



# Quality Review Visit of East Surrey College

March 2018

## Key findings

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

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at East Surrey 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 East Surrey College. The review team advises East Surrey College to:

- further develop the course review process to include systematic course review and monitoring of all areas for development including those not covered by external examining comments (Quality Code)
- further develop and clarify the approval process for new Pearson programmes
- ensure that all extensions granted are recorded and made available to the Assessment Board and to the external examiner (Quality Code)
- finalise the process for the accreditation of prior learning (Consumer Protection)
- further develop mechanisms to monitor the accuracy and currency of published information (Consumer Protection)
- further develop and implement a complaints policy that is simplified to allow for more clarity in operation (Consumer Protection)
- review and improve the ways in which the College signposts students to the College's complaints procedure (Consumer Protection).

### Specified improvements

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

## About this review

The review visit took place from 7 to 8 March 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Heather Miller
- Professor Hastings Mackenzie
- Ms Sarah Dambrumenil (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 East Surrey College

The vision of East Surrey College is to be an outstanding provider of further and higher education and training. This is supported by its mission, which is to provide inspirational, high quality education and training that meets the needs of individuals, employers in the local and wider communities.

East Surrey College is a medium-sized general further education college located to the north of Redhill. Alongside nearly 2,200 full-time further education students (generally 16-19), it also hosts adult, professional and leisure courses, around 450 apprentices and 169 higher education students (head count as of 1 February 2018). The latter are a mix of Higher Nationals and Foundation Degrees and 12 Degree Apprentices who joined the College in September 2017. The College's higher education is delivered on behalf of Pearson Education and the University of Brighton, although this relationship will soon be replaced by an arrangement with the University of Chichester.

## Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 At the time of the review the College partnered with the University of Brighton (UoB) for the delivery of foundation degrees. The second years of these validated programmes teach out from September 2018 and to enable continuity of the College's higher education provision, it has formed a new relationship with the University of Chichester (UoC). UoC partnership programmes will commence delivery for the first time in September 2018. The College also has a relationship with the awarding organisation Pearson for the delivery of its Higher National programmes. These awarding partners have primary responsibility for ensuring the alignment of programme and module learning outcomes with the FHEQ.

2 The College refers to UoB programme specifications and assessment regulations for its foundation degrees and has produced its own local programme specifications and assessment policy for Pearson awards. The College has full responsibility for assessment, moderation and feedback for all its awards and ensures that staff are appropriately trained in the FHEQ and the Quality Code. External examiners' reports confirm that programmes are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers.

3 The review team found that the College has in place arrangements that meet its awarding bodies' and awarding organisation's requirements to ensure that the academic standards of the programmes offered meets or exceeds the UK threshold standard for the qualifications offered, as set out by the FHEQ.

### 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 College has a Corporation of 16 Governors, including 11 independent members, one of whom has expertise in higher education, and two student members. The Corporation has a number of subcommittees, each with Governor representation. The College Higher Education Board, chaired by the Deputy Principal, who is also a member of the Learning and Quality Committee (a subcommittee of the Corporation) has responsibility for considering matters relating to academic governance that explicitly concern higher education. A series of Higher Education Review Boards feed into the College Higher Education Board and consider matters relating to the student voice, enhancement, and assessment standards. As a result of this system of governance, the College's arrangements are effective in maintaining oversight of academic governance.

5 This system also considers academic risk effectively, with scrutiny primarily taking place at the Learning and Quality Committee, and College Higher Education Board following consideration at operational level through termly higher education performance reviews. Matters of potential risk may also be considered or reported to the Finance and Resources Committee. In addition, the College maintains a Risk Register, which is the responsibility of the Risk Management Committee but overseen by the Corporation and involving the subcommittees of the Corporation and the College Higher Education Board.

6 The College's governance arrangements in respecting the principles of academic freedom and collegiality are effective. The principle of academic freedom is enshrined by the College's adoption of the Instrument and Articles of Government and within staff contracts. Academic staff at all levels spoke positively regarding their academic freedom and it was

apparent to the review team that staff at course level were given the freedom to reflect on and develop their courses of study.

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

7 The College operates within the arrangements as agreed with its awarding bodies and awarding organisation to help set and maintain the academic standards of awards.

