Higher Education Review of City of Bristol College

September 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 City of Bristol College. The review took place from 30 September-3 October 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Anthony Turjansky
- Mrs Catherine Hill
- Mr Matthew Kitching (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by City of Bristol 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 student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student 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 7.

In reviewing City of Bristol 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/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code.
[2] Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106.
[3] QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus.
[4] Higher Education Review web pages: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review.

Amended judgement February 2016

Introduction

In September 2014, City of Bristol College underwent a Higher Education Review, which resulted in judgements of 'meets UK expectations' for the maintenance of the academic standards of the awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies, for the quality of the information about learning opportunities, and for the enhancement of student learning opportunities. However, in relation to the quality of student learning opportunities, a judgement of 'does not meet UK expectations' was made.

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 published an action plan in April 2015 describing how it intended to address the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the review, and has been working over the last seven months to demonstrate how it has implemented that plan.

The follow-up process included three 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 30 November 2015 with one reviewer. During the visit the team met senior staff and students to discuss progress and triangulate the evidence base received over the preceding months.

The visit confirmed that the recommendations and affirmations relating to the quality of learning opportunities had been successfully addressed and the good practice appropriately disseminated. Actions against recommendations and good practice relating to the maintenance of academic standards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies, the quality of the provider's information about learning opportunities and the enhancement of student learning opportunities, which received positive judgements, had also been completed on schedule and contributed to the progress against the quality of student learning opportunities.

QAA Board decision and amended judgements

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 academic standards of awards offered on behalf its of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student 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 as follows.

Recommendation - Expectation A1
With regard to aligning work-based learning with the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark,* a Higher Education Employability and Placement Officer post was established

and the Officer has worked with Heads of School, programme leads and tutors to audit work-based learning on all foundation degrees and identify areas for development through an action plan. An Employability, Work-Based Learning and Placement Policy that requires students to be in employment or to undertake structured work placements has been developed.

In respect of ensuring that learning outcomes for interim exit awards are defined in programme specifications, the College has worked with its awarding bodies and organisation to develop learning outcomes for interim level 4 awards in foundation degrees and Higher National Diplomas. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B2
The College has put in place an appeals policy, which describes a three-stage process, for higher education admissions decisions, that sets out the possible grounds for appeal. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B4
In respect of staff providing appropriate opportunities to students to understand and evaluate their development of graduate skills, the College has worked with its awarding organisation on developing skills-related learning outcomes in Higher National Diploma programme specifications. Programme specifications for Plymouth University foundation degrees also now describe skills-related learning outcomes at level 4. In addition, the College's awarding bodies have delivered presentations on embedding graduate skills in curriculum and skills-related resources have been added to the College's intranet and virtual learning environment. A graduate skills audit tool has also been developed for use with students at induction and followed up in tutorials or modules. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectations B5 and B8
The team found that student representation features among the College's strategic enhancement priorities for higher education. A new staff post of Higher Education Student Intern has been created whose key responsibilities include promoting the student representative system. The team found evidence that the student representative system is promoted at programme level and training has been delivered in conjunction with the Plymouth University Students' Union. The Higher Education Student Representative Handbook describes the role and signposts key College policies, information sources and contacts. Student representatives understand the expectations of their role, including participation in programme committees and feeding back to students. One student representative per school attends the Higher Education Board and contributes fully to discussions. The Board now includes a higher education student on its membership. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B6
In respect of ensuring that staff make thorough use of the relevant assessment guidelines to inform the development of inclusive assessment strategies, the application of marking criteria and guidance for students that explains how grades align with those criteria, the College has developed a higher education-specific Teaching, Learning and Assessment Handbook for staff, which contains guidance on inclusive practice, and a student-focused guide, Higher Education - Understanding Assessment, with a section on learning outcomes and assessment terminology. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B7
The team found clear evidence that College-level monitoring and reporting of action taken in response to higher education programme issues, including those surfaced by external examiners, is consistent and effective.

The team also found that a higher education Student Representative Handbook summarises the role, credentials and appointment of external examiners and signposts more detailed information, including external examiner reports on the College's virtual learning environment. Students demonstrated their familiarity with, and understanding of, external examiners, and the team noted the steps taken by the College to increase their understanding through programme leads, induction, tutorials, programme committees, student meetings with examiners and access to external examiner reports. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B8
In respect of ensuring that there is adequate opportunity for programme-level monitoring committees to inform school-level self-evaluation and action planning, the team found that, while the timescale for annual monitoring remained challenging and school and College self-evaluation documents were still developed contemporaneously, a number of mitigating actions had been taken. Autumn programme committees were now scheduled earlier to allow more time to inform the completion of school self-evaluation documents and improvement plans. The Assistant Principal for Higher Education works closely with Heads of School to draft the College higher education self-evaluation document and action plan and draft self-evaluation documents are considered together at a new Pre-Higher Education Board meeting, held two weeks before the main Board. The review team concludes that the College is making sufficient progress against this recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B8
In respect of clarifying the locus of approval for school and College higher education self-evaluation documents and action plans and ensuring they receive due scrutiny in line with the defined processes and timescales, the team found that changes to the higher education quality cycle have included the earlier scheduling of autumn programme committees and introduction of a Pre-Higher Education Board meeting to finalise school and College-level self-evaluation documents prior to their approval by the Higher Education Board. More proactive and systematic use of Chair's Action between meetings enables continuous monitoring of school action plans with progress reported to the next meetings of the Higher Education Board and Governors' Curriculum and Quality Committee, and subsequent meetings. The review team concludes that the College is making sufficient progress against this recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B8
In respect of ensuring all programmes undergo planned periodic reviews, the team found evidence that revised College guidance for programme monitoring and review has been approved by the Higher Education Board and includes an internal process for the periodic review of Pearson programmes. Review will be cyclical and conducted at intervals of no more than five years with the first to taking place three years after validation.

Recommendation - Expectations B8 and C
The team found that existing guidance on programme monitoring and review has been consolidated into a strategic document which acknowledges operational variations between awarding bodies and includes a new specification for the periodic review of Pearson programmes. The higher education staff intranet provides links to external sources of information, including the Quality Code and QAA HER process, and internal guidance on programme validation, monitoring and review accompanied by College and school level

higher education self-evaluations and improvement plans and minutes of their consideration by the Higher Education Board. The Board's terms of reference and membership were revised to include the attendance of two higher education Governors and enhanced reporting of discussions and Chair's actions to the Governors' Curriculum and Quality Committee. The team saw evidence of meaningful discussions by both the Higher Education Board and the Curriculum and Quality Committee, especially in relation to monitoring of action plans, and the proactive steps taken to increase awareness of the Board and its role among staff. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Recommendation - Expectation B10

To ensure adequate and appropriate oversight of student placement opportunities at programme and College level, the new Higher Education Employability and Placement Officer has worked with Heads of School, programme leads and tutors to audit current work-based opportunities and identify areas for development through an employability action plan. In addition to placements, the new Employability, Work-Based Learning and Placement Policy includes employer-set projects and extends to cover work shadowing, community activities and volunteering. An associated Work-Based Learning and Placement Statement describes staff links to industry, use of visiting speakers and careers guidance. The Policy, which benchmarks to the latest *Foundation Degree Characteristics Statement* (2015), published by QAA, and ASET's *Good Practice Guide for Work based and Placement Learning in Higher Education* (2013), was consulted on extensively with staff pending approval by the Higher Education Board. A College database of employers and placements is in development and will incorporate information currently held in schools with centrally held data from organisational health and safety audits. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Recommendation - Enhancement

The team found evidence that the College has developed a more systematic and planned approach to enhancing learning opportunities through quality assurance processes and has a designated lead for enhancement at executive level. The revised terms of reference for the Higher Education Board describe the promotion of continuous and systematic improvement and identify the Deputy Principal (as Chair) as the College's executive lead for higher education enhancement. Strategic enhancement is now a standing item on Higher Education Board agendas. The review team concludes that the College is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

Affirmation - Expectation C

The team found evidence that students are familiar with the higher education pages of the virtual learning environment and use them to access module guides, assessment information and external examiner reports.

Good Practice - Expectation B3

Students continue to value the industrial experience of teaching staff and the use of industry experts as visiting tutors and mentors. The College has allocated funding to support visiting lecturers and educational visits. Staff undertake higher academic and professional qualifications and attend conferences based on needs that are identified through the College's staff appraisal system. The majority of teaching staff are part-time and either work in, or retain links with, their industries and professions. Employer relationships formed as part of developing student placement opportunities provide additional opportunities for staff to maintain their professional currency. The team concludes that the College is capitalising upon this identified area of good practice.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about City of Bristol College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at City of Bristol College.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf its of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **does not meet** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following feature of **good practice** at City of Bristol College.

- The use of industry-based visiting lecturers and the extent to which academic staff maintain their professional practice to support student learning opportunities (Expectation B3).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to City of Bristol College.

By March 2015:

- ensure that the requirements of work-based learning align with the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* and that learning outcomes for interim exit awards are defined in programme specifications (Expectation A1)
- ensure staff provide appropriate opportunities to students to understand and evaluate their development of graduate skills (Expectation B4)
- ensure that staff make thorough use of the relevant assessment guidelines to inform the development of inclusive assessment strategies, the application of marking criteria and guidance for students that explains how grades align with those criteria (Expectation B6)
- ensure that all external examiner reports are actioned and that recurring themes across all higher education programmes are identified and addressed (Expectation B7)
- ensure that students are informed about the role of external examiners and external examiner reports (Expectation B7)
- complete, codify and implement existing approval, monitoring and review policies and processes and deliberative structures and formally and systematically evaluate and review them (Expectations B8 and C)
- ensure adequate and appropriate oversight of student placement opportunities at programme and College level (Expectation B10).

By June 2015:

- develop and implement an appeals policy for admissions (Expectation B2)
- ensure adequate opportunity for programme level monitoring committees to inform school-level self-evaluation and action planning (Expectation B8)

- clarify the locus of approval for School and College higher education self-evaluation documents and action plans and ensure they receive due scrutiny in line with the defined processes and timescales (Expectation B8).

