

# Quality Review Visit of East Coast College

June 2017

## Key findings

### QAA's rounded judgements about East Coast College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at East Coast 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 **areas for development** that have the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at East Coast College. The review team advises East Coast College to:

- ensure that the quality assurance arrangements for all higher education programmes are consistent in the new College structure (Quality Code)
- implement a more consistent approach to scholarly activity for higher education staff (Quality Code)
- develop a formal process for training and ongoing support for student representatives (Code of Governance)
- ensure that all complaints and appeals procedures are readily accessible to students (Consumer Protection)
- ensure that the College's complaints and appeals procedures incorporate good practice guidance, including providing clear information on the right of recourse to the relevant body (Consumer Protection).

### Specified improvements

The team identified no **specified improvements**.

## About this review

The review visit took place from 30 May to 1 June 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mrs Sarah d'Ambrumenil (Student Reviewer)
- Ms Deborah James
- Ms Diane Rainsbury.

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 East Coast College

East Coast College will be formed, following a merger of Great Yarmouth College and Lowestoft College, on 31 July 2017. At the time of the visit the two Colleges were operating under a federation agreement which took effect on 1 April 2017, following which the Colleges were using the single title of East Coast College and had put in place a single leadership team and governance arrangements.

Both Colleges offered higher education programmes in partnership with the University of Suffolk (the University), and with Pearson; Lowestoft College also offered an HNC programme awarded by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). The University, previously University Campus Suffolk, was launched in August 2016 and a new collaborative agreement was put in place. Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft Colleges, together with two other colleges and the University, make up the University of Suffolk Learning Network. Prior to 2016, the Colleges' higher education programmes were approved and validated by University Campus Suffolk, a joint partnership between the University of East Anglia (UEA) and the University of Essex.

The relationship with Pearson is a direct one, although the students enrol with the University of Suffolk and can access all University facilities. The programmes also use the University's quality mechanisms. The relationship with SQA is direct, and there is no link with the University for the SQA programmes. The programmes offered by East Coast College include Higher Nationals in engineering and maritime studies, and foundation degrees and honours degrees in a number of subjects including arts, sport, social care, education, computing and engineering. There are around 370 students enrolled on the programmes.

## Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The College has arrangements to ensure that its programmes meet or exceed the UK threshold academic standards, as set out in the FHEQ, at validation and re-approval. In addition to the FHEQ, the College uses Subject Benchmark Statements; external academics at validation for support and to scrutinise programme plans; external examiners appointed by the awarding partners; and regulatory and professional body guidance where appropriate.

2 The College's arrangements are effective in ensuring that the academic standards of its programmes are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers through monitoring data, considering student feedback and annual external examiner reports, and through review and re-approval. The data, student feedback and external examiner reports are initially considered by the College before being formally considered by the awarding partner.

3 The sample of external examiner reports seen by the review team confirms that assessment is at the appropriate level for the relevant award and that standards are comparable with those of other providers.

### 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

4 The governance arrangements provide effective oversight of academic governance consistent with the AoC Code of Governance. At the time of the visit, Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft Colleges were working under a federation governance and management structure pending full merger to form the fully incorporated East Coast College. These arrangements are proving effective in practice. As part of these arrangements a Designate Board has been established, which is providing effective oversight and ensuring that there are appropriate organisational and management strategies to maintain an effective transition throughout the interim period.

5 There are effective governance structures and clarity of reporting lines to assure academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience, and effective financial and risk management. The governors' strategic oversight of the implementation of the merger arrangements involves receiving regular reports or presentations from senior management responsible for project management of specific workstreams, including the higher education workstream.

6 To maintain continuity the Designate Board includes governors from each of the colleges, and two governors have the benefit of higher education experience. There are also several independent members, a staff governor and provision for a student governor. The role of a student governor is well-established practice at each College and the terms of reference make provision for such representation on the Designate Board. However, at the time of the visit the Designate Board did not include a student governor and the team was told that this would be effected at the start of the following academic year.