8 The approval processes for new programmes and the setting and maintenance of academic standard rests currently with the UoB and Pearson. For university provision, the College operates within the frameworks set by the UoB, including procedures and templates for developing new programmes that meet academic standards. The College works collaboratively with assigned university staff to produce definitive documents on the programme aims, intended learning outcomes, structure and assessments. The resulting programme specifications form part of the definitive record for each programme as part of the validation and revalidation process. Students receive a programme handbook which contains module specifications, assessment and programme regulations. Foundation degree provision will be awarded by the UoC from next academic year and a similar process of collaboration has been followed with validation almost complete and approval to promote programmes given by the University.

9 For Pearson provision, teams prepare programme specifications using awarding organisation guidelines and a standardised template, which includes admission, programme aims and learning outcomes, and assessment methods. The Head of Department approves the specification and final approval is given through the College Higher Education Board, which is chaired by the Vice Principal. These form part of the programme handbook which students access on the intranet.

10 The College is effective in assessing that students have achieved the academic standards set. The College's responsibilities for the setting and marking of assessment activities are outlined in partnership agreements and confirmed in the responsibilities checklist. Students confirm that they receive learning outcomes for each module and the range of assessment methods used and the feedback provided helped them achieve. Mechanisms exist to ensure that assessment is fair and appropriate. Marking is subject to internal verification or cross-marking and samples are subject to external scrutiny by external examiners; the reports provided confirmed that the standards achieved were appropriate to the level of the qualification.

11 The College is active in recording external examiner comments and recommendations as part of discharging their responsibilities in maintaining academic standards. The good practice and areas for improvement identified through external examiners' reports are summarised in course reviews and in the Higher Education Self-Evaluation Document. These are considered by the Learning and Quality Committee and College Higher Education Review Board and as part of the periodic review process and course review. Course leaders respond to external examiners as required, and reports are made available to students on the virtual learning environment (VLE). The Head of Higher Education acknowledged that the Higher Education Reporting Action Plan did not provide sufficient monitoring of response to external examiner recommendations and has created a log for a more targeted College response. A further Enhancement Plan is also created, and the Head of Higher Education explained that this is for issues that enhance learning opportunities but were wider than quality assurance.

12 At programme level annual course reviews are completed for UoB and Pearson provision. These are reviewed at course boards and monitored through the quarterly

performance reviews. Course monitoring for UoB programmes considered development actions coming from a range of sources including student success and experience as well as externality through external examiner reports. The areas for development on the course review template for Pearson provision reflects external examiner concerns but was limited in providing opportunities to formally address additional programme issues. This is an **area for development** and the team advises the College to further develop course review processes to include systematic course review and monitoring of all areas for development including those not covered by external examining comments.

13 Revalidation of the foundation degree programme acts as the programme periodic review and follows the UoB cycle, paperwork and structure. For Pearson programme review protocols have been developed, a cycle agreed, and Higher National in Photography reviewed.

14 The College operates a well-established work experience process. Any programme that includes external work experience follows a standardised work experience approval process that includes risk assessments and health and safety checks. The College and employer complete a formal partnership agreement that comprehensively details the roles and responsibilities of both the employer, the students and the link College tutor.

15 Effective use is made of data in monitoring academic standards. The College's management information systems provide reliable data on retention and achievement to inform the course review process and inform the Higher Education self-evaluation document. The review process makes use of a range of data and in particular the National Student Survey (NSS) which is comprehensively reviewed as part of the Higher Education Review Boards with oversight provided by the College Higher Education Board. Student performance is monitored and issues of withdrawal evaluated, and issues followed up formally as part of the performance review system.

## **Rounded judgement**

16 The awarding body and organisation set the standards of the College's programmes through the application of their own academic frameworks and regulations, to which the College adheres. The College, through its adherence to its awarding partners' regulations, its engagement with the FHEQ the relevant code of governance and Part A of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards. The review team identified one area for development that advises the College to further develop the course review process to include systematic course review and monitoring of all areas for development including those not covered by external examining comments.

17 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)

18 There are clear lines of responsibility between the awarding organisation, Pearson, and the College for setting and maintaining academic standards. For University-validated programmes, the College follows the awarding body's processes for programme approval. The College's student handbook clearly states programme aims and learning outcomes and the awarding body's programme specifications clearly map programme level outcomes to individual assessments. The College produces definitive documentation for its Pearson programmes including locally produced programme specifications and student handbooks. The College's validated programmes follow the review processes of the University, and the Pearson programmes are subject to the College's own schedule of periodic reviews. The College lists a range of approved Pearson awards and can revise the module diet to suit employer and learner needs. The team also learned that these programmes are undergoing a transition from the Qualifications and Credit Framework to the Regulated Qualifications Framework and academic staff were aware of the implications and the impact on the assessment regime. The review team was provided with a Business Planning Process that outlined Higher National programme approval. However, it was unclear how specific programme titles were signed off as fully approved, how modules were selected for inclusion in a new award, and the point at which a programme could be advertised. The review team identified this as an **area for development** and advises the College to further develop and clarify the approval process for new Pearson programmes.

