



Quality Review Visit of Heart of Worcestershire College

May 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Heart of Worcestershire College

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

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

Areas for development

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

- update the terms of reference of its Academic Board and its subcommittee to reflect recent developments in the College and clarify the associated reporting procedures (Code of Governance)
- effectively communicate the requirements and procedures for applying for Recognition of Prior Learning to prospective students (Consumer Protection)
- ensure that the Fees Policy is also accessible to prospective students to accompany the fee information (Consumer Protection).

Specified improvements

No **specified improvements** have been identified.

About this review

The review visit took place from 23 to 25 May 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Mark Atlay
- Mr Jack Darkins (student reviewer)
- Mrs Lorraine Lavery.

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 The Heart of Worcestershire College

Heart of Worcestershire College (the College) is a further and higher education college that provides full and part time higher education courses across a range of subject areas. The College operates at four sites across Worcestershire with its higher education provision delivered mainly from two campuses based in Worcester and Redditch. The higher education provision covers eight subject areas including business, paralegal skills, engineering, interactive media and payroll and pension. The foundation and full degree provision is delivered on behalf of four awarding bodies; Birmingham City University, Staffordshire University, University of Wolverhampton, and University of Worcester. The College also delivers a range of Higher National Diplomas on behalf of Pearson and offers a distance learning programme in collaboration with the Chartered Institute of Payroll Professionals (CIPP).

At the time of the review visit the college had approximately 1,200 higher education students with more than half studying part-time. A significant proportion of the part-time students are on the CIPP programme.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The College works with its awarding bodies and organisation in the approval, monitoring and review of its higher education provision. The awarding bodies and organisation set the academic standards, and the College is responsible for delivering the programmes to the required standards in ways which are set out in the respective agreements and the associated policies and procedures. These are designed to ensure that qualifications are positioned at the appropriate level and awarded on the achievement of defined learning outcomes that students demonstrate through assessment.

2 The mapping of qualifications to the FHEQ is undertaken by the degree-awarding bodies and organisation as part of the approval process. Qualifications are also mapped against professional body requirements where relevant. The validation processes of the degree-awarding bodies together with the arrangements of the awarding organisation ensure that the College has the appropriate credit weighting and level of awards.

3 Responsibility for maintaining a definitive record for each programme and qualification resides with the degree-awarding body and for the College in respect of Pearson awards. Programme specifications indicate the appropriate level of the qualification against the FHEQ and are communicated to prospective students in outline through the web site and in detail to students through course handbooks.

4 External examiners and verifiers confirm that standards are set and maintained through the assessment process at a level that is comparable with other providers. The College considers comments made by external examiners in Course Self-Evaluation Documents (CSED), at the HE Quality Enhancement Reviews (HE QER) and an overall analysis forms part of the annual HE SED.

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

5 The academic standards of the awards delivered by the College are set in accordance with the institutional agreements between the College and its awarding bodies and organisation. The comparability of the performance of these courses are ratified through external examiner annual reporting, and the College engages in a range of annual monitoring activities with its awarding bodies.

6 Academic oversight of the College's provision is maintained through its Higher Education Quality Framework. At course and subject-level, the work of the HE Coordinators Group is categorised into three areas: Curriculum and Planning, Teaching and Learning, and HE Quality Enhancement.

7 The work of the HE Coordinators Group is reported accordingly to the Academic Board. The Academic Board's terms of reference evidence the accountability of the Academic Board in maintaining the academic standards of the College's provision, and assuring the Principal and the governing body (the Corporation) of all higher education activity undertaken by the College. Minutes of the Academic Board also demonstrate the Board's function with regard to the formulation of the HE Strategy and the HE Self-Evaluation Document, both of which have subsequently been delivered to the

Corporation.

8 Members of the Corporation sit on the Academic Board and engage in the work of the HE Coordinators Group through Learner Walks and Insight schemes and attendance at HE Quality Enhancement events. The College has in place mechanisms for ensuring the Corporation is fully informed of work being done around its higher education provision. The Corporation is served by a governors' subgroup, the Quality Group, that promotes quality assurance as a focal point of the Corporation's work.

9 This framework for the governance of higher education provision at the College accounts for the appropriate scrutiny of risk, and allows for the promotion of academic collegiality, particularly through the work of the Creative Curriculum Circles.

10 The College has, since QAA's Integrated Quality Enhancement Review of 2012 and its formation through a merger in 2014, implemented the HE Quality Framework as the primary mode of maintaining oversight of all activity around quality assurance, and reports on its efficacy in the HE Self-Evaluation Document and accompanying action plan. During the visit the review team found that the College employs a confusing variety of nomenclature and terminology, both written and verbally, with regard to the HE Quality Framework and lacked clarity when conveying it externally, although College staff were clear of their roles and responsibilities within the framework. While the provider submission for the review visit suggests a tripartite committee network beneath the Academic Board, it was confirmed at the visit that this is in fact a single committee handling three areas of business. The tenth statement of the Academic Board terms of reference also suggests individual subcommittees beneath the Academic Board, however, the College confirmed that this is handled through the work of the HE Coordinators Group. Similarly, the review team were informed that the Learner Involvement Strategy 2016-17 referenced in the Academic Board terms of reference is now known as the Learner Voice Strategy. Therefore, it has been identified as an **area for development** that the College update the terms of reference of Academic Board and its subcommittee to reflect recent developments in the College and clarify the associated reporting procedures.

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

11 The College manages academic standards through ensuring College policies and procedures are aligned to the requirements of the Quality Code and its awarding bodies and organisation and are overseen by a senior college manager. The College has established a number of internal policies and processes to manage its academic standards, and ensure they are consistent with each of its awarding bodies' and awarding organisation's expectations. The College's Academic Board with senior management, student and Governor membership has strategic responsibility for all College higher education programmes, reporting to the senior leadership team (SLT), the Quality Committee and the Corporation.

12 The College maintains academic standards through appropriate programme delivery procedures, and programme specifications provide the guidance for teaching, learning and assessment of students at the appropriate level managed by dedicated higher education coordinators in each curriculum area. These Coordinators meet monthly and have a remit for academic standards, teaching and learning and curriculum planning.

13 The College's awarding body and organisation are responsible for maintaining a definitive record for each programme and qualification and that they approve to act as the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students. In the case of awarding bodies,

the records are approved at validation or review and for Pearson qualifications, the College produces definitive records based on Pearson's programme specifications. These are contained in course handbooks and in programme specifications. Awarding body Course Management Committees and Link Tutors proactively work with the College's higher education Coordinators to support the management, delivery and review of programmes.

14 The College carries out assessments in accordance with awarding body and organisation assessment policies, and is informed by UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the relevant awarding body. The College uses a variety of assessment tools to meet the needs of individual curriculum areas and assessment practices are also informed through professional body and employer engagement activities. The College publishes programme and module/unit handbooks containing information relevant to the programme, such as course and module curricula, assessment information, reading lists and links to teaching and learning resources. These documents are also available through the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) and form the basis for effective assessment.

15 The College assessment policy indicates that marked work must be returned within four weeks and this was affirmed by staff and learners. Examination boards are held locally at curriculum level and then report to a College-level board for ratification as well as to examination boards held by its awarding bodies.

16 The College's external examiners are appointed by its awarding bodies and organisation to ensure that the academic standards of the College's provision are maintained. External examiners are required to provide an independent view on standards and on student achievement and confirm that the award is aligned with the FHEQ and any applicable Subject Benchmark Statements and that academic standards are comparable with other similar programmes. External examiner reports confirm these requirements. Students are aware of external examiner processes and have met external examiners and received their reports.

17 The College and its awarding bodies and awarding organisation conduct an annual process for programme monitoring and review for Higher Education programmes aligned to the College's Quality Improvement Strategy. Assessment boards and course management committees operate at programme level to manage standards and undertake ongoing programme monitoring to inform programme delivery to support improvement. Programmes produce an annual Course Self-Evaluation Document and Improvement Plan aligned to the requirements of the UK Quality Code using programme data, learner voice and external examiner reports. College led reviews of programmes are undertaken each term through HE Quality Enhancement Reviews led by senior management. These are underpinned by reviews of programme data and external examiner reports. Findings from these are reported to the Academic Board. These processes are then used by the College to inform the development of the overall college annual Higher Education Self-Evaluation Document and action plan. The action plan is monitored through the monthly higher education coordinators meeting and the twice annual meetings of the Academic Board. The Academic Board then reports these updates through to the Quality committee of the Corporation.

18 Work placements are managed in conjunction with higher education partners. Students are supported to source placements through the College Business Engagement team. Risk assessments are undertaken prior to commencement of placements with monitoring undertaken through tutor visits during the placement. The College is currently reviewing its approach to management of placements and work experience.

19 Strategic links have been set up with a range of local and national external partners such as the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership and the Greater Birmingham and

Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the Association of Colleges to inform the development of new provision and management of higher education within the College.

20 The College sets and monitors Key Performance Indicators for its provision which are signed off and reviewed by the Corporation. It also uses a variety of course performance reports from internal college management information systems and external data sources to monitor academic standards. Senior management and staff use an extensive and current schedule of reports to enhance the learning experience of the student. These include NSS and Teaching Excellence Framework metrics and in-house learner voice surveys and student panels, retention, daily and weekly attendance and achievement data at programme level, analysis of complaints and appeals and scrutiny of external examiner reports. Observation of teaching and learning reports are also reviewed to inform programme reviews and ensure that a high quality and relevant provision is offered.

Rounded judgement

21 The College's quality assurance arrangements are appropriate in enabling it to fulfil its responsibilities to its awarding partners and awarding organisation, and to align with the baseline regulatory requirements in the maintenance of academic standards. In the main, the College's governance structure is effective in managing its oversight of maintaining academic standards however the review team identified one area for development to strengthen the governance structure through clarifying its main committee's terms of reference and reporting procedures.

22 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)

23 The Higher Education Strategy sets out the College's strategic priorities including establishing a culture and ethos of research and scholarly activity, inspiring and encouraging students to progress to further study, making effective use of digital technologies, developing enterprise and entrepreneurship attributes, providing high quality personalised academic and pastoral support and high success rates. These priorities are well understood by staff and action is being taken to implement the strategy in a phased manner.

24 A Creative Curriculum Circle (Triple C) process supports the development of new provision. Programme proposals have to fit with the College's mission, vision and strategic objectives and receive approval from the Academic Board and the SLT.

25 The College's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy, ILT strategy, and Quality Improvement Strategy 2017-20 provides an effective framework for the development of approaches to supporting higher education learners. Their implementation is monitored by the HE Coordinators Group which reports to the Academic Board. Teaching materials are accessible to students via the College's VLE. The College acknowledges that its VLE is currently used mainly as a repository for information and has plans to extend its use in line with its strategic priorities.

26 All staff on programmes linked with a University are approved by the partner before they can teach. The Observation of Learning Policy and Procedures, linked to the UKPSF expectations, the continuing professional development (CPD) Policy and Performance Development Reviews support the development of teaching staff and there are a range of formal and informal development activities covering teaching at higher education level that are monitored by the HE Coordinators Group. In line with its strategic objectives the College, through the HE Coordinators Group, is developing policies relating to scholarship and research for consideration by the Academic Board and the SLT.

27 Students who met the team commented on the generally high quality of teaching and support that they received from their teachers and through the HE Hub which provides advice and support to students. College-wide National Student Survey (NSS) scores on teaching are slightly lower than those for further education colleges (FEC) although these outcomes are likely to be influenced by the high numbers of CIPP students studying at a distance and for whom the questions may not be entirely appropriate.

28 Students feel well-prepared for assessments, understand the need for academic integrity, and confirmed that feedback on assessed work is timely and helpful in improving performance. College-wide scores on assessment in the NSS are above the FEC mean.

29 A College-wide Learner Involvement Strategy is designed to gather student feedback. For higher education provision this is coordinated by the HE Engagement Officer. Elected student representatives are involved in course committees and students are represented on the Academic Board. Students confirmed that feedback mechanisms were effective and that timely action is taken where concerns are raised.

30 Students' employability is addressed primarily through the vocational nature of the curriculum. The College is represented on the local LEP and staff identified a range of provision that had been developed directly in response to local needs. Not all new courses were able to recruit sufficient students to sustain the required recruitment levels to be viable,

however, and effective processes are in place to support course closures (see paragraph 42). Students commented on their ability to tailor their studies to the needs of course-related employment and on the professional experience of their teachers. CIPP students commented on the way in which the modules had helped improve their professional practice and to understand some of the wider policy issues impacting on their roles.

31 Procedures to support students on work placements are defined by the awarding bodies and students confirmed that these were effective. The College does not currently have work placements for courses provided by the awarding organisation, but is considering developing them in line with the College-wide strategy. The team heard that the current College policy would be extended to embrace higher-levels drawing on the requirements of the awarding bodies and the organisation. Responsibility for their development would reside with the HE Coordinators Group and any final policy would be approved by the Academic Board and the governing body.

32 At the end of each academic year, an annual Course Self-Evaluation Document (CSED) is submitted by each HE Coordinator. The CSED focuses on assuring the quality of the programme and informs the future development of modules. The CSED covers all the programmes/courses within the subject area and documents where actions have resulted from the HE Quality Enhancement Reviews, Curriculum and Planning meetings, partnership monitoring reviews, and/or other awarding body reviews. Emergent themes and cross-institutional analysis from CSEDs contribute to the College's HE SED, which is considered by the Academic Board and the Corporation. This constitutes an effective process for annual monitoring in line with the expectations of the Quality Code.

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

33 The College actively promotes the student voice in the maintenance of academic standards through, in the first instance, its student representative system. Student feedback and module evaluations are used throughout the provision and students expressed clear awareness of changes being made by the College in the light of their feedback. Students maintain membership on the Academic Board and the Corporation. The student voice is also considered as part of the Peer Observation scheme.

34 While the College has in place a policy and system for handling student complaints, all concerns raised to date have been resolved at the informal stage. The Corporation receives annual summaries on student complaints, while it is expected that the most serious concerns raised would be brought to the Corporation's attention at the earliest opportunity.

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

35 The College uses a number of different channels to publish information about its admissions processes and entry requirements, mainly on its website and through its higher education prospectus. Training on the requirements of CMA has been delivered to the College's HE coordinators, HE Student Representatives, HE admissions team, and the College's marketing department team to ensure that prospective students are given the information they need in order to make informed decisions.

36 The College has a dedicated HE Admissions Policy on its website to support consistency and transparency of its admissions process applicable to all higher education students. The provider also has a dedicated HE Admissions Team to oversee admissions. The policy has been written in accordance with the requirements for higher education

providers set out in the Consumer Rights Act 2015 and subsequent guidance by the Competition and Markets Authority for higher education providers. The Policy is based on the principle that the College aims to operate a higher education admissions system that is fair, transparent and easily accessible, and that incorporates the values of widening participation and equal access. The Admissions Policy is linked to the Equality Policy, College Charter, Fees Policy, and HE Complaints Policy.

37 The HE Admissions policy signposts applicants to where pre-entry advice and guidance on each higher education programme and its entry requirements can be found to allow them to make an informed and appropriate application. The policy details how the College will manage changes to and discontinuation of courses and support applicants with health, disability or other additional learning support requirements. Applicants are also made aware of their right to appeal or make a complaint about the admissions process.

38 The Admissions policy makes reference to the College's careful consideration of prior experiential learning, non-traditional qualifications and qualifications obtained outside of the United Kingdom but does not signpost applicants to a specific Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy, process or evidence checklist. RPL is managed locally at curriculum level by the HE Coordinators and in association with university partners but there are no RPL guidelines available across the College's higher education provision. The review team therefore identifies the following **area for development** and advises that the College effectively communicates the requirements and procedures for applying for RPL to prospective students.

39 Entry criteria and admission processes are specified in the higher education prospectus, on the College website and on the UCAS site. Fees for each programme are specified on the webpage for each programme but the overall Fees Policy referenced within the Admissions Policy is not available for prospective students. This Policy is only available on the VLE for enrolled learners.

40 The College has a set of terms and conditions available on its website for students following acceptance of an offer (HE). The terms and conditions are linked to the College's Fees Policy, Data Protection Policy, Equality and Diversity Policy, Student Charter, HE Complaints Policy, and HE Admissions Policy. The terms and conditions also signposts learners to their course handbook received on enrolment. The terms and conditions were issued in April 2017 and are due for review in April 2019, but the College will continue to keep to under review as a new process through its monitoring its complaints. These terms and conditions refer learners to the College's Fees Policy for information on the possible fees refund procedures as a result of course changes as well as general fee and payment terms, available on the website. However, prospective students do not have access to this information and therefore the Fees Policy is not available to learners until after enrolment. The review team therefore identifies the following as an **area for development** and advises that the College ensures that the Fees Policy is also accessible to prospective students to accompany the fee information.

41 The College details its complaints and appeals process through its HE Complaints Procedure and it is made available to students on the College's website and in course handbooks. The complaints process has four clear stages from informal resolution through to formal, appeal and referral stages. The investigation of any appeals and complaints provides an important source of feedback which contributes to the enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

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

42 The review team found that the College engages with course change mechanisms, often as a result of student feedback, and such changes are communicated in a timely manner to students. The College's terms and conditions make clear the implication of course changes to applicants and students, and commits the College to supporting those affected by ensuring continuity of provision wherever possible.

43 The College has in place a policy handling the closure of higher education courses that stipulates the requirement for the College to mitigate as far as possible the impact to the student learning experience, the implementation of a supporting action plan, and to adhere to partnership course closure procedures where applicable. The review team found that teaching-out arrangements for provision undergoing closure is underpinned appropriately by action planning and reporting through the College's committee structure. Students spoke clearly with regard to closure arrangements concerned with their course.

44 The College sets out a policy for complaint handling that is informed by the QAA, the Office of the Independent Adjudicator and the Competitive Markets Authority guidance on best practice. The process is proportional, fair and timely, and has ensured all complaints to date have been resolved at the informal stage. Student complaints are reported to the Academic Board.

45 Students whom the review team met, confirmed that they are aware that they could approach tutors and other staff to talk about any concerns individually or through the learner voice mechanisms and that these are dealt through the informal complaints resolution process. They cited examples of changes made at course level such as timetabling and access to resources as a result of these exchanges to enhance the learner experience.

Rounded judgement

46 Arrangements at the College for the academic governance and management of the student academic experience are appropriate and effective in the context of the responsibilities delegated to it by its awarding bodies and organisation, and the baseline regulatory requirements. The review team did however identify two areas for development in the area of consumer protection which highlights minor omissions in the information provided to students namely RPL guidance and the accessibility of the College's Fees Policy to students before enrolment.

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

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