



Quality Review Visit of City of Wolverhampton College

March 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about City of Wolverhampton College

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

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

Areas for development

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

- further develop the management arrangements for publishing information to ensure continuing alignment with consumer protection procedures (Consumer protection obligations).

Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any specified improvements.

About this review

The review visit took place from 21 to 22 March 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Carol Vielba
- Ms Ann Hill
- Mr Richard Alderman (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

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

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

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

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

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

About City of Wolverhampton College

City of Wolverhampton College (the College) is a medium-sized further and higher education college based in the city of Wolverhampton in the Black Country area of the West Midlands. The College is the largest provider of college-based higher education in the area.

Higher education is currently delivered across two of its three campuses, with the largest, Paget Road, also providing a higher education centre for students. The College has 401 full and part-time higher education students enrolled on level 4 and 5 Higher National programmes, foundation degrees and teacher education programmes.

The College's higher education provision is delivered on behalf of one awarding body, the University of Wolverhampton and one awarding organisation, Pearson. Provision is across a range of subject areas which includes journalism; business; digital industries including computing, games development, video production and music production; creative industries including performance, live sound and events; health and social care; early years; engineering and technology and teacher education.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 Academic standards are set and maintained by the awarding body, the University of Wolverhampton, and awarding organisation, Pearson, who ensure that their awards align with national standards, specifically the NQF and the FHEQ.

2 The College is accountable to the University and Pearson for the delivery and maintenance of these standards. The College has in place internal regulations, structures, and processes for the management of higher education provision which, working in conjunction with the regulations, structures and processes of the University and Pearson, ensure that required standards are met. Minutes and reports demonstrate that these processes operate effectively.

3 Assurance of the standards of the College's higher education provision is provided through scrutiny, monitoring and review by the University and Pearson. External examiners, appointed by Pearson and the University, confirm that standards are appropriate and comparable with those found on similar programmes in other UK educational institutions. No critical issues regarding the standards of the College's provision have been raised by the awarding body, Pearson or external assessors in the recent past.

4 The College works closely with industry, public organisations and professional bodies to ensure that appropriate standards relating to practice are reflected in the design, delivery and assessment of its provision.

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

5 The College's arrangements in maintaining oversight of academic governance are satisfactory.

6 Academic Governance is overseen at the highest level of the College by the Board of Governors. Regular reports on higher education provision are prepared for this Board as well as presentations on higher education and an annual report on the curriculum planning process. Operational management is discharged to the Executive Management Team (EMT) and Higher Education Management Group, Higher Education Operational Group and the Higher Education Tutor Forum that sits below these.

7 Student membership is ensured on the Board of Governors through the specified membership of the Board. The review team noted that this Board currently has no higher education students as members owing to Board membership turnover, but that the College was mindful of higher education student representation in future Board recruitment. A link governor arrangement between Board members and curriculum areas ensures curriculum developments and the student voice are reported back to the Board and the performance of link governors in that role is evaluated.

8 The principles of academic freedom and collegiality are set out in the Instrument and Articles of Government, as well as the Code of Conduct for Governors of the College.

9 The risk register for the College is overseen by the Audit Committee, reporting to the Board of Governors termly. This register includes risks as they relate to higher education provision, an evaluation of such risks, and mitigating actions undertaken.

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

10 The College's arrangements in discharging its responsibilities for helping to set and maintain the academic standards of their awards are satisfactory.

11 The College works with the University and Pearson, for the approval, monitoring and review of its higher education programmes and has a mature and well-developed relationship with both of these. The arrangements regarding the maintenance of a definitive record of each programme and qualification; subsequent changes, monitoring and review and the provision of transcripts are clear and widely understood by staff. In addition, the College has developed its own comprehensive set of Academic Regulations to support this process.

12 Programme development and approval takes place in accordance with the frameworks and regulations of the College's awarding body and organisation. For foundation degree programmes, validation is managed by the awarding body, while Pearson awards are validated internally. Curriculum teams maintain a set of current programme and unit specifications and provide students registered on a programme with a programme handbook. The review team confirms that the materials are accessible and comprehensive and that all documentation is satisfactory in content and aligned with all relevant external reference points.

13 Arrangements for assessment to ensure that UK threshold academic standards are achieved and maintained are clear. Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning is underpinned by a range of policies and processes, including the Assessment and Internal Quality Assurance Policy, Assessment Malpractice Policy and the Recognition of Prior Learning procedure. There is a variety of assessment approaches, both formative and summative, which are clearly understood by students.

