



Concerns about standards and quality in higher education

Newcastle College, September 2016

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Introduction

1 This report is a full investigation of Newcastle College as a result of a submission to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) Concerns Scheme.¹

Concerns raised

2 Concerns about Newcastle College (the College) were sent to QAA by the Higher Education Funding Council for England on 19 July 2016.

3 The concerns were in relation to the Foundation Degree in Education and Training, and are specifically:

- whether the standard set for students and the achievement of students were appropriate
- the quality of the academic experience of students and whether, in practice, students were undertaking the volume of study set out by the College
- the effectiveness of the College's approach to standard setting and to the approval of programmes, including its use of external reference points, as it carried out these responsibilities.

4 The following points of clarification were also sought:

- whether the College offered any other programmes with similar characteristics
- the structure and delivery pattern for the programme
- the number and proportion of students awarded credit by AP(E)L and the typical volume of credit awarded this way.

The investigation process

5 QAA initiated a full investigation, which took place on 22 September 2016. The QAA concerns team was Dr Elisabeth Cook (Reviewer) and Dr Stephen Ryrie (Review Manager). The College fully cooperated with the investigation.

6 The concerns team met senior managers and teaching staff of the College, as well as a selection of students drawn from the full and part-time routes of the Foundation Degree in Education and Training. The team also considered documentary evidence provided by the College. The evidence included: the College's website; documentation relating to the approval process of the Foundation Degree in Education and Training; annual reports of external examiners; annual review reports of the School of Education; data about student enrolments and progression; documentation relating to assessment and learning outcomes; outcomes of student surveys; quality audit reports; marketing materials and guidance to admissions staff. In addition the team considered a statement from the College describing the manner in which the full-time programme is delivered.

Result of the investigation

7 The concerns were found to be not justified. In undertaking the investigation the concerns team made one recommendation.

¹ QAA Concerns Scheme: www.qaa.ac.uk/concerns/concerns-about-providers.

Explanation of findings

Programmes with similar characteristics

8 The Foundation Degree programme in Education and Training and its three associated pathways (English, Literacy and Language; Mathematics and Numeracy; Learning Difficulties and Disabilities) are the only programmes within the College's portfolio offered with a credit pattern of full-time study in one-year (240 credits) and part-time in two-years (120 credits each year).

Structure and delivery of the programme

9 The Foundation Degree in Education and Training is offered as a generic qualification (FD Education and Training) and with three specialist pathways: FD Education and Training: English, Literacy and Language; FD Education and Training: Mathematics and Numeracy; and FD Education and Training: Learning Difficulties and Disabilities. The generic programme together with the specialisms in English, Language and Literacy and in Mathematics and Numeracy were validated in April 2012 and have been delivered since September 2012. The Learning Difficulties and Disabilities specialism was validated in December 2012 and has been taught since January 2013. A further specialism, FD Education and Training: 14-19 was also validated in April 2012 but was found to replicate the generic programme too closely and was therefore discontinued. All programmes will be the subject of an internal periodic review in November 2016.

10 Each programme comprises six 20-credit modules at level 4 and six 20-credit modules at level 5. They share five common modules at level 4 and four common modules at level 5 (including, at each level, modules in work-based learning and in personal and professional development). Level 4 study offers one elective and level 5 study two electives.

11 From the outset, all programmes have been offered in full and part-time modes and with start points in September and January. The proportion of full-time students has ranged from approximately 12 per cent to 30 per cent of registrations each year. While most students enrol to begin their studies in September, the College is responsive to employer demand for programme delivery to begin in January: for example the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities specialism has been run as an 'Additional Route' with a start in January specifically for in-service teachers, offering entry with accreditation of prior learning of 120 level 4 credits and 40 level 5 credits.

12 Deliveries of the programme which begin in September typically run from mid-September to the end of July of the following year, taking 42 weeks. Although documentation relating to the validation of the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities programme includes reference to a September-to-September academic year, senior staff confirmed that the validation panel had been aware that teaching concludes in July, the September examination boards marking the culmination of the academic cycle.

13 Scrutiny of schemes of work raised two further issues with regard to the delivery of programmes in their full-time mode: firstly, that students began work on level 5 electives earlier than indicated in validation documentation; secondly, that students would proceed to level 5 modules before examination boards had confirmed the results of the assessment of level 4 modules. Senior staff outlined the 'long and thin' approach to the teaching of electives: since these focus specifically on the nature of teaching a particular specialism, they are introduced early in the year but have submission deadlines at the end of the teaching period. With regard to progression from level 4 to level 5, staff confirmed that the progress of all students is tracked closely at weekly team meetings which include discussion of 'at risk' students as a standing item. Therefore difficulties can be pre-empted and any

full-time student considered to be at risk of failing at level 4 would be counselled, raising the possibilities of either suspending studies or of transfer to part-time study. Students spoke positively about the high level of support, advice and guidance they received from individual module tutors and subject mentors, and about the structure and sequencing of modules.

Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning

14 The Foundation Degree in Education and Training has been designed for in-service teachers who have already completed a variety of smaller Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualifications and who have experience in the sector. The College accordingly acknowledges both certificated and experiential prior learning: its regulations allow a student to be awarded credit by Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) for up to 120 credits at level 4 and 60 credits at level 5. APL boards, chaired by the Director of Higher Education, meet monthly to review the evidence submitted, involve key College managers, record decisions electronically and communicate these to examination boards. Since many applicants for APL present qualifications previously gained from the NCG (formerly the Newcastle College Group) itself, staff are guided by a tariff of qualifications. In addition they may seek statements from employers and, in some cases, consult the relevant external examiner.

15 Typically, students receive either 80 or 100 credits for prior learning for non-specialist level 4 modules, including the work-placement and personal and professional development modules. For the full-time generic programme starting in September, 20 per cent (four of 20 students) in 2014 and 40 per cent (two of five students) in 2015 received credit for prior learning. All 15 students starting the generic full-time programme in January 2014 received credit for prior learning. Of the seven students met by the team, two had received credit through APL: one for 60 level 4 credits, the other (with prior teaching experience and an ITE qualification) for 120 level 4 credits and 40 level 5 credits. Students entering with a substantial volume (typically, 100 credits or more) of credit for prior learning at level 4 may join the second year of the part-time programme so that learning and teaching is a continuous experience across the year.

16 Students are required to complete between 100 and 120 hours of teaching practice over the duration of their programme, with the availability of exemptions to this requirement for students who have already completed the College's Certificate in Education or a recognised equivalent qualification. The standards set for students and the achievement of students.

17 The team saw evidence that the design and approval of the Foundation Degrees in Education and Training was guided by the requirements of professional and regulatory bodies, as set out by Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), including the New Overarching Standards for Teachers, Tutors and Trainers in the Lifelong Learning Sector. Since validation, LLUK has been superseded by the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS), which provides models for units of assessment and guidance to providers. The foundation degrees in question was endorsed by the Institute for Learning (IfL), now the Education and Training Foundation (ETF), and appears on the ETF's register of approved programmes.

18 The College was granted Taught Degree Awarding Powers for six years from August 2016 following a period of scrutiny by the Quality Assurance Agency. The QAA report (February 2016) noted 'a number of policies and processes in place to safeguard the standards of higher education awards' and that these were 'addressed initially through the validation of each specific higher education award'. These processes are commented on more fully in the section on the College's approach to standard setting and to the approval of programmes.

19 External examiners' reports confirm that the standards set for these awards are appropriate and comparable, that programmes of study reflect the appropriate level in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, and that processes for assessment and the determination of awards are sound and fairly conducted. While the template for their reports offers an opportunity for each examiner to register any concerns they may have, no such concerns have been raised in respect of the Foundation Degree in Education and Training over the last two years. Reviewers found that external examiners on the College's programmes in the School of Education are used more extensively than is common across the sector in that they also observe teaching sessions at the College and observe its staff working with students on teaching practice. Processes for acting upon external examiners' reports are comprehensive: they inform course annual reports, school annual reviews and shape action plans which are monitored throughout the year.

20 The concerns team was satisfied that the College is making scrupulous use of external examiners in setting and maintaining academic standards, including giving full and serious consideration to the comments and recommendations contained in their reports. The team concludes, on the basis of the evidence scrutinised and heard, that the standards set for students and the achievements of students on these programmes are appropriate.