7 The Academic Committee is the principal senior academic committee that links and reports into the Governors' Quality and Standards Committee. Higher education is a specific

focus at each Board meeting through a formal report and update from the Deputy Principal. The Governing Body has specific responsibility for approving the Higher Education Strategy, overall student achievement, institutional policy, organisational development, the APR return and the Risk Register. In practice, it exercises an effective assurance role in terms of the robustness of the College's self-assessment process to maintain standards and provide a responsive and high quality student experience.

8 The Quality and Standards Committee has delegated responsibility specifically in relation to monitoring the development and implementation of the Higher Education Strategy. It also reviews the Risk-based Monitoring and Enhancement report (RiME) and the higher education Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) and associated action plans for approval by the Corporation, and reviews the effectiveness of self-assessment procedures and actions to assure standards and the overall quality of the student experience.

9 There is effective oversight of risk management in accordance with the Risk Management Policy; the governors receive the Risk Register in full and triangulate and challenge from a wide range of management information including the RiME. In accordance with the policy, all reports and recommendations incorporate due consideration of risk. The internal audit report confirms that the Board has effective arrangements to assure itself that identified risks are managed and that there are effective controls in place to monitor progress and implementation.

10 There is due regard to collegiality and academic freedom and there is a Whistleblowing Policy, approved at Board level. There is unrestricted access to the staff grievance policy. Staff participate in deliberative committees and are represented on the Governing Body.

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

11 Although there have been many recent changes for the Colleges, the review team found that the College demonstrated a very clear understanding of its responsibilities in the setting and maintaining of the academic standards of the awards of the University, and of Higher Nationals awarded by Pearson and SQA. The core responsibilities of the new collaborative agreement with the University are to be discussed on a yearly basis. Responsibilities for the SQA qualifications lie outside of the agreement with the University.

12 Programmes are designed to meet local needs, and both the College's Academic Committee and the University's Quality Committee consider proposals for new programmes to ensure the programmes lie within the strategic aims of the College. The processes for validation are clearly outlined in the Quality Manual that supports the partnership agreement.

13 Prior to the new agreement with the University, the programmes were jointly validated by UEA and the University of Essex through University Campus Suffolk, and representatives from the two awarding bodies jointly sat on validation panels. The programmes from the former University Campus Suffolk partnership are currently in a transition phase to see out the students. All new programmes are validated by the University and Pearson programmes proceed through Pearson approval processes.

14 Robust validation processes ensure that programme content, structure and assessment strategies provide students with the opportunities they need to achieve the programme learning outcomes at the correct level. Externality in validation processes is clearly evidenced. External readers comment on pre-validation documentation, and external stakeholders (for example, external academic advisors, employers and representative students) sit on validation panels.

15 All definitive records for undergraduate programmes, including those for Pearson Higher Nationals, are kept by the University and can be accessed via the University's website. The definitive records for Pearson Higher National programmes comply with the framework and regulation for Higher National awards of the University.

16 The College has a consistent approach to programme modifications, including changes to Pearson Higher National programmes, through the new University procedures. Periodic review and re-approval ensures currency of all programmes.

17 Programmes are compliant with the Programme and Assessment Regulations of the University and adhere to the University Framework and Regulations for Undergraduate Awards, the Assessment and Feedback Framework and the Assessment Moderation Policy. These documents underpin the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy for 2015-2020. Assessment regulations of the Pearson Higher National Awards align with those of the undergraduate awards. All marked work is moderated according to the Assessment and Moderation Policy. Separate procedures for assessment and moderation for SQA awards are clearly outlined. All undergraduate and Pearson programmes adhere to the assessment board procedures of the University and the University provides training for chairing of assessment boards.

18 Scrupulous use is made of external examiners. For its undergraduate provision, the College identifies and proposes external examiners and the appointments are made by the University's approval panel on behalf of its Quality Committee. The College liaises with the external examiners for day-to-day business; however, the University supports in all other aspects, as set out in the Quality Manual. External examiner reports go to the Course Leader and to the Higher Education Leader via the University. Although the College is responsible for responding to external examiner reports and producing an action plan, the University independently scrutinises all reports and monitors the follow-up of actions through the Quality Committee and sub-committees. The College produces an overarching external examiners' report summary and reports are discussed at the Autumn Course Committee.

19 The College demonstrates substantial and detailed monitoring and review processes that effectively uphold the University's Teaching and Learning Framework, whereby programme review and evaluations are informed by relevant statistical measures (for example, assessment results and National Student Survey - NSS - results).

20 Each programme holds three Course Committees and meets informally at least twice a year to monitor the smooth running of the programme. The informal and formal meetings contribute to the University's ongoing RiME. The Higher Education Curriculum Group has oversight of the RiME at programme level. Pearson Higher Nationals follow the same process. For the SQA Higher Nationals, Course Committees take place and these programmes currently follow Lowestoft College quality processes.

21 Course leaders and programme area leaders also meet on a monthly basis to respond to and update the Quality Audit tracker (QAT). The QAT is based on the University's Management of Course Policy and forms the monthly agenda for the Higher Education Curriculum Group (HECG). This group in turn reports to the Higher Education Academic committee that meets three times a year. Membership of this committee includes representatives of the University's Quality Enhancement and Partnership teams. The committee oversees academic standards and programme outcomes and has oversight of the RiME at College level. The Higher Education Administration and Support Group and the Student Voice forum also feed into the Academic Committee. Minutes are then considered at the University's Partnership Quality Enhancement Group and the Quality Committee. Actions from the Academic Committee appear in the Higher Education Quality Improvement plan (HE QIP), together with actions from the RiME and the NSS.

22 The Standards Committee of the Governing Body receives the annual higher education RiME, which is drafted at an annual RiME event, and the higher education QIP.

23 The team noted that the higher education quality monitoring and enhancement processes at Great Yarmouth were to be adopted across the College as a whole and found programme monitoring and review, particularly for Great Yarmouth College, to be comprehensive and effective. The College had already recognised that although academic standards were assured for the SQA programmes, a stronger oversight and alignment of processes for all the higher education programmes across both colleges should be put in place after the merger. The team advises the College to ensure that the quality assurance arrangements for all higher education programmes are consistent in the new College structure, identifying this as an **area for development**.

## **Rounded judgement**

24 The College's governance arrangements, its internal policies and procedures, and its adherence to the awarding partners' requirements ensure that academic standards are set at a level that is consistent with UK threshold expectations and that the College meets the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards.

25 There are no specified areas for improvement in this judgement area. There is one area for development, regarding ensuring consistent arrangements for the higher education provision across the two Colleges, including the SQA programme. The area for development relates to a need to amend or update approaches that will not require or result in major structural, operational or procedural change. The need to align the arrangements across the higher education provision following the merger was acknowledged by the College at the visit, and clear evidence was provided to the team that appropriate actions, and timescales within which they would be completed, had been identified.

26 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 (the Quality Code)

27 There are effective systems and processes to manage and monitor the quality of the student academic experience, and there is a wide range of opportunities for student participation in formal quality assurance processes, deliberative committees and feedback mechanisms. Course Committees systematically review information from module feedback, the wider student voice, the outcomes from validation and review, external examiners' reports, retention and achievement data and NSS outcomes. Each Course Committee reviews and responds to a wide range of information and feedback to assure and enhance student learning opportunities. The RiME for each programme includes a detailed action plan and Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). This action planning is used to secure enhancement and improvement for the benefit of the student experience.

28 The majority of the programmes operate in accordance with the detailed policies and processes of the University, including programme monitoring and periodic review. Staff demonstrated a good understanding of these requirements, of how responsibilities were discharged in practice at programme level and of the role of deliberative committees. As part of the interim organisational structure, as a matter of policy, the course management and quality assurance processes of Great Yarmouth had been adopted, although it was recognised that it would take time to embed these fully in operational practice. Consequently, there were some instances (for example the SQA programmes) where these were not always fully reflected in operational practice, particularly in respect of student representation at Course Committees, and module feedback.

29 Students also benefit from the comparatively small cohort sizes and the accessibility and close working relationship with their tutors. Students have access to a wide range of study skills and diagnostic support. They also particularly value the role of Learning Services that support their development, enabling them to maximise their learning opportunities. There is also effective evaluation and action planning of these services through the RiME.

30 Student representatives receive training at induction, which includes input from the University's Student Union. This initial training is supplemented by further briefing by the College's Higher Education Leader at Course Committees, in recognition of the benefit of having more localised context, and at later stages in the student journey. Discussions with staff and students at the visit attested to the accessibility and responsiveness of staff, particularly the Higher Education Leader, in responding to any queries to enable student representatives to fulfil their role effectively. In practice, however, there was some variability in the training received by Course representatives.

31 The College has already recognised the limitations of confining training to induction and has initiated improvements. The review team considered that there would be benefit in having a more formalised approach to such training and access to structured ongoing support throughout representatives' tenure of office. The importance of ongoing opportunities for training and development would enable students to gain maximum benefit from their role and enable them to represent students more effectively, and is recognised by the student course representatives themselves. The review team advises the College to develop a formal process for training and ongoing support for student representatives, identifying this as an **area for development**.

32 Staff development needs are identified through RiME and QIP, which draw on a wide range of qualitative information arising from quality assurance processes to support new areas of development. Staff have access to College-based staff development opportunities as well as specific programmes provided by the University. Both processes provide an important means of sharing good practice on national developments as well as specific regulatory and quality assurance requirements. There are also effective induction arrangements to ensure staff new to higher education gain sufficient familiarity with external reference points including the FHEQ, Quality Code and University requirements. The College has a programme of teaching observation and staff also participate in the University's peer review scheme. Additionally, at Lowestoft some staff participate in the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, which provides eligibility for HEA recognition. The College is committed to extending this opportunity to include participation by staff from Great Yarmouth.

33 The College has effective processes for reporting and monitoring participation in scholarly and continuing professional development undertaken by all higher education teaching staff, and a summary is included in the annual RiME. Active participation in scholarly activity was less widely prevalent although staff and senior management were supportive of the need for broader engagement and participation. Time for scholarly activity is not formalised as part of an overall workload model and in some instances workload was identified as a potential barrier to such participation.

34 The College participates, with two other colleges, in the AoC Colleges' Scholarship Project which aims to establish a kitemark for scholarly activity in college-based higher education. The College has started to initiate development of a scholarship policy in recognition of the need for a clearer and more strategic institutional framework. Although this is in the early stages of development, the intention is to have an approved policy in place by the beginning of the next academic year. The review team concluded that the development of such a policy as part of a more structured framework for scholarly activity and associated staff development would be beneficial. The review team advises the College to implement a more consistent approach to scholarly activity for higher education staff, identifying this as an **area for development**.

35 The active involvement of external stakeholders, and external peer review, contribute to the quality of the student experience. The outcomes from external peer review exercises, such as programme approval and review and external examiner reports, inform improvement and development through appropriate action planning at Course Committee through RiME and subsequent QIP. The QIP also provides an important mechanism for identifying themes for wider development and action planning.

36 Effective links with employers and sector organisations facilitate and maintain the currency and employment relevance of educational provision through active participation of employers at course committees, as guest speakers and through the provision of live briefs.

37 Information for students is accessible and comprehensive, with the majority of programmes falling within the University's requirements including a detailed process for verifying the accuracy of information. The majority of this information is available via a link to the University's website and handbook. Information relating to other higher education programmes is provided by the College, including a Student Handbook based on a standardised template.



## **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**

38 There are effective arrangements in place to encourage student involvement in academic governance. Prior to the merger, the Higher Education Student Voice forum elected a higher education student governor. The College confirmed to the review team that arrangements for higher education student representation for the new committee structures, and training undertaken by the Clerk of Governors, are in hand.

39 While the University is responsible for all academic appeals and complaints, all non-academic complaints are the joint responsibility of the College and the University. The Governing Body receives reports on complaints and appeals from both the University and the College.

40 The responsibility for safeguarding, protection of children and vulnerable adults lies with the site where learning and teaching takes place. Oversight reports on safeguarding are received by the Governing Body through the Standards Committee on a regular basis. The Governing Body is assuring itself of the clarity and efficiency of its welfare and Prevent duties throughout the merger process until the full Corporation is in place. Specific training on these issues is provided to Governors as part of their induction and through regular updates, including statutory obligations.

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

41 The College has an effective approach to admissions based on the rigorous regulations and policy of the University. The admissions process is consistent and transparent, and students find it easy to navigate. Information is available on the University website and, where applicable, on the College website. Prospective students are invited to open days and applicants are invited to attend an interview to ensure that the programme will meet their needs. Prior to accepting an offer, applicants are provided with clear and fair terms and conditions.

42 During their programme, students registered with the University of Suffolk are required to use the University's complaints and appeals procedures. Students are only informed of the appropriate complaints and appeals processes in the Student Handbook that is linked from the University's virtual learning environment (VLE). Complaints and appeals are not mentioned in the programme handbooks or on the College VLE. The team was told that higher education students use only the University's VLE, from where all policies and guidance documents are linked, including the general Student Handbook. Students who searched the College website for a complaints procedure would find the College procedure and would be unaware that it did not apply to them. Students on the SQA programme are required to use the College's complaints and appeals procedures initially but their student handbook specifies that these procedures are only available upon request. The review team considers that the appropriate complaints and appeals procedures are not easily available to students. The review team therefore advises the College to ensure that all complaints and appeals procedures are readily accessible to students, identifying this as an **area for development**.

43 The University manages the complaints and appeals procedures for its programmes, although the College is involved in the investigation and informed of the outcome. The College procedures used for the SQA programme are not primarily intended for higher education students. The College's complaints procedure does not reference the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, or the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman or the

SQA; the appeals procedure is made up of four stages and also has no reference to the SQA. The review team advises the College to ensure that its complaints and appeals procedures incorporate good practice guidance, including clear information on the right of recourse to the relevant body, identifying this as an **area for development**.

### **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**

44 The College works with a network of Colleges and its awarding bodies in ensuring that policies and practices for programme closures and changes are transparent, fair and accessible. The College has policies in place to ensure that students are consulted and communicated with in relation to suggested changes or programme closures.

45 The College's complaints and appeals procedures, used by students on the SQA programme, are proportional, fair and timely, independent and confidential. However, the review team identified a need to update the procedures to ensure that they take full account of good practice, including providing clear information on the right of recourse to the relevant body, leading to an area for development in paragraph 43. Students on other higher education provision use the University's complaints and appeals procedures for all of their formal complaints and appeals. The review team noted that the complaints and appeals procedures were not easily accessible to students, leading to an area for development in paragraph 42.

46 The College has a very small number of complaints and appeals that reach the formal stages. However, an annual report ensures that potential improvements are considered in response to student complaints and appeals.

### **Rounded judgement**

47 The review team concludes that the College is meeting the baseline regulatory requirements in this judgement area through its governance arrangements, internal policies and procedures, and adherence to its awarding partners' frameworks and regulations.

48 There are no specified improvements in this judgement area. There are four areas for development. These relate to a need to update approaches that will not require or result in major operational or procedural change, and to complete activity that is already underway. The need for action was acknowledged by the College at the visit, and evidence was provided that there were plans for appropriate action to be taken in reasonable timescales.

49 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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