By September 2015:

- develop a comprehensive programme of training and support for student representation and ensure that there is a defined structure of student engagement at all levels (Expectations B5 and B8)
- ensure that all programmes undergo planned periodic reviews (Expectation B8)
- develop a more systematic and planned approach to enhancing learning opportunities through quality assurance processes and a designated lead for enhancement at executive level (Enhancement).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The work to promote the higher education pages on the virtual learning environment (Expectation C).

Theme: Student Employability

The College has a vocational higher education offer with a strong focus on employability and higher skills development to support learners' academic, personal and professional progression. The College's Strategic Plan aims to offer a variety of routes for employers and individuals to gain level 5 and 6 qualifications, 'creating lifetime opportunities through outstanding education and training'. The large majority of the College's higher education programmes are Pearson Higher National Diplomas, Higher National Certificates and foundation degrees, which include a significant proportion of work-based learning. The College's Careers and Progression Team provides practical advice for job seeking comprising individual guidance, workshops, drop-in and other events, preparation for interviews and access to volunteering opportunities. Students value the professional/industrial expertise of teaching staff and teachers with industry backgrounds remain active in their professions through professional updating.

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

About City of Bristol College

City of Bristol College, with in excess of 27,000 students, is one of the largest further education colleges in the country and was formed by a series of mergers starting in 1996 and culminating in January 2002 with the merger with Soundwell College.

The College mission is 'to create lifetime opportunities through outstanding education and training' while that of the University Centre is 'the delivery of inclusive affordable higher education and professional provision to potential students who can benefit from it regardless of their status or background'.

The College has five main campuses across the City with higher education offered mainly at its University Centre on its Ashley Down campus, but also at other campuses and outreach sites. The College offer includes programmes at Qualification and Credit Framework (QCF) levels 2 to 7 and *Framework for Higher Education Qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) levels 4 to 6, which cover a diverse range of vocational curriculum areas that have relevance to local students and employers.

There are currently 766 students studying on higher education programmes. The higher education offer includes foundation level programmes, Higher National Certificates, Higher National Diplomas, foundation degrees and some higher-level professional programmes that sit on the Qualification and Credit Framework (and which are out of the scope of the Higher Education Review). From September 2014, the College will be offering its first bachelor's programme. The programmes offered are in partnership with Pearson, Bath Spa University, Plymouth University, the University of Gloucestershire and the University of the West of England.

The College underwent an Ofsted inspection in February 2013 when it received an overall grading of inadequate (Grade 4). The College has stated in the self-evaluation document that it was apparent that some of the issues that led to the inadequate grading of the College's further education provision were also to be found in higher education.

In addition, the Skills Funding Agency had assessed the College as inadequate for financial health and a financial recovery plan was put in place for the academic year 2013-14 with the support of the Further Education Commissioner.

A significant restructure of the whole College took place in the summer of 2013. As part of that process all higher education provision, previously delivered in curriculum area faculties, was brought under the management of the University Centre with a new higher education management team led by an Assistant Principal (Higher Education).

During 2013-14 the College also undertook a Corporate Services Review to restructure and streamline the administrative and support functions across all delivery areas. However, to take account of the distinctive nature of higher education, the University Centre retained its own administration team. Other developments included the appointment of a dedicated higher education librarian and the creation of the post of Higher Education Planning and Operations Manager.

In June 2014, to facilitate a move away from programme-focused administration towards more functional activities, higher education administration was split to form a Customer Services team and a Data Information team. This was to provide a more consistent approach to the wide variety of tasks undertaken by the University Centre Administration Team.

After the comprehensive programme of change and development across the College in 2013 a subsequent re-inspection by Ofsted in May 2014 saw the College regarded as requiring improvement (Grade 3).

Higher education is offered across five schools: the School of Business, Computing & Professional; the School of Visual & Performing Arts; the School of Education & Counselling; the School of Health & Care; and the School of Engineering, Aero & Construction.
The programmes offered by the College on behalf of Pearson and the awarding bodies are listed below:

Pearson
Business HNC
Computing HNC
Music Production HND
Health & Social Care HND
Construction HNC/HND (new for 2014-15)
Civil Engineering HNC
Aeronautical Engineering HND

Bath Spa University
Early Years FdA

University of Gloucestershire
Counselling FdSc

University of Plymouth
Administration and Business Technology FdA
Business FdA
Computing and Information Technology FdSc
Dance Theatre Performance FdA
Digital Media Production FdA
Graphic Design with Interactive Multimedia FdA
Interactive Multimedia with Graphic Design FdA
Professional Photography FdA
Theatre Media Performance FdA
Music Production FdA (new for 2014-15)
Creative Arts Therapy Studies FdA
Early Childhood Studies FdA
Health & Social Care Management BA (Hons) (new for 2014-15)
Health & Social Care Management, Top up BA (Hons) (new for 2014-15)
Construction HNC
Electrical Building Services HNC
Engineering (Electrical and Electronic) HNC
Engineering (Mechanical) HNC and FdSc
Engineering (Mechatronics) HNC

University of the West of England
Computing Foundation Year 0
Health and Social Care Practice FdSc
Health Professions Foundation Year 0
Aerospace Engineering Manufacturing FdSc
Three first year modules from Engineering BA (Hons)

The College underwent Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in June 2010, which determined that confidence could be placed in the College's management of its

responsibilities, as set out in its partnership or centre recognition and approval agreements, for the standards of the awards it offers on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisation and for the quality of learning opportunities it offers. It also found that reliance could be placed on the accuracy and completeness of public information.

At the time, the College produced an action plan in response to the nine features of good practice and one desirable recommendation, which was signed off as complete at the College's Higher Education Quality Board in May 2011.

The self-evaluation document, submitted as part of the Higher Education Review process, sets out the actions that have been taken to maintain and enhance the identified good practice. These have generally been effective in maintaining the identified good practices.

To build on the desirable recommendation that the College continue to develop a peer observation scheme to support its higher education staff, in 2013-14 it introduced a new system for higher education teaching observation that would include an element of peer review undertaken by experienced higher education practitioners.

The self-evaluation document recorded that, in response to the Ofsted inspection of 2013, the College undertook a comprehensive cross-College review of teaching and learning which for further education included the use of an external consultancy firm to carry out an intensive programme of assessed further education level co-observations with College Directors. To introduce a parity of approach for its higher education staff a decision was made that higher education observations, while graded and co-observed, should also contain a peer element and should only be undertaken by experienced higher education practitioners.

Explanation of the findings about City of Bristol 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: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations

Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* are met by:

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant subject benchmark statements.

Quality Code, *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards*

Findings

1.1 The College works with four awarding bodies (Plymouth University, University of Gloucestershire, Bath Spa University and University of the West of England) and one awarding organisation, Pearson, in the approval, monitoring and review of its higher education programmes. Awarding partners set the standards of the College's programmes through the application of their own academic frameworks and regulations, which ensure that qualifications are positioned at the appropriate level and awarded on the achievement of learning outcomes that students can demonstrate through assessment. This process should allow the Expectation A1 of the Quality Code to be met.

1.2 The review team examined how the procedures worked in practice by reviewing the evidence and by speaking to awarding body and organisation representatives; senior, academic and support staff; and students.

1.3 The College produces programme specifications and other programme documentation to the specific requirements of its awarding bodies and organisation which are considered during programme validation. When designing programmes, staff consult the FHEQ and, where appropriate, the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements as well as other reference points such as the Southern England Consortium credit level descriptors.

Validation documents and reports make various references to engagement with the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements.

1.4   Notwithstanding some variations between the awarding bodies and organisation, programme specifications mostly define programme learning outcomes in respect of the knowledge and understanding and cognitive (intellectual), practical (subject-specific) and key transferable skills that students will have demonstrated on achievement of their intended award. All programme specifications seen by the review team described the award that students would achieve on completion and the level and credit value of the modules that contributed to it. However, awards available to students on partial completion of, or early exit from, a programme were not always specified and programme learning outcomes were rarely differentiated by level within a programme.

1.5   In addition to qualification level descriptors and Subject Benchmark Statements, the design of foundation degrees is also influenced by the national *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* which specifies 'authentic and innovative work-based learning' that enables the development of higher-level learning within both the institution and the workplace through full or part-time work, integrated work placements, and real work environments.

1.6   The review team saw evidence of several foundation degree programmes where students were already in relevant employment or undertaking formal organised placements, or engaged directly with employers or clients in the execution of work-based projects. However, the College did not present evidence of authentic work-based learning beyond work-related theory and practice in the Foundation Degree in Business and queried the availability of a formal placement or employer/client-led project in the Foundation Degree in Music and Sound Production. The College has acknowledged the challenge of providing meaningful work experience for all learners. The review team **recommends** that the College ensure that the requirements of work-based learning align with the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* and that learning outcomes for interim exit awards are defined in programme specifications.

1.7   Overall, the review team concludes that the College has not taken full account of the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* in some subjects and therefore there is the potential for students to be awarded a foundation degree without undertaking authentic work-based learning. Consequently, the review team conclude that the Expectation is not met and that the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

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

Findings

1.8   Awarding body and awarding organisation regulations, to which the College is required to adhere, govern the award of academic credit and qualifications for the College's higher education programmes.

1.9   The review team reviewed the effectiveness of the governance arrangements, academic frameworks and regulations by scrutinising documentation submitted as evidence and by talking to awarding body representatives, senior and academic staff to determine whether the Expectation had been met.

1.10   The review team found that subject assessment panels and progression and award boards for Plymouth University, Bath Spa University, Pearson and University of Gloucestershire are held at the College with university representation as appropriate. Assessment boards for University of the West of England awards are held at the University with College representation. A combined report on the operation and outcomes of award boards is received and considered by the College's Higher Education Board. External examiners provide written endorsement of the operation and outcomes of assessment and award boards.

1.11   The review team is satisfied that the College adheres to the frameworks and regulations of its awarding bodies and organisation. Therefore, it concludes that the College meets the Expectation and that the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

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

Findings

1.12   The College's awarding bodies and organisation are responsible for approving programme specifications, which the College is required to contribute to in the form of content for handbooks and module guides. Equivalent documentation for programmes delivered in partnership with the awarding organisation is scrutinised as part of the internal process of approval and conforms to the agreement with that partner. Programme leaders update content annually and the respective university partner approves this prior to the commencement of the academic year. A process is in place with each awarding body/organisation to enable minor modifications to be made with alternative procedures followed should the scale of changes require the awarding body to review the whole programme, although the threshold for making such changes varies between the awarding bodies and organisation.

1.13   The College's documented approach to the production, approval, monitoring and amendment of definitive programme information, subject to being followed, is sufficient to enable this Expectation to be met.

1.14   This Expectation was tested by meeting with awarding body representatives; senior, academic and support staff; and students, and by examining programme specifications and information available for College staff, which details their responsibilities in relation to this Expectation.

1.15   Detailed programme specifications were provided for the team, which were shown to contain clear modular information relating to assessment, learning outcomes and delivery methods (subject to the variance highlighted under Expectation A1). Students the review team met were satisfied with the programme and module level information they receive about their programmes and felt it provided them with the information to succeed.

1.16   The review team found that the College, along with its awarding bodies and organisation, was able clearly to articulate the approaches taken when amending an aspect of the programme, such as assessment, and how this would be reflected in information produced for students. The team also found the College to be very knowledgeable of and responsive to differentiation in processes between the awarding bodies and organisation. The review team saw evidence of programme modifications that required approval from the College Higher Education Quality Manager and the relevant staff from the awarding body/organisation.

1.17   Due to the involvement of the awarding bodies and organisation, detailed programme specifications provided to the review team, evidence of student satisfaction regarding information in this area and formal processes for approving any changes, the review team concludes that this Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.18   Programme approval takes place in accordance with the frameworks and regulations of the College's awarding bodies and organisation. Validation is managed by awarding bodies with the exception of Pearson awards, which are validated internally within the College. The College's Higher Education Board monitors the validation and re-validation of all higher education programmes. The processes and procedures of the College allow Expectation A3.1 to be met.

1.19   To test this, the review team considered the College's self-evaluation and associated supporting evidence and programme approval documentation, and met awarding body and organisation representatives; senior, academic and support staff; and students.

1.20   The College produces outline planning proposals for new programmes which are considered by the Senior Leadership Team before progressing to theawarding bodies and organisation for approval. Planning approval considers the proposed curriculum on the basis of academic rationale and analysis of market demand; mode of delivery; staffing and resource requirements; and financial viability based on projected student numbers.

1.21   Validation documentation comprises programme specifications and module records that describe the level of the qualification or credit and the intended learning outcomes. Programme learning outcomes are defined in relation to the knowledge and skills that students will have achieved on completion of the programme.

1.22   The validation process considers the appropriateness of programme aims and intended learning outcomes for the level of the qualification. Validation panels make use of external academic expertise with reference to Subject Benchmark Statements' subject standards.

1.23   The review team considers that the College higher education provision is designed and approved in accordance with the frameworks and regulations of the College's awarding bodies and organisation. Effective operation of these procedures by the College is monitored by its awarding partners. The review team therefore concludes that this Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

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

Findings

1.24   The College conforms to the assessment regulations of its awarding bodies and organisation. The College has a published set of Assessment Guidelines for Higher Education Programmes. These make suitable reference to reasonable adjustments where required by students with protected characteristics and provide helpful guidance on inclusive assessment strategies for staff.

1.25   Subject assessment panels and progression and award boards operate in accordance with the regulations of the awarding bodies and organisation and confirm that students have achieved the standards set for the award of credit and qualifications. External examiners endorse the process and outcomes of assessment boards, which are reported in summary to the College's Higher Education Board. This allows the Expectation to be met.

1.26   The review team explored the effectiveness of the processes and procedures for assessment of students through the reading of the self-evaluation document and associated supporting evidence and by conducting meetings with awarding body representatives; senior, academic and support staff; and students.

1.27   Programme specifications and module records describe the assessment by which students will demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes at programme and module level. This information is reproduced in the programme and module handbooks that are made available to students.

1.28   Teaching staff are mentored and supported to carry out assessment at the relevant levels of the FHEQ. The College conducts internal moderation of assessment in accordance with the requirements of its awarding bodies and organisation.

1.29   External examiners confirm that the standards set at validation are being maintained and are comparable with those of similar programmes of other providers. Most of the external examiners' reports seen by the review team made explicit reference to the Quality Code (or its predecessor the Academic Infrastructure), the FHEQ and/or Subject Benchmark Statements when evaluating standards.

1.30   External examiners' reports confirm that UK threshold academic standards are met and that most programmes provide a good variety of assessment tasks. There are, however, examples of some external examiners' reports that indicate over assessment. This factor contributes to the recommendation made under paragraph 2.58.

1.31   External examiners' reports for the Pearson programmes in aeronautical engineering and health and social care led to students' awards being blocked temporarily where there was insufficient evidence that the required standards had been achieved through assessment.

1.32   Despite this, as this is limited to only a small part of the higher education provision, the review team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and that the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

1.33   The College adheres to its awarding body policies and procedures regarding the monitoring and review of programmes to meet UK threshold academic standards. This should allow the College to meet the Expectation under A3.3.

1.34   The review team explored the effectiveness of the processes and procedures through the reading of the self-evaluation document and associated supporting evidence and by conducting meetings with awarding body representatives; senior, academic and support staff; and students.

1.35   The College meets the requirements for programme monitoring and review set by its awarding bodies and organisation. The Higher Education Board, which reports to the Curriculum and Quality Committee of the Board of Corporation (governing body), has oversight of the standards of the College's higher education programmes and includes standing items on monitoring programme performance and 'courses for concern'.

1.36   Annual programme monitoring is located within programme committees, which meet twice a year, to consider standards in the context of student progression and issues that have been raised by external examiners and assessment boards. The review team noted that programme monitoring was mostly effective but in the specific case of the HND in Aeronautical Engineering had failed to result in sufficient and timely action being taken to address issues raised by the external examiner.

1.37   School Self-Evaluation Documents are informed by programme monitoring and comment on standards in relation to student achievement and progression and the effectiveness of assessment. School Self-Evaluation Documents were not considered by the Higher Education Board in 2013-14 although the Board's remit required it and the College has indicated this will be rectified in 2014-15. This is addressed under Expectation B8. The Higher Education Board receives separate reports on matters raised by external examiners and assessment boards.

1.38   External examiners are appointed by the awarding bodies and organisation and confirm that the standards set at validation remain appropriate and are being maintained through assessment.

1.39   On the basis that programme monitoring operates mostly effectively in accordance with awarding body and organisation requirements and takes due account of the reports of external examiners, the review team concluded that this Expectation was met and the risk was low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

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

Findings

1.40   The College is responsible for maintaining the academic standards of the provision it delivers, to the standards set by the awarding bodies and organisation through the application of the academic frameworks and regulations. It relies mostly upon the expertise of the external examiners appointed by the awarding bodies and organisation to provide externality. Validation panels for the approval of new programmes include external academic subject experts who advise on the setting of academic standards. The College also specifies the involvement of an employer or industry representative in the validation of vocational/professional awards. This process allows the Expectation to be met.

1.41   The review team considered the College's self-evaluation document and awarding body and organisation academic frameworks and regulations to establish the College's responsibilities maintaining academic standards. In addition, the review team scrutinised external examiners' and verifiers' reports and explored the processes for obtaining and using external expertise in meetings with senior, teaching and support staff, as well as employers.

1.42   External examiners or external verifiers appointed to each programme confirm that the standards set at validation are appropriate and being maintained and are comparable with similar programmes of other higher education providers.

1.43   The review team heard about the Partners in Business Board that includes a range of employers who work with the College to identify skills gaps that feeds into curriculum development.

1.44   The review team was satisfied that the College, in partnership with its awarding bodies and organisation, meets the Expectation concerning the appropriate use of external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations: Summary of findings

1.45   In reaching its positive judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook and took into consideration that the College's degree-awarding bodies and organisation have ultimate responsibility for the setting of the academic standards. All but one of the Expectations for this judgement area are met with the associated level of risk being assessed as low. The review team has noted that the primary responsibility for the setting of standards lies with the College's awarding bodies and organisation. A positive judgement in this area demonstrates that the College is aware of its responsibilities for maintaining those standards.

1.46   The review team made one recommendation for this judgement area under Expectation A1. The Expectation under A1 has not been met with the associated level of risk deemed moderate. The work-based learning element of at least one of the foundation degree programmes is not evident and learning outcomes are not explicit for interim exit awards. This has been addressed by the review team making a recommendation that the College ensures that the requirements of work-based learning align with the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* and that learning outcomes for interim exit awards are defined in programme specifications.

1.47   The review team noted under Expectation A3.3 that programme monitoring was mostly effective, but in the specific case of the HND in Aeronautical Engineering this had failed to result in sufficient and timely action being taken to address issues raised by the external examiner. It has also been noted under Expectation A3.3 that the School Self-Evaluation Documents were not considered by the Higher Education Board, which is within its remit. Both points are addressed under Expectation B8.

1.48   The review team, therefore, concludes that the maintenance of threshold academic standards of awards offered by the College on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and organisation **meets** UK expectations.

2   Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes

Quality Code, *Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval*

Findings

2.1   The College has a recently adopted strategic approach to higher education programme development. This involves the College's Senior Leadership Team considering new programme proposals to ensure alignment with institutional strategic aims/goals before proceeding to outline approval by the university awarding bodies. The College follows the procedures for programme design and approval laid out by the validating body with the exception of Pearson Higher National Diplomas and Higher National Certificates where the College operates an internal approvals process.

2.2   Working with the awarding body that manages the approval process, in accordance with the Memoranda of Agreement, the College ensures provision is appropriately aligned to the FHEQ, and Subject Benchmark Statements. This allows the Expectation to be met.

2.3   To test this, the review team considered a range of documentary evidence and responses in meetings to examine the approach the College takes to programme design and approval.

2.4   Curriculum development is a standing agenda item at meetings of the College-level Curriculum and Quality Committee which reviews the Higher Education Strategy and reports to the Corporation Board (Governing Body). New programme developments are reported to the Higher Education Board, which considers their alignment with College strategy. Updates to curriculum are a standing item at meetings of the Senior Leadership Team, which reviews them in advance of their consideration by the awarding bodies and organisation. Planning approval considers the proposed curriculum on the basis of academic rationale and evidence of market demand, mode of delivery, staff and resources for teaching, and financial viability based on projected student numbers. Proposals for new programmes are submitted for consideration by the planning committees of awarding bodies and organisation. The review team found evidence of a planned approach by the College to programme development that took account of awarding body, organisation and College curriculum strategies.

2.5   Validation sets the standards of the proposed curriculum and considers how students will be taught, assessed and supported. Validation documents comprise programme specifications and additional evidence that describes the academic and market rationale for the programme; the curriculum and intended learning outcomes and their alignment with national level descriptors, and with professional standards where applicable; programme structure, including modules and credit; teaching, learning and assessment strategies; staff and resources for teaching; student support; programme organisation and management; and arrangements for quality assurance and assessment boards. Module records describe the level and credit, module aims and intended learning outcomes, content, teaching, assessment and learning resources for each module.

2.6   The College's draft guidelines for teaching and learning in higher education specify that all higher education programmes are developed with reference to the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. Programme specifications make broad reference to the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements and the College promotes staff knowledge and awareness of the Quality Code through professional development activities and higher education conferences.

2.7   Notwithstanding some variations between the awarding bodies and organisation, programme specifications mostly define programme learning outcomes in respect of the knowledge and understanding and cognitive/intellectual, practical/subject-specific and transferable/key skills that students will have demonstrated on completion of their intended award. However, the programme specifications seen by the review team indicated that programme learning outcomes were rarely defined at the interim stages of an award and were only occasionally mapped directly to modules. Programme specifications and handbooks describe the assessment by which students demonstrate achievement of the programme learning outcomes. Module records and handbooks describe the module learning outcomes and the assessment by which students demonstrate their achievement. Programme modifications are permitted by awarding bodies and organisation within pre-defined limits and are used by the College to adjust and refresh existing curricula.

2.8   External academic subject experts are engaged to sit on internal College validation panels and are nominated to participate in the validations of awarding bodies. The College specifies the involvement of an employer or industry representative in the validation of vocational awards.

2.9   Students confirmed their contribution to programme development and validation through the completion of end of module surveys. Although not members of validation and review panels, current students have been consulted about new programme delivery. Students have also been canvassed about the introduction of top-up degrees. In addition, the spring programme committee agenda, which student representatives are invited to attend, includes a standing item on programme development.

2.10   The documentation reviewed, and evidence from meetings, demonstrate that the College fulfils its responsibilities with respect to programme design and approval in line with the awarding bodies and organisation. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission*

Findings

2.11   Full-time applications at the College are processed through UCAS while part-time applications are managed internally. The College has an Admissions Procedure for Students to Higher Education Programmes as well as a policy for the Recognition of Prior Learning, applications through which are approved by the Higher Education Quality Manager. Guidance is produced for prospective students in the form of a Higher Education Application Guide. Applicants are interviewed by College staff to determine their suitability and this is supported by associated forms and guidance. The Higher Education Planning and Operations Manager maintains oversight of admissions in conjunction with the Higher Education Quality Manager. No documented policy exists for managing complaints and appeals relating to admissions, instead these are handled on a case-by-case basis.

2.12   Despite the absence of a formal complaints and appeals policy linked to the admissions process, the review team considered that the College's arrangements for the recruitment, selection and admission of students as outlined in the evidence were sufficient to meet the Expectation.

2.13   This Expectation was tested by meeting with students and staff, viewing the College's policies and procedures relating to admissions, and by reviewing the College website and induction materials designed for students.

2.14   Students met by the review team were positive about their experience as applicants. They believed the information they received was informative and that the interview process was well organised. Those who had applied to have their prior learning recognised also agreed that the process had been transparent. Staff confirmed that central support is provided which enables them to ensure consistency when interviewing applicants. This includes Interview Guidance for Higher Education Staff and a form to record details captured during the interview itself.

2.15   Students were consistently positive about the induction process, which they felt was thorough and covered essential topics such as how to use learning resources. The Higher Education Enhancement Forum had tasked a subcommittee to work on induction and this has yielded positive results with programme teams building on a core set of activity which is centrally agreed.

2.16   Complaints and appeals procedures for higher education students are not referenced explicitly in the College Admissions Procedure for Students to Higher Education Programmes, although it does state that applicants can enquire about reasons why entry to a programme was refused. When the review team met students they were not certain about how to raise a complaint or submit an appeal should the need arise but intimated that they would consult the student handbook in the first instance. Staff informed the review team that any appeals would be considered on a case-by-case basis. However, the review team found that this did not provide students with transparent and accessible information and therefore **recommends** that the College develop and implement an appeals policy for admissions.

2.17   The review team concludes that due to the centrally supported selection process, positive developments centred on induction, and the high degree of student satisfaction this Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.

Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*

Findings

2.18   The College's mission prioritises the pursuit of excellence in teaching and learning. An overarching strategy for teaching, learning and assessment is reviewed by the Curriculum and Quality Committee of the Board of Corporation and a Teaching, Learning and Assessment Handbook provides guidance on lesson planning, learning resources and student support. Specific guidelines for higher education teaching and learning were under development at the time of the review and aim to integrate the existing College strategy with the Quality Code.

2.19   The majority of teachers who teach higher education work exclusively on higher education programmes and are either recruited externally or developed from among the College's further education staff. Staff qualifications and experience are considered during programme validation and staffing is reviewed as part of annual programme monitoring. All teaching staff are expected to have or acquire a higher education teaching qualification as a condition of their employment. A new teaching contract has been introduced from September 2014 with reduced teaching hours that aims to provide additional capacity for lesson planning, evaluation and research. The College believes the new contract will help attract and retain the best teachers, including those joining from industry, and its introduction was welcomed by staff.

2.20   In September 2014, the College began delivering a conversion degree in health and social care management offering progression from foundation degrees and Higher National Diplomas. Teachers are appropriately qualified and experienced, some of whom have taught previously at FHEQ levels 6 and 7, and hold, or are studying for master's or doctoral qualifications. The College has identified staff scholarship and research as a priority area for development and acknowledges the link between scholarship and teaching at levels 5 and 6. All higher education teaching staff are supported to study for higher qualifications and a new research bursary scheme has been put in place to incentivise staff research.

2.21   Students are mentored by visiting tutors from industry some of whom are College alumni. Students value the professional/industrial expertise of teaching staff and teachers with industry backgrounds remain active in their professions through professional updating. The use of industry-based visiting lecturers and the extent to which academic staff maintain their professional practice to support student learning opportunities is **good practice**. Most foundation degree programmes contain opportunities for work-based learning including placement or work-related learning including industry or community projects and public performances.

2.22   Formal staff induction and mentoring systems have been revised to increase their higher education focus. The College operates a paid mentor scheme for experienced teachers to mentor new colleagues and module leaders provide informal mentoring.

2.23   An internal review in 2013 indicated that the College's process for teaching observation was unreliable and required more strategic direction. A new system of formal observation was subsequently introduced that was designed to include an element of

peer review. Observations are conducted by senior managers with experience of higher education and a small number of experienced external observers. Students provide feedback on observed lessons. Teachers are graded in accordance with Ofsted grade descriptors (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement, Inadequate), the outcomes of which inform individual staff performance reviews. Feedback from the first year of the new system has been evaluated with a view to making refinements and informal peer review and team teaching are also used by staff as part of their self-evaluation and development.

2.24   Teaching, Learning and Assessment Coaches (TLACs) spend half of their time teaching and the rest working with other teachers to promote improvements in teaching, learning and assessment across the College. TLACs work with staff who have been identified as requiring support through teaching observation and performance review. Teachers may also refer themselves to a TLAC as part of their professional development.

2.25   The College holds a termly conference for higher education staff with themes that align specifically with chapters of the Quality Code. Recent themes have included enhancing the student experience, student progression to employment or further study, and assessment.

2.26   Scheduled individual or group tutorials and other less formal meetings provide opportunities for students to engage in dialogue with tutors to reflect on their progress. The College has identified some variation in how personal tutoring operates across Schools, and work undertaken by the Higher Education Enhancement Forum is supporting the development of a new Higher Education Tutorial Policy. However, a survey of student representatives recorded strong satisfaction with the quality of tutorial support provided by the College.

2.27   Students evaluate their learning experience through the completion of module evaluation questionnaires and an annual Student Perception Questionnaire. These, together with the National Student Survey, form part of the evidence used for annual programme monitoring. However, around a third of students on Plymouth University awards had not responded to the Student Perception Questionnaire in 2013-14, and over half of students on other awards, although response rates varied across programmes. The review team found that with the exception of some engineering students the majority were positive about the quality of teaching on their programmes.

2.28   From its reading of the evidence and meetings with staff and students, the review team noted an appropriate emphasis on learning and teaching within the College through the development of higher education-specific guidance, policies and procedures for teaching and staff development. On this basis the team considers that this Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*

Findings

2.29   Recent changes to the College's management structure, staff contracts and staff development activities have been designed to support the experience of higher education staff and their students. An internal review in 2013 identified that the quality of the College's higher education learning environment required improvement.

2.30   A new University Centre was introduced which brings together all of the College's higher education programmes within a dedicated management and administrative structure supported by a new management information system. While still largely a 'brand' at present, existing and new sites have been reviewed to identify a permanent physical location for the University Centre that will offer a high quality technological, learning and social environment for students. However, some programmes will continue to be delivered at other sites where specialist facilities are located. The introduction of the University Centre had improved communication between teaching and administrative support staff and helped foster an emergent higher education student identity, notwithstanding the challenge of engaging students on programmes at satellite campuses with limited higher education-specific facilities. However, students' identification with the awarding bodies and organisation appeared variable, particularly among those who were already in employment and for whom affiliation with the College held greater significance.

2.31   Heads of Higher Education Schools provide academic leadership and are responsible for managing staff performance, curriculum development, teaching and research, and quality assurance. Programme coordinators manage the operation of programmes and are supported by programme leaders, module leaders and personal tutors. Staff expressed confidence that co-location of most higher education provision has enhanced student support and facilitates the exchange of good practice.

2.32   Staff development has become increasingly higher education focused and a College Development Programme provides opportunities for academic and support staff to exchange reflection and practice. Staff development needs are identified through teaching observation and performance review and a Workforce Development Unit coordinates these with strategic and operational priorities to produce an annual Workforce Development Plan. The College's Leadership and Change Management Development Programme enjoyed full take-up by senior higher education staff during 2013-14.

2.33   The College's higher education prospectus describes the support that is available to students including 'an extensive range of support services from help with study skills to careers advice and financial support'. The Higher Education Guide for Applicants contains summary information about financial and disability support. Programme handbooks signpost the support that is available to students and include online links to awarding bodies and organisation's web portals, study guides and online library resources. Most of the students met by the review team were aware of their entitlement to awarding bodies and organisation's resources and while the physical distance from Plymouth University made it impractical to access its library facilities directly, online access was readily available.

2.34   The Learning Resources Centre (LRC) houses the College's library provision including e-books and journals and provides links to awarding bodies' online resources. LRC staff liaise with programme teams to process updates to course reading lists and

communication has been enhanced by the introduction of a dedicated higher education Librarian. Books may be ordered or reserved with the LRC via the virtual learning environment (VLE). Students indicated general satisfaction with central learning resources but expressed some concerns about the study environment and opening hours of the LRC, the sufficiency of books and e-journals and the sufficiency and reliability of the College's fixed computer provision. The College is developing the use of mobile learning technologies including tablets and a VLE mobile application as part of its information technology strategy. Students indicated that they would welcome the provision of more social learning spaces at all College sites.

2.35 In addition to library services, the LRC provides individual and group support for higher education students in English, mathematics and study skills including academic research, referencing and avoiding plagiarism. Students indicated a high level of satisfaction with the one-to-one support provided through the College's 'Study Plus' scheme. However, excessive demand had resulted in delays in accessing Study Plus, which has now been changed to include a small group option as well as the one-to-one support model. A dedicated section of the VLE contains guidance on study skills including academic referencing.

2.36 The College's Disability and Well Being Support Services team supports learners with diverse needs including learning difficulties such as dyslexia, and works closely with programme teams. Students indicated a good level of satisfaction with the support provided for those with disabilities or learning difficulties. The College's Equality and Diversity Policy commits to making reasonable adjustments to enable disabled access to learning facilities.

2.37 The College's Careers and Progression Team provides practical advice to students on job-seeking comprising individual guidance, workshops, drop-in and other events, preparation for job interviews and access to volunteering opportunities. A newly formed Employment Services team hosts a database of job and placement vacancies. Students indicated that support for developing curricula vitae and preparing for job interviews has helped increase their confidence when seeking employment.

2.38 Higher education students receive an induction at both College and programme level and a new framework enables the standard induction to be tailored to individual programmes. Students are introduced to the College's central learning services and resources including the VLE. First year students meet with second year students as part of their induction. Students indicated satisfaction with induction. A 'Swap Don't Drop' scheme provides support for students at risk of withdrawing during their first six weeks of study and offers advice on transfer to alternative programmes. Students receive advice and support for progression to further study.

2.39 Students are assisted in finding and securing work placements and receive handbooks detailing relevant policies and procedures including insurance and health and safety and how they will be supervised, monitored and supported while on placement. Employers receive specific support to mentor students in the workplace. However, a survey of student representatives found mixed satisfaction with the support provided by the College to help students secure a placement.

2.40 The College's mission prioritises investment in learning and the harnessing of technology and innovation to transform learning. Staff perceive higher education to be a driver for the College-wide development of e-learning. All students have access to a VLE and the College has developed a set of threshold standards (Bronze, Silver and Gold) for its use within programmes. These define various content requirements such as (at Bronze level) a student handbook and module information including guidance for assessment with more interactive applications being found at the higher levels. Staff are provided with

development for their effective use of the VLE. A higher education tab on the VLE provides access to College policies and regulations and central support services although there is evidence that not all students make use of it. Music and sound production students at the Deep Blue Sound Music delivery centre have their own VLE. The College VLE is increasingly used by programmes for the online submission of student work. Notwithstanding some individual instances of difficulty with access and online submission, the majority of students indicated satisfaction with the VLE's content and reliability.

2.41   Programmes in subjects such as digital music production and engineering make extensive use of specialist resources. However, some digital media students expressed concern about the availability of editing facilities. The College has invested in new computers for digital media in 2014-15 and the collaboration with Deep Blue Sound Music provides music and sound production students with access to industry-standard facilities.

2.42   Transferable skills are incorporated into programme aims and learning outcomes. While largely unfamiliar with the term, most students described opportunities for personal development planning within their programmes, either in a discrete module or integrated within subject modules encompassing study skills and skills for employment. The review team heard examples of reflective journals and e-portfolios being used by students to record their skills development, which was sometimes monitored through personal tutorials. Students were able to describe where skills such as communication, self-organisation and time management were developed within their programmes. However, the review team noted that there was no College-level statement on the purpose and function of personal development planning. The review team therefore **recommend** that the College ensure staff provide appropriate opportunities to students to understand and evaluate their development of graduate skills.

2.43   From its reading of the evidence and meetings with staff and students, the review team noted that appropriate support and resources were provided by the College to enable the development of learners both academically and in preparation for employment. On this basis the team considers that this Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B5: Student Engagement*

Findings

2.44   The College has a formal system of student representation in place that includes student representatives who are elected by their peers and who are required to attend the College's programme committees.

2.45   Representation at senior levels within the College structure is more limited and undefined. Students are represented at the Higher Education Board of Studies and a new Executive Student Forum has replaced the College's Student Council. While students are represented on the Board of Governors and on its Curriculum and Quality Committee representation may not always include higher education students. Students are involved in validation events, though not as panel members. They are also able to provide feedback through module evaluations, the National Student Survey and student perception questionnaires.

2.46   From the evidence reviewed the review team found that the existing structures for student engagement within the College are underdeveloped and that in design, the College does not meet the Expectation.

2.47   The review team tested this Expectation by meeting with students, staff and student representatives. The team also scrutinised results from student feedback, committee minutes, and saw a list of student representatives and written statements from the College on student engagement arrangements. The review team were not able to view training materials for student representatives as briefings are delivered verbally.

2.48   Elections for representative positions are not well established or competitive. The system relies essentially on volunteers. Student representatives do not receive formal training or ongoing support but the Higher Education Quality Manager provides them with an initial briefing. Students reported that in addition to not receiving any training they had not received a role description, outlining their responsibilities. In general, the review team found a lack of information for students in relation to student representation and engagement. The list of representatives for the current academic year also demonstrated that gaps exist, especially in the School of Engineering, Aero & Construction.

2.49   The review team did see evidence that programmes often elected a second representative who essentially forms a job share arrangement with the other student and allows them to deputise for the representative at programme meetings if they are unavailable. The review team found that where this system was in operation it was working effectively. The review team also found that the College was making efforts to hold meetings for part-time students at a time they were able to attend.

2.50   The review team found that where student engagement opportunities exist within College structures, their success and effectiveness is variable. Student attendance at the Higher Education Board is inconsistent and therefore representation is not always effective at this level, which the College recognises. Although students are members of the Board of Governors and Curriculum and Quality Committee and may be drawn from higher education programmes, this is not always the case with further education students taking up roles instead. There is limited student involvement in curriculum design as standard. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College develop a comprehensive programme of

training and support for student representation and ensure that there is a defined structure of student engagement at all levels.

2.51   The College demonstrated that it had acknowledged some shortcomings in its student engagement structures and established a work stream to tackle the issue. However, the review team found that this work did not extend far enough and the work stream has now concluded its activity. Although committee minutes also demonstrate that the College is discussing weaknesses in its representative structures actions do not appear to be especially focused, linked to timescales or progressed in an expedient fashion. The College is seeking to appoint a member of staff who will hold responsibility for student engagement and the team considered this to be a positive development. Similarly, the team was informed that the College is discussing the addition of a dedicated higher education student representative on its Board although at the time of the review this was not in place and the College was attempting to prepare potential governors through the work of the Executive Student Forum.

2.52   The College conducts student perception questionnaires to gather feedback on their experience. The team found that in several areas response rates are very low and that this includes programmes where the College have been unable to elect student representatives. Significant problems had arisen on the Pearson Aeronautical Engineering programme, which is based in a School with low survey response rates and student representation.

2.53   The review team concludes that while the College has taken some steps to involve students in the enhancement of their learning experience the existing structures for student engagement within the College are underdeveloped. Due to the lack of an agreed and understood definition for student engagement, the absence of robust training for student representatives, gaps in student feedback collected through internal surveys and the limited effectiveness of student participation in committees and other quality systems the review team came to the view that this Expectation was not met and the level of associated risk was moderate. The review team found that while senior managers had intervened to create a dialogue between the College and students, the under reliance on formal structures and systems, which as yet does not appear to have been fully addressed, gives rise to the risk that future issues may not be identified immediately and that the effectiveness of any remedial action is not being fully appraised.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*

Findings

2.54   The College conforms with the assessment regulations of its awarding bodies and organisation. Students are made aware of the assessment requirements and academic regulations of their programme through programme handbooks and through web links to their awarding bodies' information. While working within the regulations of its awarding bodies the College has a policy and procedure for the recognition of prior learning which has been used effectively by a number of students.

2.55   The College has developed Assessment Guidelines for Higher Education Programmes, which are aligned explicitly with *Chapter B6* and *Chapter B7* of the Quality Code. These provide guidance for staff on the purpose of assessment; its design; formative and summative assessment; learning outcomes and grading criteria; marking and feedback; internal moderation and external examining; and recognition of prior learning. Review and evaluation of the draft guidelines formed part of a conference for the College's higher education staff. New teaching staff work with a school mentor and the Higher Education Quality Manager to ensure that they are competent to assess at the relevant levels of the FHEQ.

2.56   The College's Assessment Guidelines for Higher Education Programmes provide guidance to staff on developing students' understanding of the purpose and process of assessment. A new initiative entitled Innovation Sets is designed to support academic and support staff to come together in groups to develop projects that enhance the experience of learners, the first of which was to produce guidance on developing students' assessment literacy. The 2014 College Development Programme provided an opportunity for teachers and assessors to review their assessment practice. Guidance and resources for assessment are available to staff via the University Centre intranet.

2.57   Programme learning outcomes and assessment strategies are described in programme specifications and handbooks. Module learning outcomes and assessment strategies are described in module records and handbooks. Working within the regulations and procedures of its awarding bodies and organisation, the College has developed a standard approach to the production of assessment briefs that describe learning outcomes, assessment tasks and grading criteria. Assessment briefs are internally moderated and external examiners comment on their appropriateness.

2.58   The College operates marking and internal moderation processes in accordance with the requirements of its awarding bodies and organisation and there is evidence of transparency within moderation.

2.59   External examiners are generally positive about the quality of assessment and feedback, fairness and consistency of marking and the operation of assessment boards. There are, however, some reports that criticise the transparency of marking and moderation decisions and some reports that cite over assessment and poor assessment practice. This has been a recurring issue with the Pearson Aeronautical Engineering provision, which despite intervention by senior management has not brought about sustained and effective

improvements. In relation to these issues, the review team **recommends** that the College ensure that staff make thorough use of the relevant assessment guidelines to inform the development of inclusive assessment strategies, the application of marking criteria and guidance for students that explain how grades align with those criteria.

2.60   The College, in accordance with the regulations of its awarding bodies and organisation, implements procedures for managing cases of academic malpractice. Students are advised of the regulations in programme handbooks. The College operates a process for managing claims for extenuating mitigating circumstances in accordance with the regulations of its awarding bodies and organisation.

2.61   Subject assessment panels and progression and award boards for Plymouth University, Bath Spa University, the University of Gloucestershire and Pearson programmes are held at the College with university representation. Boards for the University of the West of England awards are held at the University with College representation. External examiners attend assessment and award boards. Actions taken in response to examination board discussions are considered at autumn programme committees. External examiners provide written endorsement of assessment processes including the management and outcomes of assessment boards. The outcomes of assessment boards are summarised and reported to the Higher Education Board.

2.62   While award certificates are issued by the awarding bodies and organisation, the College produces transcripts that contain information about grades and progression. The transcripts viewed by the review team indicate that these are distributed in timely fashion following assessment boards.

2.63   Assessment processes and outcomes are evaluated through the processes of annual monitoring and periodic review. Changes to assessment are approved through the permitted changes process which staff confirm is effective and clear and within limits for programme modification that are defined by the awarding bodies and organisation.

2.64   The review team concludes that most students have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit and so the Expectation is met. However, evidence from some external examiner reports, particularly for the HND Aeronautical Engineering programme, indicates that all of those involved in the assessment process do not consistently operate the College's processes for marking assessments and moderating marks and the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B7: External Examining*

Findings

2.65   The College is able to nominate external examiners for all programmes with the exception of Pearson awards. Examiners are appointed and managed by the awarding bodies and organisation according to their own processes and regulations. Examiners confirm that the standards set at validation are appropriate and being maintained and are comparable with similar programmes of other higher education providers.

2.66   External examiners produce annual reports using the template forms developed by awarding bodies and organisation. Notwithstanding variations between awarding bodies, examiners comment on the appropriateness of assessment to the intended learning outcomes; assessment design and volume; formative and summative assessment; fairness and consistency of marking and internal moderation; quality of written feedback; and features of good practice in teaching and assessment. The reports seen by the review team indicated that external examiners provide mostly clear and occasionally detailed comments on the quality of assessment and its appropriateness to the intended learning outcomes. Most reports required examiners to make explicit reference to the FHEQ and/or Subject Benchmark Statements when evaluating the appropriateness and comparability of standards. Examiners also endorse the assessment process and its outcomes.

2.67   Programme teams communicate with external examiners to ensure they are provided with the materials required for moderation and examiners comment on this in their reports. Teams respond formally to examiners' reports and the reports and responses are considered by autumn programme committees as part of the College's annual monitoring process.

2.68   Programme team responses and the minutes of autumn monitoring demonstrate that the College generally takes good account of external examiner reports, which are reflected in action plans that are updated and received by programme committees. However, issues raised by the external examiner for the Pearson HND in Aeronautical Engineering in 2012-13 resulted in students' awards being blocked twice pending interventions by the awarding organisation. Effective remedial action was slow to be taken and the most recent examiner's report indicates that while progress has been made, 'significant quality issues remain as outlined in previous reports'. In the review team's considered opinion, this is an isolated though serious instance where the external examiner process had functioned correctly but the College's systems for overseeing and monitoring programme quality failed to result in sufficient and timely action being taken. A brief overview of issues from external examiner reports is received and considered by the College's Higher Education Board. Nevertheless, the review team **recommend** that the College ensure that all external examiner reports are actioned and that recurring themes across all higher education programmes are identified and addressed.

2.69   Student representatives attend autumn programme committees where external examiner reports and responses are considered. Examiners' reports are made available to students through the VLE. However, students the review team met demonstrated little understanding of the external examiner role or familiarity with their reports. From the academic year 2014-15, students will be notified of the name, position and institution of their external examiner in line with the Quality Code. In addition, the review team **recommend** that the College ensure that students are informed about the role of external examiners and external examiner reports.

2.70   Teaching staff are supported in seeking external examiner appointments, in particular for Pearson programmes, although at the time of the review only the Assistant Principal for Higher Education held such an appointment. Some staff have external examiner experience from previous employment.

2.71   Notwithstanding the specific issues related to the HND in Aeronautical Engineering, the review team found evidence that the College generally makes appropriate use of external examiner reports to support the monitoring of academic standards and quality. In the team's judgement, the Expectation was met and the overall level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

Quality Code, Chapter B8: *Programme Monitoring and Review*

Findings

2.72   The College has a system of programme monitoring and review which is aligned to the requirements of each awarding body and organisation. Annual programme monitoring takes place through programme committee meetings. The autumn programme committees review the action plan from the previous monitoring cycle and consider a range of end of year data including the National Student Survey, external examiners' reports and quality indicators for recruitment, completion, progression and so on. Further action plans summarise matters for attention, define actions and designate responsibilities and target dates for completion. Spring programme committees revisit the action plans to evidence progress.

2.73   The annual programme committee meetings feed into the production of School Self-Evaluation Documents that are expected in turn to contribute to a College self-assessment document. School Self-Evaluation Documents provide commentary and evaluation against the four QAA judgement headings of academic standards, quality, information and enhancement. Notwithstanding some variations in the evaluative detail provided in the School's Self-Evaluation Documents, those seen by the review team indicate a risk-focused approach to standards and quality. However, through a review of the College's Higher Education Quality Plan and meetings with relevant staff the review team found that the timings of the autumn programme committee meetings did not allow sufficient time and opportunity to effectively provide evidence and information for the School level Self-Evaluation Document. Accordingly, the review team **recommends** that the College ensures adequate opportunity for programme level monitoring committees to inform school-level self-evaluation and action planning.

2.74   The School's Self-Evaluation Documents are accompanied by improvement plans. The monitoring of these improvement plans is part of the terms of reference of the Higher Education Board. However, the minutes of the Board did not provide evidence of this occurring. The Curriculum and Quality Committee of the Board of Governors has terms of reference as set out in the committee membership and terms of reference. These terms of reference do not make clear the responsibilities of this committee in relation to the monitoring and approval role for higher education matters. The link between this governance committee and the Higher Education Board was not understood by staff or coherently presented through documentation. The review team heard that aspects of monitoring and review were currently being changed to better support standards and quality improvement.

2.75   Through meetings and review of documentation it became clear that the procedures for monitoring and evaluating the higher education provision across the College are not systematic or fully understood by all those involved. At programme level, awarding bodies have confidence in how their own procedures are operated by the College and staff applied these effectively. The procedures for monitoring and review at School and College level are less effective and the review team did not have confidence that this level of review and monitoring were effective in bringing about enhancement or the required improvement. An example of this is the lack of progress made in relation to the Pearson Aeronautical Engineering programme over a sustained period, despite additional monitoring. Although the monitoring procedures at programme level do include sections related to enhancements of learning opportunities for students these are not effectively aggregated in the School

Self-Evaluation Documents to contribute to strategic School improvements. This is linked in part to the issues raised in paragraph 2.72 related to timings.

2.76   The College uses the Higher Education Self-Evaluation Document to inform the production of the College Self-Evaluation Document. The Higher Education Board includes in its terms of reference its responsibility for receiving and recommending approval of the College Self-Evaluation Documents and action plans but there was no evidence in minutes of this taking place. The minutes noted how the process would be undertaken in future but previous minutes had not recorded any earlier College Self-Evaluation Document being considered. The Curriculum and Quality Committee considered the 2012-13 Higher Education Self-Evaluation Document, although minutes indicate that there was no accompanying action plan at the time of receipt. Consequently, this absence of strategic-level quality assurance and management has resulted in a lack of rigour and cohesion relating to how actions across the College would be identified, actioned and monitored to bring about improvements and enhancements.

2.77   The Higher Education Board meets termly and is chaired by the Deputy Principal. The constitution includes two higher education teaching staff and two higher education students. As noted in paragraph 2.49, student attendance at this Board is inconsistent and may not be as effective as a result of this sporadic attendance. The Board remit is to monitor, evaluate and assess risk in relation to a range of quality indicators related to quality and standards. It also monitors the validation process and reviews higher education policies, regulations and the management of public information. From meetings and the review of evidence, the review team felt that the purpose of the Board is not well established and staff and students do not understand its role in scrutiny, approval and monitoring of their programmes. Accordingly, the team **recommend** that College clarify the locus of approval for School and College Higher Education Self-Evaluation Documents and action plans and ensure they receive due scrutiny in line with the defined processes and timescales.

2.78   The College participates in the periodic review and re-approval of its programmes in accordance with its awarding bodies' timescales. Programme teams engage with the periodic review processes well and find them useful in critically evaluating the appropriateness of the curriculum and in supporting changes or developments in the context of programme performance data. There is, however, a lack of guidance to staff on the purpose and process of the periodic review and this is addressed as part of the recommendation in paragraph 2.76. This type of periodic review does not currently take place for Pearson programmes and as such the team **recommend** that the College ensures that all programmes undergo planned periodic review.

2.79   The review team concluded that monitoring and review operates most effectively at programme level when the awarding bodies and organisation are actively driving the process and monitor the action plans regularly. As indicated in paragraph 1.30, Pearson programmes rely only on external verifiers' reports rather than a formal annual monitoring report. This approach has led to the issues referred to in paragraph 2.74. Beyond programme level, the School and College level monitoring is weak due to the absence of quality management processes that can provide institutional level oversight. The College does have a number of quality assurance systems and procedures, particularly in relation to the differing awarding body requirements that staff are aware of and pay due cognisance to. These are not, however, drawn together in a single unified quality strategy that articulates how quality assurance management processes at programme, School and College level are regular, effective, systematic and can assure the College discharges its responsibility in relation to this Expectation. Accordingly, the review team **recommends** that the College completes, codifies and implements existing approval, monitoring and review policies and processes and deliberative structures and formally and systematically evaluate and review them.

2.80   Overall, the review team conclude that the College does not possess sufficiently robust arrangements for the monitoring and evaluation of programmes, in particular at School and institutional level. Serious issues have arisen on the Pearson Aeronautical Engineering programme as a result of the ineffective operation of both the Higher Education Board and the Curriculum and Quality Committee, in relation to quality assurance and monitoring responsibilities. This inadequacy in institutional strategic oversight and the fact the College have not addressed the shortcoming in an expedient or, at the time of the review, effective manner gives rise to continued risk on the basis that such problems may present themselves in other parts of the College's higher education provision.

2.81   In the absence of a unified set of quality policies and processes that can be relied upon to identify and bring about improvements for students the College is failing to maintain strategic oversight of programme monitoring and review. The review team was not satisfied that the College is fully aware of this risk and did not deem the remedial action taken to date sufficient as the recommendations made under this Expectation demonstrate. The team therefore considers that the Expectation is not met and the level of associated risk is serious.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Serious

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints*

Findings

2.82   The College has a Complaints Policy and a Higher Education Complaints Procedure which references the role of the awarding bodies and organisation in complaints. Students are encouraged to try to resolve their issues informally in the first instance, then formally if that is unsuccessful. Subsequently, they are directed to the awarding body and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. The College employs a Complaints and Appeals Administrator who processes student complaints and reports them to the Head of Higher Education. In addition, the Higher Education Board receives oversight reports and complaints are tracked through to resolution. A policy document also exists for students wishing to appeal an assessment decision. Students are provided with information about the complaints and appeals procedures in their handbooks.

2.83   The review team found that College arrangements for the submission, handling, resolution and monitoring of complaints and appeals were sufficient to allow the Expectation to be met.

2.84   The review team tested this expectation by meeting with students and staff, including the Complaints and Appeals Administrator. The team also viewed minutes of the Higher Education Board together with the Higher Education Complaints Procedure and documentation relating to appeals. They also viewed the tracking document used by the College.

2.85   The majority of students the review team met were clear about how to make a complaint, or appeal an assessment decision, and that details were contained within the student handbook. Students are encouraged to discuss complaints with any staff member they consider approachable prior to invoking the formal process. The review team were informed that the Complaints and Appeals Administrator responds to complainants within two working days and that the turnaround time for the investigation and response is 15 days, which is being met by the College.

2.86   Due to the clear policies and information within student handbooks, explicit role of the awarding bodies and organisation, dedicated staff resource, clear tracking process and robust oversight by the Higher Education Board the team considers this Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.

Quality Code, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*

Findings

2.87   The College works with its awarding bodies and organisation, employers and placement providers to deliver its higher education programmes. It enters into legally binding partnership agreements with its awarding bodies and organisation which set out the terms of the partnership, its duration and financial arrangements. Separate operational documents describe the responsibilities and functions of each partner in the setting and maintenance of standards and the management of student learning opportunities.

2.88   The large majority of the College's higher education programmes are Higher National Diplomas/Certificates, validated by Pearson and Plymouth University and foundation degrees which contain a significant proportion of work-based learning. Part-time students including those on engineering, construction and early years programmes use their employers for work-based learning. Other students secure their own placement opportunities with College support although placements for early childhood studies have traditionally been sourced and allocated by the College. Students receive handbooks detailing relevant policies and procedures including insurance and health and safety and how they will be supervised, monitored and supported while on placement. Tutors conduct site visits while placements are underway and employers receive guidance and support to act as mentors to students. Employers met by the review team were generally satisfied with their communication with the College although some felt this could be more structured and that access to the VLE would be beneficial.

2.89   Until the end of 2013-14, a central College team coordinated most placements although counselling placements were managed at programme level. However, since September 2014 all placement organisation has been devolved to programmes. Students indicated that where placements had always been managed locally this had been effective and staff referred to the benefits of adopting this approach across programmes. However, students of the early childhood studies programme spoke of delays in being allocated placements under the new devolved arrangement. A survey of student representatives also found mixed satisfaction with the support provided by the College to help students secure a placement. The review team struggled to find evidence of the operation and quality of placements being considered formally within the College's monitoring process and **recommends** that the College ensure adequate and appropriate oversight of student placement opportunities at programme and College level.

2.90   Notwithstanding some individual issues related to the devolution of placement organisation to programme areas, which are still at an early stage, the review team found evidence that the College's management of learning opportunities delivered with employers and placement providers is appropriate and effective. On this basis the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

The College does not offer research degrees.

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.91   In reaching its judgement that the quality of learning opportunities offered by the College **does not meet** UK expectations, the review team matched the findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook.

2.92   Of the 10 applicable expectations for this judgement area, six were met with a low level of risk (Expectations B1, B2, B3, B4, B9 and B10), two were met with a moderate level of risk (Expectations B6 and B7), B5 was not met with a moderate level of risk and B8 was not met with a serious level of risk.

2.93   There are 11 recommendations associated with this judgement area, four of which are under Expectation B8.

2.94   The review team made recommendations under Expectations B2, B4 and B10, which are met with an associated level of low risk. That under Expectation B2 relates to formalising the College appeals policy for admissions so that it provides students with transparent and accessible information. That under Expectation B4 relates to personal development planning and that under Expectation B10 has been made to ensure that the College keeps its placement management system under review to ensure that no students are disadvantaged.

2.95   While both Expectation B6 and B7 were met, each was assigned a moderate level of risk. Under Expectation B6, the College ensures that most students have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit. However, there are inconsistencies in assessment practice, particularly in the Pearson Aeronautical Engineering programme.

2.96   Under Expectation B7, the review team found that programme team responses and the minutes of autumn monitoring demonstrate that the College generally takes good account of external examiner reports, which is reflected in action plans that are updated and received by programme committees. However, issues raised by the external examiner for the Pearson Higher National Certificate in Aeronautical Engineering in 2012-13 resulted in students' awards being blocked twice, pending interventions by the awarding organisation. Effective remedial action was slow to be taken and the most recent examiner's report indicates that while progress has been achieved, 'significant quality issues remain as outlined in previous reports'. In the review team's considered opinion, this is an isolated though serious instance where the external examiner process had functioned correctly, but the College's systems for overseeing and monitoring programme quality failed to result in appropriate and timely action being taken.

2.97   The other, lesser issue under Expectation B7 is that students who met the review team demonstrated little understanding of the external examiner role or familiarity with their reports.

2.98   The review team noted that while Expectation B5 was not met the risk was moderate. The lack of an agreed and understood definition for student engagement, particularly above programme level, and the absence of robust training for student representatives limits the College's capacity to ensure the quality of student learning opportunities under this Expectation and contributes to the moderate level of risk. There is also some evidence to suggest that gaps in student feedback and low response rates in some areas means that the College may not always be aware of issues that may affect the quality of student learning opportunities. The moderate, rather than serious, risk assigned to the outcome takes account of proportionality.

2.99   The review team concludes that Expectation B8 was not met and that the associated level of risk was serious. The reasons for this are that the College failed to provide evidence to the review team that in respect of its deliberative structure, arrangements for monitoring the quality of learning opportunities were sufficiently robust, understood by key staff, comprehensively documented or, where arrangements were in place, that they were operating as specified. The review team did conclude that programme teams are largely fulfilling the expectations of their awarding bodies. However, at College level, oversight arrangements across Schools is lacking and the involvement of students is more limited. The review team therefore concludes that the College has significant gaps in the quality assurance systems for monitoring and review that mean that the quality of student learning opportunities is being compromised.

2.100   Having concluded that Expectation B8 was not met with a serious level of risk, the review team, taking into account the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook, have returned a judgement of 'does not meet UK expectations' in this judgement area.

3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

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

Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

Findings

3.1 The College makes a wide range of information available for the public and staff as well as for current and prospective students. This includes a strategic plan, website, staff intranet, prospectus, student handbooks and other promotional material. Arrangements for the management of information are in place but are not formally documented. The College's Planning and Operations Manager is responsible for oversight of information and liaises with link staff at the College's various partner institutions. Programme teams construct information and also liaise with link tutors, or their equivalent, at the various awarding bodies. An Audit and Compliance Team also has responsibility to check published information.

3.2 The review team found that the College approach to managing information and the extent to which it was fit for purpose, trustworthy and accessible was robust in theory and would allow the Expectation to be met.

3.3 The review team tested this Expectation by reading a wide range of documentation including the College prospectus, programme specifications and student handbooks. The team also viewed the College website, staff intranet and virtual learning environment as well as meeting students and staff.

3.4 Liaison arrangements between the awarding bodies and organisation, the College's Planning and Operations Manager, and programme leaders are well understood by those directly involved in the process and are operating effectively. The Planning and Operations Manager acts as a gatekeeper with information produced by staff at programme level. However, the review team formed the view that documenting the process for the approval and monitoring of information had the potential to strengthen this further and aid the College in communicating expectations to those involved in particular with regards to monitoring. This contributes to the recommendation made under Expectation B8 that the College complete, codify and implement existing approval, monitoring and review policies and processes and deliberative structures and formally and systematically evaluate and review them.

3.5 The College website was under development during the period of the review and is still evolving. Clear links exist to higher education content, including the College's mission and Higher Education Strategic Plan. Programme pages are well ordered with Key Information Set data clearly visible. Programme pages also contain information about the mode, type of assessment and entry requirements. Information about the learning support available is also readily accessible, as is information about support provided by the awarding bodies and organisation. Students reported to the team that they found the information on the website to be both detailed and accurate.

3.6 The 2014-15 prospectus is also very clear with detailed information about the programmes on offer, clearly assigned to the correct awarding bodies or organisation. The prospectus also contains case studies from students who have studied the programme

which gives a further insight to the course of study. Again, students responded positively to the team about the clarity of information contained within the prospectus and also within the Higher Education Course Information Sheets.

3.7   A threshold standard is in place for staff engagement with the VLE, adherence to which is, in theory, considered through appraisal meetings between module leaders and their line managers. In practice, the team found that use of the VLE was variable and a greater emphasis is placed on encouraging more extensive use of the VLE through the College bronze, silver and gold scheme. One to one guidance for staff from the IT Support Team is also available. Although a small number of students reported access issues and concerns over staff usage, the majority of students were very content with the VLE.

3.8   Important information for students such as how to access support services, the Code of Conduct and the Higher Education Student Charter is located on the higher education tab on the VLE; this also houses external examiner reports. However, students were largely unaware of this resource, despite it forming part of their induction. The Higher Education Quality Manager is working to familiarise students with this dedicated information repository, which the team viewed as a useful development and therefore **affirms** the work to promote the higher education pages on the virtual learning environment.

3.9   The team met employers, including placement supervisors and mentors, who broadly speaking were of the view that they had received the information they required. This included the modules undertaken by placement students, assessment arrangements and learning outcomes. Usually the programme leader communicates this by email, although in some instances it relied on the student passing information on. Employers were of the opinion that information to them could be more consistent and strengthened including arrangements for them to provide feedback.

3.10   Staff are able to access information about the majority of the College's numerous quality assurance systems and procedures through the staff intranet. However, these are not unified in a single document and as Expectation B8 highlights there is a need for the College to codify all information pertaining to its quality processes and the role its deliberative structure plays in overseeing them so that this is understood by all staff. Staff were aware of the information contained on the staff intranet, however, and knew of the need to take account of the differing awarding bodies and organisation requirements. They were also able to provide examples of applying the procedures, as referenced elsewhere in this report, for instance in relation to modifying programmes or compiling annual monitoring reports.

3.11   The review team concludes that as a result of the well understood process for the approval of information, monitoring by the awarding bodies and organisation, comprehensive website, prospectus and higher education tab along with the high degree of student satisfaction together with that of employers this Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

3.12   In reaching its positive judgement that the quality of information produced by the College about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations, the review team matched the findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook.
The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. This is because the review team found that the College approach to managing information to ensure that was fit for purpose, trustworthy and accessible for all stakeholders including all students, staff and employers was robust.

3.13   However, the review team did form the view that documenting the process for the approval and monitoring of information had the potential to strengthen this further and aid the College in communicating expectations to those involved in particular with regards to monitoring. This contributes to the recommendation made under Expectation B8 that the College complete, codify and implement existing approval, monitoring and review policies and processes and deliberative structures and formally and systematically evaluate and review them.

3.14   Under the one Expectation for this judgement area the review team affirms the work the College is undertaking to promote the higher education pages on its VLE to make students more aware of this resource.

4   Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

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

Findings

4.1   The College uses both the College Strategic Plan and the College Higher Education Strategic plan as key documents to set out its deliberate steps to improve the quality of learning opportunities. Specific examples of how this manifests itself are provided through these documents which include enhancements to teaching and learning, changes to infrastructure to include more higher education specific posts, improved accommodation for higher education and a new teaching contract. Although these developments are very recent (during 2013-14) the College has invested in specific actions to enhance and improve teaching, learning and assessment, specifically the introduction of eight Teaching and Learning Academic Coaches (TLACs), introducing funded research opportunities and more staff development opportunities to enhance practice of staff through use of external and peer practitioners.

4.2   The TLACs spend half of their time teaching and the rest working with other teachers to promote improvements in teaching, learning and assessment. TLACs identify and share good practice to enhance student learning opportunities across the College. 'Innovation Sets' bring academic and support staff together in groups to work on projects that enhance the experience of learners. Projects receive financial support from the College and the first of these will develop guidance and materials to support the development of students' assessment literacy.

4.3   The College has introduced a monthly Higher Education Enhancement Forum, which is open to all teaching, administrative and support staff involved in supporting higher education programmes. Recent forum activity has included improvements to the College's systems for induction and personal tutoring. The forum as an initiative is embryonic and is not always recognised or embraced by staff as a way to enhance their own practice. Attendance and engagement by staff is low.

4.4   Annual programme monitoring takes place at autumn programme committees where opportunities for quality enhancement are considered. External examiners comment on specific features of good practice with potential for wider dissemination. The College participates in awarding bodies' and organisation's periodic review processes, which identify existing good practice and areas for improvement. A programme modifications process enables curriculum to be updated and refreshed between re-validations.

4.5   The College has launched a University Centre which brings together all higher education programmes and Access provision within a new management and administrative structure that aims to enhance the student experience. The College aims to provide 'outstanding University Centre accommodation offering a high quality technological, learning and social environment'. Co-location of the higher education management team within the University Centre provides opportunities to exchange good practice between schools.

4.6   The team concludes that there are some strategic enhancement activities that are having a positive effect on the student learning experience in the college. These include the introduction of new posts such as the Higher Education Librarian, the Higher Education Planning and Operations Manager, Assistant Principal (Higher Education) and a dedicated higher education admissions system and staffing. The Higher Education Conference for staff

was also well received by staff as allowing them to share good practice with colleagues. The enhancement-focused themes in the conferences align with the Quality Code. These have included improving the students' experience, student progression to employment and further study and assessment. New teaching contracts have been introduced from September 2014, which the College believes will help attract and retain staff from industry and so enhance the vocational learning experience.

4.7   The review team was not, however, sufficiently persuaded that there is a systematic approach to enhancement in the College that effectively demonstrates that the strategic activities mentioned above represent a planned and coherent enhancement approach that improves all areas of student learning opportunities. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College develop a more systematic and planned approach to enhancing learning opportunities through quality assurance processes and a designated lead for enhancement at executive level.

4.8   Overall the team concludes that the College meets the Expectation that deliberate steps are being taken to improve the quality of learning opportunities. There is evidence of some strategic initiatives that are having a positive impact but there is a lack of a systematic approach and a clear strategic lead. The associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.9   In reaching its positive judgement that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the the College **meets** UK expectations the review team matched the findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook.
The Expectation for this judgement area was met but the associated level of risk was deemed moderate due to the lack of a systematic approach and a clear strategic lead in this judgement area.

5   Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

Findings

5.1   The College has a vocational higher education offer with a strong focus on employability and higher skills development to support learners' academic, personal and professional progression. The College's Strategic Plan aims to offer a variety of routes for employers and individuals to gain level 5 and 6 qualifications, 'creating lifetime opportunities through outstanding education and training'. Programmes are developed to meet the needs of business and employers and provide progression opportunities from existing vocational provision at level 2/3 within the College. A 'Partners in Business' board brings together employers from different sectors to identify skills needs that shape the College's development of curriculum. For example, the School of Health & Care works with the local NHS Trust and local authority children's services in the development of health and social care and early years programmes. The College specifies the participation of an employer or industry representative in its programme validation process.

5.2   The College is a member of the West of England Local Enterprise Partnership, which has identified engineering and the creative industries as key areas for regional growth. The School of Engineering, Aero & Construction works with Airbus, Rolls-Royce, GKN plc and the Ministry of Defence in the provision of engineering qualifications and aeronautical engineering programmes make use of the specialist resources of the College's Advanced Engineering Centre. A new Foundation Degree in Music and Sound Production is being delivered with music production training organisation Deep Blue Sound at the company's Bristol premises using teachers employed by the College. Digital media production students spend 10 weeks working out of Knowle West Media Centre, a local arts organisation and charity, where they are engaged in community-based film projects that have resulted in further work for some students.

5.3   Programme learning outcomes reflect the development of transferable skills for employment and students identify communication, self-organisation and time management as helpful to their employability. Opportunities for personal development planning are provided within programmes and students use reflective journals and e-portfolios to record their skills development.

5.4   The large majority of the College's higher education programmes are Higher National Diplomas/Certificates, validated by Pearson and Plymouth University, and foundation degrees, which include a significant proportion of work-based learning. Foundation degrees contain opportunities for work-based learning that include organisational placements and employer/client-led projects. Opportunities for work-related learning include industry or community-based projects and public performances. Students are supported in finding and securing work placements and receive handbooks detailing relevant policies and procedures and how they will be supervised, monitored and supported. Part-time students in relevant employment use their employers for work-based learning. Tutors conduct placement visits and employers are supported to act as mentors. Placements are supported by agreements between the College, employers and students.

5.5   Students value the professional/industrial expertise of teaching staff and teachers with industry backgrounds remain active in their professions through professional updating. A new teaching contract has been introduced which the College believes will help attract and retain the best staff from industry. Students are mentored by visiting tutors from industry some of whom are College alumni.

5.6   The College's Careers and Progression Team provides practical advice for job-seeking comprising individual guidance, workshops, drop-in and other events,

preparation for interviews and access to volunteering opportunities. Students indicated that support for developing curricula vitae and preparing for job interviews had helped increase their confidence when seeking employment. Employers contribute to open days and a database of job vacancies and placement opportunities managed by the College's Employment Services team. Student progression to employment was the theme of a 2013 conference for the College's higher education staff.

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 27-29 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/assuring-standards-and-quality

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

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

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

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.