14 The team heard that students are able to check their own progress and performance through the use of tracking instruments. Subsequent to the final University Award Board and the final Award Board for Pearson programmes; final grades are recorded and forwarded to the Examinations section of the University and the College.

15 The College's EMT which reports to the Board of Governors has strategic responsibility for the management of academic standards and quality of higher education provision. The Governing Body receive regular updates relating to higher education provision, including data on complaints and compliments.

16 Operational matters are considered by the Higher Education Operational Group. The Higher Education Management Group meets monthly to review curriculum performance and progress. These groups ensure that there is a coordinated approach which effectively oversees academic standards and impact. Staff whom the team met were confident in their understanding and operation of the College's underpinning quality assurance framework and cycle.

17 Comprehensive arrangements are in place to monitor programmes across higher education provision, including a quality improvement plan, an annual periodic review report, and higher education action plans. The nature of these arrangements varies according to the requirements of the University and Pearson. Curriculum areas which are involved with the delivery of foundation degrees at the University, work with it to support and contribute to

annual monitoring processes through the use of course journals. In respect of Pearson, the College completes a centre review visit which considers higher education programmes according to an annual cycle.

18 The College's annual Self-Assessment Report is used to monitor the provision and includes a range of data and evidence, such as external examiner reports, student evaluation and internal verification reports. Each curriculum area produces a Self-Assessment Report.

19 The review team found that there are rigorous processes in place for the monitoring of student performance, such as termly Quality Learning and Teaching Reviews and bi-monthly Curriculum Management Data (CMD) meetings.

20 External examiners from the University and Pearson, confirm that the academic standards of higher education provision are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers and that qualifications are awarded only where the achievement of relevant learning outcomes has been demonstrated. The team confirms that there are robust systems in place to enable issues to be identified and resolved.

Rounded judgement

21 The College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards through its governance structures; internal processes and procedures; adherence to the regulations of its awarding body and the awarding organisation and engagement with the FHEQ. There are no areas for development or specified areas for improvement in this judgement area.

22 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education

24 The College has a clearly defined management structure with separate structures and responsibilities for higher education. Minutes and reports demonstrate that these systems operate effectively. Management systems are subject to internal audit.

25 An annual quality improvement cycle is in place. Self-assessment reports on curriculum and service areas feed into a report for the College as a whole. The cycle includes weekly, monthly, termly and annual activities that involve all stakeholders, groups and committees at all levels. Action plans are prepared and implementation is monitored by the EMT.

26 The University is responsible for the annual monitoring and periodic review of provision delivered on its behalf by the College. Pearson retains responsibility for the annual monitoring of Higher National programmes but delegates responsibility for periodic review to the College. The latter has a periodic review process in place.

27 College strategies and systems are designed to support strategic enhancement and continuous improvement. The College uses key performance indicators aligned to its strategy which are monitored regularly. Extensive data is collected and analysed on staff and student performance with internal and external data used at various points in the quality cycle. Minutes and reports demonstrate the College's effective use of data to identify issues to be addressed and opportunities for enhancement.

28 Students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning and skills development. The College facilitates independent learning in multiple ways, including study skills that enable students to manage, apply and communicate knowledge and information. Teaching staff set formative assessments and share assessment information through assignment briefs and clear marking and grading criteria. Students receive timely and helpful feedback on their work and can access their grades on demand through the student portal. External examiners' reports confirm the development of independent learning.

29 Student feedback is collected regularly and analysed using a range of mechanisms including surveys, module evaluation and focus groups. Minutes and reports demonstrate that student views in relation to the quality of the learning experience are responded to appropriately.

30 The review team noted that the metric on student satisfaction for full-time students had been significantly below benchmark. The team reviewed the evidence base and discussed the issue with the College. The College acknowledged that the issue related to a particular programme and has taken action to address the problems involved. The review team considers that the College has taken appropriate steps to address this issue.

31 Elected student representatives sit on the Student Council attended by College management. Representatives receive a briefing document. Students also provide feedback informally through tutors. One of the two student governors is usually a higher education student. A student representative is invited to attend higher education management groups. Governors meet termly with students from the curriculum area to which they serve as a link governor.

