedback is available to internal

moderators and external examiners. Feedback is routinely monitored by the programme leaders and administrative support team, who intervene if guidelines are not adhered to. Feedback is generally cited by examiners as an area of good practice and is monitored through the moderation process to ensure that it is helpful and enables students to develop their academic skills. The 2015 internal student survey reported that students were satisfied with feedback, which was prompt and helpful in clarifying things they did not understand. Students confirm the usefulness of feedback in helping them to make improvements for the next assessment.

2.65 Intermediate awards are in place for Arden University programmes to reflect student progress on programmes which may take five years or more to complete, and to aid students' motivation. Students will be awarded CertHE and DipHE at the end of each level. The intermediate awards will be recorded in the final award transcript.

2.66 Learning support is provided for students with special educational needs in line with the University's Equality and Diversity Policy. Appropriate arrangements and reasonable adjustments to assessment modes are made for students with disabilities. Students are encouraged to inform the University of a disability at application, and referral is made to the Student Affairs Committee. Students confirmed that the support received, from identification of the disability to the ongoing support, is extremely helpful.

2.67 The team concludes that effective assessment strategies are in place reflecting the requirements of the University and its awarding bodies and organisation. Processes for the assessment of students and for the recognition of prior learning are fair and equitable. The assessments methods, the learning outcomes and assessment criteria are made clear to students in the Student Handbook, programme handbooks and assessment briefs. Students report that they are satisfied with the assessment process and consider marking to be fair and feedback useful and developmental.

2.68 Overall, the review team concludes that the University operates equitable, valid and reliable assessment processes which enable students to demonstrate the extent to which they have met learning outcomes. Therefore, the Expectation 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

2.69 The University's Regulatory Framework sets out the purpose and role of external examiners in approving standards of assessment against the FHEQ and other external reference points. The regulations stipulate that all assessments contributing towards the classification of final awards are subject to moderation by an external examiner. The University operates a system of module and award external examiners who moderate a sample of all assessments and confirm the academic standards achieved. For provision delivered in partnership with the University's awarding bodies and its awarding organisation, external examiners are appointed formally by the partners.

2.70 Nominations for examiners are approved formally at programme level and submitted to the QSC for scrutiny prior to approval by Academic Board. The external examiner report template is designed to ensure the identification of good practice and raise any concerns. Processes are in place for the induction, mentoring and support for external examiners. Expectations of the University's external examiners are set out in the External Examiner Handbook. The receipt of external examiner reports is a standing item on the agenda of the QSC. The processes and procedures in place for the system of external examining would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.71 The review team studied a range of documentation associated with external examining, including the University's Regulatory Framework, the policies and procedures for external examining including those of the partner awarding bodies and organisation, induction materials, external examiners' reports and responses, and committee minutes.

2.72 The University has extensive processes and procedures to support an effective external examining system, and values the expertise provided. External examiners are appointed to all programmes. Responsibility for the nomination of suitably qualified examiners rests with programme leaders. Conflicts of interest are identified prior to appointment and reviewed annually. Evaluation of nominations takes place against set criteria, and is overseen by QSC. Letters of appointment set out the terms, conditions and responsibilities. Tenure is for four years, with an optional one-year extension, and is reviewed annually to ensure that examiners continue to meet eligibility criteria. All external examining is carried out online. External examiners appointed by partner universities attend the University's examination boards and engage with programme teams, and nominations are made in accordance with the awarding body's appointment criteria. The University of Wales appoints its own external examiners, with whom the University's programme teams interact through moderation processes and examination boards.

2.73 The University has a thorough induction process in place to support all new external examiners, including those appointed by validating university partners. This is designed to ensure that the University's specific processes, delivery methods, platforms and systems are clarified. Examiners without experience in the role elsewhere are mentored by an experienced examiner. There are varied ways in which external examiners are supported in their role, including the External Examiner Handbook, access to online programme and teaching materials, student work, and marker and moderator feedback. Guidance is also provided on access to the University's electronic systems.

