Quality Review Visit of Darlington College

March 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Darlington College

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

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

Areas for development

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

- identify clearer arrangements for respecting the principles of academic freedom and collegiality (Code of Governance)
- provide more accessible training for student representatives in order to equip them more fully for their role (UK Quality Code)
- develop further opportunities for students to be more formally engaged as partners in quality assurance processes (UK Quality Code).

Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any **specified improvements**.

About this review

The review visit took place from 21 to 22 March 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Paul Brunt
- Mr Benjamin Hunt (student reviewer)
- Ms Elizabeth Shackels.

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 Darlington College

Darlington College (the College) is a vocationally oriented College serving the town of Darlington and the neighbouring areas of North Yorkshire and County Durham. It offers a range of higher education provision across several subject areas with the aim of equipping students to progress to employment. In 2016-17, the College had 302 students in higher education, predominantly studying on a part-time basis, and enrolled on programmes leading to an award from Teesside University, the College's single awarding body.

The College's higher education provision is primarily in the fields of engineering, computing, management and education. It consists of a range of foundation degrees, Higher National programmes, a Postgraduate Certificate in Education, a BA (Honours) in Education and Training and a number of Certificates, Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas at levels 4, 5, 6 and 7.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1   The College effectively executes its responsibilities for ensuring that the academic standards of its programmes are aligned to the FHEQ. The College works with a single awarding body (Teesside University) for its higher education provision. The University is responsible for programme approval, and details from approval events show appropriate consideration of the FHEQ in the design of the programmes and in the approval of definitive documentation.

2   The College, with its awarding body, has arrangements in place to ensure that the academic standards of its programmes are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers. The College is part of a regional higher education network and makes use of this and other indicators for comparisons with higher education programmes. There is also a range of data used including Teaching Excellence Framework metric data that is evaluated to plan, improve and inform academic standards.

3   The University is responsible for external examiner arrangements. External examiner reports comment on the comparability of standards and the sample of reports seen by the review team confirms that standards are comparable.

4   Annual and periodic review mechanisms ensure that actions arising from staff and student feedback, and external examiner reports are dealt with fully. The College's deliberative committee and reporting structure confirms that appropriate actions have taken place.

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 effective, with clear demarcation of responsibility. The College's Governing Body is responsible for the academic standards of the College and for setting and review of the curriculum. The College Principal is responsible for making recommendation to the Governing Body about the vision and mission of the College and for implementing policies and decisions. The Principal liaises closely with the Vice Chancellor of Teesside University.

6   The Quality and Standards Committee considers and recommends to the Governing Body areas of good practice, under-performance and also matters arising from the Collaborative Provision Annual Monitoring and Enhancement report. The Quality and Standards Committee is responsible for advising the Governing Body on the overall academic performance of the College. The College's Executive Team is responsible for maintaining oversight of academic standards at an operational level through receiving and scrutinising minutes of meetings and reports from other committees such as the Higher Education Management Group, and the Higher Education Forum and Curriculum Management meeting. In addition, the Deputy Principal takes the strategic lead on higher education, while the Assistant Principal takes the operational lead. Both the Deputy Principal and the Assistant Principal report directly to the Quality and Standards Committee.

7   The College has developed effective arrangements for maintaining oversight of academic risk. The Governing Body maintains a comprehensive risk register covering all

financial and academic risks to the College and uses this as the primary mechanism for maintaining oversight of academic risk. The College has recently appointed a Higher Education Link Governor to liaise more closely with higher education staff and students. The role involves gaining a fuller understanding of the challenges of higher education provision, as well as supporting the development of programmes and projects.

8   The responsibility for arrangements for respecting the principles of academic freedom and collegiality lies with the Governing Body. However, the Governing Body has not given full consideration to its responsibilities in this respect and senior members of the College did not outline an effective approach to these principles. Although teaching staff of the College expressed awareness of these principles and showed confidence in their capacity to deliver programmes of higher education, the review team advises as an **area for development** that the College and its Governing Body should identify clearer arrangements for respecting the principles of academic freedom and collegiality.

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

9   The roles and responsibilities between the College and the University regarding the setting of modules and assessment criteria are clear and transparent. The College is provided with policies and procedures as set out by the University to ensure that learning outcomes and assessment criteria are set at the appropriate levels of the FHEQ. There are secure arrangements for supporting work placements in respect of learning outcomes and assessment. College staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities regarding the setting of academic standards. The process for the creation and monitoring of definitive documents is robust.

10   The processes in place for the assessment of learning outcomes and feedback to students are appropriate. The roles between the College and the University are transparent. Standardisation events take place between the College and the University to ensure coherence in assessment procedures. The College follows the University's policy for recognition of prior learning. Students commented positively on their assessment and feedback.

11   The University is responsible for the employment and use of external examiners. External examiners' reports comment positively on the maintenance of academic standards. The College strategically monitors external examiner feedback in collaboration with the awarding body. Students are made aware of the roles of external examiners in programme handbooks. There is transparent access to external examiners' reports for students. The College makes strategic use of external expertise such as local employers and industry experts during the design and review of programmes.