32 The College has identified low levels of student engagement as an issue to be addressed. Actions have been taken with the result that levels of engagement have increased and further initiatives are planned.

33 The review team noted the College had experienced growth in undergraduate student numbers. The team reviewed the evidence base and discussed this with the College. The increase in student numbers in recent years is consistent with planned strategic change and the College confirmed that slower growth is now planned. The review team considers that the College manages student numbers effectively.

34 The College has in place a range of physical and human resources designed to support student learning. Students are content with the resources available. There is a Higher Education Centre on the main campus to which all higher education students have access. Students studying on University validated programmes have access to learning resources at the University. Learning is supported by the virtual learning environment (VLE) which is accessible remotely. Minimum standards of VLE content for modules are defined and audited. Students can access a range of personal and academic support services. New students are supported to make the transition to higher education. Student progress is monitored and those at risk of failing to achieve are placed on a risk register with regular tutorial follow up. Students consider that the high level of support available is a defining characteristic of the College.

35 The College's commitment to fostering practical currency, scholarship, and maximising staff capability and performance is set out in key strategy documents. Teaching staff are observed regularly and receive constructive feedback. A developmental appraisal system is in place through which training needs are identified. Opportunities are provided for staff to engage in peer observation and to undertake continuous professional development. The College supports the development of a higher education ethos among teaching staff and sponsors higher degrees.

36 The College makes effective use of externality to improve the student learning experience. External examiners' reports, which are shared with staff and students, contain commentary on course quality. The College process for periodic review is led by an external adviser. The College's Self-Assessment Report is externally validated. Programmes work with employers in relation to curriculum development and delivery. The College plans to increase opportunities for employer engagement with its provision. One Higher National programme contains modules that involve placements. Placements are managed in accordance with agreed College policies and practices for risk assessment; health and safety; workplace expectations and monitoring by tutors.

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

37 The College's arrangements for encouraging student involvement in academic governance ensure a robust approach to enhancing the student voice and ensuring student complaints are addressed.

38 Student members are appointed to the Board of Governors as set out in the Instrument of Government; and a representative is invited to attend the Higher Education Management Group, Higher Education Operational Group and Higher Education Tutor Forum. The College has reviewed arrangements for student representation, reuniting further education and higher education structures to ensure sustainability; attendance at arranged meetings and events and recruitment of representatives to all courses. Senior Management also attend Students' Union Council meetings to listen to and respond to the student voice.

39 Student Complaints are considered through a single 'Have Your Say' route for compliments, suggestions and complaints, with a distinct complaints policy and procedure used to respond to complaints. An annual summary report of complaints is received by the Board of Governors, and the review team was provided with a complaints tracker that evidenced that the College's complaints procedure was upheld.

40 Students confirmed a variety of forums in which the student voice was recorded and reported through the governance structures and highlighted that they were aware of how a complaint could be made and would be handled. The review team considered whether the uniting of compliments and complaints procedures under a single 'Have Your Say' identity might impede students from understanding how to and make a formal complaint, but found no evidence for this.

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

41 Processes are in place for the collation, checking and publication of information for prospective and current students in order to ensure accuracy, accessibility and utility. All public information requires approval by the Higher Education Management Board before final sign-off. Checks are made on the continuing accuracy of published information. Information about programmes leading to University qualifications is signed off by both it and the College.

42 The College's arrangements in ensuring that the approach to admissions is consistent and transparent meet the baseline regulatory requirements. There is an Admissions Policy and a clear process which provides specified timeframes and responsibility for action. Admissions criteria are agreed during programme approval and reviewed through annual monitoring and the College's periodical review process. There is a Recognition of Prior Learning Policy. Students are enrolled following interviews which include the identification of learning needs and progression opportunities. Admissions processes and procedures are effectively coordinated by the College's admissions team.

43 The College holds regular open and applicant days and students confirmed that they found these events very useful.

44 The College is responsible for ensuring that prospective students are informed about arrangements with the University and Pearson. This includes information about the management of academic standards, complaints and appeals procedures and their rights and responsibilities as students.

45 Programme handbooks are available in hard copy and also held on the College's VLE. Students confirmed that the handbooks contain a wide range of definitive course information, including access to the complaints procedure. They also confirmed that access to the complaints procedure is easily accessible both in hard copy ('Have Your Say') and on the VLE. The review team heard from staff that the complaint handling process is discussed with students at induction sessions and is subject to annual review.

