



Quality Review Visit of Belfast Metropolitan College

March 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Belfast Metropolitan College

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

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

Areas for development

The review team identified the following **area for development** that has the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at Belfast Metropolitan College. The review team advises Belfast Metropolitan College to:

- ensure clear reference to the role of NIPSO in documentation relating to academic appeals (Student Protection).

Specified improvements

No specified improvements have been identified.

About this review

The review visit took place from 13 to 15 March 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Miss Sarah Bennett (student reviewer)
- Mrs Alison Jones
- Mr Mark Cooper.

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

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

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

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

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

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

About Belfast Metropolitan College

Belfast Metropolitan College (the College) was established in 2007 following the merger of Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education and Castlereagh College. The College has four sites across Belfast where it delivers higher education, and at the time of the review the College had 1196 part-time and 1400 full-time students enrolled at the College. The College delivers higher education across more than 30 subject areas in partnership with four universities (awarding bodies) including Queen's University, Ulster University, Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Dundee with an agreement to deliver provision from September 2018 in partnership with The Open University. The College runs a number of higher national diplomas and certificates in conjunction with Pearson and delivers a number of higher education professional and vocational courses with professional awarding organisations. The College also offers higher level apprenticeships in civil engineering, accounting, IT pathways and digital marketing.

The College's vision is *to be a world class college that nurtures the talent and ambition of the City of Belfast and beyond*. Its mission is *to make a fundamental impact on the economic and social success of the city of Belfast and beyond by equipping its people, employers and communities with the education and skills for work* and is supported by four strategic aims and four core values. The College works to meet its strategic aims through collaboration and membership of cross-sector working groups, and Northern Ireland specific, national and international college forums and groups.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 In partnership with its awarding bodies and organisations, the College has effective arrangements in place to ensure that the academic standards of its programmes meet the standards set out by the FHEQ. Programme and course specifications clearly indicate alignment with the FHEQ, and subject benchmark statements are referenced. Ultimate responsibility for academic standards lies with the College's awarding bodies and awarding organisations. Staff confirmed they had the academic freedom to work closely with each university partner in the development of foundation degrees.

2 Programmes are assessed internally through processes outlined by the awarding bodies and awarding organisations, including internal moderation and double marking, with grades achieved by students considered at Examination Boards. The College has appropriate external input from external examiners, and External Quality Assurers, ensuring comparability with similar education providers. College staff explained how they seek comparability through a sectoral working group of up to six Northern Ireland Colleges through internal verification and cross-moderation events for cross sector collaborative provision.

3 The College also ensures comparability of academic standards through inclusion of key stakeholders and external representatives in programme design, approval and delivery, and adhering to formal university processes for programme revalidation and approval. College academic staff who deliver higher education are also active within their relevant industry, and confirmed that assessment materials are relevant to current practice.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland

4 The review team found that the College has in place effective governance arrangements to maintain oversight of the College's higher education provision. The College has a defined structure for its governance that includes the Curriculum, Quality and Engagement (CQE) Committee, a sub-committee of the Governing Body which has oversight of the College's higher education provision. The CQE Committee receives regular reports, data and presentations and scrutinises the Annual Provider Review report prior to sign off by the Governing Body and submission of the signed statement to the Department for the Economy (DfE).

5 Members of the Governing Body are drawn from a wide range of backgrounds and includes both staff and student governors. In response to a recommendation from the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education review in 2017, the College has designated two governors on the CQE with responsibility for higher education.

6 Staff and governors articulated the importance of academic freedom and collegiality within the College. Members of the Governing Body and its sub-committees are actively involved in higher education activities and initiatives at the College, including participation in validation/revalidation events, institutional approval visits and the HE Student Representative meeting with the Executive Team.

7 Robust arrangements are in place for maintaining oversight of academic risk. The Director of Curriculum and Learner Success holds monthly Curriculum Planning and Performance Reviews (PPRs) with each Curriculum Department that include the identification of risks. Outcomes from the PPRs are reported back to the Executive Team and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) has oversight of the College's Corporate Risk Register which assesses each risk on basis of a colour rating of green, amber, red or black. The Centre Manager for Strategic Planning presents updates on risks to the ARC which, in turn, reports to the Board of Governors on a quarterly basis.

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

8 The setting and maintenance of academic standards is clearly defined, understood and effectively discharged by the College in relation to the delivery of awards. The College works within regulations and in accordance to agreements with its partner universities and awarding organisations. The formal agreements cover many partnership aspects but in relation to academic standards cover the securing and setting of standards through items such as admissions, assessment practice, programme monitoring and review and external examining. These agreements are supported by process and practice information detailed in associated partnership handbooks and formal agreements. For other non-university awarding organisations, many are assessed either partially or fully through formal examination and it is through these assessment methods that national standards are met.

9 The College has a strong internal verification process including standardisation activities shared across up to six Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges through a common working group for cross sector collaborative provision. They also follow the marking and moderation processes as set out by its awarding bodies and awarding organisations and staff attend associated Examination Boards. Programme assessors for these programmes initially design and draft assessment materials which then undergo internal verification and validation by other team members internally and then more widely in the other Northern Ireland colleges for cross sector collaborative provision. The strength and effectiveness of the system has been noted by their associated awarding bodies and awarding organisations. They also ensure that external examiner feedback is appropriately addressed which also confirm standards are met.

10 The College follows and participates in validation and revalidation events with its partner universities. Similarly the College has designed and is currently piloting their own system of periodic reviews for non-university higher education programmes. The rollout of this pilot coincides with a timely strategic review of its existing higher education provision to ensure the needs of student and employer are met.

11 Definitive programme records are evidenced in programme specifications which are appropriately detailed and are found as separate documents or presented in course handbooks and are also available on the College's virtual learning environment (VLE). Programme specifications indicate where each programme is aligned to the appropriate level of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmarks.

12 Data is used effectively to monitor and improve standards. Each member of staff has access to relevant course data to allow for monitoring and improvement. Higher education Data is reported to governors through the Curriculum, Quality and Engagement Committee for review and sign-off of the HE Annual Provider Review. Top level college data confirms strong levels of performance for retention and achievement. This is supported and broken-down into part and full time modes and benchmarked against regional factors. Data

is scrutinised and presented to the Governing Body with detail and outcomes published in the College Annual Report.

Rounded judgement

13 The College's quality assurance arrangements are appropriate in enabling it to fulfil its responsibilities to its awarding bodies and awarding organisations, and to align with the baseline regulatory requirements in the maintenance of academic standards.

14 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

15 The College has a clear admissions policy and process, which is available to prospective and current students and staff on the College website. The policies are inclusive, fair and informed by the strategic priorities of the provider. There is also a clear policy for accreditation and recognition of prior experiential learning (APEL), which is in line with Northern Ireland APEL guidelines.

16 Managing and monitoring the quality of the student academic experience is achieved through a variety of means. The Department for Learner Success ensures integration of academic standards and the quality of the student academic experience, by receiving input from each Head of Department. The Director of Curriculum and Learner Success chairs regular meetings with the Directorate's heads of department and the College Curriculum Quality Assurance (CQA) manager every two weeks, under clear terms of reference. Overarching quality assurance and the annual quality calendar are also developed to identify strengths and areas for development.

17 Student engagement and involvement has been greatly improved since the last QAA review in 2014, with a new Student Council, formal training for higher education representatives, student involvement in the HE Quality Committee and Student Governor representation. Students described participation in meetings with the external examiner, and involvement in the revalidation process. The College has further plans to incentivise student representation and make participation easier. Students described the consideration taken to represent higher education views as a Student Governor representative.

18 The College regularly examines retention, achievement and progression data against regional benchmarks, undertakes internal reviews of provision in the form of the Annual Quality Assessment Return and is subject to annual external review by the DfE. Feedback from students is gathered in a "You said: We Did" initiative, at staff-student Consultative Committee (SSCC) Meetings and in the twice-yearly student satisfaction survey with satisfaction rates of those surveyed at 90%+. Staff gave examples of how student engagement, attendance and student voice data is being used to drive the rationale behind module selection and periodic reviews of non-university higher education programmes.

19 Feedback regarding resources is captured via the annual Learner Satisfaction Survey, the results of which are shared with the HE Quality Group and SLT if required. Comments from stakeholders such as external examiners and a recent STEM Foundation report indicated appropriate and up-to-date resource provision, with respect to university expectations and employer requirements for the courses offered. Students noted a number of improvements as a result of their feedback.

20 Pastoral support for students is good. Personal tutorials and the VLE are used to support students in their learning. Student support is also provided by the Department for Learner Success which is divided into Student Support and Student Services. These include information about safeguarding, support for transgender students, wellbeing, external counselling services, the Students Union and accessibility information. Students are signposted to these services through the Department for Learner Success on the College website, the College handbook, and the VLE.

21 The College's approach to the quality of learning and teaching is laid out in the Curriculum Strategy and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. To ensure that

each student has an equal and effective opportunity to achieve, teaching staff are subject to annual evaluation processes, feedback from student surveys and teaching observations every two years. Staff also receive considerable training regarding the Quality Code and from the DfE. Many lecturers are also practitioners, and as part-time staff are better able to monitor and support students in work placements. Employers receive guidance from the College in a placement induction and regularly update students' progress with staff.

22 The extensive College information policy is mapped to Part C of the Quality Code. Information provided to prospective and current students on the College website, in the College prospectus and in course handbooks and staff handbooks is comprehensive. Students confirmed that they found information provided by the College to be accurate.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland

23 The College has comprehensive arrangements in place to engage students in academic governance. Students are represented by elected HE Class Representatives and HE student representatives of the Student Council who sit on the College's HE Quality Group responsible for the safeguarding of academic standards and quality of provision. Training for Class Representatives and Student Council is provided by the College's Students Union and two full-time Student Liaison Officers. Members of the Student Council meet with members of the student body, Director for Curriculum and Learner Success and Governors.

24 Students are invited to participate in validation/revalidation panels, meet with external examiners and provide feedback on branding/marketing materials and inputting into the student ambassador information. The College is proactively encouraging greater participation in governance through the Student Liaison Officers working directly with higher education representatives, greater notification of meeting times and developments from the start of the next academic year to provide a training pack, introduce a buddy system and qualifications to enhance their CVs.

25 A Student Representative is also elected to the membership of the College's Governing Body. This role is restricted within the Articles of Government agreed for all Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland that enable one Governor from the whole student body to represent both further education and higher education students. Whilst it is therefore not always possible for the College to secure a student governor from its higher education student body, the College's HE Class and Council representatives compensated sufficiently for the absence of a higher education student governor.

26 SLT, Audit and Risk Committee and the full Governing Body receive summary reports and updates on complaints and appeals and on-going resolutions. Oversight of complaints is through Audit and Risk Committee which undertakes effective monitoring to ensure outcomes are used to improve student experience and inform the Governing Body's annual reporting. As part of the College's schedule of internal audits, an external audit company undertook an audit of complaints in 2016 resulting in action taken by College to develop a suite of templates for complainants.

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

27 The College's approach to admissions is consistent and transparent. The College website has a defined higher education section dedicated to consumer protection measures.

It has links to key documents published by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and also direct access to download the Complaints and Compliments Policy which was developed and adopted by all six Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges. This policy is clear, inclusive and details the process for submitting a complaint. The policy also covers pre-application admission complaints as well as on-programme complaints.

28 Terms and conditions are CMA compliant and outline contractual expectations of both parties and provide headline explanations of supporting policies and procedures, for example, equality & diversity, course cancellation and closure and refunds. The terms and conditions document states that any changes will be consulted upon with the student body.

29 The College also reviews the effectiveness of its policies and analyses feedback to improve services. The Admissions and Enrolment Group has the remit to scrutinise admissions related complaints. This group also plans for, proposes and monitors admissions procedures and adapts practice following internal and external reviews.

30 The College maintains a comprehensive UK Quality Code mapping document that demonstrates strong practice and adherence to Part C. Its website and prospectus provides a full range of information for students to help them make informed decisions including a recently developed and mandatory Pre Entry Advice and Guidance (PEAG) session. This session contextualises associated programme specifications for the courses the candidates are interested in applying for entry onto.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's (NIPSO) Principles of Good Administration

31 The College has detailed procedures for Higher Education Programme Closure, Suspension and Substantial Change that are aligned to the UK Quality Code, and the CMA guidance and the College's Terms and Conditions. The procedure enables a flexible approach to be adopted in terms of complexity and risk rating associated with the closure or suspension of individual programmes. The CQA Manger is responsible for putting in place improvement and recovery plans for under-performing courses and course change/closure action plans monitored through the Planning and Performance review process.

32 The College provided a detailed example of the closure of the programme operated in collaboration with Manchester Metropolitan University in order to safeguard current students' learning experience. Students informed the review team that they are consulted on any changes to their programmes carried out in line with the College's procedures and College staff explained how they had been involved in changes made to the programmes offered by their awarding bodies.

33 The College's procedures for handling complaints are aligned to standards for complaints handling in the public service agreed by the Northern Ireland Permanent Secretaries Group. The College's Corporate Compliance Manager within the Centre for Strategic Planning produces a quarterly report which examines complaints and appeals. This is considered by the College's Audit and Risk Committee, Governing Body and Senior Leadership Team through risk management reports. Complaints and appeals data is also fed into College processes through the HE Quality Group and College's Admissions and Enrolment Group to inform improvements. In response to a recommendation from the Northern Ireland Ombudsman to make the complaints process more accessible on the website, the College implemented an on-line complaints handling system to enhance student accessibility in addition to making the policy more readily available via the College's homepage.

34 As with the College's approach to complaints, the College's procedures for handling academic appeals are proportionate, fair and timely and are appropriately reflected within

individual Programme Handbooks for its higher education courses. They also reference the Northern Ireland Ombudsman Scheme (NIPSO), of which the College is a member. The College's Assessment Appeals Guidelines does not reference the independent body if students remain dissatisfied upon completion of internal procedures for academic appeals which the College acknowledged. The College plans to review the Guidelines within its usual review cycle in the next academic year. The review team therefore concludes that the College should ensure clear reference to the role of NIPSO in documentation relating to academic appeals, identifying this as an **area for development**.

Rounded judgement

35 Arrangements at the College for the academic governance and management of the student academic experience are appropriate and effective in the context of the responsibilities delegated to it by its awarding bodies and awarding organisations, and the baseline regulatory requirements. The review team identified one area for development within student protection which highlighted an omission in referencing NIPSO to students in the College's appeals process.

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

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