12   The awarding body is responsible for oversight of programme reviews and for the annual monitoring of collaborative provision. The College is responsible for creating module leader and programme leader reports for specific programmes and for the self-assessment report, all of which are monitored in senior team meetings. The College produces the Collaborative Provision Annual Monitoring and Enhancement Report, which is shared and analysed with the University; the subsequent action plan is created after consideration of the report. The University carries out an annual Quality Enhancement Visit, which monitors various operations in the College. Particular focus is placed on the monitoring of academic standards and the processes that take place between the College and the University.

Rounded judgement

13   Overall, the governance and quality management of academic standards is effective and enables the College to fulfil its responsibilities to the awarding body, to align with the baseline regulatory requirements and to maintain comparable academic standards. The review team identified a single area for development regarding identifying clearer arrangements for respecting the principles of academic freedom and collegiality; there are no specified improvements.

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

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

15   The College has a variety of mechanisms to manage and monitor the quality of the student academic experience, and these are working well. All programmes have a programme leader who regularly meets students and provides an accessible point of contact. Programme leaders have a defined role, and are central to the monitoring mechanisms, which include attendance at meetings of the Higher Education Forum. Students are able to raise issues directly with a Governor at a Student Liaison Committee and meet senior staff on a regular basis at HE Student Voice meetings. Student representatives contribute to programme team meetings organised and held at the University. Further, there is a higher education student governor on the Corporation who received an induction for this role. Students reported satisfaction with their level of engagement with the College and the responsiveness to issues they raised. While student representatives felt able to discharge their duties, it was apparent that they had not received training or formal ongoing support for their role at the College. Training was available at Teesside University's Students' Union, but student representatives whom the review team met had not been able access it. The review team advises the College to provide more accessible training for student representatives in order to equip them more fully for their role, identifying this as an **area for development**.

16   During the review it was noted that while student engagement was working well, student representatives were not currently involved as formal members of College committees. Senior management representatives stated that they valued the contribution of students but had not to date sought their participation at key meetings and quality assurance activities, and stated that this was because of the attendance difficulties students faced. The review team advises the College to develop further opportunities for students to be more formally engaged as partners in quality assurance processes, identifying this as an **area for development**.

17   The means by which the College uses data to inform and improve the student academic experience is effective. The College recognises the importance of using data for quality improvement and has implemented this successfully at programme level. Data referring to the current year of study is presented through module and programme reviews, which informs an annual self-evaluation report and quality improvement plan at curriculum level and is evaluated by a panel of senior staff and a governor. A College-wide Collaborative Provision Annual Monitoring and Enhancement Report is developed internally and considered by the Higher Education Management Board, Quality and Standards Committee and Corporation. This is approved by the awarding body, which further undertakes periodic reviews at the College. All review activities make appropriate reference to the student academic experience.

18   The College works closely with its students to involve them in the learning and assessment process, and this was confirmed by the students met by the team and in their submission. Students were positive about the quality of teaching on their programmes, and reported that feedback on assessment was constructive and assisted their personal development. They also commended the employability relevance of the curriculum and the personalised approach to learning enabled through small cohort sizes and tutorials. Students were particularly positive regarding the commitment and accessibility of teaching teams and the ongoing professional and vocational awareness of their tutors.

19   The College gathers feedback from students through a variety of formal means, and actively responds. Student feedback informs the annual review mechanisms gathered at the module and programme levels. Students who met the review team stated that the College had quickly responded to any issues they raised, and they had generally not needed to pursue the more formal channels.

20   Adequate learning resources are available to all students, and are readily accessible. The University's programme approval processes require the College to show that it will provide appropriate resources for learning, and the quality of resources is monitored through the annual review process. The Higher Education Management Group evaluates resources and seeks ways to make improvements. Students reported satisfaction with resources for their programmes, including library and IT resources. The library and IT staff provide an induction for students designed to develop research skills and to ensure that students are aware of the learning resources available across the College and through the University. Students met by the review team particularly valued the additional ongoing support provided by the College.

21   The College has a comprehensive and appropriate staff development strategy, which enables staff to maintain their subject currency and supports the quality of the student experience. The University requires the College to provide relevant staff development and enables access to its own development programme. All staff have an annual appraisal of their performance and development needs, and have their teaching observed formally and informally with a peer. An annual College-wide schedule of higher education training activities are provided, and some staff have been involved in scholarship projects. Individual staff are supported to undertake higher degrees and receive time remission for this or support towards course fees. Some staff maintain their own professional practice, and others are supported in industrial updating.

22   The College makes good use of external stakeholders and employer input to improve the quality of the student academic experience. The College engages with local organisations, businesses, work-based learning providers and employers to contribute to the higher education programmes. Some stakeholders contribute directly to the delivery of learning as guest speakers or provide case studies for student projects. The input and value of external stakeholders informs the annual review reporting process.