The quality of the academic experience of students and their volume of study

21 The College is a division of The School of Education of NCG. The latter has a strong regional and national profile as a specialist provider and is engaged in a range of initiatives across the sector through its role as Success North's Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training, one of 10 such centres in the country. It takes the quality of its students' academic experience seriously and monitors this through course annual reports, school annual reviews, improvement plans, Higher Education Audit, Higher Education Quality Audit, National Student Survey (NSS) evaluations, and action plans. Students provide feedback on individual modules, through Higher Education Learner Forums, through the NSS and through regular contact with tutors. The team found that these processes are robust and carefully followed.

22 Procedures for information, advice and guidance are comprehensive and ensure, through a range of pre and post-interview tasks, that students make a choice of programme appropriate to their circumstances and are prepared for their studies. Students entering without credit for prior learning are informed in advance of the intensive nature of the full-time programme, and are advised that studying in this mode is incompatible with regular employment. Such students have the further option of following the part-time route. External examiners, though they generally meet only small numbers of students, report positive comments about the quality of the learning experience and support received by students. This was endorsed by students themselves, who confirmed that they found their courses enjoyable and fulfilling, and have since been able to progress within their teaching careers.

23 From the range of evidence provided, the concerns team was satisfied that students on the foundation degree programme enjoy an academic experience consistent with UK expectations.

24 Turning to matters concerning volume of study, the report on the approval of Foundation Degrees in Education and Training and its associated pathways indicated that volume of student work and staffing were areas for consideration by the approval panel. Discussion of this was captured in three short bullet points which all related to staffing although the panel confirmed in a checklist that appropriate attention had been given to student workload and the balancing and scheduling of assessments. The report on the approval of the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities specialism listed course structure as an area for consideration. Discussion of this was captured in five bullet points, four of which

related to the Additional Route (the fifth to the September-to-September delivery). The panel again confirmed that appropriate attention had been given to workload and the balancing and scheduling of assessments. The concerns team could not determine from these reports that matters such as workload and credit structure had been discussed in depth at either event. While accepting that the events had taken place some years previously and that recollections may have faded with the passage of time, the team received no satisfactory clarification from senior staff about this, their responses focusing instead on access, demand and employer needs.

25 The concerns team therefore collated evidence from three different sources about volume of work and the spread of learning hours over the various learning and assessment activities: senior staff, students and teaching staff. These led to estimates which were not consistent.

26 The College provided a breakdown of study tasks which led to an estimate of 2,400-2,680 hours of study for the one-year, full-time programme. The concerns team considered that the time notionally allowed to some elements in this breakdown may be over generous, but acknowledged that the vocational nature of the programmes would lead to considerable time being spent on teaching, observing, lesson planning, and discussion of practice.

27 Students who had studied on the full-time programme disagreed with the view of senior staff that the programme in this mode 'takes over their lives', describing the workload as 'manageable'. All valued the opportunity to complete the programme in a single year. Part-time students made the point that since their work placements dovetailed so closely with their jobs it was hard to quantify the hours spent on the more time-consuming elements of the programme, specifically work-based learning and personal development. They felt that much of their learning developed through personal reflection, which could not always be structured or accounted for. Personal testimonies from graduates with regard to workload were very contrasting, highlighting great variability in perceptions of workload and time spent in private study and, therefore, the difficulties in quantifying this. Teaching staff provided estimates that the concerns team considered the most realistic. They outlined the wide scope of private study in addition to preparation for formal assessments - collating teaching resources and lesson plans, reading and refining subject knowledge, anticipating student problems, involvement in assessment processes and, eventually, marking - and observed that some students would go beyond programme requirements (for example, by spending extra time on placement). From these discussions, the concerns team formed the view that the workload and expectations placed on students on these foundation degree programmes were not inconsistent when compared to practice across the sector.

28 Finally, the concerns team scrutinised assessment across modules and found assessment regimes and word counts reasonably consistent. Members of the course team outlined the means by which parity in assessment and workload across modules were achieved: through ongoing discussion (staff meetings, team teaching), higher education audits of module guides, and feedback from external examiners. The lack of detail in the reports of approval events led the team to scrutiny of the effectiveness of the College's approach to the approval and monitoring of programmes, considered in the next section and which leads to the recommendation made in paragraph 31.

The effectiveness of the College's approach to standard setting and to the approval of programmes, including its use of external reference points.

29 The four foundation degrees in question conform to the standards set by the PSRB for Initial Teacher Education (LLUK at the time of approval, LSIS as LLUK's successor body) and are on the register of approved courses held by the Education and Training Foundation.

Use of the OFSTED Common Inspection Framework in all modules ensures that students are fit for practice on completion of their programme. ETF professional standards align well with the characteristics of the foundation degree graduate, as outlined in section 1.3 of the Characteristics Statement for the Foundation Degree. NCG received Foundation Degree Awarding Powers in July 2011. The Foundation Degree in Education and Training, validated in April and December 2012, were therefore among the early approval events organised independently by the College. The lack of detail and clarity in validation reports discussed in paragraph 24 are consistent with the comments made in the report of the application for taught degree awarding powers of February 2016 that 'Observation of validation events held in the early part of the scrutiny cycle suggested that these had not been adequately prepared'.

30 Nevertheless the concerns team noted also that the report confirmed that 'observation of similar events in the latter part of the scrutiny cycle showed that NCG has significantly improved its briefing and guidance for programme teams, and the quality of discussion and level of leadership are now appropriate.' Senior staff described a more robust initial strategic planning phase that now precedes validation events. In addition, documents are checked by the Higher Education Directorate prior to validation, and recommendations arising from approval events and actions taken in response to these are reported to the Higher Education Quality and Standards Committee. The College makes appropriate use of externality in assembling validation panels, which include an external academic and an employer representative. The concerns team concludes that there was no evidence to question the rigour or consistency of the College's current process for approval of programmes.

31 The team noted that the distinctive nature of the design and delivery of the foundation degree programmes has not been reflected in the attention paid to them in the College's internal monitoring processes. Rather, the Higher Education Annual Review Reports of the School of Education address the entirety of the School's provision at levels 5 to 7, and its action plan does not identify actions to be undertaken in relation to particular programmes. Taking into account the distinctive nature of the foundation degree programmes, the inconsistencies in evidence relating to the volume of student work, and the possibility that the validation events for these programmes had not been adequately prepared, the team **recommends** that the College should ensure that annual monitoring and periodic review in future includes commentary and reflection on the volume and level of learning on the Foundation Degree in Education and Training.

32 In considering the College's use of external reference points, the team noted that the documentation to support the validations of the Foundation Degree in Education and Training show that they were designed and developed with reference to a range of such points: the Subject Benchmark Statements for Education Studies, the Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark, the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, and the Code of Practice for Work-Based Placement Learning, the Dublin Descriptors and national occupational standards (LLUK units of assessment, the New Overarching Standards for Teachers, Tutors and Trainers in the Lifelong Learning Sector, and revised guidance for providers from LSIS). Appendices to these documents show this mapping process in detail. At both validation events the panel commended the thorough mapping of the curriculum against a range of relevant external benchmarks and, for the Learning Difficulties and Disabilities event, included a second commendation on the use of contextualisation to create a specialist qualification to meet the needs of local employers.

33 The report of the application for taught degree awarding powers of February 2016 notes that the College endeavours to embed national requirements into internal processes and that its engagement with employers and industrialists is extensive and effective. The report also observes that staff within the School of Education were making a notable

sectoral impact on practice in teacher education, helped by their status as a Centre for Excellence in Teacher Training (the only such centre outside the university sector), having attracted funded projects for the Education and Training Foundation and BIS.

34 The College has effective approaches to standard setting and to the use of external reference points. However, greater attention to the distinctive features of the foundation degree programmes in processes for monitoring and review would strengthen the College's alignment with Expectation B8 of the Quality Code.

Recommendation

35 The College should:

- ensure that annual monitoring and periodic review in future includes commentary and reflection on the volume and level of learning on the foundation degree programmes in Education and Training.

Conclusion

36 The QAA concerns team does not uphold the concerns raised. This means that the College is meeting the expectations of the Quality Code.

37 In light of the conclusions of this report, the College will provide an action plan to QAA within four weeks of publication setting out how it will address the recommendation made by the concerns team.

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