Quality Review Visit of Hartlepool College of Further Education

April 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Hartlepool College of Further Education

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Hartlepool College of Further Education.

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

Areas for development

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

- increase opportunities for students to be formally engaged in processes for the quality assurance and enhancement of their educational experience (Quality Code)
- ensure that higher education students are represented at all levels of the academic governance structure (Code of Governance)
- augment the College website to provide clear guidance and more focused messages for prospective higher education students (Consumer Protection)
- ensure that the complaints procedure is easily accessible to all internal and external stakeholders (Consumer Protection).

Specified improvements

No **specified improvements** were identified.

About this review

The review visit took place from 24 to 25 April 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Jeremy Bradshaw
- Miss Maxina Butler-Holmes
- Ms Jeanine Sogaard Forland (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 Hartlepool College of Further Education

Hartlepool College of Further Education (the College) is a medium-sized general further education college. The College's mission is 'Excellence in Further and Higher Education'. The College operates its higher education provision under franchise arrangements with Teesside University.

The College is one of five colleges within the Tees Valley that work collaboratively and with Teesside University to deliver higher education provision through the Tees Valley Higher Education Business Partnership (TVHEBP).

The College has around 400 higher education students. Its higher education provision consists of higher national programmes and foundation degrees in a number of curriculum areas, and honours degree provision in Engineering and Education.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1   Higher education provision at the College is operated under a franchise agreement with Teesside University (the University). The College delivers, assesses and internally moderates the programmes in accordance with, and under the oversight of, the quality assurance mechanisms of the University. The provision is managed through the Tees Valley Higher Education Business Partnership (TVHEBP). The Memorandum of Agreement and the Operations Manual clearly set out the respective responsibilities of the University and College.

2   The University is responsible for ensuring that its awards are appropriately aligned with the FHEQ. The University's Quality Handbook clearly describes the FHEQ levels associated with each type of award and the Operations Manual defines the number of credits required for each award. FHEQ level is considered at module and programme approval events. Programme approval forms prompt for consideration of external reference points including the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements, Characteristics Statements and PSRB requirements. Approval processes require the participation of external academics, practitioners and PSRB representatives as appropriate. Programme learning objectives are framed in accordance with the University's level descriptors, which are informed by the FHEQ. Programme specifications include information about the FHEQ level and relevant subject benchmarks.

3   The principles and procedures for programme or module modifications align closely with those for approval and include an expectation that there will explicit consideration of external reference points. Annual review processes also include explicit consideration of the FHEQ and other relevant external reference points.

4   External examiners, appointed by the University, confirm comparability with other UK higher education providers and verify that standards are appropriate for modules and awards.

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

5   There are effective arrangements for maintaining oversight of academic governance through comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations. Governance is clearly structured to comply with the AoC good practice guidance. This is evidenced through the academic governance structure, including the organisation of the various committees, including the TVHEBP Board, TVHEBP Higher Education Managers Committee, and Higher Education Sub-Committee (HESC). These boards and committees report directly back to the College Leadership Committee (CLC). CLC comprises heads of schools and members of the senior management team, and communicates directly with the governors, providing oversight over academic governance. CLC also receives oversight reports regarding the other TVHEBP colleges, and the Annual Monitoring and Enhancement Oversight Report (AMER) for the College. Minutes of meetings of the Board of Governors are made publicly available on the website, supporting accountability and transparency.

6   The principles of academic freedom and collegiality are respected through staff involvement in planning, monitoring and self-assessment processes at each appropriate

level. Academic freedom is facilitated through the monthly Management Forum, which is attended by senior managers, heads of academic schools and managers of support divisions. Staff perceive that their working environment is positive and that it encourages opportunities for them to develop new programmes, develop their own curriculum and improve provision. The Teaching, Learning and Development Hub and the University's annual conference support collegiality and academic freedom by facilitating conversations between College staff across disciplines in seminar-style formats.

7   The Board of Governors is responsible for managing academic risk, and receives reports from several sub-committees including the Sub-Committee for Curriculum and Standards, and the Audit Committee. The sub-committees meet regularly with the College's senior managers to maintain academic oversight. The discussions and decisions made by CLC regarding academic risk are reported back to the Governing body on a termly basis, through meetings with the sub-committees and the Board. Academic standards and academic risk are additionally considered through discussions with the Heads of School during periodic business review meetings with the College executive. The summary of this data is then analysed and reviewed in Programme and School Self-Assessment Reports, with action plans being produced in the College AMERs.

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

8   The College adheres to the regulatory frameworks, reporting arrangements and quality assurance procedures of the University. Appropriate reporting layers, from strategic to programme-level relationships, operate between the partners. There is a TVHEBP Strategic Board, attended by the College Principal, and an operational Higher Education Managers' Group. Within the College management structure, feedback is received through CLC and the HESC, which discuss reports following each University school's Quality Monitoring Visit, and the institutional AMER. The remit of the HESC includes the review of curriculum and policy developments, oversight of higher education activities and University relationships.

9   The design and content of programmes are jointly agreed through the University's approval process. Proposals for new programmes of study and their constituent modules originate with the College. Approval documents are prepared by the College and are then scrutinised by appropriate staff from the University and College to ensure alignment with the University's requirements. The HESC has delegated responsibility to examine new programme proposals, including resource allocation and quality assurance arrangements in line with the College's strategic priorities and the University's approvals process. Detailed and constructive discussion of proposals takes place through the University's three-stage process; the College staff assume responsibility for the 'critical read' stage. Most recently, the College has worked with the University to develop provision in Aerospace Engineering.

10   College staff are responsible for assessment and moderation of work, following the College's Quality Assurance Policies and Procedures under the oversight of the quality assurance mechanisms of the University. First and second marking take place within programme teams, with blind marking used to support new members of staff in ensuring that assessment is at the appropriate level. Staff attend partnership standardisation days at the University, which provide opportunities to network and share practices. The requirements for students to achieve learning outcomes are articulated within programme handbooks, which also provide links to the University website for information relating to academic regulations, progression through a programme and examination board arrangements. Students confirmed that they are provided with a clear view of the assessment process.

11   Effective use is made of independent and expert input in the setting and maintenance of standards including engagement with external examiners, employers and professional bodies. New programme developments and changes are informed by feedback from stakeholders including students, industrial contacts and employers. Specific examples were provided of cases where module content had been adapted to specifically reflect employer needs, and assessments had been designed to ensure that learning outcomes were placed within an appropriate industrial context.

12   External examiners are involved in the assessment process through attending the standardisation days and examination boards organised at the University; they do not, however, meet with students. College staff attend module, programme and award-level boards. Actions arising from external examiner reports are discussed through the HESC and fed through to the University staff, who provide the formal response. The reports are posted on the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) for student information. Concerns previously expressed by the external examiner for Engineering programmes had been managed in a constructive way.

13   The College engages effectively in annual monitoring, with an institutional AMER providing the composite summary; once approved by CLC and HESC, the AMER is received by the TVHEBP Board. The AMER provides performance benchmark targets for recruitment, retention, achievement and progression; the College performs above these targets for retention and success rates. Programme-level self-assessment reports are used to inform the overall College AMER. Programme and institution-level action plans are used constructively for monitoring and enhancement purposes, with progress updates at CLC and HESC. These review processes make use of a range of data including destinations data and surveys (including the National Student Survey - NSS), which are used to inform programme, School and College-level reporting and actions through the management structure.

14   Periodic review of programmes is conducted under the University's processes. A Programme Evaluation Document is produced to inform the process. At the time of the review, in light of the plan to increase the number of progression routes and consequent changes to modules, the foundation degree in Public Services had transferred from the periodic review into programme approvals process.

Rounded judgement

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

16   There are no areas for development or specified areas for improvement in this judgement area.

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

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

18   There are efficient mechanisms for collecting student feedback and using this to improve provision. Through these mechanisms a number of issues have been raised and addressed, improving the quality of students' academic experience.

19   The College makes effective use of data for improving the student academic experience. Students participate in the NSS. As a large proportion of the higher education students are not eligible for the NSS, the College also runs its own Survey of Student Views, which has a similar set of questions and is open to all students on higher education programmes. Both surveys have a participation rate around 70 per cent. Survey results are collated through the AMERs and discussed at HESC, CLC and the TVHEPB.

20   There are also opportunities for face-to-face meetings between staff and students. Programme-level student representatives are elected by their peers. Their role is to feed back student views and issues to the programme leaders or, if they wish, to the head of school. Students are also invited to Voice of the Learner meetings at school level with other student representatives. Similar meetings for student representatives are held with both the Principal and Governors.

21   However, much of this activity involves, but does not proactively engage, students in the learning and assessment process. Other than the Board of Governors, there are no serving student members of the main College committees. Student membership of key committees in the quality structure would benefit the College, the student body, and student committee members. The review team advises the College to increase opportunities for students to be formally engaged in processes for quality assurance and enhancement of their academic experience, identifying this as an **area for development**.

22   The University conducts annual Quality Enhancement Visits of all its franchised programmes. These visits are centred around discussions with students about the quality of their academic experience to date. Reports are produced after each visit and an action plan produced to address any issues arising.

23   The College conducts self-assessment of its higher education provision through AMERs. Programme-level reports are used by Heads of School in preparing School Self-Assessment Reports (SAR), which then contribute to the AMER, in combination with other material, such as cross-College student performance data and NSS results. Student performance data are summarised and discussed, along with feedback from staff, students, external examiners, University Quality Enhancement Visits, the NSS, QAA, and any PSRBs. AMER reports are discussed and approved by the HESC, CLC, Curriculum and Standards Committee and Board of Governors. An action plan is then constructed to address issues raised by the AMER.

24   Three-year trends show high or improving success rates in the majority of programmes. The College is aware of, and has reviewed, each programme on which progression or achievement rates are declining and has put in place an action plan to address the underlying issues.

25   Metrics for employment for full-time students showed performance significantly below the benchmark for the 2015-16 cohort. The College investigated this and took appropriate action. Follow-ups with relevant students revealed that a much higher

percentage of students were now either in employment or further study. The College has instituted a review of careers guidance and support for full-time higher education students, and liaised with the University to review the careers advice it provides to College students. Student Services at the College has created an exit programme for full-time higher education students that will be incorporated into tutorials to prepare students for progression to employment. The review team considers that the College has implemented appropriate strategies for improving the employment metric.

26   There are effective arrangements for ensuring that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and support are available for students. The University's programme approval and review procedures require consideration of the adequacy of learning resources, including analysis of print and electronic reading lists for each module, staff development requirements and identification of specialist resources. Students reported that learning resources are of a good quality and readily accessible, and were aware that they could supplement resources provided by the College with those available at the University. Examples were provided of improvements made to learning resources in response to requests through Voice of the Learner meetings.

27   The College has effective arrangements in place to ensure that staff are competent in research, scholarship and pedagogy. The University requires the College to ensure that all teaching staff are qualified to at least level 7, and to support staff in their professional development, including acquiring knowledge of the University's quality and regulatory requirements, and pursuing scholarly activity. The performance indicators monitored through the University's Annual Monitoring and Enhancement processes include its expectations for staff development.

28   College staff have undertaken a wide range of CPD activities in the last three years. In addition to opportunities provided by the University, the College supports and develops its teaching staff through its Teaching, Learning and Development Hub, where experienced staff mentor and pass on best practice in teaching and learning. Attendance at CPD sessions is generally not mandatory but records show that all higher education tutors have attended some Hub CPD sessions in the last year.

29   There is extensive and effective use of external input to programme design and the improvement of the quality of the student academic experience. Programme and module approval, and annual monitoring and review processes, include explicit consultation with external stakeholders. The College was able to provide examples of ways in which input from employers and other external stakeholders had informed programme developments. External examiners also contribute to the improvement of the student academic experience. Their reports are forwarded to the College by the University and are considered through the annual monitoring and continuous improvement processes by the HESC, CLC, Curriculum Standards Committee and Board of Governors. Examples were provided of improvements to the higher education provision that had resulted from external examiners' reports.

30   Students receive handbooks that contain information about their programmes of study, assessments, learning resources and sources of support. Module and programme specifications are prepared and maintained by the University, and the College's website links through to the University's copies of information whenever possible.

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

31   The College is generally effective in encouraging student involvement in academic governance and ensuring that the welfare of students is secured. Student involvement is

clearly encouraged, with high value being placed on understanding students' needs and the voice of the learner. The student voice is elicited through the use of internal and external surveys. Student involvement and engagement is largely facilitated at local programme level through student representatives. Student representatives are democratically peer elected, and encouraged to provide feedback and raise issues directly with programme teams. The student representatives are invited to attend feedback sessions with senior management (Heads of School Question Time) and the Chair of Governors (Meet the Governors), and through the Voice of the Learner meetings.

32   Students are represented at sub-committee levels of the governance structures, including on the Curriculum and Standards Sub-Committee, and through the student governors on the Board of Governors. However, higher education students are not formally represented in the governance structure or arrangements and the HESC is not currently attended by any higher education students (leading to the area for development in paragraph 21). The team acknowledges that many of the higher education students are part-time, which can present challenges in respect of engagement, but considers that the College could investigate alternative approaches to facilitate greater engagement. As students become better represented, the student representatives may also require formalised training in order to hold these roles effectively. These skills and training opportunities may positively contribute to increasing the students' employability skills and development. The review team therefore advises the College to ensure that higher education students are represented at all levels of the academic governance structure, identifying this as an **area for development.**

33   The governance arrangements ensure that student complaints are effectively addressed through both informal and formal procedures, and both the University's and the College's own policies. Welfare is specifically considered through the requirement for confidentiality and discretion throughout the complaints process, as well as through the opportunity for students to receive pastoral support from Support Services. This is further underpinned by staff training, which ensures safeguarding and confidentiality and enables staff to provide adequate pastoral support for students.

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

34   There are effective mechanisms in place for checking the accuracy and consistency of information provided to applicants and students. The TVHEBP Colleges work collaboratively with the University's Department for External Relations (DER) to ensure the accuracy of published information. This is confirmed in the University's collaborative provision annual monitoring overview report. DER conducted an audit of the College's public information during 2016, which included an action plan, and provided staff development on the implications of the consumer protection legislation. The management of published information is a standing agenda item for the Higher Education Managers' meetings. The AMER includes a Public Information section, which confirms that the College Head of Student Recruitment holds responsibility for signing off information provided to prospective students.

35   The College's website provides information about the College and its higher education programmes; however, the team considered that there is little insight provided into the higher education student experience at the College to enable prospective students to make an informed choice. The review team heard that the College's position is to avoid duplication of information that is accessible on the University's website and that the majority of applications come from internal College progression routes and personal contacts, which enables informal advice and guidance to be provided relating to the next steps for formal application. Potential applicants from external sources, however, are directed straightaway

to the University website, where generic UCAS information is provided or online applications are presented for part-time students. The Terms and Conditions for Admissions are not immediately evident. The University website presents the definitive programme information for potential applicants.

36   Although (following the audit by the University) the College is taking steps with the production of a higher education prospectus, which will present a more welcoming approach, the review team advises the College to augment the College website to provide clear guidance and more focused messages for prospective higher education students, identifying this as an **area for development**.

37   The DER reviewed the terms and conditions for admissions and the College's website link to the University's in 2016. The annual quality visits (QEVs) also consider the accuracy of public information. It had previously been noted that the TVHEBP webpages displayed images of University facilities that could potentially be misleading for applicants, but students confirmed to the team that they had understood from the outset that they would be studying at the College.

38   The College's approach to higher education admissions is included in a wider Course Transitions document but it is not summarised on the website. The University's admissions policy applies and staff are guided by the relevant section in the TVHEBP Operations Manual. This policy includes the processes for appeals and the recognition of prior learning.

39   Students are informed of the College's complaints procedure during induction. The procedure is available on the VLE and in programme and student handbooks. Students are also able to contact the main reception for further information should they wish to pursue a complaint. The review team noted that the complaints procedure is not currently available on the College's website and is therefore not accessible to all internal and external stakeholders. The review team advises the College to ensure that the complaints procedure is easily accessible to all internal and external stakeholders, identifying this as an **area for development**.

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

40   The College has clear policies and practices in place regarding closures and changes. Any programme changes or closures follow the University's policy, which is available to students through the University's public website, allowing for this process to be fair, accessible, and transparent for students.

41   In the last five years, only one programme has undergone a significant change. The arrangements ensure that students are continually informed and consulted about these changes. As per the Quality Handbook, these changes are communicated directly through the heads of school and programme leaders.

42   In the event of a programme closure, the College has arrangements in place to ensure the continuity of provision for students. This would normally be by incorporating students on equivalent or near equivalent programmes at the College or other TVHEBP colleges in the first instance. The College aims to run out the final years of ongoing programmes wherever possible, but would not recruit new students.

43   There are arrangements for ensuring wider support for higher education students in the event of a programme or provider closure. This particularly includes the TVHEBP colleges, which work closely to ensure that students are not academically disadvantaged by any programme changes or closures.

44   The College has a clear complaints and appeals procedure, encompassing both formal and informal arrangements. Students stated that they would always discuss matters informally with their programme leader before making a formal complaint. In the first instance, complaints are considered through the College's own complaints procedure. If the complaint is not resolved, the student can further appeal to the University (aligned with OIA guidance), and then to the OIA. The policies and procedures ensure that complaints and appeals are handled appropriately and confidentially. The welfare of students is ensured as staff are trained to appropriately safeguard, to ensure confidentiality and to provide pastoral support to students.

45   The College has effective arrangements for using the outcomes of complaints and appeals processes to improve the student experience. Although both are rare occurrences, complaints and appeals would be considered by the CLC, through the AMER. This provides a forum to discuss the implications of any complaints. This in turn may be considered by the Director of Standards, and integrated into self-assessments at programme, school, or institutional levels to improve the student experience.

Rounded judgement

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

47   There are four areas for development identified in this judgement area. These relate to a need to update procedures that will not require or result in major operational or procedural change. No specified improvements were identified.

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