2.74 The Head of Quality maintains a register of external examiners' reports. The QSC has oversight of the University's engagement with its external examining systems,

and receives copies of external examiner reports and programme leaders' responses. All external examiners reports are considered at programme level, with any issues reported to QSC by the Programme Directors. Reports are read by the Academic Director and the Registrar, with summary analysis being presented to QSC and Academic Board. External examiners' reports feed into the University's annual monitoring process. Responses to external examiner reports are made by programme leaders, and approved by the Academic Director and either the Registrar or the Head of Quality. An analysis of all external examiner reports is compiled annually.

2.75 The QSC receives all external examiners' reports, with the chair of the QSC compiling a summary annual report for Academic Board. This provides a range of data and assurances encompassing external examiners' judgements. Reports are reviewed in detail at course committees. Any significant issues are reported to QSC, along with good practice and areas for enhancement.

2.76 The University expects its own Awards Boards to confer awards for the first time in January 2018. All subject and awards boards include at least one external examiner to verify assessments and student achievements against all modules that count towards the classification of an award. Procedures for the approval of minor modifications are established under the University's Regulatory Framework. External examiner approval is sought for any such changes. In addition to external examiners, external panel members are used in all approval events.

2.77 External examiners have oversight of both distance and blended learning modes of delivery, in order to maintain consistency across programmes and modes. For distance learning programmes, the University operates a quarterly cycle of examination boards and receiving external examiners' reports, which combine into an annual report. This quarterly process involves course committees, and outcomes feed into annual monitoring reports. Examiners now confirm standards of assessments at reporting points, report verbally to all examination boards, and submit an annual report.

2.78 Information about external examiners is available for students. For the University's own programmes, and students registered with the University of Sunderland, the information is provided on the Arden University VLE. Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) registered students can access the information through the awarding body's VLE. Some distance learning students registered with ARU appeared unaware of this, although blended learning students registered with Arden University knew of the reports and how to access them. Students stated that they would like to be alerted when external examiner reports are made available, and that further information should be provided on the importance of the external examiner role.

2.79 Overall, the review team concludes that the University has a robust and thorough set of processes and procedures for external examining, both for its own awards and on behalf of its awarding bodies and organisation, and makes scrupulous use of external examiners' reports. This approach confirms that the Expectation is met and that the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review

Findings

2.80 The University operates a structured and systematic set of processes to monitor and review programmes, according to its own procedures and those of its awarding bodies and awarding organisation. Following the acquisition of degree awarding powers and university title, the Board of Directors, as advised by senior managers, took the strategic decision to stop recruiting to all external awards and has recently validated its own portfolio of programmes. Comprehensive exit arrangements, in line with the individual partnership agreements, are in place for programmes delivered on behalf of other partners. These exit arrangements have been subject to Academic Board approval to ensure that the interests of students are safeguarded. These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.81 The review team examined a range of evidence, including annual and periodic monitoring and review reports, external examiner documentation, and minutes of key quality assurance committees, and had discussions with teaching and support staff, senior staff and students.

2.82 The University has robust governance arrangements for the monitoring and review of programmes to ensure currency of provision and the maintenance of academic standards. All programmes are subject to annual monitoring, coordinated by the programme leader and discussed at the course committees. The continuous review of quality of provision and the effectiveness of responses to student feedback was identified as a strength in the Specific Course Designation annual monitoring visit report of 2016.

2.83 Academic Board has oversight and overall responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards and the Regulatory Framework. The QSC reports to the Academic Board and ensures that academic standards are maintained through monitoring and review, and ensures that robust processes are applied and operate in a consistent and timely manner. The Quality Assurance Schedule is clear and supports a quality audit and enhancement-led process.

2.84 Programme leaders coordinate the annual monitoring reports, which are discussed at course committees. The report templates ensure an effective and consistent approach and that enhancements are captured through the action plan. The annual monitoring procedure takes account of feedback from staff, external examiners, students and other stakeholders. Students are aware of their involvement in the annual monitoring process. A project is currently being conducted to establish the data set to support the annual monitoring process and ensure student recruitment; progression and achievement are all consistently monitored against appropriate measures.

2.85 In addition to annual monitoring there is cyclical monitoring process undertaken by the course committees, which takes place quarterly. This ongoing review takes account of student feedback, module performance data and external examiners' feedback and allows changes to be made on an ongoing basis, leading to enhancement. Academic staff confirmed that course committees involve a range of staff input and any changes recommended are thoroughly discussed, and may be subject to approval by the external examiner.

2.86 The University has a comprehensive student representative system, with elected course representatives, and two lead student representatives on senior University committees, Learning and Teaching Committee and Academic Board. The University has recently extended student representation on University-level committees to include the QSC. As members of these committees, students contribute to the final approval of new programmes and the annual monitoring process. Student representatives are also members of the Course Committee.

2.87 Students understand the importance of how feedback is considered through the deliberative processes. Students consider that they are involved effectively in maintaining and improving the quality of their learning opportunities. Students are confident that their evaluations feed into programme development and enhancement.

2.88 Overall, the team concludes that the University operates effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and review of its own programmes, and for those it delivers on behalf of its awarding bodies and awarding organisation. This systematic approach ensures the currency of provision and the maintenance of academic standards. Staff and students are aware of their responsibilities in the quality assurance and enhancement processes. The team concludes that the Expectation is therefore met and that the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints

Findings

2.89 The University operates fair and transparent complaints and academic appeals processes, which are clearly articulated within its policies and procedures. These processes are communicated to students through programme handbooks and are accessible online. The policies and procedures in place to govern complaints and appeals would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.90 The review team tested the effective operation of these processes by scrutinising a range of documentary evidence, including committee reports on appeals and complaints, information made available to students and staff, and formal communications between the University and students during these processes. The review team met with senior staff, academic staff, support staff and students.

2.91 Students may submit an academic appeal against assessment decisions of an examination board, or when found guilty of unfair practice or academic misconduct on the grounds of material error or non-adherence to academic regulations, as part of the assessment process. All academic appeals are dealt with through this process.

2.92 Students are informed of the outcome of their appeals formally through standard letters. Appeals against examination board decisions are subject to initial verification to consider whether there are appropriate grounds, and if the student is not satisfied with the outcome they may submit a formal appeal. Formal appeals are considered by the Academic Director and a further nominee and, if upheld, are referred back to the examination board.

2.93 The complaints procedure relates to complaints concerning students' academic experience, the support provided by the University, and harassment or discrimination by staff. The procedure is in three stages: informal resolution, where initial resolution is offered; a formal complaint, which is submitted to the Head of Student Support, who provides a response upholding or rejecting the complaint; and a review of outcome stage. The third stage is conducted by a review panel, and must relate to the procedures followed when considering the formal complaint, consideration of whether the outcome was reasonable, and new material evidence not previously available. Where students are dissatisfied with the outcomes of their appeals or complaint, they are directed to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). Students may make informal, anonymous complaints through the online student voice platform.

2.94 The University records all concerns and complaints. Formal student complaints are managed confidentially, and in accordance with the University procedures, with the aim of early resolution of issues. Information for students, available as part of applicant offer packs and in the student handbook, makes clear the processes and grounds for making complaints or submitting appeals. Students' formal and informal complaints are supported by the student support staff, while academic appeals are managed by the quality team. Students confirmed that they are clear about the grounds and processes for complaints or appeals, and emphasised that most issues are dealt with informally. Formal communication of outcomes to students is clear and highlights the available next steps or actions being taken.