46 Marketing information for programmes is located on the College's website. Introductory overview information about the College, campuses, facilities, staff and students is clear and transparent and a search function enables prospective students to access publically available documentation, with links to online enquiry services. The review team found that there is sufficient information and guidance material on the College's website and in hard copy, such as the higher education prospectus and programme information sheets to inform students of their options, career choices and progress to higher education study.

47 Students confirmed that they were provided with the information they needed to make accurate and informed decisions, including the total cost of the programme. They also confirmed that any important terms and conditions, such as additional costs, were made clear to them.

48 Staff confirmed that terms and conditions related to consumer law and the College's legal obligations to students are fair and balanced; explained at interview, reinforced at enrolment and also at student progression events such as 'stretch and challenge' sessions.

49 The review team found that the website contained one item of out-of-date information regarding course fees. Information was presented in respect of 2015-16 course fees, but this had not been updated for the current academic year or 2017-18, meaning that prospective students may not be aware of any potential fee changes. However, current students commented favourably on the applications and admissions process and particularly on the individualised support and information they received which enabled them to appreciate the demands of higher education study.

50 The review team found that the College's website and the higher education prospectus contained an inaccurate comparison of course fees between the College and University study. The costs presented were not comparing the same product, thus providing possible scope for confusion for prospective students.

51 The need for action was quickly acknowledged by the College, with clear evidence of appropriate action being taken within twenty four hours. The review team considered that the requirement to amend and update the College's approach to rectifying the ambiguity and out-of-date information on the website and higher education prospectus does not require any major procedural change.

52 The review team found that the College is fully aware of its responsibilities for compliance with consumer protection obligations and it takes them seriously, for example, explaining terms and conditions at interview and enrolment. Students confirmed that they are treated fairly and have a fair opportunity to resolve any problems.

53 The review team heard that the College has staff in post with specific responsibility for consumer protection measures and updating legal guidance. There is a defined formal process for monitoring the reliability of public information and review of online information platforms which is widely understood by staff which was tested by the review team.

54 Nonetheless, the review team identifies an **area for development** and advises the College to further develop the management arrangements for publishing information to ensure continuing alignment with consumer protection procedures.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) Good Practice Framework, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's (PHSO) Principles of Good Administration, and HEFCE's Statement of Good Practice on Higher Education Course Changes and Closures

55 Responsibility for course closure rests with the awarding body and the awarding organisation. The College has a procedure for course closure where the choice for discontinuation rests with the College. The procedure considers issues of equality and diversity and the impact of teaching out a programme on enrolled students.

56 Since the last review, the College has transitioned from predominantly foundation degree provision to Pearson Higher National programmes. Where the University has closed a programme, the College met the relevant Associate Dean to consider the impact of this and ensure continuity of provision.

57 Material changes to courses are typically made between cohorts to lessen impact; with students able to cite changes to course structures that had been made from previous cohorts and identify additional academic support provided.

58 The procedures for complaints and assessment appeals are set out and available on the College's VLE, with the complaints procedure also available in hard copy through the Study Hub. The appeals procedure follows a staged process, including an Internal Quality Assurer to review the case and an appeal panel held within ten days. Complaints are managed independently by the Quality Improvement Team of the College, acknowledged in writing and investigated within ten working days. Students maintain a right to appeal the outcome of internal procedures to the awarding body or Pearson and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. The policies and procedures are also detailed in the College's academic regulations.

59 Complaints are tracked by the Quality Improvement Team to ensure independence, that procedure is upheld and timescales are met. Statistical information on complaints is reported annually to the Board of Governors in summary format, as well as a termly report on compliments and complaints to the EMT. A form is also completed at the completion of the complaints process to review timescales and lessons learned, which is used to inform College Quality Improvement Plans to enhance the student experience.

60 No formal complaints relating to higher education provision had been recently received by the College. Students commented that minor issues are typically resolved informally. Other issues have been identified through the bi-monthly CMD meetings and resolved by curriculum managers.

61 The review team therefore concludes that student protection measures are transparent, fair and accessible and meet the baseline regulatory requirements.

Rounded judgement

62 The College has demonstrated through its governance structures and internal policies and procedures that it effectively meets all the baseline regulatory requirements in this area. There is one area for development in this judgement area where either activity is underway or there are minor omissions or inconsistencies. There are no specified improvements in this area.

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

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557050
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk