Higher Education Review of Aylesbury College

March 2014

Contents

About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Aylesbury College. The review took place from 18 to 20 March 2014 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Ann Hill
- Dan Derricott (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Aylesbury College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These Expectations are the statements in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)[1] setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review the QAA review team:

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

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 6.

In reviewing Aylesbury College the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The themes for the academic year 2013-14 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,[2] and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

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

---

[1] The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode.
[2] Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/higher-education-review-themes.aspx.
[3] QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus.
[4] Higher Education Review web pages: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/higher-education-review.

Amended judgement July 2015

Introduction

In March 2014, Aylesbury College underwent a Higher Education Review, which resulted in 'meets UK expectations' judgements for the maintenance of the academic standards of the awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisations, the quality of student learning opportunities, and information about higher education provision. It also received a judgement of 'requires improvement to meet UK expectations' for the enhancement of learning opportunities.

Negative judgements are subject to a formal follow-up by QAA, which involves the monitoring of an action plan produced by the College in response to the report findings.

The College provided an action plan in September 2014 describing how it intended to address the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the review, and has been working over the last nine months to demonstrate how it has implemented that plan.

The follow-up process included two progress updates and culminated in the review team's scrutiny of the College's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence, along with a one-day visit on 22 May with two reviewers. During the visit, reviewers met senior staff and students to discuss progress and triangulate the evidence base received over the preceding months.

The visit and supporting evidence confirmed that the recommendation, affirmations and good practice, germane to the enhancement of learning opportunities judgement, had been successfully addressed. Actions against recommendations, affirmations, and features of good practice in maintenance of threshold academic standards, quality of learning opportunities, and information about higher education provision, which received positive judgements, had also been completed on schedule and contributed to the progress against the Enhancement judgement.

QAA Board decision and amended judgement

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

- the maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisations **meets** UK expectations.
- the quality of learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- information about higher education provision **meets** UK expectations.
- the enhancement of learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

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

Findings from the follow-up process

The team found that the College had made progress against the recommendations, affirmation and features of good practice as follows.

Recommendation - Expectation B4
The College has effective arrangements to support students' transition into higher education, working with students' employers to identify how it can do this. It has transition days and

induction evenings with students' respective awarding bodies. Teaching staff have attended training events with local employers in order to understand their needs. The College has engaged with students' employers on an individual basis to determine how best to support students.

Recommendation - Expectation B4
The College's has worked with Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) to improve students' access to its virtual learning environment (VLE). It now has an embedded link to BNU's VLE on the College's internal site. Students receive a VLE induction and accessible guidance on using it. The College uses surveys to invite students' feedback, remains alert to any issues, and meets the University on a termly basis to discuss site maintenance and enhancement. Frontline support for using the VLE is available from both the College and the University.

Recommendation - Expectation B4
The College has formalised academic liaison between programme teams and library staff so that library resources are up to date. It now has bespoke library inductions so that staff and students can make full and effective use of the library, and it arranges further sessions for students prior to their first assignments. Curriculum Directors give the Learning Resource Centre notice of any proposed and new academic programmes and the Centre Manager meets tutors individually to ensure the Learning Centre can support their programmes and maintain reading lists. In addition, the Centre Manager attends all course committees and learning resources are a standard agenda item. The Head of Learning Support Services attends a monthly Higher Education Forum to maintain oversight of services for higher education programmes.

Recommendation - Expectation B5
The College has strengthened engagement with students, including at senior decision-making level, such that students are actively involved in ensuring and enhancing their educational experience. The Student President is a member of Quality Success Panels and the College's governing body. Student representatives receive training and are invited to a broad range of committees. The College continues its work to enhance representatives' attendance at meetings in light of work and study commitments. The College has introduced online feedback forums, and has involved students in developing and monitoring the College's Higher Education Review action plan. It has enhanced the use of focus groups to respond to National Student Survey results, and students confirmed that their views are heard and the College responds appropriately.

Recommendation - Expectation B10
The College has formalised its relationship with, and responsibilities of, workplace mentors by developing employer and workplace mentor handbooks aimed at strengthening the quality assurance of this area. It includes, for example, a standard contract between workplace mentor and students, signed at the start of the work placement. Students value workplace mentors and are clear about the relationship between the work placement and academic study.

Recommendation - Expectation B3, Enhancement
The College has revised its Higher Education Strategy so that it explicitly articulates the delivery, measurement and monitoring of teaching and learning elements. An action plan sets out deadlines against each objective for this academic year. The College had identified shared priorities for developing the student learning experience across its higher education provision. Priorities included supporting students to understand and adapt to higher levels of study; developing the use of the VLE by students and staff; supporting staff to maintain currency in their discipline area and teaching practices through undertaking continuous professional development; and enhancing the role of the student voice in quality assurance. The College has made demonstrable progress in some of these areas through centrally

driven initiatives that involve staff from across the different programmes. The review team concluded that the College is implementing the recommendation in accordance with the action plan.

Recommendation - Expectation Enhancement
The College ensures that deliberate steps are articulated and taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. It has developed an Enhancement Strategy that sits alongside the Higher Education Strategy as a means of articulating its enhancement priorities and initiatives. In addition, the College has engaged in a number of other activities in support of enhancement, such as introducing transition evenings for students, engaging students in the development of the HE Students' Charter, developing student feedback forums on the VLE, adding enhancement as a standard agenda item to the Higher Education Forum, and using quality assurance procedures, including success panels and quality improvement plans, to identify enhancement. The College uses quality assurance processes, including those of its awarding bodies, to generate reliable and comprehensive information on the quality of the student learning experience. This means there is regular and systematic consideration of this data at programme and subject level through Quality Success Panels. The Learning and Quality Group's weekly meetings, chaired by the Vice-Principal Learning and Teaching, also consider matters of higher education quality, as does the Higher Education Forum. The College uses the information gathered through its quality assurance processes, and more actively through its deliberative bodies such as the Higher Education Forum, to identify good practice in its higher education provision.

The College has a Curriculum Manager and an Advanced Practitioner working to support staff across the College who teach on higher education programmes, focusing on academic staff development and sharing good practice between subject areas. It also uses its relationships with its awarding bodies to share and discuss good practice. It is clear that where the College has invested efforts into particular initiatives, such as improving transition into higher education, there has been demonstrable progress and impact. The College makes use of its well-established approach to strategic management, to monitor progress against these priorities and objectives. Furthermore, the College is embedding a positive ethos around enhancing the student learning experience and is changing its structures to give this more attention, such as specifically considering enhancing the higher education student learning experience at the Quality Success Panels.

Recommendation - Expectation B7
The College has worked appropriately with awarding bodies to maximize opportunities to ensure consistency in the use of external examiners and their expertise. It has produced a good practice guide on working with external examiners for staff in order to improve consistency across programmes. Teaching staff are specifically made aware of *Chapter B7* of the Quality Code through the College's higher education teachers' toolkit. Staff confirmed that, in future, external examiners would report directly on the College's provision, rather than providing an overview across all providers.

