

Review of College Higher Education of Gloucestershire College

May 2013

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About this review

This is a report of a Review of College Higher Education conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Gloucestershire College. The review took place on 20-23 May 2013 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Richard Allen
- Dr Philip Davies
- Katherine Cooper (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Gloucestershire College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - threshold academic standards¹
 - the quality of learning opportunities
 - the quality of information
 - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

In reviewing Gloucestershire College, the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [themes](#) for the academic year 2012-13 are the First Year Student Experience and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² Background information about Gloucestershire College is given on page 4. A dedicated [page of the website](#) explains more about this review method and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.³

¹ For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

² www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/rche/pages/default.aspx

Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about Gloucestershire College (the College).

QAA's judgements about Gloucestershire College

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

- The academic standards of the awards the College offers on behalf of its awarding bodies **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.
- The quality of information produced for students and applicants **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at Gloucestershire College.

- Systematic use is made of the Higher Education Peer Observation Scheme for the improvement of student learning opportunities (paragraph 2.2).
- Support offered to staff to undertake higher-level qualifications results in a consequent input of research into the student learning experience (paragraph 2.3).
- Staff engage well with the comprehensive offer of staff development opportunities (paragraph 2.6).
- The Talkback system for complaints and compliments is responsive to students and well used by them (paragraph 2.10).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Gloucestershire College:

- by September 2014, achieve greater consistency across all higher education programmes by revising its management of Pearson Edexcel programmes (paragraphs 1.8 and 1.19)
- by September 2013, develop a monitoring procedure so that it can assure itself that all assignments are returned to higher education students within the specified time (paragraph 1.10)
- by September 2014, establish deliberative structures for higher education and distinct higher education strategies (paragraph 1.14)
- by March 2014, involve panel members external to the College in the approval and revalidation of Pearson Edexcel programmes (paragraph 1.18)
- by September 2014, develop a consistent tutorial policy to ensure an equivalent entitlement for all higher education students (paragraph 2.7)
- by September 2014, develop a college-wide set of information and guidance documents for placements and work-based learning (paragraph 2.32)

- by January 2014, formally develop and disseminate a strategic, institutionally led approach to enhancing further the quality of higher education students' learning opportunities (paragraph 4.3).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- student involvement in the selection of some learning materials for their courses (paragraph 2.8)
- implementation of the recent Higher Education Student Engagement Strategy and in particular the plan to establish students as full members of major committees in the College (paragraph 2.9)
- the plan to develop the collection of destination data and the relations with alumni in order to enhance the information for stakeholders (paragraph 2.21)
- continuing to use proactively the opportunities offered by the strategic alliance with the University of Gloucestershire for the development of the College's higher education (paragraph 2.27).

Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

At the programme level, students are consistently represented and able to play an active role. In various contexts, teaching staff involve students in making a contribution to quality assurance and enhancement. However, representation of higher education students on central College committees is by invitation and formally consists of the new post of Higher Education Representative on the Board of Governors and the Curriculum and Quality Committee. Developing the student representation system features in the list of enhancement activities. Although the team notes the recent draft Student Engagement Strategy, the committees in which this and other enhancement activities are discussed involve students only by invitation and there is as yet no deliberative forum that brings together staff and higher education students for discussion of such matters.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the [handbook](#) for Review of College Higher Education, available on the QAA website.⁴

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx

About Gloucestershire College

Gloucestershire College is a large general further education college offering further and higher education. There are currently nearly 4,000 full-time further education students and some 3,500 part-time. There are 252 higher education students, of whom 171 are full-time.

The College has three main campuses throughout Gloucestershire: Gloucester, Cheltenham and Berry Hill/Royal Forest of Dean (RFD). In addition, there are two satellite campuses for Construction and Engineering in North Cheltenham and Mitcheldean (RFD), and a multi-purpose campus primarily for schools provision in Tewkesbury. The higher education provision is primarily at the Gloucester campus, with some areas run from the Cheltenham campus.

The College mission is: 'transforming lives, supporting business'. For its higher education, the key strategies are to be a major local provider of higher education with niche provision in a few areas, and to support this with the provision of progression routes from further to higher - including postgraduate - education.

Significant changes since the last review include an expansion of the College estate. As part of the Gloucestershire Regeneration Project, the College's Gloucester site was relocated to a purpose-built campus, giving the opportunity to provide up to date technologies and accommodation. The historic Alexandra Warehouse close by was purchased and conversion is almost complete. This provides a bespoke higher education learning centre in Gloucester in conjunction with some partner universities.

The College has three universities and Pearson Edexcel ('Edexcel') as awarding bodies for its higher education. The partnerships with the University of the West of England and the University of Worcester are now the smaller proportion of the provision, while that with the University of Gloucestershire has been strengthened by the signing of a strategic alliance in February 2013.

The challenges faced by the College include economic and social regeneration within the local area, where there are local wards with significant deprivation and low levels of progression to higher education. In 2011-12, the College completed its first full year following a merger with the previous Royal Forest of Dean College in February 2011. Much of the focus in 2011-12 has been on the harmonisation of staff and the merging and embedding of working practices. Other challenges include the recent changes in funding arrangements and the withdrawal of some higher education numbers by some partners. The College recognises that the small numbers of full-time higher education students make it more difficult to provide a higher education ethos for them and for staff which, the College perceives, may discourage students progressing to higher education from staying in the College.

Explanation of the findings about Gloucestershire College

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.⁵

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)⁶ is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the [handbook](#) for the review method, also on the QAA website.⁷

1 Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards at Gloucestershire College **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Standards at the College are managed through collaborative partnerships with universities and Edexcel. Recent QAA reviews of the university partners have led to judgements of 'confidence'. No concerns have been expressed about the College by Edexcel. In part due to relatively small numbers of higher education students, policies and procedures are largely common to higher education and further education. The College is now beginning to expand its higher education provision and could enhance its management of higher education by establishing distinctive higher education policies, and the consistency in its management of Edexcel and university programmes, and could benefit from wider deliberations across its higher education community to enrich the expertise and experience within the College.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 The College's partner awarding bodies are responsible for ensuring that their programmes are matched to levels on *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), and this is set out in the partnership agreements. Proposals for validation in partnership with universities specify learning outcomes which are mapped against modules and levels. Proposals for validation for Edexcel programmes use modules which have already been mapped to specific levels. Learning outcomes and details of levels are normally included in programme handbooks and in detailed module guides for students. Validation panels for the universities check, and external examiners comment on, the appropriateness of the levels of existing programmes. The review of the level of teaching is monitored through the peer observation of teaching scheme for higher education staff, which the team note later in this report as a feature of good practice (paragraph 2.2).

Use of external examiners

1.2 The responsibility for external examiners belongs to the awarding bodies, as set out in the agreements. Recent external reviews of the universities confirm this is properly carried out by the partner universities. For Edexcel courses, the College follows the specified procedure which includes a clear statement of the respective responsibilities. External examiners are nominated and appointed for each programme by the

⁵ The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However, it is available on request for inspection: please contact QAA Reviews Group.

⁶ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx

⁷ See note 4.

awarding bodies. Contacts with the external examiner, the format of their report and the initial actions after receipt of the report are the responsibility of each university. Edexcel appoints external verifiers/examiners for all programmes within its framework. Appointments by Edexcel are managed by a specified Quality Nominee within the College Quality Office. The universities are responsible for the briefing and training of external examiners. Heads of school brief the examiners on College matters. Reports seen by the review team confirm that external examiners appointed by the universities and Edexcel carry out their role in a conscientious, fair and appropriately exacting manner.

1.3 Edexcel external verifier/examiner reports are submitted directly to the College. Where the award is made by a university partner, external examiner reports are submitted to the university and then passed to the College. Once received by the College, the process for review of the reports and monitoring of actions is the same for all awarding bodies; this is described for staff in the useful Higher Education Guide. Extracts from the reports and action points are logged within the College's performance management system, which is then used to monitor the progress of actions required. The Director of Quality and Performance reports monthly to the College Management Team on issues raised by external examiners and the consequent actions. A summary of themes and progress against action points is made annually to the Governors' Curriculum and Quality Committee. The review team concluded the system makes a robust contribution to the maintenance of standards, and saw a number of cases where examiners made recommendations which improved teaching on the course for which they were responsible. The processes for dealing with external examiners' reports described above ensure external examiners can raise any serious concerns they have about the programme.

1.4 The College's systems are potentially less effective in consideration of the reports on matters that can have a more general impact on the enhancement of the institution's provision and the students' learning experience. The performance management system is geared to specific action points; the Governors' Curriculum and Quality Committee has only a small staff membership and discussions of reports are likely to be short due to the many agenda items to be covered. This contributes to the **recommendation** relating to the development of deliberative structures for higher education and distinct higher education strategies, which would provide stronger opportunities for discussion of themes drawn from external examiners' reports within the whole higher education community in the College (see paragraph 1.14).

Assessment and standards

1.5 The College's Student Assessment Policy states that assessment is at the heart of the learning experience for students. Meetings with students confirmed that this was the case. The policy is supported by strong staff development policies and take-up of specific events on assessment. The systematic Higher Education Peer Observation Scheme also includes the requirement that observers comment on assessment with prompt reflection by the person observed. This contributes towards the identification by the review team of the Higher Education Peer Observation Scheme as good practice (paragraph 2.2). The requirement that staff possess or are working towards a teaching qualification, together with the regular focus on teaching and learning in staff development, contribute to the use of assessment as an effective learning process.

1.6 Validation documentation for the universities requires an assessment strategy. The College's Higher Education Guide expands on this, setting out that an early assessment to support students' initial learning experience should be normal practice. The Edexcel framework makes the linking of learning and assessment a normal part of these awards.

1.7 University awarding bodies determine the conduct of assessment boards for their awards and the programmes are governed by their regulations. The review team concluded from the partner agreements and annual reports that assessment was conducted in a fair and transparent manner. Assessment boards for Edexcel programmes are determined by the College Student Progress and Examination Board Procedure. Course leaders have formal responsibility for the accuracy of marks submitted to a board. The Head of School chairs the board, ensuring it follows protocols and achieves its purpose, and is responsible for the accuracy of the results. All those teaching the course are members of the board, together with the course internal verifier and the Edexcel lead internal verifier for the area. Personal tutors (or those carrying out this role) and functional skills tutors, where they exist, are also members, allowing the board to take a rounded view of individual student cases as necessary. A representative from the Quality Office also attends the boards.

1.8 The College operates its own set of policies and procedures to regulate the conduct of assessment for Edexcel provision. Students who met the review team knew of the procedures and would seek initial advice from their course leader. In general, students expressed no concerns about assessment. The College takes appropriate steps to ensure students are assessed on the basis of their own work, and to communicate regulations in this area to students. This is reinforced in the assessment submission procedure. These warnings and regulations are reiterated in student handbooks and are sufficient to assure academic standards. However, the review team formed the view that the regulatory effect of these documents has the potential to be weakened because of the way they mix regulatory matters with procedure. Separate assessment regulations and guidance documents would create regulations of equivalence to those of the university awarding bodies. The review team **recommends** that by September 2014 the College achieve greater consistency across all higher education programmes by revising its management of Edexcel programmes (see also paragraph 1.19).

1.9 All the College's university awarding bodies require some combination of second marking and moderation for programmes leading to their award. Edexcel courses achieve similar results through the sampling involved in their internal verification process. Guidance is provided for staff in a detailed and clear Guide to Quality Assuring Student Assessment (on Edexcel programmes). The College also makes effective use of templates for the setting and marking of assessment. These assist the transparency of the process for students, and the cover sheet used when submitting assessments has a useful section inviting students to comment on their own performance.

1.10 The College's partner universities require that feedback on assessments be provided within 20 working days. The College's own Student Assessment Policy requires that feedback be provided more quickly, described usually as within two weeks, but in the Higher Education Guide stipulated as within 14 working days, and this has a normative effect across all courses. The Higher Education Guide spells out the importance of high-quality feedback; students whom the review team met confirmed readily that formal written feedback provided was full and useful and that, in their experience, staff were also very ready to meet informally to provide further advice and guidance. Although there is evidence that almost all students receive their feedback within the stated period, the College centrally does not have a means for knowing that this is the case and, therefore, of identifying any late returns. The review team therefore **recommends** that by September 2013 the College develop a monitoring procedure so that it can assure itself that all assignments are returned to higher education students within the specified time.

1.11 The College has robust systems for recording assessment outcomes. Responsibilities in examination boards are clearly set out and a representative from the Quality Office attends each examination board to ensure proper practice. The external examiners' reports seen by the review team confirm that overall data is complete

and accurate. The Quality Office is responsible centrally for transmitting outcomes to partner universities and to Edexcel.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.12 Overall responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards rests with the each awarding body. Academic managers within the College carry out their responsibilities according to the awarding body requirements. This is confirmed by the annual monitoring reports, regular partner liaison meetings, and contacts between programme leaders and their link tutors.

1.13 The Board of Governors has overall responsibility for all aspects of the academic programmes of the College. Through its Curriculum and Quality Committee, the Board takes major decisions and monitors performance. Below that level, authority in the design, monitoring and review of programmes rests with a series of senior managers with defined roles - such as that for the Vice-Principal for authorising that a new programme can proceed to validation, thereby confirming that staffing and other resources are available. The Quality Office authorises enrolment and the Director of Quality and Performance ensures any issues raised in subsequent monitoring reports are addressed. Evidence seen by the review team confirmed the effective operation of these processes.

1.14 This structure is clear, but Indicator 2 of *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) refers to the academic authority as 'for example [a] senate or academic board', meaning that authority rests with a body which includes representatives of the general higher education community within the institution. The College used to have such a body which was replaced by the Learning and Teaching Standards Board, which itself has been disbanded. Decisions are largely taken by nominated individual postholders. Such bodies as the Higher Education Managers' Group and the Higher Education Strategy Group also largely include these same individuals. There is limited representation of other staff members on other committees where discussion of higher education issues occurs, other than at programme level. The review team concluded that the College does not yet benefit from sufficient deliberations involving a wide range of those in the higher education community. It therefore **recommends** that by September 2014 the College establish deliberative structures for higher education and distinct higher education strategies (see also paragraph 1.4).

1.15 A new programme is proposed for approval by a school, although the initial prompt may come from the Higher Education Strategy Group or the College Executive. Programme approval is then a two-stage process. The first outline approval takes place at a meeting of directors of centres - an informal group with formal approval then given by the Vice-Principal (Curriculum and Quality). Validation then follows the process as set out by the relevant awarding body.

1.16 The sample of validation reports and more detailed case studies provided for the review indicate that the College's practices articulate its policies well. The scale of the College higher education provision allows for practice to be managed by a small number of individuals, and this represents a strength. The review team learnt that the Director of Quality and Performance is developing a series of user guides as a resource for staff, and the review team considered these valuable for reinforcing consistent practice for present and future staff engaged in higher education teaching.

1.17 If a proposal for a new programme released for validation is linked to an award by a partner university, it will follow the validation process for that university. Proposals for programmes within the Edexcel framework are subject to a College validation process. The College's view is that appropriate externality is provided by the inclusion of members of

the College from areas other than that making the proposal, but the review team formed the view that this does not fully meet the requirements of Indicator 3 of Quality Code *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval* in terms of externality, and means that the College is not currently benefitting from a wide input into the development and approval of the programme.

1.18 Overall, the College approval and monitoring processes for Edexcel programmes make less use of what the Quality Code refers to as 'external participation' compared with the externality involved in partner university processes. In *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*, Indicator 3 states that 'higher education providers ensure independent and external participation in the management of threshold academic standards'. Edexcel provides a structure for the award and a menu of academic content and can normally be regarded as having taken the Quality Code into consideration. This may be taken to constitute some externality, but the College almost always retains significant freedom in the final content of the award offered to students and how its design may be tailored to local circumstances. The College's academic decision-making would be enhanced by additional external input into the design of the award, focused on particular issues, and, in particular, by external membership of validation and revalidation panels. The review team accordingly **recommends** that by March 2014 the College involve panel members external to the College in the approval and revalidation of Edexcel programmes.

1.19 University programmes use the universities' processes for annual monitoring and periodic review. For Edexcel programmes, the College uses an online performance management system managed by the Director of Quality and Performance. This collects and regularly updates inputs, including statistical data, student surveys and action points from external examiner reports. However, it is not equivalent to the type of regular review set out in Indicators 3 and - in particular - 5 of *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code, which allow for formal reflection by the programme's teaching staff and students, taking into account institutional or other relevant factors. The broader review of the continuing validity and relevance of programmes in the Edexcel framework is undertaken through a revalidation process on a five-yearly cycle, which may follow the pattern for validation or, in practice, be carried out as a desk exercise. There are discrepancies between this and the procedures for periodic review as set out in Indicator 6 of *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code and operated by the university awarding bodies. In the case of periodic review, this includes external participants. Guides for staff, the Quality Improvement Framework cycle and meetings with staff indicate that the College is committed to quality improvement. However, further steps to ensure the equivalence of oversight of all higher education programmes, regardless of the awarding body, would strengthen the Edexcel provision, embed the Quality Code in these procedures, and provide staff development. This therefore contributes to the **recommendation** that by September 2014 the College achieve greater consistency across all higher education programmes by revising its management of Edexcel programmes (see paragraph 1.8).

Subject benchmarks

1.20 The partnership arrangements with the universities require that subject benchmarks are considered when a new programme is approved and at the periodic review. Validation reports show this takes place. Edexcel processes also ensure that this is done, since the framework used determines the structure and outline content of the courses. The programme handbook template requires subject benchmarks to be specified for students.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at Gloucestershire College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 The College has adopted a philosophy of combining, as far as possible, higher and further education systems. All new staff are expected to have a teaching qualification and, where staff are employed for specific professional expertise, they are expected to obtain such a qualification. All new staff have a specific higher education induction, followed by a teaching induction. The College has a team of qualified mentors and a mentor coordinator, and staff training is provided to support the role of mentor.

2.2 There is a thorough process for the observation of higher education teaching and learning, and this activity is reviewed and monitored by a Teaching Improvement Manager who then reports to the Higher Education Managers' Group. Higher education staff undergo a specific observation process of systematic lesson observations and student and staff feedback, which feeds into the training plan. Systematic use is made of this to improve student learning opportunities and also to monitor the level of teaching. An online recording scheme provides detailed qualitative and quantitative reports for directors of centres and heads of school, making the reporting process rigorous and relevant. In addition, College staff engage with partner colleges in the South West Peer Review Group of Colleges, which provides a wider forum for the review of processes and the dissemination of good practice. The review team concluded that the use made by the College of its Higher Education Peer Observation Scheme is a feature of **good practice**.

2.3 The College encourages staff to gain higher qualifications and supports them financially to do this. Higher education staff have the same teaching hours as further education staff but can apply for study leave. The review team heard of cases where this had been granted. A total of 86 staff (43 teaching staff and 43 non-teaching staff) have a master's qualification or above. A further 15 members of staff have applied to undertake higher level programmes, with 44 staff teaching on higher education programmes in total. Most members of staff teaching higher education engage in scholarly activity. The review team heard of examples where staff undertaking PhDs were incorporating elements of their research into their teaching, enabling students to benefit from current thinking. The review team concluded that the support for staff to undertake higher qualifications and the input of research into the students' learning experience represent **good practice**.

2.4 The College has decided not to link to the Higher Education Academy or to engage with the UK Professional Standards Framework at this time. The small numbers of higher education students, particularly those studying full-time, provide a challenge for the College in creating a community of higher education practitioners. However, the College offers a substantial staff development programme to all its staff, and staff discuss teaching and learning enhancements in many contexts, including cross-college teaching and learning days (see paragraph 2.6). The systematic Higher Education Peer Observation Scheme, noted as a feature of good practice (paragraph 2.2), also provides substantial staff development.

Learning resources

2.5 Overall, the College takes care to recruit staff with appropriate expertise. There have been occasional problems in specialist areas when there are unplanned in-year staff departures. The College makes good these gaps as soon as it is able, and at such times might consider keeping students better informed of the situation. Overall, the majority of students met by the review team spoke of the enthusiasm of the staff who taught them and praised their willingness to provide support over and above the timetabled classes.

2.6 The College has an extensive programme of staff development. Additional training days are provided for all staff, together with special higher education training events, inter-college meetings, and additional training provided by partner universities which provide access to their own staff development programmes. The College has started to introduce sessions on the Quality Code, but familiarity with this is still not universal, particularly among staff with no management responsibilities. College staff who teach higher education for University of Gloucestershire programmes are able to use the University's facilities, such as the library. All staff, including managers, are expected to engage in relevant training. Attendance at staff development events is monitored and there is a comprehensive tracking system for staff development. During 2011-12, 397 separate staff training events were held in the College and 2,666 attendances were logged across all staff. The review team concluded that the comprehensive staff development programme is a feature of **good practice**.

2.7 Tutorial entitlement varies across programmes and there is a wide variation of practice across schools. Currently practice is inconsistent and the College has no process for determining if individual programme entitlements are adhered to or whether any student is being disadvantaged. Students met by the review team reported that staff are always available to them, even if this is outside the set teaching times. A pilot tutorial system is in operation in one school for the current year, whereby two staff are employed only to provide personal and academic support. Interim monitoring shows this to be well received by students and enhancing student engagement with the programmes. The team **recommends** that by September 2014 a clear policy of tutorial entitlement be available to students to ensure that all students have equivalent access to tutorials.

2.8 The College provides resources across both further and higher education without distinction and this enables all students to benefit from specialist resources. Resources enable students to meet the objectives of their courses; students confirmed they have sufficient resources. The resources capital budget is approved by the College Executive on the basis of the submission of annual bids. Students in one area are involved in selecting items to be purchased from the library budget for that area from a list of suggestions and choice of resources, and the review team **affirms** this involvement of students in the decisions on spending the learning resources budget. The Alexandra Warehouse is being developed as a Higher Education Centre, with the intention of encouraging a sense of difference for higher education students and providing an appropriate context for advanced study, particularly for the majority of mature students. The newly opened Gloucester Campus has up to date information technology equipment, both in the classrooms and other study areas. The College facilitates the purchase of laptops through a bursary scheme.

Student voice

2.9 Students make a limited contribution to quality assurance. All programmes have student representatives and at this level students are able to contribute actively, although no training is provided. Students commented that not all programmes consistently reported

back on the matters raised. There is a Students' Union but currently this has no higher education representative and higher education students reported that it does not represent their interests. A higher education representative on the Board of Governors was first appointed this year. The College is reviewing student representation on its committees and has recently developed a Student Engagement Strategy. The review team **affirms** the College's intention to implement this strategy and in particular the plan to establish students as full members of major committees in the College.

2.10 Student views are collected by a wide range of mechanisms, including the National Student Survey, Student Perception of College, Student Perception of Tutorial surveys, focus group meetings, and the opportunity to comment on units. The College also has established Talkback, which is an effective system for students to raise complaints and compliments on forms widely distributed around the College or through the website. The Director of Quality and Performance passes comments to relevant staff, and students reported using the system and on the responsiveness of the College. The team concluded the Talkback system, which is responsive to students and well used by them, represents **good practice**.

2.11 The College pays careful attention to the National Student Survey results, which are published on the College website, and there is a robust process to address responses which are below a specified level. However, the number of final year students who can take part in this survey is relatively small, making the results at times difficult to interpret.

Management information

2.12 Management information is clearly defined and available to all staff through a widely used online performance management system. A new centralised assessment tracking system has been introduced and key performance indicators are extensively used to monitor a range of quality indicators. Data is easily available to and monitored by governors, senior managers and - at programme and module level - by lecturing staff.

2.13 The College has well defined systems for collecting and returning the required data to the relevant bodies, including the Higher Education Statistics Agency and the Unistats website.

2.14 There are appropriate systems to collect data in order to monitor the admission and progress of students with disabilities and the monitoring of complaints and appeals. This contributes to the review team's **affirmation** of College plans to develop the collection of destination data to help with its careers' service (paragraph 2.21).

Admission to the College

2.15 Entry requirements are clear, fair and explicit. The entry requirements for programmes of partner universities are approved at validation. The College has recently recognised that the different admissions processes for internal and external applicants for higher education were in need of review to ensure fairness and clarity. This has resulted in a new draft admissions policy which addresses these issues and potentially ensures the admission procedures are objective and clear.

2.16 The admissions process is monitored as part of the ISO 9000 accreditation. The admissions team maintains a portal of information for partner universities in order to facilitate access for them to review the application information and confirm offers to potential students. A selection of interviews carried out through the year are monitored and the Executive Director with responsibility for this area is charged with carrying out an annual

review to ensure consistent practice and the dissemination of good practice. After applying, potential students are interviewed by a central admissions team member and a trained subject specialist. On acceptance, students receive a welcome pack before enrolment. Students report that the system is effective and efficient.

Complaints and appeals

2.17 The College has comprehensive and effective complaints and appeals procedures in place. Students are informed about complaints and appeals procedures at induction and are reminded of them throughout the academic year. The processes are also set out in student handbooks. There is a wide range of opportunities to raise issues in class and through the Talkback system. Students met by the review team were content with the operation of the complaints and appeals systems available and particularly mentioned the Talkback scheme, which they readily used, and noted the prompt response they received from the College. This contributed to the review team's conclusion that the Talkback system is a feature of **good practice** (paragraph 2.10).

2.18 The range of opportunities for students to raise issues ensures that very few reach the formal stages of the process. In such cases, there are robust processes for dealing with formal complaints and appeals.

Careers advice and guidance

2.19 Careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) is effectively managed and quality assured. Student Services advisers have designated responsibility for enquiries related to higher education. Higher education students have full access to all CEIAG services. The area is overseen by the Student Services Manager. The Student Services area as a whole is ISO 9001 compliant. As such, it is quality reviewed annually and undergoes an external review every three years. Progress on improvement plans is monitored by the Director of Quality and Performance. Interviews are observed for quality and consistency, and students agree that the service is well provided and the advice and guidance was helpful and accurate. The Student Services staff are also responsible for giving financial information about fees and bursaries. This concentration of advice to a trained team ensures consistency.

2.20 The majority of higher education students are in sector-related programmes, and as such they also receive advice and guidance about the sector and its professional opportunities from teaching staff through the normal operation of the programme. Where students are already working in the sector, they also receive advice from their workplace and supervisor.

2.21 The College has plans in hand to develop its collection of data on student career destinations in order to make more effective use of this for careers advice and programme development. It also plans to purchase appropriate software to allow it to develop an alumni association. The review team **affirms** these plans in order to enhance the information and advice available for stakeholders.

Supporting disabled students

2.22 The College has well established systems for supporting disabled students, including class support, specialist technical equipment and a virtual learning environment. Staff have appropriate training to deal with disability and support learning differences. There is a dedicated disability support unit to diagnose, assess and meet the needs of disabled students. A range of resources is available, including speech to text software,

scribes and appropriate hardware. Students spoke favourably of disability support overall and noted in particular the effectiveness of the Disability Support Team. Applicants who declare a disability are supported through the processes from the point of application by disability support workers.

2.23 The newly built campus buildings have been designed with current disability access requirements in mind. Every care is taken to ensure disabled students can participate fully in all aspects of their programme.

Supporting international students

2.24 There are no international higher education students. The College is recognised by the UK Border Agency for the admission of international further education students and has the aspiration to recruit international higher education students in the future.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.25 The College has no postgraduate research students.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.26 The management of the College's academic partnerships is a crucial element of the maintenance of the awards it offers on behalf of its university partners. Although there are some differences of detail, the process is similar for the three university partners. At institutional level, there is a partnership agreement signed off by the Principal of the College and the Vice-Chancellor of the university. Day-to-day management of the partnership at this level is the responsibility of the College Director of Higher Education, working with the office responsible for partnerships in each university. The Director of Higher Education may attend the partnerships committee and any more general partnership meetings held by each university. At course level, the Director of Higher Education has responsibility for ensuring the operation of the annual operating agreement that exists for each programme. Course leaders also work directly with link tutors allocated by the partner university. Evidence shows that this provides a strong element in the College's framework for managing standards and quality. Awards made by the College in partnership with Edexcel are secured overall by the Edexcel Licensed Centre system. A member of the College Quality Office fulfils the required role of nominated contact.

2.27 Recent QAA reviews of the university partners have led to judgements of confidence in their collaborative provision, and no concerns have been expressed about the College by Edexcel. The number of programmes with the University of the West of England and the University of Worcester has reduced recently and a strategic alliance with the University of Gloucestershire was signed in February 2013. The University has indicated a determination to manage its partnerships well through recent actions relating to this strategic alliance. As a result of this alliance, several Foundation Degrees are now under development for September 2013. Some joint teaching on programmes at the College and at the University is planned. College staff who met the review team spoke of their involvement with these new developments and the benefits they saw. The review team **affirms** the opportunities offered by the strategic alliance for the development of the College's higher education.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.28 There is no flexible, distributed or e-learning at the College.

Work-based and placement learning

2.29 The College uses placements for students studying Foundation Degrees where students are not in work related to their studies. In creative subjects, live briefs are often used instead so that the contact with employers and knowledge of sector practices is developed, as required by the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*. Students undertaking placements within the programme are normally required to find their own placement. The College carries out the relevant procedures to check the placement providers' suitability and safety, and sets up a service level agreement which specifies responsibilities of each party. In cases where the student is unable to find a placement, the College provides help to do this and, where appropriate, makes efforts to expand its range of local sector potential placement providers. Admissions staff are responsible for setting out to potential students the responsibilities of students for finding placements. In the majority of cases, students have been clear about their responsibility to find their own placements.

2.30 Staff are required to visit students on placements. They provide clear contact details for students to use if necessary when they are on placement. Student handbooks generally provide clear information about work-based learning and the assessment requirements associated with them.

2.31 The College has developed a training unit, Nexus, which works with local employers and partner universities to accredit existing in-house training and build on this to form awards - some at higher education level - and develop new programmes in response to employer needs. Senior managers at the College indicated that Nexus feeds useful information into the College from which other programme staff can benefit. The College also uses open evenings to strengthen relationships with employers and placement providers in the local area.

2.32 The review team saw the materials available for students, mentors and employers provided by various programmes. It noted that some programmes had examples of effective, clear and well designed materials. However, the materials provided and the advice about appropriate contacts with potential and actual placement providers were not consistent across the College. The review team **recommends** that, building on the good practice already existing in some programmes, by September 2014 the College develop a college-wide set of information and guidance requirements and documents for placement and work-based learning.

Student charter

2.33 The Student Entitlement Policy sets out expectations of students and what they can expect to receive in return from the College. This is the equivalent of a student charter. The Student Entitlement Policy is easily available on the virtual learning environment and the College website, where it signposts students to other relevant policies and procedures. Students who met the review team knew broadly what they can expect from the College and what is required of them. However, they reported that, although readily accessible, the policy could be more widely promoted at, for example, induction.

3 Public information

Outcome

Gloucestershire College makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when

applying to the College and in preparing for what they might expect when they join. The quality of information produced for applicants and students at the College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

3.1 The College produces information for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. There is a well understood cycle for ensuring information published by the College on its website is clear and up to date, and there is a process for managing the consistency of content. The College is currently redeveloping its website for a relaunch in October 2013.

3.2 The responsibilities of the universities and the College with respect to marketing materials and other information are set out in the relevant agreements and are checked as part of the Institutional Review cycle. The relevant College staff liaise effectively with partner institution colleagues to follow the agreed procedures and timescales and to ensure information is accurate. The content of the prospectus is taken from that of the website once it has been approved and locked to prevent further changes. At this point, it is checked by an external proofreader and the curriculum area before being signed off.

3.3 The management information systems section is responsible for the collection and transmission of Higher Education Statistics Agency data, the Key Information Set and the Wider Information Set. The information detailed in Higher Education Funding Council for England circular letter 2006/06/45 is up to date and accessible to the College's stakeholders, much of it on the College website. Unistats information is readily available from the College website.

3.4 There are effective arrangements to inform students about progression opportunities. University staff from the linked course will often hold advisory sessions at the College. Open evenings are also used to engage partners and potential and previous employers in sharing progression options and careers advice. A new customer relations system due in October 2013 will allow increased detail in reporting. The College already collects some destination data, but has plans to introduce a more systematic analysis of data and to develop contacts with alumni. This contributes to the review team's **affirmation** of these plans in order to enhance the information available for stakeholders (paragraph 2.21).

3.5 Student handbooks for Edexcel programmes are created using a common template. These are completed by the programme leaders and consistency ensured by a check carried out by the Higher Education Quality Manager. For university courses, the student handbooks are considered during the validation process. They contain much useful information and are available to students on the virtual learning environment. The Human Resources Department is responsible for the staff handbook, and this has been recently supplemented by the useful Higher Education Guide which sets out the College quality assurance processes and other information for staff.

3.6 There is a process set out for Edexcel external verifier/examiner reports to be shared with students. Some students met by the review team had seen the report for their programme. However, as set out above, senior staff acknowledged that College practice on this has not been consistent across all programmes. There is now a plan to ensure all students have the opportunity to see the external examiners' reports.

4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at Gloucestershire College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 The College has a commitment to improving student learning opportunities, and specific examples of good practice can be found across the College. The Quality Improvement Framework supports improvement following a cycle from programme level to College level. A new Higher Education Strategy has been developed for 2013-17. This contains a number of areas in which enhancement is planned and some of these build on previous developments. These include: more vocational focus within programmes; disseminating good practice, including that identified by external examiners; continuing to provide support for professional development and scholarly activity for staff teaching higher education; developing a specific higher education student experience, and further development of the Alexandra Warehouse dedicated higher education accommodation.

4.2 Against this background, at the time of the review, the College's strategic approach in this area is less clearly articulated. Many of the enhancements in teaching, learning and assessment rely on the cross-college responsibilities of the Higher Education Manager - currently a part-time temporary post. Recent changes in the committee structure have made it less clear where the current primary focus of the enhancement strategy lies at senior level. The College has forums that it can use for the evaluation of student contributions to quality assurance processes and enhancement, particularly the Higher Education Managers' Group and the Higher Education Strategy Group. A strategic management of enhancement is difficult to trace through minutes of the various management meetings, which chiefly record operational actions taken or planned; at present it is mainly in the Higher Education Strategy Group where any qualitative discussion of enhancement takes place, but this group has only been in place since 2012.

4.3 The move to develop a Student Engagement Strategy and the proposals set out in the Higher Education Strategy show that the College evaluates performance in these areas and considers enhancement. The team **recommends** that by January 2014 the College formally develop and disseminate a strategic, institutionally led approach to enhancing further the quality of higher education students' learning opportunities.

5 Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Each academic year, a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's Review of College Higher Education teams. In 2012-13, the themes are the **First Year Student Experience** or **Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement**.

The review team investigated student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement at Gloucestershire College.

The College has taken forward the recommendation from the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review of May 2007 to 'strengthen the participation of students in the operation and monitoring of their programmes'. At the programme level, students are consistently represented and able to play an active role. In various contexts, teaching staff involve students in making a contribution to quality assurance and enhancement. However, representation of higher education students on central College committees is by

invitation, and is formally limited to the new post of Higher Education Representative on the Governors' Curriculum and Quality Committee. Developing the student representation system features in the list of enhancement activities, as does a plan to move from surveys to gathering feedback in a collective situation through the increased use of focus groups. Although the team notes the recent draft Student Engagement Strategy, the committees in which this and other enhancement activities are discussed involve students only by invitation and there is as yet no deliberative forum that brings together staff and higher education students for discussion of such matters.

Innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

5.1 The close working relationship between students and their teachers is an evident strength at the College, and innovations occur mainly within this context. The review team heard of strong support from students for the Talkback system for compliments and complaints, which functions as more than a suggestion box and has influenced provision for students' learning. The review team noted this as a feature of good practice (paragraph 2.10). There has been and remains a commitment to the use of student surveys. The review team heard that the College maintained a repository of external examiner reports accessible to students through the virtual learning environment.

5.2 Examples of innovation at a group or institutional level are by contrast largely in prospect, but the College has identified this as an area for action. More significantly, the review team heard that the College is working on a systematic Student Engagement Strategy to create a focused approach to student involvement in quality assurance.

Staff experience of/participation in student involvement

5.3 Despite the relative underdevelopment of the student representation system, the ethos of close engagement between teachers and learners means that teaching staff are involved in the contribution students make to quality assurance. The strong emphasis on scholarly activity noted above also leads to action research into pedagogy and learning which involves students. More senior staff also facilitate and participate in student involvement in quality through the 'learning walks' that are a central technique of the management of quality in the College. The review team noted occasions where staff directly involved students in decision-making about resources for their course (paragraph 2.8). The team also heard about a similar process whereby staff worked with students in the conversion of an existing programme in Education to another award.

Acting on student contributions and 'closing the feedback loop'

5.4 The College puts great emphasis on its performance management system to record actions required and their completion. Talkback also provides a source for input from students. Staff at most levels also input into the system that actively monitors action plans using a traffic light system. The College is thus well placed to understand whether it has closed the loop on issues raised by students. Students, on the other hand, do not have access to the system and must depend on information provided by staff or their own follow-up. Meetings with students provided evidence that this feedback normally takes place.

5.5 There are College committees which evaluate student contributions to the quality assurance process. However, as noted earlier, these bodies have to date been staff groups involving students only by invitation, and the College has no deliberative forum that brings together students and staff and where enhancement priorities could be discussed.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions; for example, pages 17-20 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of threshold academic standards, learning opportunities and enhancement.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms, please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx.

academic standards: The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

credit(s): A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education programmes of study, expressed as 'numbers of credits' at a specific level.

enhancement: Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice: A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution or college manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

framework: A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

framework for higher education qualifications: A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

learning opportunities: The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

learning outcome: What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

operational definition: A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study): An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

programme specifications: Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes of study**, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

public information: Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

Quality Code: Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of reference points for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the Expectations that all providers are required to meet.

subject benchmark statement: A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

threshold academic standard: The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications **frameworks**. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standards**.

widening participation: Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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