23   The College has effective arrangements to ensure that information related to the student academic experience is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The College's responsibilities for publishing information about its higher education programmes are clearly detailed in its agreement with the awarding body. Approval mechanisms exist to ensure its accuracy. The College publishes higher education course handbooks that are contextualised to reflect individual programme detail, programme aims and learning outcomes. Handbooks are available electronically and in hard copy. Students confirmed that their handbooks are useful and informative.

24   Student satisfaction metrics arising from the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2014 were below their benchmarks. The College evaluated the factors contributing to this outcome and noted the small sample size and the impact of a programme that has since been withdrawn. These actions have resulted in improvements that have brought recent NSS results to be in line with benchmark expectations.

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

25   The College has in place arrangements to engage students in governance through the appointment of student representatives and a higher education student governor who is also a member of the Governing Body. Students do not participate on other College committees, but the open-door policy and supportive approach provided by programme leaders compensates sufficiently for the absence of wider participation on College committees.

26   Student representatives are invited to attend a range of meetings, such as the University Programme Boards, Student Liaison Committee and more recently the HE Student Voice meetings. The Student Voice meetings are scheduled three times a year, held over lunchtime each day for one week to encourage greater participation from students. College management representation includes members of the College Executive Team and Governor. Actions are recorded and monitored by the Assistant Principal who reports directly to the Quality and Standards Committee. The College also uses other feedback processes to collect and respond to student feedback; these include survey evaluations from an independent data processing service, outcomes from the NSS and module evaluations.

27   The Governing Body has effective oversight of complaints, appeals and any submissions to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. The College Executive Team produces annual reports on complaints and appeals that are then scrutinised and considered by the Quality and Standards Committee and Governing Body.

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

28   The terms and conditions for study are clear and transparent. They can be found on the University's website for prospective students. Students are required to sign their agreement to the College's terms and conditions as part of the enrolment process. Students commented that their terms and conditions were accessible and fair. Extra financial costs incurred for students during a programme are transparently outlined on the College website.

29   The creation and monitoring of public information is clear, accurate and transparent. The College is responsible for promoting and marketing information to prospective students. The University supplies guidelines to the College regarding the marketing of information regarding its relationship with the College. Students were aware of the relationship between the College and awarding body during the admissions process. Public information is signed off and monitored by the College's Marketing Manager, Curriculum Manager and by the University. Students commented that the College's public information was accurate and transparent.

30   The admissions process is clear and accessible. The College follows the University's admissions policy which is clear and transparent. Staff are given guidance and interview templates to ensure consistency during the admissions process. The application process allows students to request additional support upon enrolment. Students are made aware of the College's process for the recognition of prior learning via the College website. Students commented that the admissions process is transparent and consistent.

31   The student complaints process is accessible clear and fair. The process is provided to students during the induction process and can be found on the College's website. The complaints form clearly outlines the College's complaints-handling process

and provides a formal opportunity for students to make a complaint. The complaints form is easy to access for students.

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

32   The College follows the policy of its awarding body in relation to student complaints and appeals and has formed appropriate procedures to deal with both student complaints and appeals. The College complaints procedure is in line with the good practice framework of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. All students are made aware of both academic appeals and complaints during induction.

33   The review team found both staff and students knowledgeable regarding how a student could access the appeals procedure; students recounted occasions when an appeal had been made, the process followed with the University's oversight.

34   Oversight of the College's complaints process rests with the Quality Assurance Manager. The approach adopted by the College is to attempt to resolve all complaints informally through discussion between the student and the programme leader. However, in situations where this is not the case the College's procedure clearly outlines the stages students will progress through and the point at which the awarding body becomes involved. In their meeting with the review team both staff and students were not only conversant with the process but also highlighted the confidential nature and timeliness of the process. All complaints are recorded, actioned and reported through to Quality and Standards and the Governing Body.

35   The review team found that students were very clear about the admission process and that course changes may be made before, during and after their enrolment. Any material changes were communicated to students by programme leaders, by email or on the virtual learning environment.

36   The College follows the process of the University in relation to course closure. The College and the link tutor work closely together to ensure that students will be able to complete their programme. At the time of the review the College had only experienced one course closure.

37   Both major and minor alterations to programmes can be initiated by either the College or the University using the prescribed processes outlined in the Teesside University Quality Handbook. The College terms and conditions inform students of the possibility of course alterations prior to joining the College. Students are involved in the process of course alterations through surveys and module evaluations. All course amendments are communicated to staff and students in a timely manner.

Rounded judgement

38   The College operates clear policies and robust procedures to ensure that the quality of the student academic experience is managed in line with baseline regulatory requirements and in line with the requirements of its awarding body. The review team identified two areas for development, relating to the provision of formal training for student representatives and to the development of further opportunities for students to be more formally engaged as partners in quality assurance processes.

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