19 Course Board meetings are held each semester. Student representatives valued their attendance at these boards and noted that issues raised were recorded and followed up at subsequent meetings. Each round of Course Boards refers its minutes up to a Higher Education Review Board (Student Voice and Resources). An External and Enhancement Higher Education Review Board (HERB) is held in March each year followed by two HERB exam boards for initial assessments and referrals. The HERBs enable issues to be elevated to the College Higher Education Board if necessary for further discussion or action. The meeting structure is effective in managing quality-related issues at programme level.

20 External examiner reports are available to students on the College's VLE. There is effective use of external examiners and the annual monitoring process takes care to identify issues raised and track actions taken. The College makes full use of the awarding body's annual monitoring template in its oversight of foundation degree programmes. Programme-level reports make effective use of data and are considered at Higher Education Board while the cumulative Self-Evaluation Document and Action Plan is appraised at College-level Performance Review meetings.

21 The review team noted that Higher National course leaders have authority to grant extensions. This process could involve submitting a mitigating circumstances form and evidence or could be a less formal request to the course leader. It was evident from the review team's meeting with students that inconsistency of treatment across programmes could result from the design of the process. The team also noted that the awarding organisation's Centre Guide to Assessment requires that course leaders provide evidence of all approved extensions. The review team therefore advises the College to ensure that all extensions granted are formally recorded and made available to the Assessment Board and to the external examiner, identifying this as an **area for development**.



22 The College admissions process dealt with very few claims for accredited prior learning and responded to each case individually referring to awarding body and organisation guidelines as required.

### **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**

23 The College elects student representatives for each course and these representatives are invited to attend Course Board meetings with staff and the Higher Education Review Boards. A small number of senior higher education student representatives then attend College Higher Education Board. Senior representatives are also invited to Higher Education Performance Reviews, and one would sit on a Higher National Periodic Review panel. There are two student Governors; however, due to the small proportional numbers of higher education students neither of these positions is required to be held by higher education students. Students were aware of the role of representatives, and representatives receive a written guidance sheet explaining the parameters of their role. Students' views are considered within the programme review processes and students are encouraged to provide feedback to course leaders throughout their course. As a result, the review team found that the provider's governance arrangements were effective in encouraging student involvements in academic governance.

24 The effectiveness of the College's governance arrangements relating to complaints is considered within the consumer protection obligations section.

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

25 The College's arrangements ensure that the approach to admissions is consistent and transparent.

26 The College Admissions Policy is underpinned by standardised processes, easily accessible on the College website and applies to both higher and further education. The College Client Services Team manages application and enrolments for higher education programmes and the Deputy Principal Curriculum and Quality oversees the process and commissions regular audits to ensure that the principles of fair admissions are met. Full-time applicants apply through UCAS and part-time directly to the College. Offer letters provide information on course fees and signposts terms and conditions. Careful guidance is given to those students who are not accepted to assist progress to other areas.

27 All applicants are interviewed by the course teams using a standardised template that includes course content and structure, progression and support needs. Overall admission patterns are reviewed by the College Higher Education Board. Dissatisfied applicants can request a formal review of the selection decision, which is signposted through the Admissions Policy and process. Students commented positively on the support provided by College staff during admission.

28 The College acknowledges that accreditation of prior learning is an area for development and is currently completing a College-specific process, which will be reviewed by the Learning and Quality Committee. The team advises the College to finalise the process for the accreditation of prior learning, identifying this as an **area for development**.

29 The College holds Matrix accreditation for the quality of information provided to prospective applicants. Information on how to apply, financial advice and support options information are available via the College website.

30 Progression events are held for internal further education students to progress to higher education, with open days and admission events for external prospective students. Course leaflets and higher education course listings are available in printed form and on the College website. These are reviewed annually and the process, underpinned by a Communications Policy is completed by course teams, the Head of Higher Education and Head of Marketing. However, the review team found that the information on which prospective students make decisions for Pearson qualifications is variable, and the titles of qualifications do not always reflect those within the Pearson specification qualification title guidelines. The provision of clear and consistent public information for prospective students is an area for development. The team advises the College to further develop mechanisms to monitor the accuracy and currency of published information, identifying this as an **area for development**.