2.95 Outcomes of complaints and appeals are reviewed periodically, and actions taken in response to them are considered as part of the quality assurance processes. A thematic report is submitted annually to the Academic Board. These reports also highlight where students have been required to engage with the processes of their awarding body. Senior managers receive a quarterly report on complaints, appeals and any resulting actions and oversee the thematic review of complaints effectively.

2.96 The University has a self-critical approach to considering student complaints. A recent review of complaints and concerns highlighted increasing numbers of informal and formal complaints. Staff consider that this increase correlates with extensive efforts to document informal complaints, and senior managers and support staff highlighted that increased logging of informal complaints allows for common issues to be raised at committees.

2.97 The University operates fair, accessible and timely processes for handling complaints and academic appeals. Appeals and complaints procedures are clearly communicated to students and designed to ensure that student concerns are heard fairly and consistently and dealt with in a timely manner. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and that 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

2.98 The University does not work with any organisations, other than with its awarding bodies and awarding organisation. Therefore, this Expectation does not apply.

Expectation: Not applicable

Level of risk: Not applicable

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

2.99 The University does not offer research degrees; therefore, this Expectation is not applicable.

Expectation: Not applicable

Level of risk: Not applicable

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

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

2.101 All Expectations are met and the associated level of risk is low in all areas. The review team identified five areas of good practice and no recommendations. The areas of good practice include: under Expectation B2, the ongoing and personalised support provided to prospective students at all stages of the admissions process; Expectation B3, the systematic embedding of the Arden Learning Model; Expectation B4, the high level of understanding by staff and students of the graduate attributes embedded in the intended learning outcomes; Expectation B4, the close working relationship between the professional support team and academic staff; and Expectation B5, the value placed by the University on student engagement and its contribution to the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

2.102 The team affirmed two areas where the University is already taking action to improve the quality of learning opportunities: under Expectation B2, which identifies the steps being taken to ensure blended learning students are successfully engaging with induction activities prior to enrolment; and under Expectation B5, the work being undertaken to further extend the use of technology to enhance the student voice.

2.103 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the provider is **commended**.

3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

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

Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

Findings

3.1 The University recognises that it holds ultimate responsibility to ensure the accuracy of information of the awards offered by itself and those it delivers on behalf of its awarding bodies and organisation. There are well-developed approval procedures for marketing and publicity to meet these varied responsibilities. The University provides an extensive range of information for a variety of stakeholders in both printed and digital form. Policies and procedures are informed by the Quality Code and minutes of Academic Board confirm that regular discussion takes place to review these. These policies and procedures would allow the Expectation to be met.

3.2 The review team tested the operation of these procedures by examining documentary evidence, including the institutional information, approval processes and marketing information provided to prospective students about their programme of study. The team examined a variety of printed materials including programme and student handbooks, as well as information on the University website and on the VLE. The review team also met with senior staff responsible for the information processes, teaching and support staff, and a selection of distance learning and blended learning students.

3.3 The main source of information for potential students, members of the public, students and staff is the University's website. The website provides a wide range of information about the University, its purpose and values, full programme specifications, fees, governance arrangements, policies and the regulatory framework.

3.4 University regulations require that all publicity and marketing material is approved prior to publication in accordance with a procedure in which requirements and responsibilities for the approval are clearly identified.

3.5 The University website, academic policies, programme and student handbooks are reviewed regularly. All material is signed off by the Quality Manager and a record is kept of approvals. The Registrar confirmed that guidance supplied by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has been used during the development of policies. Programme specifications are publicly available on the University website.

3.6 Potential students are able to search the website by subject, level of qualification, and mode of study. Programme information provided includes key facts, including duration, fees and funding, entry requirements, information about modules and assessment types, and, where applicable, professional body accreditation. Applicants and enrolled students receive a range of information throughout the admissions and induction processes, including student handbooks and through access to the VLE. The website also enables potential students to explore the learning experience of delivery and the support offered for the two different modes of study offered, distance learning, and blended learning at an Arden study centre. Students confirmed that the website and VLE are attractively presented, engaging and easy to access and provide extensive information.

3.7 Successful applicants receive a comprehensive offer pack which forms part of their contract with the University. The offer pack includes full terms and conditions, the relevant programme and student handbook, a student policies and procedures document, the refund policy, privacy policy, a full copy of the University regulatory framework, and, where applicable, campus maps and information on loans.

3.8 Enrolled students have access to the University's VLE online learning platform. This platform provides a standardised structure for presenting learning materials, and includes library and careers resources, electronic copies of handbooks, timetables, the regulatory framework and other relevant documentation. Separate student handbooks are provided for those studying by distance learning and by blended learning. External examiners' reports are available on the VLE. Students confirmed that the quality of the information supplied is supportive, accurate and helpful.

3.9 A Student Charter outlines what the University expects from its students, and what the students can expect from the University, and from the student association. The University sought to improve the processes for the student voice and launched a specialist online facility in June 2016. This bespoke platform provides students with course hubs managed by student representatives, which are not visible to staff. Where appropriate, feedback items are escalated by student representatives to subject feedback boards, which align with the University's course committee structure,

3.10 The specialist platform integrates with the University's VLE and has an application available for smartphones and tablets, allowing students to give feedback and contribute to discussions easily at any time, or from any location. Students confirmed that this approach has made a significant difference to their engagement and had made the responses and actions taken by the University more visible following feedback.

3.11 The University issues a full transcript as a record of student achievements whether they complete or leave early. The transcript includes details of modules passed, grades attained, credits accumulated and award achieved. However, the University plans to provide a more extensive Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR), which will also record students' extracurricular achievements including student representation and student association appointments.

3.12 The University has robust policies and procedures in place to ensure that the information it provides to all audiences is accessible, fit for purpose and trustworthy. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and that the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

3.13 The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low.

3.14 Information published by the University is fit for purpose and trustworthy. Processes for the development and verification of information are understood by staff. Students confirm that information is comprehensive, accessible and helpful to them, and that they are provided with sound information to support their learning.

3.15 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the provider **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 University seeks to embed a culture of continuous quality enhancement across all aspects of its provision through obtaining feedback from students, staff and external examiners. The quarterly review cycle and a robust annual monitoring process allows for the students' learning experience to be continuously reviewed and enhanced. Academic Board delegates the quality enhancement process to the Quality and Standards Committee (QSC) while maintaining institutional oversight. Additionally, the Board of Directors oversees an annual strategic plan which identifies enhancements across the University. These structures underpin an institutional ethos of enhancement, supported effectively through well-established quality improvement processes, articulated through a well-defined deliberative structure. These processes and approaches would allow the Expectation to be met.

4.2 The review team scrutinised a wide range of evidence, including annual and periodic monitoring and programme review reports, reports of the Arden Learner Experience Project, external examiners' reports and minutes of a range of deliberative committees. The review team held meetings with academic and professional support staff, senior staff and students.

4.3 The University's quality assurance framework is well established and provides a sound basis for enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities. The rigour of the University-wide monitoring of quality and standards was endorsed in the 2016 QAA annual monitoring report. The report confirmed that the quality assurance processes are effective in ensuring the enhancement of learning opportunities, and that the continuous review of quality and the timely responses to student feedback are a strength. This continues to be the case. Recommendations following annual programme review, and the cyclical and ongoing approach, allows for continuous improvement leading to enhancements.

4.4 The University sees the involvement of employers in programme development as essential, and a planned enhancement is to develop a larger pool of employers to provide a business perspective. The University makes effective use of a well-established alumni network.