Affirmation - Expectation B3
An interim Higher Education Manager supports the development of consistent practice across all programmes. This Manager is engaged in multiple activities being coordinated centrally, including quality assurance training, transition evenings for students, and the further development of the teachers' toolkit.

Good practice - Expectation B3
The College has further developed its working relationship with Buckinghamshire New University. It engages strategically with the University and has identified new progression routes at the new University Campus Aylesbury Vale. Staff meet regularly to share teaching

and learning practice, and enhance the VLE and other resources. The College is working towards enhancing the relationship between student representatives from both institutions.

Good practice - Expectation B4
The College has also further enhanced its rigorous and creative approach to supporting and motivating staff in the development of the VLE. It has developed an updated range of targets and raised the standard of criteria for staff to attain medals within the innovative Cloud Medals Scheme. The College is particularly active in developing new online learning materials for the benefit of students and staff.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Aylesbury College

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

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

Good practice

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

- The productive working relationship between the College and Buckinghamshire New University, which benefits programme delivery and provides a progression pathway (Expectation B3).
- The rigorous and creative approach to supporting and motivating staff in the development of the virtual learning environment (Expectation B4).

Recommendations

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

By September 2014:

- develop robust support for students' transition into higher education across all provision in partnership with students' employers (Expectation B4)
- work with the relevant awarding body to ensure students have complete and seamless access to the virtual learning environment (Expectation B4)
- formalise academic liaison between programme teams and library staff to ensure adequate and up-to-date library resources (Expectation B4)
- strengthen engagement with students at College level, including through membership of senior College decision-making bodies, to ensure and enhance students' educational experience (Expectation B5)
- formalise the relationship with, and responsibilities of, workplace mentors (Expectation B10).

By December 2014:

- explicitly articulate the delivery, measurement and monitoring of the teaching and learning elements of the Higher Education Strategy (Expectation B3, Enhancement)
- ensure deliberate steps are articulated and taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities (Enhancement).

By June 2015:

- work with awarding bodies to maximise opportunities and ensure consistency in the use of external examiners and their expertise (Expectation B7).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The appointment of the Higher Education Manager to support the development of consistent practice across all programmes (Expectation B3).

Theme: Student Employability

Student employability is embedded within the College's higher education provision. Provision that meets educational, training and employment needs is a commitment reflected in Priority One of the College's strategic plan. The College supports this objective through its partnership in a business federation, Buckinghamshire New University under the title Buckinghamshire Education, Skills and Training, the College's work with Local Enterprise Partnerships, and its work with local employers in the development and delivery of programmes.

The College aims to recruit teaching staff with industrial experience and supports their 'industrial updating' through staff development. The portfolio of foundation degree programmes indicates the value the College places on the importance of developing students' employability potential. Programmes include clearly articulated criteria for the development of employability skills, which are routinely evaluated in annual programme review processes. Students participate in placements and work-based learning and benefit from careers advice and guidance.

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

About Aylesbury College

Aylesbury College (the College) is a medium-sized general further education college with over 4,000 students, based at an 'Integrated Learning Campus' at the centre of Aylesbury. The College offers courses from levels 1 to 5 under all Ofsted subject-sector areas, and at levels 4 to 5 at higher education level. Around a third of its students are aged 19 or over, 700 are work-based students and 600 are in workplace training. The Integrated Learning Campus comprises purpose-built facilities, a University Technical College, a nursery, a Sure Start Centre and Life Skills Centre. Alongside one of its awarding bodies, the College jointly owns the company Buckinghamshire Education, Skills and Training (BEST) to provide higher education courses locally. It is also represented on the Board of Governors of the Buckinghamshire University Technical College.

The College's vision is to 'help people of all ages and abilities achieve their aspirations by providing outstanding service in an innovative and inclusive environment'. This is underpinned by its mission to bring positive change to individuals through the provision of innovative education and vocational skills, and to create an Integrated Learning Campus, an inclusive, inspiring environment in active participation with the wider community.

At the time of the review the College had 112 higher education students across eight programmes. Buckinghamshire New University validates seven of these programmes, four of which are foundation degrees, and the remaining three an award and a certificate in Education and Training and a Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector. A further foundation degree is franchised through the University of Bedfordshire.

Since its last QAA Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in 2009, the College appointed a new Principal in March 2013 and has reorganised its leadership and management structure. The vice-chancellor of Buckinghamshire New University was appointed to the College's Board of Governors in 2010 and is lead governor for higher education. The College has reduced its higher education programmes from nine to eight. It no longer offers a programme validated by Oxford Brookes University, but since 2011 has offered a foundation degree franchised by the University of Bedfordshire. In March 2013 it secured directly funded student places to which it recruited seven students. In September 2013 it opened the Buckinghamshire University Technical College.

Challenges faced by the College including recruiting students to higher education in a county where many students leave to go to university elsewhere and do not return. The College responds to this by providing higher education opportunities to those in the region who are in employment and wish to study locally. It intends that such provision should be accessible, vocationally relevant, meet local, regional and national skills needs, allow progression, and enhance students' employability skills.

The College's last IQER identified four recommendations and four features of good practice. The College has addressed these recommendations through the action plan following this review. All features of good practice remain or have been enhanced with the exception of one concerning a member of marketing staff seconded one day a week to Buckinghamshire New University where the arrangement has ceased.

Explanation of the findings about Aylesbury College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

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

1 Judgement: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards

Expectation (A1): Each qualification (including those awarded through arrangements with other delivery organisations or support providers) is allocated to the appropriate level in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

Quality Code, *Chapter A1: The national level*

Findings

1.1 The College offers foundation degree and teacher education awards on behalf of two awarding bodies which are ultimately responsible for setting threshold academic standards. Institutional agreements are coherent and are mapped against the Quality Code. Each qualification is aligned to the appropriate level in the FHEQ through course planning processes and the awarding bodies' validation processes.

1.2 One foundation degree programme is franchised from the University of Bedfordshire. The College is responsible for ensuring that teachers are aware of the awarding body published policies for programme approval. The awarding body is responsible for ensuring awards are developed in line with the FHEQ via its published policies for programme approval.

1.3 Where programmes are validated by Buckinghamshire New University, the College is responsible for curriculum development and mapping the programmes to the FHEQ. The awarding body is responsible for ensuring compliance with the FHEQ and approving the award within the framework. Buckinghamshire New University's validation process includes an external academic reviewer, identifies the quality assurance mechanisms for the programme and considers the context document and programme specification. The development of programmes is a collaborative effort between this awarding body and College staff. In meetings, staff and students demonstrated a clear and comprehensive understanding of the arrangements regarding the setting and maintenance of threshold academic standards. Through these arrangements, the College's policies and procedures are aligned with Expectation A1 of the Quality Code.

1.4 The review team tested the provider's arrangements in relation to the Expectation through the scrutiny of validation reports and programme specifications. It also tested familiarity with the arrangements in meetings with staff, and volume of study with students.

1.5 The College adheres to awarding body processes, ensuring the alignment of programmes with the FHEQ. Programme tutors work closely with awarding body link tutors during the curriculum development process in a productive partner relationship.

1.6 Students confirmed that they are satisfied with the volume of study and that it is sufficient to demonstrate the learning outcomes. Some students found their study more challenging than expected and although they appreciate the existing support from tutors, they would appreciate more guidance and support at the start of the programmes (see Expectation B4). The College has created a dedicated area within their virtual learning environment (VLE) for higher education students which contains guides on critical writing and research. The College confirmed it was working with an awarding body to improve students' skills in the development of analytical critical writing.

1.7 Overall, the team concluded that each qualification awarded through the College's arrangements with the awarding bodies is allocated to the appropriate level in the FHEQ,

and that the management of this allocation is effective. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2): All higher education programmes of study take account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements.

Quality Code, *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level*

Findings

1.8   The College ensures curriculum developments are in line with the relevant subject benchmarks and qualification descriptors for both the awarding bodies. The awarding bodies are ultimately responsible for testing the alignment to subject benchmarks and qualification descriptors and approving the award through their published policies for programme approval.

1.9   Context documents and programme specifications for each programme, submitted as part of programme approval, include a description of how the programme meets subject benchmark statements and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) benchmarks. Context documents also outline how programmes meet the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* (FDQB). External examiner reports comment on how programmes meet subject benchmark statements.

1.10   The review team explored the College's alignment with the Expectation through meetings with staff and scrutiny of programme context documents. The team found that the College takes account of the FDQB in the design of modules and that there are a variety of work-based and placement learning activities. Teaching staff confirmed a variety of modules which aim to develop students' skills in understanding theories in relation to work settings, for example within early years settings. The team considered that in practice the College takes account of the relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements. However, there are some characteristics of the FDQB that could be effectively used to strengthen the existing programmes, such as through the provision of employer and mentor handbooks (see paragraphs 2.51 and 2.52).

1.11   In line with the FDQB, the programme teams ensure that local employers are closely involved in programme development. Indeed, the College was engaging with employers in developing a new Foundation Degree in Cyber Security. The College also uses industry labour market intelligence to inform module design and delivery, for example in the Foundation Degree in Early Years.

1.12   The context documents for the Foundation Degree in Early Years and the Award in Education and Training demonstrate the College's involvement in the programme design and describe mapping of subject benchmark statements and qualification benchmarks. The College also takes account of relevant professional benchmarks, for example for the Foundation Degree in Early Years.

1.13   Overall, the team concluded that alignment with subject and qualification benchmarks is an effectively managed area and that both are taken into account in programme development. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3): Higher education providers make available definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements for a programme of study.

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: The programme level*

Findings

1.14   The College develops definitive documentation, including programme specifications and module descriptors, for all programmes and they form a core part of the programme approval process for both awarding bodies. It uses the appropriate awarding body templates, both of which are aligned with the Quality Code.

1.15   The review team tested this Expectation by examining programme specifications and handbooks, and through discussing intended learning outcomes with staff and students.

1.16   Handbooks and programme specifications provide appropriate descriptions of learning outcomes and learner achievements. Staff confirmed that they understood the process for confirming definitive information with awarding bodies, and that the College is responsible for displaying and publishing programme information documentation, for example on the College's VLE and on the website for both awarding bodies.

1.17   The review team's meetings with students confirmed they receive programme handbooks and they contain helpful information relating to their studies, including intended learning outcomes, assessment criteria and module guides. Teaching staff confirmed that the handbooks are updated annually.

1.18   The review team considered that the processes undertaken by the College to make available definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements for the programmes of study are effective, meet Expectation A3 and there is a low level of risk posed by these arrangements.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A4): Higher education providers have in place effective processes to approve and periodically review the validity and relevance of programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter A4: Approval and review*

Findings

1.19   While responsibility for the academic standards of a programme ultimately lies with the awarding body, the College has in place a rigorous process for the approval of new course proposals and adheres to the arrangements for the validation, monitoring and periodic review of programmes in line with the specifications of the quality assurance arrangements of the awarding bodies. Annual monitoring processes follow the partner university quality assurance arrangements.

1.20   The College's involvement in the design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes enables standards to be maintained and allows students to demonstrate learning outcomes of the awards. The responsibilities of the College and the awarding bodies are clearly set out and described in its memoranda of agreement.

1.21   There are effective processes to approve and periodically review the validity and relevance of programmes. Buckinghamshire New University is responsible for the quality assurance processes relating to validated provision, such as programme review and enhancement (PRE) and collaborative provision partnership review (CPPR). Programmes are normally validated for a period of six years, after which they are subject to revalidation. This process requires the College and University to reflect on the previous period using student, graduate and employer feedback. The College is responsible for implementing policies and addressing any ensuing actions relating to validation processes, for example appointing an industry external adviser and updating the programme specification for the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector. Minor programme modifications are handled by the awarding body's committee system.

1.22   The University of Bedfordshire is responsible for programme approval and review of its provision at the College in accordance with its published processes. It undertakes institutional approval and review on a quinquennial cycle. The College is expected to address actions arising from these events.

1.23   Programmes validated by Buckinghamshire New University undergo annual programme review and enhancement. This evidence-based process assures the awarding body that quality and standards are being maintained and enables a process of continuous improvement; it is mapped against *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code. The foundation degree validated by the University of Bedfordshire is evaluated annually by the College through a course report. This is amalgamated into an overall report covering a number of partners by the awarding body's link tutor.

1.24   The College uses Success Panels as part of its quality improvement processes to enable curriculum teams to identify good practice and areas for development. However, it is unclear how the College addresses issues for improvement arising from course review and validation through its committees. The review team were unable to determine which bodies or to whom Success Panels report, or if these panels are part of a formal quality assurance process or committee cycle, because they do not feature in the College's quality cycle documents or its Higher Education Strategy. There was little evidence of actions arising related to course review and validation in recent sets of Higher Education Forum minutes seen by the team, though there were examples of plans to develop higher education teaching practice, such as the development of a tutor's toolkit for higher education staff.

1.25   The review team tested these arrangements by speaking with staff and scrutinising programme approval and review documentation. There is a clear productive and supportive working relationship between the College and its awarding bodies, which is reinforced by the role of the link tutors. The review team found that teachers and senior staff had a good understanding of the processes in place to approve and review programmes.

1.26   In practice, the College is responsive to these periodic events, for example planning support for third-year students and reviewing reference learning resources for the Foundation Degree in Educational Practice students following a periodic review event. The College has recently increased its provision of learning resources for higher education programmes and students confirmed that they had evidenced this recent investment.

1.27   The College responds appropriately to issues arising through annual quality improvement plans (QIPs) and PREs. This is effected through course committees as part of a standardised agenda. For example, staff confirmed they have increased use of both awarding bodies' VLEs. However, the arrangements for action planning arising from monitoring are unclear as there are no specific action plans for each programme that summarise actions arising from all sources for the year.

1.28   Verbal and documentary evidence provided by the College demonstrated that this aspect of activity is satisfactorily addressed, but existing quality assurance arrangements do not include the production of an annual action plan that collates the specific issues for each programme. Overall, the team agreed that the processes undertaken by the College to approve and periodically review the validity and relevance of the programmes are effective and meet the guidance of this Expectation, and consequently there is a low level of risk posed by these arrangements.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A5): Higher education providers ensure independent and external participation in the management of threshold academic standards.

Quality Code, *Chapter A5: Externality*

Findings

1.29   The College participates in awarding body processes that support the participation of externals in the management of threshold academic standards, such as through (re)validation, external examining and programme development.

1.30   The arrangements for externality in programme development include the involvement of two external reviewers in programme validation for one of the awarding bodies, specifically one academic reviewer and one industry professional who inform the programme development team. The industry participation ensures the College's foundation degrees are industry-relevant. The College's other awarding body also ensures externals participate in approval and review events to confirm benchmarking with other higher education providers.

1.31   The processes and expectations for ensuring the use of external expertise in quality assurance meet and comply with *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code. In the case of one awarding body the College is responsible for nominating external examiners who sit on the University validation panels and are involved with ongoing quality assurance processes. The awarding body is responsible for approval and appointment of external examiners who consider the maintenance of academic standards, the measurement of student achievement and comparability to other higher education institutions. For its other awarding body, the College may suggest external examiner nominations when replacements are required. External examiners are appointed for a period of four years.

1.32   All external examiner reports are reviewed and evaluated at the College by the Director for Quality and Outcomes who then circulates them to the Curriculum Directors to act upon any recommendations. The College makes monthly progress and action updates to curriculum area QIPs.

1.33   The review team looked at evidence of programme design, validation and external examining, and discussed these with staff, students and employers. The College provided examples of where it has addressed issues identified by external examiners, such as introducing critical thinking into a module and increasing the teaching of information literacy skills.

1.34   Programme teams ensure that local employers are closely involved in programme development including the development of a new foundation degree. Employers confirmed that they are not explicitly involved in formal annual monitoring processes.

1.35   The College has recently, and satisfactorily, addressed a recommendation for action from the previous IQER regarding sharing external examiner reports with students. The students confirmed that they know how to access external examiner reports on the College's VLE.

1.36   The team concluded that effective quality assurance processes are in place to ensure independent and external participation in the management of threshold academic standards. The Expectation is met and there is a low risk posed by these arrangements.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A6): Higher education providers ensure the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and that the award of qualifications and credit are based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Quality Code, *Chapter A6: Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes*

Findings

1.37   The College is responsible for setting assessment tasks for one awarding body and is involved in setting them with the other. The College assesses work against awarding bodies' marking criteria and for internal moderation. The awarding bodies lead on overall responsibility for the assessment and moderation processes, with consideration of student work undertaken by University-appointed external examiners. The awarding bodies are responsible for determining course assessment strategy, tasks and marking schemes and for conducting the boards of examiners.

1.38   The team tested this Expectation through reviewing moderation forms and policies and external examiner reports. The team met staff and students. External examiner reports confirm that assessments standards are appropriate, in line with UK equivalents, and that they test the intended learning outcomes. Staff confirmed effective arrangements for second marking, internal moderation and moderation by external examiners, especially where the grade contributes to the final classification. Marking grids are provided by both awarding bodies and College staff attend moderation meetings. Staff demonstrated a clear understanding of *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning* of the Quality Code. The close working relationships between the College's higher education staff and the awarding bodies, and particularly with the link tutors, are a strength that contributes to the currency and future development of the programmes.

1.39   Students consider assessments appropriate to their programmes and to the level at which they were studying. Students were clear about the continuity between modules and how they are able to improve their performance. They demonstrated a good understanding of marking criteria. Some students were not confident about the differences between formative and summative assessment. There is a three-week turnaround on assessment feedback, and students are generally satisfied with the level and quality of feedback. Additionally, they are appreciative of the level of individual support provided.

1.40   In light of these processes and practices, the team concludes that the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and the award of qualifications and credit are based on the achievement of intended learning outcomes. The review team concluded this is an effectively managed area of activity. The Expectation is met and there is a low risk posed by these arrangements.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.41   In reaching its judgement about threshold academic standards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook.

1.42   The College's main responsibilities for maintaining threshold academic standards are for adhering to the policies and processes set by its awarding bodies. The College effectively discharges its responsibilities within the context of its partnership agreements. All Expectations relating to the College's maintenance of threshold academic standards are met, and the risk for each is low.

1.43   The review team concludes that the maintenance of the threshold academic standards of the awards offered at the College on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies **meets** UK expectations.

2 Judgement: Quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers have effective processes for the design and approval of programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*

Findings

2.1 The College's higher education provision consists largely of franchised programmes that are designed and approved by the awarding bodies. The College is responsible for adhering to its awarding bodies' processes and meeting conditions of approval events.

2.2 College staff influence the design of programmes where possible in the partner arrangements through positive formal relationships. This is often achieved through link tutors and partner network meetings held by the awarding bodies. The College recognises its responsibility for ensuring that programmes are delivered as specified in the validated programme documentation and engages with the link tutor systems established by both of its awarding bodies. There are clear and robust processes in place for the design and approval of programmes, to which the College makes a positive contribution. The review team consider that these arrangements align with the Expectation.

2.3 The review team explored the strength of these arrangements through discussions with staff from the College and the awarding bodies, and by scrutinising approval documentation. The review team were able to confirm the productive nature of relationships with both awarding bodies and how the College uses these productive relationships to support staff development, such as through teaching observation. The review team is confident that that the College is effectively discharging its responsibilities in adhering to validated programme documentation.

2.4 In examining programme and validation documentation, such as programme specifications, context documents and validation subgroup reports, the review team explored the extent to which the FDQB and its defining characteristics are embodied in the design of programmes. This was further explored in meetings with senior and teaching staff of both the College and awarding body during the review visit, as the majority of the provision is foundation degrees. The review team found formal consideration of the FDQB in context documents for existing programmes and current consideration of it by a curriculum team developing a new programme with an awarding body. The review team were also able to identify the defining characteristics of the FDQB replicated in the delivery of the programmes and the vision and mission of the College.

2.5 Overall, the review team concluded that the framework for programme design and approval is robust and effective; the Expectation is met and the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B2): Policies and procedures used to admit students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied.

Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Admissions*

Findings

2.6   The College admits students to its programmes using a process set out in its Admissions Policy. The policy outlines the steps involved in admissions, including meeting entry requirements and attending an interview. As well as the full policy being published on the College's website, a summary of the key points is visible to students. The policy includes information for students on how they can appeal an admissions decision through the College's Compliments, Comments and Complaints Policy and Procedure. The policy also includes a commitment to it being reviewed annually. These policies and procedures for admitting students align with the Expectation. Information on the programmes, applications process and student experience at the College is provided through the website and at open days, as well as through a prominent admissions desk in the College's building.

2.7   The review team explored the admissions process and the provision of information with students and teaching staff during the review visit, and confirmed that the process is working effectively and is clearly understood by staff. Students found the process tested their suitability for the programme and supported their decision making and progression. Similarly, students found the information helpful in informing their decision.

2.8   The review team considered the framework for admitting students to be clear and effective, and concluded that the Expectation is met and the 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

2.9   The College's Higher Education Strategy outlines its aim to provide high-quality, accessible higher education that provides progression opportunities to higher study, and provides students with the opportunity to enhance their professional expertise and employability skills. This is supported by the College-wide Quality Improvement Strategy and Learning Resources Strategy There is a framework for reporting and reflecting on management information at programme and provider level.

2.10   The College effectively delivers a range of higher education awards that are well integrated into a wider 'ladder' of qualifications that facilitate progression between awards. They are also flexible regarding the needs of a student body that predominantly works full-time and studies part-time. The College take an integrated approach to delivering their higher education programmes alongside programmes at lower levels. Delivery is grouped into curriculum areas headed by a Curriculum Director, rather than operating as discrete higher education provision. Those who teach on higher education programmes are brought together under the leadership of a Curriculum Director with responsibility for higher education and the newly appointed Higher Education and Professional Development Curriculum Manager predominantly through meetings of the Higher Education Forum.

2.11   The College has continued to build on the good practice identified in its last IQER in relation to its partnership with Buckinghamshire New University. The review team found that this partnership was productive at all levels and across various support functions, including programme teams, academic quality teams and marketing teams. The establishment of a federation between the two providers, delivered through the Buckinghamshire Education, Skills and Training partnership, and the joint development of the Waterside Higher Education Centre are prime examples of how the collaborative approach benefits both partners and students. The review team considers the productive relationship between the College and Buckinghamshire New University, which benefits programme delivery and provides a progression pathway, **good practice**.

2.12   The College delivers programmes in disciplines where it already delivers further education programmes. In seeking to assure and improve the quality of teaching and learning, the College has invested in staff development as a means of deepening discipline expertise and supporting teaching at higher education level. This has involved industrial updating, sponsoring staff to undertake master's degrees and, as part of a wider College commitment, supporting all staff to obtain a teaching qualification at level 5 or above. One of the higher education teachers is an Advanced Practitioner, supporting staff to reflect on their teaching and introduce good practice.

2.13   The College reviews the quality of teaching and learning through a number of mechanisms including student feedback, feedback from external examiners and peer observation. It responds to this feedback by formulating actions for improvement which in turn are captured through documents such as the Quality Improvement Strategy. The Higher Education Strategy sets out the College's aims for higher education but does not include

explicit actions or deliverables for improving the quality of teaching and learning across the higher education provision.

2.14   Through its meetings and scrutiny of evidence, the review team explored the College's approach to staff development and concluded that this had previously been ad hoc and focused on the interests of individual staff, rather than being a vehicle for driving strategic change and enhancement in teaching and learning. The College is changing this practice through restructuring the senior team and increasing capacity in the higher education management team. The College is beginning to devise a staff development programme based on its priorities for developing learning and teaching.

2.15   The College were able to demonstrate that their system of review and continuous improvement has a positive impact on the student learning experience. Staff and students were able to cite real examples of how programmes and teaching had been improved, either proactively or in response to recommendations, as a result of feedback from students, external examiners, peers and other stakeholders.

2.16   The review team thoroughly explored with the College its priorities for developing the student learning experience and how these are articulated. In discussion with the review team, different groups of staff identified a number of priorities but these sometimes differed and were not coherently articulated in a key strategic document or operational plan. The College recognises that much of its programme development work is driven at curriculum level alongside further education provision, and is often contained within individual programmes rather than across the higher education provision. The review team **affirms** the appointment of the Higher Education Manager to support the development of consistent practice across all programmes.

2.17   The culture and environment for studying at the College is inclusive and supportive, which students appreciate. The College supports student to enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking to varying extents in each programme but with some inconsistency.

2.18   Overall, the review team concluded that there is risk in the disconnect between the high-level Higher Education Strategy, which aims broadly to deliver 'high quality higher education provision that is vocationally relevant', and teaching and learning in practice. The Higher Education Forum brings together higher education staff but there are inconsistencies between programmes, for example in the approach to engaging employers. The review team **recommends** that the College explicitly articulate the delivery, measurement and monitoring of the teaching and learning elements of the Higher Education Strategy by December 2014. The review team considers this a moderate risk to the quality of student learning opportunities due to this weakness in the College's articulation and systematic review and enhancement of provision. In light of the effective provision of learning opportunities, support for students, and staff development, the review team concluded the Expectation is met.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement*

Findings

2.19   The College has arrangements to resource and support students through their studies. Some of these are delivered directly by the College and some via the awarding body, such as access to electronic journal databases. Some of the College's arrangements for enabling students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential are articulated in a Learning Resources Strategy. The College evaluates is arrangements for enabling students to develop through programme reviews.

2.20   The review team considered this Expectation through an analysis of support for students, personal tutor arrangements, programme evaluations and resources, by analysing supporting documentation and meeting staff, students and employers.

2.21   The College embeds the development of study and research skills into each programme to varying extents. This is delivered by programme teams and, for the relevant programmes, the Buckinghamshire New University Learning Development Unit. The College supports staff development by providing sessions on topics such as 'how to support students to develop critical and analytical thinking skills' and 'how to teach research skills'. The College also allows time for staff to undertake 'industrial updating' so that their skills and knowledge remain relevant.

2.22   The College recognises the challenges of students' transition into and out of foundation degrees and that more support could help students develop as critical thinkers and independent learners. The College also recognises the role of employers supporting their staff through part-time foundation degrees and the importance of workplace mentors in supporting students throughout transitions. Students confirmed that enhanced support during this period would be helpful. The Higher Education Forum has discussed student transition, but the team found little consistency across all programmes for supporting the development of academic skills and transition into higher education. The review team **recommends** the College develop robust support for students' transition into higher education across all provision in partnership with students' employers by September 2014.

2.23   The College's Tutorial Policy stipulates the support available to students. Tutors provide academic, pastoral and career guidance depending on the students' needs. Students recognise and value this support, but there was some blurring of personal tutor roles given the scale of provision and small studies cohorts where the tutors often deliver much of the teaching.

2.24   The College has a well established Learning Resource Centre (LRC) on-site which provides access to books, journals, computers, study space and some electronic resources. The review team explored both the availability of resources, which was raised as an area of concern in the student submission, and the relationship between programme teams and LRC staff during its meetings. The review team found some discrepancy between the views of students it met and the student submission, with some considering the availability and currency of books as adequate and others as a significant issue. The College responded to problems with the availability of books by ring-fencing financial resources for investing in books for higher education students; students have yet to recognise the impact.

2.25   The review team considered the process by which book stocks are acquired and maintained in line with the development of programmes, and the extent to which LRC staff

supported programme teams in remaining aware and making use of the most current resources in their teaching. It found that while LRC representatives attend course committee meetings and have membership on the Higher Education Forum, there remained issues raised by students about book availability and currency. The review team found that arrangements to update reading lists before the start of the academic year were based on an email to programme leaders, to which not all programme leaders respond. The College's Learning Resources Strategy does not describe how the LRC engages with curriculum areas to inform their services and resources. The review team **recommends** that the College formalise academic liaison between programme teams and library staff to ensure adequate and up-to-date library resources by September 2014.

2.26   The College directly provides access to a range of electronic resources and works with awarding bodies to enable access to their collections, particularly online journal databases. Students raised concerns through the student submission and directly with the review team that they could not always easily access Buckinghamshire New University's VLE, which they rely upon for access to electronic resources. Students indicated low satisfaction with resources in the 2013 National Student Survey (NSS), and through focus groups the College established that this was in response to the VLE access issues. The review team heard various interpretations of the problem but the College provided evidence that its Curriculum Director and the Learning Technology Team are working with Buckinghamshire New University to resolve the issues, supporting students appropriately in the meantime. However, there was no clear plan of action or timescale for resolution of the issues which date back to the NSS results from August 2013, meaning there is a risk of another cohort facing the same difficulties. The review team **recommends** that the College work with the relevant awarding body to ensure students have complete and seamless access to the VLE by September 2014.

2.27   The College's dedicated Information Learning Technology (ILT) Team developed its own VLE ('Cloud') to meet the College's needs. An ILT Strategy is supported by a staff development framework and includes a network of ILT champions in each curriculum area and some business support areas; the provision of breakfast briefing events; the implementation of a minimum standard for each course site; and a bronze, silver and gold medals system which recognises good practice and encourages substantial development of sites.

2.28   The review team explored the use of the College's VLE with staff and students and found that students were familiar with what they could expect to find on it, in line with and beyond the minimum standards specified in the ILT Strategy. Staff demonstrated enthusiasm about the opportunities it provided to develop their teaching practice. The College's positive use of its VLE is partly due to a competitive medal award system between departments. The review team considers the rigorous and creative approach to supporting and incentivising staff in the development of the VLE to be **good practice**.

2.29   In considering this Expectation the review team found effective arrangements that support students to develop their potential to agree that this Expectation is met, for example through the skills and relevance of teaching staff and effective use of the VLE as a major learning and teaching tool. However, there remain operational weaknesses in the consistency of support for students' transition across all programmes, in the management of library resources, and in students' access to the resources they are entitled to through their awarding body. These weaknesses present a moderate risk to the College's ability to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B5: Student engagement*

Findings

2.30   The College collects student opinion through a well developed framework of surveys, a system of student representation and mechanisms such as comment boxes. Staff and students value the small-scale, personal approach to teaching which means that student feedback is often conveyed locally and informally, enabling an immediate resolution. The College and its students are supported by one of the awarding bodies' students' union in developing a robust and effective system of student representation. The College recognises that its approach to student representation may be unsuitable for its work-based learning student body. The College has been successful in gaining National Union of Students funding for a collaborative project to facilitate conversations between staff and students on NSS results. These arrangements provide a well developed framework for student engagement.

2.31   The review team explored the College's development of student engagement in discussion with managers, teaching staff, support staff, student representatives, students and one of the awarding bodies' students' unions. It also considered training for student representatives.

2.32   The College's commitment to embedding the student voice supports their approach to continuous improvement. In discussions with staff and students, there was consensus that current arrangements present a one-way relationship, with the College receiving feedback and working to respond to it in isolation of students. Student representation is supported by the delivery of training from both the College and the Buckinghamshire New University Students' Union at the beginning of the year, but not explicitly by ongoing support as reps undertake their role.

2.33   The review team also explored the clarity and impact of the higher education student voice in the College, in the context of small-scale higher education provision alongside larger-scale further education provision. The review team heard mixed views on the impact of the higher education student voice and of the Higher Education Student Charter, and students' knowledge was limited of the opportunities for representation within College decision-making structures beyond programme level. For instance, there is no student representation on the Higher Education Forum which is the primary body driving the development of the student learning experience.

2.34   There is also a lack of higher education student representation at a senior level. The review team therefore **recommend** that the College strengthen engagement with students at College level, including through membership of senior College decision-making bodies, to ensure and enhance their educational experience by September 2014.

2.35   Overall, the review team concluded that the Expectation is met and arrangements present a low risk owing to the College's commitment to using student feedback which is meaningful and enacted. However, collaboration between staff and students in developing the student experience is limited.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit.

Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning*

Findings

2.36   The programmes delivered by the College make use of both formative and summative assessment to demonstrate that students have achieved the intended learning outcomes. The College works within the awarding bodies' procedures to ensure parity in the marking of assessments and the quality of feedback to students. This is ensured through the use of marking grids and internal and external moderation. Marking has been strengthened in some subject areas following advice from external examiners and awarding bodies. Students are informed of assessment arrangements and schedules in programme handbooks. In principle this is a robust approach on the whole that supports and stretches students to learn from assessment as well as demonstrate their ability.

2.37   The review team explored assessment in terms of the parity of marking and moderation and the quality and timeliness of feedback, in meetings with students, staff and representatives of the awarding bodies and through the scrutiny of supporting documentation. It found examples of the College's responsiveness to external examiner feedback on the parity of marking. There was also evidence of the College supporting students to maintain good academic conduct as part of the programmes.

2.38   Students raised some practical concerns through the student submission about the bunching of assessments and timeliness of feedback in some subject areas. However, in meetings students expressed satisfaction with the spread, nature and usefulness of the assessments, and find the feedback from tutors helpful in improving their performance in future assessments. In particular, the use of marking criteria grids proves useful for staff and students in respectively demonstrating and understanding the award of particular marks and what is needed to improve their marks.

2.39   Overall, the review team found some contradiction between the student submission and the views encountered during the review visit. There was a greater consensus that assessment is working well, allowing students to continually improve their performance and clearly providing an opportunity to demonstrate whether learning outcomes have been achieved, and the review team did not encounter any evidence to contradict this. The review team concluded the Expectation is met and the risk is low because students have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B7: External examining*

Findings

2.40 The College's awarding bodies appoint and support external examiners in their evaluation of programme delivery both by the awarding body its partners. The College engages with external examiners by supplying samples of marked work and occasionally hosting visits. This engagement is centred on receiving and responding to the external examiners' annual reports which mainly provide an overview of the programme across all providers rather than separately reporting on the provision at each of the awarding bodies' partners. In conjunction with the awarding body, via link tutors, the College makes scrupulous use of external examiners in theory.

2.41 The review team explored the nature and depth of the relationship between the College, the awarding bodies and external examiners in discussion with staff and representatives of the awarding bodies, and analysed the content of external examiner reports.

2.42 The reports provide assurance that the College is maintaining threshold academic standards, that assessments measure student achievement against the learning outcomes, and that standards are comparable with other higher education providers in the UK. The College's responsiveness to external examiners' recommendations is evident, such as enhancement to the moderation of assessment. The College and awarding bodies recognise the scope for external examiners to comment directly on the College's provision and recommend areas for development. This practice appeared stronger in some areas than others, and the review team therefore **recommends** that the College work with awarding bodies to maximise opportunities and ensure consistency in the use of external examiners and their expertise by June 2015.

2.43 Overall, the review team were able to see a developed system that is steered by experienced awarding bodies and therefore concluded that the Expectation is met and the associated risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers have effective procedures in place to routinely monitor and periodically review programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*

Findings

2.44   The College's programmes are subject to the annual monitoring and periodic review processes of their awarding bodies. Each Buckinghamshire New University programme is monitored through the College's completion of annual PRE forms and Strategic University Review and Enhancement (SURE) forms. The University of Bedfordshire monitors programmes through the College's completion of a course report. Both awarding bodies amalgamate annual monitoring reports into overview reports of the programme across all providers to consider the programme as a whole and feed these into their annual monitoring processes and committee reporting. It is evident that the College engages productively with these processes and responds to the recommendations and action plans resulting from them. The College therefore meets the Expectation in theory.

2.45   The review team explored the effectiveness of these processes in discussions with College staff and representatives of the awarding bodies and through an evaluation of programme review reports, and found the processes enable effective monitoring and continuous improvement. The review team were also able to confirm that the outputs of these processes feed into, and strengthen, the College's own quality assurance and quality improvement cycles whereby all external reports are received centrally at the College and disseminated to Curriculum Directors, who integrate actions points into QIPs for each curriculum area. Overall, the processes ensure that programmes remain current and valid and draw sufficiently on both information on student performance and external input to ensure their robustness.

2.46   The College engages with and benefits from robust annual monitoring and periodic review processes as part of its relationships with awarding bodies. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the risk presented by these arrangements is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have fair, effective and timely procedures for handling students' complaints and academic appeals.

Quality Code, *Chapter B9: Academic complaints and student appeals*

Findings

2.47   There is a framework in place for supporting informal and formal resolution of complaints and appeals. The College has a Compliments, Comments and Complaints Policy which sets out the procedure for complaints handled internally. Each of the awarding bodies also has a complaints policy and academic appeals policy which can be invoked where necessary and relevant. The College advocates informal resolution before any formal procedures are used and provides support for students through its Student Services team. This informal route, via tutors, was identified by students in their submission as the usual route for dealing with any concerns, although there is some lack of awareness on how to escalate complaints. Course handbooks inform students of the complaints and appeals processes.

2.48   The review team explored the complaints and appeals processes with students, managers, teachers and support staff. Informal resolution provides a useful means for addressing complaints and students who remain dissatisfied can seek to involve the awarding body or find support from the Student Services team.

2.49   The review team concluded that there were effective procedures for considering complaints and appeals, and that while students may not be aware of the policy explicitly, they were aware of how they could seek support outside of their programme team. The review team therefore considers the Expectation to be met and the risk presented by these arrangements 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

2.50   The majority of the College's higher education student body are in full-time employment and study part-time for purposes of professional development and career progression. The College's programmes draw on students' existing professional practice as a prerequisite of entry and for placements, with the exception of the FdSc Computing. An Employers' Handbook for one programme sets out broad guidance on the role of the workplace mentor and provides extracts of programme and module information.

2.51   The review team explored the relationship between the College, students and employers to ascertain whether learning opportunities on the programme were fully and formally connected with those in the workplace through meetings with staff, students and employers. Identification of and liaison with workplace mentors were more consistent and robust in some subject areas and weaker or lacking entirely in others. Employers have limited engagement in, and are supportive of, the learning experience at the most challenging times, such as during transition and induction. Characteristics of the FDQB could be effectively used to strengthen existing programmes, such as through the provision of employer and mentor handbooks.

2.52   Overall, the review team concluded that the College does not consistently establish and maintain a relationship with workplace mentors to ensure workplace learning is integrated with academic study. The review team **recommends** that the College formalise the relationship with, and responsibilities of, workplace mentors by September 2014.

2.53   The College has implemented arrangements with employers to ensure that learning opportunities are secure. Therefore, this Expectation is met but the inconsistency in relationships with workplace mentors presents a moderate risk because it affects a number of programmes.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.54   The College offers no postgraduate provision, therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

Quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.55   In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook.

2.56   All applicable Expectations are met and the risk is judged low in all areas except three which represent a moderate risk. Seven recommendations arise from this scrutiny of the quality of learning opportunities, three in relation to one Expectation, and four in relation to four Expectations. There is one affirmation in relation to one of these Expectations, and two features of good practice identified in relation to two Expectations.

2.57   The College's arrangements to support Expectations B3 and B4 are sufficient but the team identified a number of operational weaknesses in the recommendations and affirmation which present a risk. Actions taken to address these weaknesses will not result in major change to structures, processes or practices but will enable the College to meet the Expectations more fully.

2.58   The other recommendations identify improvements to enable the College to meet the relevant Expectations more fully and address minor oversights.

2.59   The review team concludes that the quality of learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

3 Judgement: Quality of the information produced about its provision

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

Quality Code, *Part C: Information about higher education provision*

Findings

3.1 The College produces information for prospective and current students via its website, leaflets, prospectuses and open day flyers. In agreement with an awarding body, it submits data so that Key Information Sets are displayed on its website.

3.2 Production of the programme handbooks is the responsibility of the awarding bodies. They are confirmed at validation and review events and updated by the College annually. For the University of Bedfordshire, the College completes a template for the handbook with course and unit-level information. Buckinghamshire New University retains responsibility for information published about their courses on the College's website; the University of Bedfordshire undertakes periodic review of partner colleges' websites to ensure the accuracy of information presented in relation to the courses and its relationship with the College.

3.3 The team explored this Expectation through the scrutiny of publicity and marketing information, including prospectuses and the College's website, and through meetings with staff and students. The College demonstrated a good understanding of its responsibilities for the provision of information as agreed with its awarding bodies, and familiarity with publicity guidelines and the arrangements for the use of branding for all College marketing and communications materials and activity.

3.4 Students confirmed that the pre-course information includes sufficient detail relating to admissions procedures, programme content and progression opportunities. They were satisfied with the accuracy and completeness of pre-course and course-level information, including the extensive range of helpful information located on the College's VLE. Students are aware that external examiner reports are located on the College's VLE, but do not routinely read them.

3.5 The College provides a student charter for higher education students but some students are either unaware or unfamiliar with the content. Staff are unsure of the process for reviewing, evaluating and updating the student charter.

3.6 The College has responded effectively to previous concerns regarding the introduction of a more formal system to check the accuracy and completeness of public information. Public information and version control processes and procedures are clearly articulated within the higher education marketing strategy, which takes account of *Chapter B2: Admissions* and *Part C: Information about higher education provision* of the Quality Code, and staff are clear about their responsibilities. The College's marketing team reviews all programme information on the website on a quarterly basis and the curriculum leaders, led by the Curriculum Directors, review their programme information for the website and prospectuses annually.

3.7 The team found that information contained on the College's website and on the VLE is up to date, attractively produced, relevant and easily accessible. The team agreed that the College's arrangements for providing information for its intended audience about the higher

education it offers are fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The operation of the policies and procedures for the provision of information meets this Expectation, and the arrangements pose a low risk.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Quality of the information produced about its provision: Summary of findings

3.8   In reaching its judgement about the quality of information about higher education provision, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook.

3.9   The Expectation in this area is met and the risk was judged low with no recommendations arising.

3.10   The review team concludes that information about higher education provision at the College **meets** UK expectations.

4 Judgement: Enhancement of student learning opportunities

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

Findings

4.1 The College invests time and effort into individual initiatives to improve the student experience or increase the accessibility of its higher education provision. Examples include the development of a dedicated higher education study space and the collaborative approach to enabling seamless progression in a number of subject areas. The College also delivers a robust system of continuous improvement at programme and subject level in line with its wider ethos of operating within discipline-based units.

4.2 These individual efforts are effective in their own right and produce a number of improvements but they do not constitute a deliberate approach to enhancement at provider level, meaning the Expectation is not met in theory.

4.3 The review team extensively explored the College's arrangements and approach to enhancement through meetings with senior managers, teaching staff and support staff. The College has a Higher Education Strategy with operational plans for some of the areas it covers, but this was missing for the student learning experience. The College was unable to evidence where an operational plan for the enhancement of the quality of students' learning opportunities could be found and drawn upon by staff and students.

4.4 The review team also explored whether priorities for enhancement could be verbally identified through its meetings with staff but did not receive consistent responses to indicate that enhancement priorities at provider level existed or were understood. Upon a request for further evidence on the provider-level approach to enhancement, the review team received a list of individual activities within some programmes such as visits to awarding bodies' sites which further confirmed the lack of strategic, provider-level view of enhancement. The College had purchased online resources to enhance pedagogy across its provision, but it was unclear how the impact of these resources on teaching would be measured, evaluated, evidenced or furthered.

4.5 The College provided evidence of executive-level discussions around developing a distinctive employer-led curriculum and defining graduate attributes as part of the development of a new College strategic plan. The review team considered this to be a useful starting point for developing an approach to enhancement but concluded that this could not constitute an existing, functioning and effective approach to enhancement.

4.6 Overall, the review team concluded that despite the Higher Education Strategy, the College lacks an articulation of the deliberate steps taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities, and the current approach is largely responsive and fragmented between subject areas. While the student learning experience is good according to external examiners, students and awarding bodies, the lack of focus on enhancement would limit the College in achieving some of its ambitions, for example a higher education curriculum that meets local, regional and national skills needs on an ongoing and evolving basis. The review team **recommends** that the College explicitly articulate the delivery, measurement and monitoring of the teaching and learning elements of the Higher Education Strategy by December 2014, and **recommends** that the College ensure deliberate steps are articulated and taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities by December 2014.

4.7   In light of the weaknesses identified in the College's approach to enhancement, the review team concluded that the Expectation in this area is **not met**. These weaknesses in the College's governance of enhancement, and how this is articulated in action, represent a moderate risk.

Expectation: **Not met**
Level of risk: **Moderate**

Enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.8   In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook.

4.9   The review team took account of the College's current practice in relation to enhancement and its recent work around developing a distinctive employer-led curriculum and defining graduate attributes as part of the development of a new College strategic plan. This work is not yet fully embedded in the operational planning.

4.10   The Expectation in this area is not met and the risk is moderate. Without action, this moderate risk could lead to a serious problem over time with the management of this area. Two recommendations arise from this scrutiny of the College's approach to enhancement: one ensures the articulation and delivery of the teaching and learning elements of the Higher Education Strategy, and the other ensures deliberate steps are taken at provider level to enhance learning opportunities.

4.11   The review team concludes the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

5   Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

Findings

5.1   The College works well with employers at all levels. In terms of high-level engagement it is a partner in a business federation with Buckinghamshire New University under the title Buckinghamshire Education, Skills and Training (BEST). This partnership delivers a strategic vision for seamless education and skills provision from levels 1 through to 8 to meet the needs of businesses and the community. The College also works with its two Local Enterprise Partnerships to meet regional and national skills needs. A good example of an outcome of these engagement strategies with employers and industry professionals is the development of a new foundation degree, which will involve a dynamic partnership between employers, Buckinghamshire New University and the College.

5.2   The College provides students with a wide range of opportunities to develop their employability skills and demonstrates this commitment at all levels. The College is a 'hub' for members of the Federation of Small Businesses and this enables good networking opportunities between the College, employers and students.

5.3   The College works with its awarding bodies on their respective employability agendas and fully engages with their requirements for embedding employability throughout its provision. This includes use of a published guide which provides a structural framework for the development of employability skills.

5.4   The demonstration of the College's commitment to employability included a staff training session on supporting students to gain employment. It reinforced the outcomes of training through a variety of initiatives to encourage staff to reflect on employability for students. The College's Professional Development Policy expects that all teaching staff are required to take five days of industrial updating over three years.

5.5   The College aims to recruit teaching staff who have current industrial experience. This encourages students to develop their employability skills; for example, at least one member of teaching staff is an employer and is able to share current professional practice with staff and students. Students appreciate the industrial and commercial practices embedded in their teaching and learning; for example, teachers provide case studies of their own experiences.

5.6   The College prioritises employability by embedding it as an element in the College's annual programme review process. Students undertake study modules which include the development of presentation skills, writing curricula vitae and promoting their skills to prospective employers.

5.7   The portfolio of foundation degree programmes and work-related teacher training programmes confirms the value the College places in the importance of developing students' employability potential. For example, the Foundation Degree in Educational Practice demonstrates commitment to employer engagement through links with local schools and the provision of work placements, and students value this.

5.8   Module descriptors embed employability in the curriculum, and some good, clearly articulate criteria for the development of employability skills, through stated aims and learning outcomes; for example, modules within the Foundation Degree Working with Children and Young People encourage a reflective approach to professional practice. The Foundation Degree in Computing includes a module on creating and managing a professional portfolio using current digital technologies, while the Foundation Degree in Business and Management assesses a work-based project and students' ability to link and apply business and management themes in the workplace. Similarly, there are a variety of

modules within the programmes that aim to develop students' skills in understanding theories in relation to work settings, for example within an early years setting.

5.9   Students are encouraged to develop their writing and critical analysis skills and use the career development facilities at the awarding bodies. Students receive visits and talks from employers and they are able to gain more information about future employment. Students confirmed that their engagement with the College makes them feel more confident of promotion by their current employer and of their recruitment prospects as a consequence of the knowledge and skills they have acquired from their study, including live briefs.

5.10   The College provides support for the development of employability potential through careers advice from external speakers, and students complimented the value of this aspect of their learning experience, consolidated by the expertise of teaching staff in promoting various progression routes. Students know what is expected of them and they value work placements and the employability focus of their programmes. Some students are not aware that the College provides a careers service, and this aspect could be promoted more effectively to students.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 27 to 29 of the Higher Education Review handbook.

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

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

Academic standards
The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Award
A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

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

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

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

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

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

e-learning
See technology enhanced or enabled learning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quality Code
Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** that all providers are required to meet.

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

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

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or **e-learning**)
Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

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