31 The terms and conditions are reviewed annually by the Head of Finance, the Head of Marketing, the Head of Higher Education and the Admissions and Enrolments Manager. They are accessible on the website and highlighted within admissions letters. Course teams are prompted to discuss them as part of the mandatory admissions interview and this is recorded on the interview record sheet. The College Client Services Team is briefed to provide guidance on terms and conditions during the recruitment process and post admission.

32 The College operates two complaints procedures: the Feedback Procedure for Prescribed Higher Education Students, which details Informal Stage One and Informal Stage Two of the procedure. The third stage requires students to access the Client Feedback Policy, which is the College complaints procedure for all applicants, students and visitors to the College. The Client Feedback Policy is comprised of three stages, with an informal stage, a formal stage and a right of appeal. Once this policy is exhausted students return to the Feedback Procedure for Prescribed Higher Education Students which details 'Formal Stage Two (External)', which provides that students studying a University course can ask for their concern to be escalated to the partner University and 'Formal Stage Three (External)', where 'for certain types of issue' a concern can be raised with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

33 The review team found that this process is complicated, with multiple stages and multiple policies to navigate that could be streamlined for the student. While the College stated that in practice a student would not be disadvantaged for using only Informal Stage One or Informal Stage Two, this is not stated or implied within the Feedback Procedure for Prescribed Higher Education Students. The review team advises the College to further develop and implement a complaints policy that is simplified to allow for more clarity in operation, identifying this as an **area for development**.

34 A further challenge for both the Feedback Procedure for Prescribed Higher Education Students and the Client Feedback Policy is the way in which students are alerted to these procedures. Neither of the procedures are mentioned in the 'advice and guidance' section in the Student Handbooks, in the VLE or on the College intranet (contrary to guidance in the Feedback procedure for Prescribed Higher Education Students). An explanation of the Client Feedback Policy, but not the higher education specific complaints procedure, is included within the 'induction' slides that are given to students at the beginning of their course although these slides do not contain a web link to the Policy or the relevant webpage.

35 Both the Policy and the Procedure are available on the College website, although elements related to higher education are not cross-referenced. Students are able to access advice about the complaints procedure from the course leaders or Client Services, although not all students were fully aware of the details of the complaints procedure and it was not



advertised on the Client Services webpage. The review team advises that the College should review and improve the ways in which it signposts students to the College's complaint procedure, identifying this as an **area for development**.

36 The review team acknowledges that when students submit a formal complaint, this is handled in a proportionate, fair and timely way and analysis of the complaint takes place at a senior level.

### **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**

37 The College has effective arrangements in ensuring that course closures and changes are transparent, fair and accessible and students are informed of changes. While the College does not have a specific formal policy outlining these eventualities, information is included within students' Terms and Conditions. The College provided the review team with a number of examples where changes and closures had been made and effectively communicated to students and where the College has supported another College when closures were made elsewhere. Additionally, the College was aware that it would be preferable to formally detail provisions within its Admissions Policy and plans to do so.

38 The review team was satisfied that the College handled complaints confidentially and ensured that someone independent considered a complaint at each stage. The review team noted that while it appeared within the Client Feedback Policy that the Deputy Principal was involved in both the substantive and the review stage, in practice this was not the case. It is noted that the College provided two examples in the last three years of where formal complaints had been appropriately considered. In one example, a complaint had been upheld and had led to the College changing its practice. It is noted that informal complaints are not recorded by the College and while this is not required, it is considered to be good practice, particularly where there are small numbers of formal complaints. The Deputy Principal raises complaints with the directorate and with governors where they reach a senior level.

### **Rounded judgement**

39 The College has demonstrated through its various governance structures and internal policies and procedures that it meets baseline requirements in this area. There are six areas for development that advise the College to amend and/or update its approaches without any major structural, operational or procedural change. The review team advises the College to further develop the approval process for new Pearson programmes, ensure that all extensions granted are recorded and made available to the Assessment Board, to finalise the process for the accreditation of prior learning, to further develop mechanisms to monitor the accuracy and currency of published information, to further develop and implement a complaints policy that is simplified to allow for more clarity in operation and to review and improve the ways in which the College signposts students to the College's complaints procedure.

40 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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