4.5 The University has built on its experience delivering distance learning and has developed a blended learning delivery model which combines the strength of its leading-edge online learning environment with 12 hours of contact teaching per week, compressed into two days. The aim of the blended learning approach is to provide a unique, flexible and supportive learning experience, enabling students who have been unable to engage in traditional higher education programmes to achieve a professionally relevant qualification. The compressed weekly timetable, combined with substantive online study material, enables students to engage in work, or to support family and other commitments, within a full-time study mode. Students are very enthusiastic about the blended learning approach and confirmed that this mode of delivery allowed them an opportunity to study while not giving up their career.

4.6 The University is undertaking a systematic and ongoing review of its blended learning programmes following the first semester assessment, when it became evident that the assessment strategy had not achieved the desired success rate. A full thematic review

was therefore undertaken, with students fully involved. The aim was to identify the issues and make recommendations to improve the student experience. Developments have included a revised induction programme with more focus on behaviour, attendance and engagement, a revised assessment schedule leading to changes to the regulatory framework, and a technology grant to support students' use of appropriate devices for online engagement. These changes have impacted positively on the approach and continue to be evaluated.

4.7 The University has developed its own technology systems, ensuring a bespoke quality service for its students. The core of the University's learning experience is the VLE, ilearn. Changes to the platform and its presentation were made following a review by the academic team. The changes made included moving away from being content-focused to a four-stage student learning journey identified as the Arden Learning Model. The learning stages include gathering, engaging, consolidating and moving forward. There has been significant investment to support the development of these modules, with new authors and support staff being employed. This has resulted in greater student satisfaction with online material and tutor support. Blended learning students are aware of the Arden Learning Model and confirmed that they find the module discussion sections and transferable skills development very helpful, although distance learners are not specifically aware of this model. The University may wish to consider how this unique learning experience can be communicated more effectively to all students in future.

4.8 The ilearn virtual learning environment is being continuously developed and enhanced. The most recent upgrade in September 2017 included new functionality which provides an enhanced student experience. Staff and students are prepared initially on the use of ilearn during induction and through face-to-face support or online videos. Students report that they are very happy with the functionality, and appreciate that it provides a single repository for information and allows academic interaction between staff and students. Blended Learning students stated that significant improvements had taken place over the previous year.

4.9 The systematic embedding of the Arden Learning Model, which facilitates a high level of active engagement by students' in their learning, is considered to be good practice under Expectation B3. The learning model is supported by the recently established Arden Learner Experience Project, which will be working over the next year to identify ways in which the academic aspects of delivery will better dovetail with student support functions.

4.10 There is evidence of explicit links between the quality assurance processes and enhancement of provision. Staff at all levels, including academics and professional support staff, have an excellent understanding of enhancement and describe confidently how they continuously strive to improve the student learning experience. The team considers the highly effective and systematic involvement of staff at all levels in the continuous improvement of students' learning opportunities to be **good practice**.

4.11 Overall, the University has a range of deliberate enhancement initiatives, underpinned by robust and effective annual review processes and a robust and effective committee structure, which drive quality enhancement. The University is taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities for students, and staff at all levels are continuously striving to improve the student experience. The Expectation is therefore met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

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

4.13 A range of mechanisms are in place which enable enhancement to take place, and the highly effective and systematic involvement of staff at all levels in the continuous improvement of students' learning opportunities is good practice.

4.14 Therefore, the Expectation in this area is met and the associated level of risk is low.

4.15 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

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 21-24 of the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) 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.

Awarding organisation

An organisation authorised to award a particular qualification; an organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

Blended learning

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

Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'. See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning.

Enhancement

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

Expectations

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

Flexible and distributed learning

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

Framework

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

Framework for higher education qualifications

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

Good practice

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

Learning opportunities

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

Learning outcomes

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

Multiple awards

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

Operational definition

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

Programme (of study)

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

Programme specifications

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

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.

Self-evaluation document

A report submitted by a higher education provider, assessing its own performance, to be used as evidence in a QAA review.

Subject Benchmark Statement

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

Threshold academic standard

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

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

Widening participation

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

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
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Tel: 01452 557050
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk