

Application for taught degree awarding powers: NCG (Newcastle College Group)

Scrutiny team report

February 2016

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About this report

This report reflects the findings of a team appointed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to conduct a detailed scrutiny of an application from NCG (Newcastle College Group) for the power to award taught degrees.

The application was considered under criteria approved by Government in 2004. In advising on applications, QAA is guided by the relevant criteria and the associated evidence requirements. QAA's work in this area is overseen by its Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers (ACDAP), a subcommittee of the QAA Board.

ACDAP's initial consideration of applications establishes whether an applicant has made a case to proceed to detailed scrutiny of the application and the evidence on which it is based. If satisfied on this matter, ACDAP agrees that a team may be appointed to conduct the scrutiny and prepare a report, enabling ACDAP to determine the nature of the recommendation it will make to the QAA Board.

Scrutiny teams produce reports following each of the engagements undertaken. The final report reflects the team's findings and is structured around the four main criteria contained in the 2004 TDAP criteria,¹ namely:

- governance and academic management
- academic standards and quality assurance
- scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of academic staff
- the environment supporting the delivery of taught higher education programmes.

Subject to the approval of the Board, QAA's advice is communicated to the appropriate minister. This advice is provided in confidence. The minister determines whether it should be disclosed to the applicant. A final decision on an application, and the notification of that decision, is a matter for the Privy Council.

¹ The TDAP criteria are available in Appendix 1 of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills' *Applications for the grant of taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers and university title: Guidance for applicant organisations in England and Wales (August 2004)* at www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32388/11-781-applications-for-degree-awarding-powers-guidance.pdf (PDF, 304KB)

Executive summary

A Governance and academic management

During the scrutiny, particularly in 2015, the scrutiny team has seen evidence of a growing awareness of the distinctive nature of higher education and the implications of gaining taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) among the Corporation members and the senior staff across the Group. The Corporation meets frequently to oversee the operation of the large and complex NCG structure, of which higher education forms a part. Financial management is sound and, despite the challenging external circumstances, there has recently been significant investment in higher education. Resources are approved by the Corporation and actively considered at all stages of new programme development and annual monitoring and review. There is an appropriate executive and deliberative framework within which higher education is managed, central to which is the Higher Education Directorate, which manages all higher education provision effectively.

In May 2014, the governing body of 14 people, including staff and student representatives with a range of relevant skills, appointed a member with substantial higher education experience. This, together with the more recent arrival of the new Newcastle College Principal, has focused the input of the governing body to a greater extent onto the higher education provision and enhanced the level of debate on higher education matters.

The overall risk register is actively maintained and considered, although risks are at a relatively high level and the detail of academic risk would not necessarily feature but would be addressed through existing systems of internal control, including quality assurance procedures that incorporate risk management. The development of the strategies for change management and the identification of academic risk is essentially devolved to the Higher Education Directorate, which is proactive in providing leadership of the higher education provision and the cornerstone for the rigorous and robust operation of quality assurance.

During the scrutiny the institution has become increasingly proactive in the ways in which it develops, operates and considers its higher education provision. Staff better understand the distinctiveness of higher education and this is evident in assessment and teaching methods, and in their own growing involvement in research activities. There is now evidence of a self-critical academic community. Indications that the Group is placing a higher priority on higher education include the Chief Executive taking up the chairing of the Higher Education Academic Board and the early actions of the new Principal. Since the award of foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP) the Group has recognised and responded to the needs of a growing academic community. The structures are in place to safeguard the standards of awards and to promote more active academic leadership for higher education within the schools.

B Academic standards and quality assurance

NCG has its own set of regulations currently operating for foundation degrees and interacts well with those of its awarding bodies. It has established draft regulations for extending the existing regulatory framework within its existing higher education academic regulations to include Levels 6 and 7. These draft regulations are due to be presented at the Higher Education Academic Board for approval in June 2016. It has developed an extensive Higher Education Framework, summarised in a definitive document early in 2015, which covers existing provision under foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP), and there is in place an approved set of regulations should taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) be granted.

A comprehensive Higher Education Quality Reference Manual, updated annually, contains all the policies, procedures and regulations to enable staff to carry out reliably and

consistently the monitoring and review of programmes and the development of new ones. Documentation concerning the maintenance of quality and standards is explicit. Procedures such as annual review, course approval and assessment are uniformly operated across all higher education provision on all sites: Newcastle, West Lancashire and Kidderminster Colleges. Liaison across the dispersed higher education provision is effective and reporting lines work well into the committee structure.

There is extensive and often close liaison with employers, professional bodies and sector bodies, as well as the employment of fractional staff who are themselves practitioners. Some employers contribute to curriculum development and some act as validation panel members. External examiners are carefully selected and responded to, with relevant changes being made to programmes. Increasing numbers of staff are involved in relevant professional bodies and subject groups outside the colleges and several have been appointed as external examiners in a range of institutions. NCG has developed ways of identifying and disseminating best practice from elsewhere.

Validation of programmes has become more efficient since the start of the scrutiny and the level of debate has risen. The validation of online programmes, developed during the scrutiny, was able to take appropriate account of this mode of study. Despite the attention given at validation to resources and staffing, there are areas in which it is difficult to recruit and retain staff. NCG is aware of these difficulties and is addressing them.

C Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of academic staff

NCG employs 184 staff teaching higher education programmes, 75 per cent on full-time contracts. Approximately 40 per cent of these teach solely higher education courses. Half hold doctoral or master's degrees; the remainder hold bachelors or other qualifications. Approximately 75 per cent are academically qualified one level above that which they are teaching, and active measures are in place to ensure that, in future, all new teaching staff will be thus qualified. For those currently not qualified at the appropriate level, processes are in place to ensure that staff have current and valid professional experience to enable them to operate effectively.

There is a very effective programme of pedagogic staff development, offering both formal training for staff new to higher education teaching, and also more developmental activities for all higher education staff. NCG has an increasing regional and national presence in the higher education teaching and learning community, and has established a particular focus around 'student as producer', which is providing a structured framework for positive and potentially sector-leading pedagogic developments.

The Group operates a well established framework for the appraisal of higher education staff, which is clearly having an impact in both pedagogic and scholarship-focused activity. Significant funding has been made available to release staff for further study and other staff to engage in personal scholarship and research. The Group has embarked on a range of research and scholarly initiatives to generate more engagement and outputs by staff, appropriate to Levels 6 and 7. The majority of higher education staff are actively engaged in scholarly activity that informs their teaching and the development of the student as producer work should further this.

Higher education staff present a profile of external engagement with other higher education institutions that is very typical of the rest of the sector, if not higher than most. The Higher Education Directorate's ability to benchmark and network with other sectoral colleagues is clear, and NCG is thus well aware of change and initiative in the sector. Higher education academic initiative and leadership emerges strongly through the Higher Education Directorate and Higher Education Managers, and increasingly through the School Directors.

The recently appointed Newcastle College Principal brings additional energy and direction to the higher education vision.

D The environment supporting the delivery of taught higher education programmes

NCG's frameworks for the conduct of its higher education provision are well articulated. There are effective processes to monitor and review the teaching and learning infrastructure, teaching and assessment, and to confirm that standards are being achieved and maintained. Arrangements for the timely and accurate feedback of the outcomes of assessment are in place and effective. Innovation in assessment feedback has featured a number of times during the scrutiny: the use of podcasts, wikis and the virtual learning environment for feedback all attracted external commendation.

NCG continues to invest in its estate and physical resources for higher education provision. Teaching and learning facilities are generally modern and fit for purpose. Apart from individual school areas for higher education students there is a recently completed central area only accessible to higher education students.

There are clear and well organised processes for obtaining feedback from students, staff and employers, all of which contribute to course design, approval, annual monitoring and periodic review. Internal student satisfaction and module surveys are benchmarked with the Group's sectoral competitor base, so better informing subsequent internal evaluation. NCG's Higher Education Partnership Strategy (Student Charter) captures the vision to position students at the heart of their own learning and to ensure that the student voice is always heard.

Information produced for students is copious, clear and helpful, and supplements the robust arrangements for induction. The availability of learning resources is always considered at every stage of course approval, and is routinely reviewed more holistically, both annually and periodically. The current programme of capital investment has made significant steps in improving provision for the higher education student academic community.

NCG higher education students and staff have access to a wide range of advisory and support services, regardless of delivery site. The Group has made a decision not to provide an in-house careers service for the time being, and students are referred to the National Careers service. Service areas are monitored annually, and in-house services appear to be providing an appropriate facility. Effective mechanisms are in place to deal with student complaints and academic appeals.

NCG's administrative support systems appear largely fit for purpose. Some challenges appear to persist in the generation of student data for assessment boards and committees, but the strong higher education data team and the attention to detail in assessment boards have ensured that assessment decisions have not been compromised. Appropriate remedial action is in hand and there can be confidence that the higher education data team is capable of providing timely and accurate information. There is a clear process for an appropriately senior person to sign-off publicity information.

Privy Council's decision

The Privy Council's decision is to grant Newcastle College Group renewable taught degree awarding powers for six years from 1 August 2016.

Introduction

This report provides a summary of the work and findings of the scrutiny team (the team appointed by QAA to review in detail the evidence submitted in support of an application for taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) by NCG (the Group)).

The application was considered by QAA's Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers in September 2013 when the Committee agreed to proceed to the detailed scrutiny of the application. The team appointed to conduct the detailed scrutiny comprised Dr Christopher Amodio, Mrs Patricia Lowrie, and Professor Emeritus Ian Robinson (scrutiny team members) and Ms Jenny Lyon (secretary). The detailed scrutiny was managed on behalf of QAA initially by Professor Peter Hodson, until his retirement in March 2014, and subsequently by Dr Penny McCracken, Assistant Director.

The detailed scrutiny began in January 2014, culminating in a report to ACDAP in February 2016. In the course of the scrutiny, the team read a wide range of documents presented in support of the application. The team also spoke to a range of stakeholders and observed meetings and events pertinent to the application.

Key information about NCG

NCG, formerly known as Newcastle College Corporation, is a large organisation consisting of six divisions:

- Newcastle College
- Newcastle Sixth Form College
- West Lancashire College
- Kidderminster College
- Intraining
- Rathbone

Those delivering higher education are Newcastle College, West Lancashire College and, since 1 August 2014, Kidderminster College. Students following the online foundation degrees with NCG Direct are registered with Newcastle College. The Group's other divisions focus on youth training and skills: Rathbone, a youth charity focusing on skills acquisition by young people aged 14-24 for employment; Newcastle Sixth Form College; and Intraining, a national provider of training and employment-related services.

Newcastle College Corporation was granted foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP) in July 2011. The application for taught degree awarding powers (TDAP) was originally made also by the Newcastle College Corporation. During the scrutiny, the Group made a formal application to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to change its name to NCG, signalling the consolidation of the work of NCG, which incorporated at that time five trading divisions and subsidiaries. This took effect in November 2013. The awarding body for FDAP was changed to NCG and the application for TDAP is therefore now being made in that name.

At the time of the TDAP application, the main awarding body was Leeds Beckett University, then known as Leeds Metropolitan University, which allowed NCG considerable delegated authority; this had facilitated the development of NCG's own set of regulations, which had been drawn up for FDAP. The final outgoing programmes validated by Leeds Beckett University completed in September 2015. Other awarding bodies used for particular expertise are Kingston University and Newcastle University. Since 2013-14 the main awarding body for higher education awards at Levels 6 and 7 has been Teesside University and most higher education awards went through a validation process for this institution in

spring 2013. However, very recently, the new Vice-Chancellor at Teesside has suggested that the University is considering withdrawing from partnership work and validation activity and NCG are currently considering options, should this be the case. There are some Pearson Higher National awards in two divisions delivering higher education. Kidderminster College, which joined the Group in August 2014 as the sixth division, has also retained its other existing awarding body, the University of Worcester.

There are seven schools within Newcastle College:

- School of Construction, Engineering and Science
- School of Creative Industries
- Digital Skills Academy
- School of Health and Enterprise
- Lifestyle Academy
- NCG Direct
- Newcastle School of Education

In 2015-16, the six divisions of NCG have between them 20,890 learners across higher education and further education. Of these there are 2,534 registered higher education students, of whom 95 were registered as overseas students. Of the higher education students, 1,994 are studying full-time and the large majority of students across all modes of study are at Newcastle College (2,415). The sectors of NCG currently offering higher education provision are Newcastle College, West Lancashire College with 89 (headcount) higher education students, Kidderminster College with 30 (headcount) students, Newcastle School of Education and NCG Direct. The majority of the higher education provision is managed within Newcastle College and higher education students are registered with Newcastle College regardless of where they are based. There are 11,015 16-18 year old learners, including just over 1,000 learners from Kidderminster College.

NCG employs 184 staff teaching higher education programmes, 75 per cent on full-time contracts. Approximately 40 per cent of these teach solely higher education courses. Half hold doctoral or master's degrees; the remainder hold bachelor's or other qualifications. There is a higher education administrator in each school.

Recognising the complexity of the work of the organisation, the Corporation has established an overarching mission: Unlocking potential through learning.

Detailed scrutiny against taught degree awarding powers criteria

A Governance and academic management

Criterion A1

An organisation granted taught degree awarding powers is governed, managed and administered effectively, with clear and appropriate lines of accountability for its academic responsibilities. Its financial management is sound and a clear relationship exists between its financial policy and the safeguarding of the quality and standards of its higher education provision. In the case of an organisation that is not primarily a higher education institution; its principal activities are compatible with the provision of higher education programmes and awards.

- 1 As set out in the introduction, NCG is a complex organisation operating in a constantly changing environment. Higher education is developed and delivered within the mixed economy of education and training provided by the different divisions in NCG.
- 2 The provision of higher education is considered as a major element of the work of the Group. The business plan for Newcastle College (NC) for 2014-15 identified two key objectives that included reference to higher education: the continuation of innovative programmes of study (including mandatory English and Maths) to consolidate the higher education offer and further development of adult provision; and the continuation of the process to extend the current foundation degree awarding powers (FDAP) to taught degree awarding powers (TDAP).
- 3 The Corporation remains relatively small with 14 members, including a student governor, staff governor and the Chief Executive. Financial planning, quality assurance and resource allocation policies are ultimately the responsibility of the Corporation. Full Corporation meetings are held almost every month and the work of the Corporation is supported through the work of its three standing Committees, which cover Audit, Remuneration and Search, and the three Advisory Committees, one for each College (Newcastle, West Lancashire - WLC and Kidderminster - KC). The approach to Advisory Committees is currently under review. The Corporation also has the facility to convene a special committee as required, with the membership drawn from an identified subgroup of governors. Corporation business is facilitated and supported by the Corporation Clerk.
- 4 The Audit Committee meets four times a year and is a key subcommittee advising the Corporation on the adequacy and effectiveness of the Corporation's systems of internal control and its arrangements for risk management, governance processes and securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness (value for money). There is an internal audit service provided by Price Waterhouse Cooper. Internal audit plans are considered by the Audit Committee prior to approval by the Corporation.
- 5 NCG is an exempt charity under Part 3 of the Charities Act 2011 and from September 2013 has been regulated by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills. The financial report for the year ending 31 July 2015 indicated that the Group budget objectives for the year were broadly achieved. A surplus of £113,000, representing the target of 0.1 per cent of Group income, was generated. Cash balances or facilities were consistently maintained at least equivalent to 30 days and approximately £29 million was spent on capital investment to meet student and business support needs. This represents over double the £14 million spent in 2014. NCG has accumulated income and expenditure reserves of £66.5 million.

6 In its review of operations in 2014-15 the Corporation acknowledged the continuing challenges faced by the Group in achieving its objectives, relating to its contracting activities outside the higher education provision during a phase of ongoing cuts driven by Government spending reviews and budget tightening.

7 The Corporation has approved a budget target for NCG for 2015-16 of a surplus similar to that achieved in 2014-15, acknowledging that the budget presents a very challenging target which will require close management of costs and an increased focus on commercial activity, the better to use available resources.

8 The provision of higher education is seen as providing opportunities for learners, in particular those already studying within NCG, to progress to courses leading to higher level qualifications. Newcastle and the wider North East is traditionally an area of low take up of higher education. The learner progression into higher education and employment from NCG further education is high. One school reported that 90 per cent of learners progressed into employment or higher education, with 40 per cent progressing internally and 60 per cent to other higher education institutions.

9 The Higher Education Academic Board, established in 2008, is responsible for all the higher education activity in the Group. The Academic Board reports to the Group Executive Board, which in turn reports to the Corporation. Monthly reports on higher education are presented to the Executive Board and the Corporation receives a higher education report at each meeting. There are two subcommittees of the Academic Board: Higher Education Quality and Standards and Higher Education Teaching, Learning and Assessment. The Higher Education Quality and Standards Committee has prime responsibility for the higher education quality assurance processes and is chaired by the Group Director of Quality and Standards. These lines of communication and reporting ensure that higher education provision is fully deliberated at school, Academic Board and senior management level.

10 The Higher Education Directorate provides leadership across NCG for the delivery of higher education and in particular has been responsible for establishing the quality assurance procedures now in place. The Directorate, based in Newcastle College (NC), is a small team of staff comprising a Director of Higher Education, Head of Higher Education Quality and Standards, Head of Higher Education Curriculum, a Research and Engagement Manager and the Higher Education Regulations and Operations Manager, now called the Head of Higher Education Registry. The work of the Directorate has made a very positive contribution to the development and implementation of the quality assurance procedures relating to both NCG foundation degree awards and to the validated degree awards offered in NCG.

11 Each division of NCG has an annual agreed business plan achieved through NCG's comprehensive business planning and budget setting process. Business planning is the responsibility of school executive structures (see paragraphs 122-124). School directors are required to carry out detailed consideration of finances, resources and capital expenditure and to identify and address staffing and other resource needs in relation to higher education delivery. This planning is developed in parallel with Higher Education Directorate input concerning the development of the academic case. There is awareness and concern about capacity issues and decisions are based on careful financial consideration.

12 Financial and academic management of higher education sit within the management of the Group. During the scrutiny process there has been a growing recognition of the distinctiveness of higher education and the significance of TDAP.

13 The Higher Education Academic Board and the Higher Education Directorate ensure that all higher education developments pay full attention to the relevant legislation,

the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and other relevant guidance, including that from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs). Higher Education Managers, who have been appointed in each school/Academy, provide a key linkage between schools and the Higher Education Directorate. The Higher Education Managers work with Quality Managers at school level to ensure that higher education development and delivery is compliant with agreed policies and practice, which themselves are based on the Quality Code, legislation and guidance. Quality Managers have overarching responsibility for the operation of quality processes in further and higher education at school level.

14 In other areas, for example staff development, the scrutiny team found that the organisation had aligned its higher education staff training and development with the HEA Professional Standards Framework for Higher Education Staff (see paragraphs 108-115). There is also a new higher education teaching observation scheme, introduced in 2013-14, which has been designed by benchmarking against *Chapters B3, B4 and B5* of the Quality Code. Staff reportedly found the scheme to be both supportive and developmental. There remain some areas for improvement, but the staff are in general agreement that the scheme has been a very positive step forward.

15 There is strong evidence that full account is taken of higher education legislative requirements and developments. The Higher Education Directorate is alert to the external educational environment and communicates effectively across the organisation, ensuring awareness and understanding of sector-wide higher education matters and their impact on the provision in NCG.

16 The higher education policies and systems are well defined and documented, and are agreed and reviewed by the Academic Board. Clear management and guidance is provided by the Higher Education Directorate. The Higher Education Quality Reference Manual provides documentation for use across all the higher education provision in NCG. Standardised agendas and minutes are used, which give a framework for areas to be addressed by higher education course teams. The Higher Education Managers in the individual schools assist staff in quality assurance matters, ensuring that there is consistency in implementation of policies and procedures.

17 Student attendance at committees is encouraged and the organisation is aware that there are some issues around the timing of meetings that need to be resolved in order to facilitate student involvement. Learner forums are used to ensure that students are aware of policies and systems. The forums provide an opportunity for staff to explain to students where and why processes and procedure may constrain flexibility, for example on assessment submission dates. The scrutiny team found evidence that learner forums are effective in eliciting valuable student feedback, and NCG had responded to this in a positive manner. A Student Agreement has recently been developed in line with the Competitions and Markets Authority Guidance for higher education providers. The Agreement sets out Newcastle College's commitments to students and identifies what is expected of students in return. It is intended that the Agreement will be used in all divisions of the Group offering higher education provision.

18 The higher education Student Internship programme, introduced in 2013-14, has proved highly successful in the development and implementation of the higher education Student Engagement and Research and Scholarly Activity (RSA) strategies. The student interns were recruited to work on quality enhancement and research projects. In December 2014 external funding was secured from the HEA Learning and Teaching in Cyber Security Grant scheme to support five student internships to pilot the Student as Producer project in a vocational higher education setting. NCG intends to consolidate the Internship programme, with student interns forming the core of a new Student Fellowship scheme to

commence in 2015-16. This would see students play a significant part in the development of the higher education student academic community.

19 The devolved nature of the implementation of higher education, while allowing individual schools to develop higher education alongside the further education provision, has led to some variability in the perception of the way forward with the overall development. The Academic Board and the Higher Education Directorate provide an important central role in moving forward the development of higher education and in ensuring that policy and procedures are appropriate, reviewed and enhanced. There is evidence of an emerging cohesive higher education academic community of staff and students supported by appropriate resourcing.

20 The Corporation endeavours to ensure that its members have appropriate skills, knowledge and experience to address the issues raised by the wide portfolio of education and training activities of its divisions. In May 2014 the Corporation appointed a governor with a specific higher education background, recognising the need to enhance its membership in this area.

21 The Corporation annually undertakes a self-assessment of its own performance using evidence from a range of sources. This exercise is comprehensive and includes consideration of governors' responses to a questionnaire based on the Good Governance Standard for Public Services (GGSPS); records of attendance at meetings; and feedback from internal and external auditors on corporate governance. In autumn 2014 the self-assessment survey included new statements based on Ofsted and QAA expectations, in addition to the statements based on the GGSPS used in previous years. The self-assessment report identified that, 'Although corporate governance has been maintained at a high standard, the bar has been raised in terms of national expectations about governors' involvement in curriculum development and quality assurance and NCG's response is being developed'.

22 In relation to higher education the responses of some governors indicated uncertainty as to whether they were appropriately monitoring the range of indicators detailed in the questionnaire. The indicators related to threshold academic standards; academic quality; enhancement and information. The Corporation was assured that these areas were addressed at the operational level and that assurance was carried out by the Academic Board, the Higher Education Directorate and through validation of higher education provision by partner universities. The Higher Education Report that the Corporation receives at each meeting has been amended and now specifically addresses the indicators and identifies progress being made in implementing changes in the higher education provision. At Corporation meetings observed by the scrutiny team the report was presented 'for information' by the Principal of NC and did not always generate discussion. The new Principal of NC has already initiated some changes in the presentation of the report, which encourage a greater degree of engagement by governors. This action fulfils one of the self-assessment outcomes where the Corporation agreed that the Higher Education Reports and the presentation of the Higher Education Annual Review should be made more explicit in order that governors could be more confident in their monitoring of higher education.

23 The work of the Corporation was described in the application, and the evidence gained through observations of the Corporation meetings, subcommittees and training events supports the statement made there that NCC 'is a self-managed, self-critical organisation'. There is a growing realisation in the NCG Corporation of the ways in which higher education provision and requirements differ from those for further education and identifying how members of the Corporation could more effectively contribute on higher education. The governors' understanding is being addressed, for example, through the additional governor appointment of a former Pro-Vice Chancellor and the recent changes to

the format of the Higher Education Report presented to the Corporation by the new Principal of Newcastle College.

24 There are other forums where higher education matters are discussed with varying levels of consideration and participation. An Extended Executive Group comprises all NCG Directors, including the Group Director for Quality and Standards, the Principals of the three Colleges, together with the heads of the commercial training arm, the youth training arm and the Newcastle Sixth Form College. Members of this group generally work well as a team, have a good oversight of financial management, and demonstrate an effective corporate top-level understanding of national higher education matters.

25 The current Chief Executive was appointed in August 2013 and is supported at Group level by five Group Directors with responsibility for bids and business development; HR and organisational development; finance and property services; planning and performance; and quality and standards. These areas of responsibility reflect the complexity of the Group's activities, of which the provision of higher education is just one component.

26 Each division of NCG has a Principal or Managing Director. Higher education is positioned within the Newcastle College organisational structure with the Director of Higher Education, who leads the Higher Education Directorate, reporting directly to the Newcastle College Principal. The Head of Higher Education Quality and Standards is, since September 2015, line managed by the Director of Higher Education. The previous Principal of Newcastle College, appointed during the FDAP scrutiny, left in June 2015 and a successor took up this post in September 2015. The appointment of this new Principal of Newcastle College has the potential to lead to changes in the management structure. Although the Higher Education Directorate is located within the Newcastle College organisational structure, its responsibility covers higher education wherever it is taught. Recognising higher education as a cross-Group provision, the Chief Executive has been appointed as Chair of the Academic Board with effect from the start of the 2015-16 academic session. His participation in this role will further enhance the Corporation's appreciation of the higher education agenda for the Group.

27 The school directors are identified as providing academic leadership but the leadership for the development and quality assurance of the higher education provision is mainly provided by the Higher Education Directorate.

28 In the wide range of higher education-related activities that have been observed, including the chairing of committees, participation in validation events and staff development, the senior staff from NCG involved in these events, often taking a leading role, have mainly been members of the Higher Education Directorate. These members of staff were clearly capable of academic leadership in these various roles. Other staff at senior level have a wide portfolio covering higher education, further education, training and commercial activities, and the leadership of higher education provision was not previously their prime focus. However, very recently, meetings and observations have seen a higher priority placed on higher education. In 2015-16 several new senior staff have been appointed including the new Principal at NC, who has signalled the need for a proactive approach to academic leadership of higher education. Programme leaders provide academic leadership at appropriate levels for the higher education provision and are effectively supported by the Higher Education Managers and Quality Managers at school level.

29 The commitment by the organisation to providing increased opportunities for academic staff to undertake further study and contribute to the research agenda has provided a context for emerging academic leaders to be identified (see paragraphs 13-15 and 92-107).

30 Academic policies and systems are developed in a collegiate manner with oversight and clear guidance from the Higher Education Directorate. The Higher Education Academic Board and its two subcommittees, Higher Education Quality and Standards (HEQSC) and Higher Education Learning, Teaching and Assessment (HELTA), have responsibility for the development and evaluation of policy, strategy and practice. These committees each have a wide membership and all include student representatives. The Higher Education Research and Scholarly Activity Committee (HERSA) has been established as a subcommittee of HELTA and also includes student representatives and staff from all schools with higher education provision. Staff are also involved in Higher Education Task Groups at NC and WLC, which consider specific aspects of higher education development.

31 The Higher Education Directorate leads on the communication of academic policies and systems through its proactive membership and leadership of committees and through its network of Higher Education Managers. Being appointed in individual schools, the Higher Education Managers act as a conduit for dissemination of changes and new policies. They are seen as key links between the Higher Education Directorate and staff in the schools.

32 The requirements of achieving PSRB accreditation are often a key consideration in developing new programmes and staff consult relevant stakeholders and PSRB personnel at an early stage. Staff are aware of the need to ensure that programmes of study fully comply with PSRB criteria to attract students and to guarantee subsequent professional registration for successful students. Programme teams gave careful consideration to the choice of PSRB with which to be affiliated in order to secure the best opportunities for their students.

33 The vocational imperative of the higher education provision requires close working relationships with industry to ensure that the higher education provision meets industry requirements. There are strong links with industry, with the different schools liaising with their respective industrial sectors; for example, the School of Construction, Engineering and Science has a Civil Engineering steering group. There is also widespread involvement of practitioners from relevant industries as consultants in programme development, and validation events also include employer representation.

34 The application states that audit and annual monitoring and review have been instrumental in identifying and improving processes. There is clear evidence that policies, systems and activities are monitored and reviewed through the annual monitoring process. Records of HEQSC show that the annual monitoring cycle is followed across the higher education provision. Annual updates are made to the Quality Reference Manual and changes are made as required, for example to align with terminology in the Quality Code and with the requirements of validating bodies.

35 There is an annual process for reviewing the constitutions of Academic Board committees, which are then confirmed by the Board. The membership of the Academic Board and its subcommittees includes wide representation of the academic community and so ensures that there is appropriate expertise to discuss the annual monitoring reports. The requirements for each course to have three programme committee meetings a year in addition to regular (monthly) programme team meetings enables the higher education provision to be appropriately monitored. Programme committee meetings are recorded on a standard minutes template and the minutes of meetings are held in the school, with a copy being sent to the Higher Education Directorate.

36 Audit, monitoring and review are coordinated by the Higher Education Directorate from Newcastle. A process for Higher Education Quality Audit has been developed, in which the focus of the annual audit is a theme changed each year. A recent audit considered the 'assessment life cycle'. Each school was audited by a team comprising Higher Education Managers and School Quality Managers from other disciplines. The outcomes of the audit

were reported to HEQSC. The audit meetings were followed up by Higher Education Quality Review meetings between each School Quality Manager and the Head of Higher Education Quality and Standards, and a summary report was compiled for consideration by HEQSC.

37 Procedures for monitoring and review are carried out across all higher education provision in accordance with the centrally devised scheme. The Head of Higher Education Quality and Standards based at NC has conducted a higher education Quality Audit at West Lancashire College (WLC) and the same surveys are used across WLC and NC. WLC have a Consistency Panel looking at key aspects of quality and standards.

38 There is substantial evidence of a rigorous quality assurance system for monitoring and review and the scrutiny team noted that appropriate action was taken when deficiencies were identified, in one case leading to course closure in a carefully considered manner.

39 The NCG Corporation has a comprehensive risk register, which addresses cross-divisional issues such as health and safety, human resources, and physical resources. The risk register is actively considered and updated. Academic risk would be brought to the attention of the Chief Executive in the context of the Corporation meeting, although the Group Risk register would not contain the level of detail in terms of itemising specific issues of academic risk.

40 The development of the strategies for change management and the identification of academic risk is essentially devolved to the Higher Education Directorate. The higher education Quality Audit process also provides an opportunity for the identification and management of academic risk. Staffing challenges are acknowledged in some areas as presenting emerging academic and reputational risks and measures are taken to ensure that appropriate and timely action occurs to mitigate these risks. The validation processes require early identification of staffing levels and questions the contingency planning to ensure that an appropriate teaching team would be in place.

41 The quality reviews held on a school-by-school basis also provide detailed information, which could identify areas for the analysis of risk. These reviews are considered at an institutional Quality Review meeting and an Executive-level risk plan is developed. The Head of Higher Education Quality and Standards meets with the Director of Group Quality and Standards to discuss issues at the Executive level.

42 There are a number of policies and processes in place to safeguard the academic standards of higher education awards. The annual monitoring and review process, the involvement of external examiners, student reviews and the Quality Audit process all contribute to safeguarding the student experience and maintaining the standards of the higher education awards.

43 Academic standards are addressed initially through the validation of each specific higher education award.

44 There are two stages to this process, an internal one, and then the external one with external panel members, chaired by a member of staff from the awarding body. The monitoring of academic standards for existing courses is then carried out at programme and school levels. Programme reports and annual reports are prepared and are scrutinised by the Academic Board and its subcommittees. Action plans are drawn up to address emerging issues.

45 Following the award of FDAP in 2011 the organisation has recognised and responded to the needs of a growing academic community. There is an emerging plan for post-TDAP academic development, indicating the Group's aspiration to develop a market niche in higher education for professions in commerce, business and industry. The Group

recognises the need to have modes of study available for students who are in paid employment and the requirement for additional student support to improve retention.

46 While the Higher Education Directorate is working hard to establish policies and procedures for the implementation of successful and secure higher education provision, continued efforts are needed to ensure that senior academic leaders can commit to the development and support for higher education provision alongside their further education, training provision and commercial activities. The organisation has benefitted from the guidance provided by more mature higher education institutions and has shown that it has the capacity and willingness to learn from best practice.

47 Discussions held by the NCG Corporation on strategy and purpose initially raised concerns about whether the Corporation truly understood the responsibilities that TDAP would bring. The Corporation has shown a growing awareness of the locus of ownership of higher education matters and has made changes to its membership and the reporting processes to widen its understanding of its responsibilities associated with the growing higher education provision. The scrutiny team encourages it to continue this process.

48 A recent development addresses the positioning of higher education within the overall governance structures. In January 2015 the Higher Education Directorate brought forward an initial proposal which gave a clear vision for the development of Higher Education provision, focusing on improving the student experience for higher education students. The Higher Education Directorate also suggested changes in the executive/deliberative structures which would establish a clearer line management role in relation to higher education for the Directorate. Proposals for the development of higher education are being considered in the Review of Higher Education launched by the new Principal in November 2015.

B Academic standards and quality assurance

Criterion B1

An organisation granted taught degree awarding powers has in place an appropriate regulatory framework to govern the award of its higher education qualifications.

49 NCG currently uses its own regulations for the foundation degree provision and those of its current awarding bodies for relevant Level 5, Level 6 'top-up' and master's degrees. NCG has established an extensive and comprehensive quality and standards framework, within a detailed Higher Education Quality Reference Manual (the Manual), which is continually being reviewed and developed, in line with the Quality Code. The Manual is the repository for all documentation concerned with regulation of the higher education provision, and staff know where to find the relevant information or policy. This has been based on the regulations initially successfully constructed to manage foundation degrees and has since been modified to reflect necessary changes if full TDAP were granted. Additionally, the Higher Education Framework Definitive Document of January 2015 sets out the management and quality assurance framework for use with existing and future higher education provision within the institution. The regulatory framework is based on best practice identified from the other awarding bodies' regulations. The work of the scrutiny team confirms that NCG has developed a detailed, appropriate and workable range of policies and guidelines reflecting admissions, assessment, progression, appeals and complaints within an appropriate framework to regulate its foundation degree provision (that is, its current status).

50 Annual review reports indicate detailed consideration about varied statistical trends, and discussion has been observed in relevant committee and group meetings. NCG currently has to work within regulations for at least four other awarding bodies in addition to its own for foundation degrees, and this has been accomplished without conflict. Processes work well, and appeals are few. The Head of Higher Education Quality and Standards keeps a detailed overview of the whole higher education provision and ensures that all policies are applied consistently. A Higher Education Task Group was established prior to the application for FDAP. Enhancements of higher education regulations and procedures are discussed with key staff at the Higher Education Task Group meetings, with outcomes reported to the HEQSC and thus the Higher Education Academic Board. Thorough work has been, and continues to be, done by this Higher Education Task Group in assuring quality of provision through the framework.

51 Earlier in the scrutiny there was some indication concerning the accuracy and nature of data provided for programme assessment boards. However, review of the operation of programme assessment boards during summer 2015 suggests that these problems have been largely dealt with.

52 Scrutiny indicates that the regulatory framework governing its higher education provision, covering the student life cycle and established by the Higher Education Directorate, and which is responsible across NCG for the delivery of higher education, is appropriate to its current status and is implemented fully and consistently. There is evidence to demonstrate that the framework and infrastructure in place for award of foundation degrees could be readily extended to cope with the additional responsibility for Levels 6 and 7 without putting quality or academic standards in jeopardy.

53 NCG has established draft regulations for extending the existing regulatory framework within its existing higher education academic regulations to include Levels 6 and 7. These draft regulations are due to be presented at the Higher Education Academic Board for approval in June 2016. NCG developed its framework based on best practice, through

the previous involvement with Leeds Beckett University and now with Teesside University, and this has helped NCG to identify key aspects for any new policies and guidelines. Policies and guidelines are kept under review and amended as necessary, and reflect expectations of the Quality Code and *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). Processes and procedures have been mapped to the Quality Code. Current awarding bodies support NCG's application for TDAP, and indicate that they have confidence in NCG's ability to deliver its Level 6 and 7 programmes independently and assure their quality and standards.

54 The quality of NCG documentation is generally very clear and explicit. Observation of committee and Group-level meetings suggests a high degree of awareness of the framework and its operation. Continual review and consideration of programmes of study in terms of method of delivery, student progression and achievement, and indeed currency, is strongly supported by most staff who teach higher education programmes. Initial discussions with staff, and review of existing research and scholarly activity documentation, suggested that some were not sufficiently familiar with levels of teaching and learning required beyond Level 5, in terms of level descriptors as defined in the FHEQ. The scrutiny team was subsequently reassured that the staff selected to teach the higher education programmes are fully aware of the levels expected.

Criterion B2

An organisation granted taught degree awarding powers has clear and consistently applied mechanisms for defining and securing the academic standards of its higher education provision.

55 External examiners note that programmes of study reflect the appropriate FHEQ level, and that students are demonstrating the relevant learning outcomes. Reports are generally positive and supportive, entirely in line with those seen at other institutions. There is effective engagement with the Quality Code. NCG is well aware of the required levels and this has been reinforced by the successful validation through Teesside University's procedures, which require demonstration that programmes reflect appropriate level descriptors.

56 The Higher Education Directorate provides clear guidance on the distinction between academic programmes and training. Given the nature of the institution, a large number of vocational/training programmes are offered at Newcastle and the other Colleges in the Group. Meetings with senior management and teaching staff at West Lancashire and Kidderminster confirmed that appropriate standards, achievement of learning outcomes and engagement with national benchmarks are applied uniformly across the entire provision. Teesside University places great importance on staff qualifications during validation events, and NCG has an established and robust process for ensuring that only those who are appropriately qualified (see paragraphs 85-91) may deliver degree-level programmes.

57 The institution has endeavoured to embed national requirements into internal processes. At present, the awarding bodies are quite prescriptive concerning their requirements for programme specifications and mapping to the Quality Code, and this is a culture that has been adopted by NCG itself for validation of its own foundation degree programmes, and is planned for Level 6 and 7 qualifications. The current NCG foundation degree provision clearly takes appropriate account of the Quality Code, relevant award and Subject Benchmark Statements, National Occupational Standards, national guidance on programme specifications, and the requirements of any relevant PSRBs. Documentation, including programme specifications and validation portfolios, is very detailed in most cases. There is a wealth of evidence to support this. Mapping with Quality Code and with other appropriate benchmarks is in place.

58 NCG takes externality very seriously and its nature of business ensures that engagement with employers and industrialists is extensive and effective. A range of relevant professional bodies is engaging with NCG and its programmes, and there is much external employer interaction, particularly in the areas of engineering, electronics and public sector vocational programmes, where such interaction is highly evident and strongly welcomed by the relevant programme teams. Relevant stakeholders are engaged in the development of programmes. In some cases, local employers ask NCG to provide a short course or foundation degree programme for an identified workforce. Such requests are carefully considered so that only those that fulfil the criteria for a higher education programme are taken further. All validation events have industrial and or professional body representation. Professional body accreditation is sought and evident in most programmes where it is relevant. There is effective use of appropriate external examiners from a range of higher education institutions.

59 External examiners' reports are, in general, highly positive. These reports are taken very seriously by NCG, and responses are required by the Higher Education Directorate at various stages of the following year's review processes leading to annual reports, in addition to a more rapid response to the examiner concerned.

60 Robust and consistent processes were found to be in place during the scrutiny for FDAP and these are applied throughout the higher education provision up to that level. Validation events for programmes at Levels 6 and 7 with Teesside University have shown a considerable improvement in efficiency of process and level of discussion during this scrutiny, and staff involved in the delivery of higher education appear to have benefitted from these events. Internal and external validation events involve external academic panel members and a representative from local stakeholders of professional bodies, which reflects the national dimension.

61 Observation of validation events held in the early part of the scrutiny cycle suggested that these had not been adequately prepared. However, 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.

62 During the scrutiny, NCG began to develop and extend its online distance learning delivery of higher education programmes (see paragraphs 71-72). Such programmes are administered by NCG Direct, treated as a School within Newcastle College rather than a division as was originally the case, and are subject to the same general institutional regulations for programme approval. In recent HEQSC minutes, there is a potential plan to extend such programmes to top-up at Level 6 by distance learning. Observation of a pre-validation event for BA (Hons) Leadership and Management with Teesside University demonstrated that appropriate consideration had been given to the challenges of distance learning delivery, including concerns over security, equal opportunities and consistency. NCG's regulatory framework ensures that the programme is at the correct level. The subsequent validation event was successful.

63 The scrutiny team found that the provider's programme approval, monitoring and review arrangements are robust, applied consistently, have at all levels a broadly based external dimension, and take appropriate account of the specific requirements of different levels of award and different modes of delivery, although the delivery of complete awards by distance learning has yet to be made operational.

64 The Higher Education Directorate has responsibility for ensuring that programmes are adequately resourced. There is an evident relationship between planning and resourcing, and Higher Education Quality and Standards Review carried out by Higher

Education Directorate ensures resources and their development are considered by schools within any new provision proposal. Documentation for all validation and review events must clearly address programme resourcing, and there is considerable subsequent discussion at these events. The adequacy of programme resourcing is a key aspect of annual monitoring reports. Scrutiny of these reports indicates that there have been problems with resources in certain areas of NC's higher education provision, particularly in the construction and media areas. Staffing of some areas of higher education provision is a problem, such as in engineering, particularly in terms of retention of effective and well qualified tutors. NCG is aware of these difficulties and is taking steps to remedy them.

Criterion B3

The education provision of an organisation granted taught degree awarding powers consistently meets its stated learning objectives and achieves its intended outcomes.

65 Evidence seen by the scrutiny team confirms that the NCG's commentary in the application concerning strategies for meeting stated learning objectives to achieve intended outcomes is accurate. It has refined and developed strategies designed for FDAP into a comprehensive NCG Higher Education Framework Definitive Document, which adequately covers additional requirements in the event that responsibility is granted for awards at Levels 6 and 7. Successful awarding body validations suggest that NCG is aware of the changes necessary to reflect responsibility for a higher level of award, though in some areas much staff development was needed to achieve this. Additionally, NCG has established a Guide to Good Practice in Assessment, which helps tutors to ensure that achievement of learning outcomes is demonstrated, with many processes reflecting 'best aspects' of those required by the existing awarding bodies. Programme documentation reflects these strategies, and external examiners' reports confirm that learning outcomes are being achieved at the appropriate level. Assessment strategies are varied, and assignments are pre-verified, with the responses appropriately modified according to established processes. Progression and achievement data are scrutinised and key outcomes are used to promote continuous improvement.

66 The application indicates that staff are informed of relevant policies and processes, and that staff development sessions are held for this purpose. Observation of relevant committee and group meetings, and scrutiny of minutes, demonstrate that the staff involved in the delivery of higher education programmes are indeed aware of the corporate policies and procedures. Many staff are excited about being involved in higher education teaching, and there is a process for College approval of all those involved in degree-level work. The quality of documentation provided by the Higher Education Directorate within its manual is high, with detailed guidance provided. Higher Education Quality Review and Audit ensure that staff teaching on such programmes are involved throughout in the identification, progression and development of higher education programmes. Several staff development events are run annually to ensure that staff are familiar with any changes to the regulations and aspects such as assessment good practice. For example, there was recently a higher education Staff Conference on Assessment. Additionally, NCG has established an annual programme of events for both staff and students involved in higher education, which are well attended (see also paragraphs 108-115).

67 The Higher Education Directorate has established a clear hierarchical line of responsibilities for programme monitoring, amendment or indeed closure, which is well documented. The established set of guidelines and policies for minor modification and major changes to programmes operating for foundation degrees are working effectively and are robust. NCG has rigorous review mechanisms, including regular Quality Audits and discussion in HEQSC meetings, to ensure that changes are not made to existing

programmes without prior approval, and any changes are reported in annual monitoring reviews and within the annual planning cycle. Clear rules have been formulated to indicate how much of a programme may be altered without a requirement for re-validation.

68 Key developments during 2014-15 included Kidderminster College (KC) joining the NCG, and establishment of programmes of study wholly delivered by online learning. There are thus two additional sites, each at some distance from Newcastle and from each other, operating some of the same programmes and other site-exclusive modules/programmes, and all with the same procedures and policies. Evidence seen by the scrutiny team and meetings with relevant staff at KC and WLC confirmed that all follow fully the higher education regulatory framework. For example, a scheduled validation event at KC was cancelled by the NCG Higher Education Directorate as sufficient documentation had not been provided and the Directorate could not be assured of programme standards. It is also noteworthy that a programme was successfully validated under NCG's foundation degree powers at WLC in June 2015. This was set up specifically to reflect local demand, and contained only modules devised by the local College staff, apart from a common research module. This indicated an increased level of maturity on behalf of WLC, reflecting the longer relationship with NCG and increased mutual trust. In addition, observation of a pre-validation event for the proposed online programme and the subsequent validation event showed a high level of planning, and discussion with the programme team indicated a clearly thought out strategy leading to a coherent programme of study. However, the coherence of delivery can only be evaluated after programmes have run for a longer period.

69 The consistent operation of the Manual across sites and modes of delivery is the result of leadership and development by the Higher Education Directorate.

70 The application claims that there are close links between support services and programme planning and approval processes, and this was supported by observations and discussion with key staff. Review of regulatory documentation confirmed that learning support services are considered at all points of programme approval, and that support staff interact extensively with academic staff engaged in programme development and approval. Validation and periodic review require confirmation from key services that they have been involved in the proposal or review planning; for example, library services must confirm that there are sufficient books/journals/e-items in place for any prospective higher education programme. Discussions at WLC and KC confirmed that standard processes apply for programmes developed and operated there. All Colleges provide a very high level of individual student support to enhance the learning process. The overall evidence suggests that appropriate mechanisms are in place were TDAP to be granted.

71 Discussions and observations confirm that learning opportunities provided for students at NC, WLC and KC are adequate and appropriate, supported by external examiners' comments and reports of validation events, although there are some queries about nature and level of physical subject-specific resources in certain areas. Distance learning programmes have been developed by NCG Direct, which is treated as a school within the framework. The scrutiny panel initially had concerns about the ability of the institution to deliver Level 6 programmes in this manner, particularly in terms of availability of support and necessary learning resources. However, the documentation for, and observation of, the pre-approval meeting for a Level 6 programme by online learning indicated that staff are aware of potential problems, and had put in place the necessary support mechanisms so that students studying at a distance are not disadvantaged and have an equivalent, if not identical, learning experience (see paragraphs 60-63).

72 With the modified academic and pastoral support processes needed for distance learning students being put in place, the requirement that robust arrangements exist for ensuring that the learning opportunities provided to those students that may be studying at a

distance from the organisation are adequate is substantially met, although such programmes are still in their early stages.

73 Substantial evidence about programme review suggests that this aspect of provision is currently sound and operating appropriately. Standards are confirmed by NCG for foundation degrees under its own awarding powers and by awarding bodies for Levels 6 and 7. NCG has developed a quality framework which would be able to encompass relevant process for Levels 6 and 7. Teesside University, NCG's major validating body for Levels 6 and 7, has already devolved much of the responsibility for quality assurance to NCG, and is content with the way in which such responsibilities are exercised. Discussions at WLC and KC confirm that there are effective processes for monitoring, review and maintenance of academic standards across the entire Group. Its benchmarking and mapping procedures ensure that appropriate standards are identified and maintained. Evidence suggests that this would also be the case for programmes at Levels 6 and 7. Initial concerns about the ability of the NCG Management Information System to cope with the increased responsibilities of Level 6 and 7 awards were dispelled following discussions with NCG staff and with awarding body representatives. This was confirmed by observation of programme examination boards, although there were still a few residual problems. Scrutiny of staff CVs shows that the level of academic research to support master's level work is taking place at an appropriate level in some areas but not in others. NCG is aware of this and is working to enhance it (see section C).

74 Discussion with staff and students, and observation of programme meetings, indicate an appropriate knowledge and understanding by all parties of assessment practices and procedures. The QAA Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review of October 2013 favourably reported on this aspect of provision and is confirmed by subsequent external examiners' reports from across the higher education provision. Comprehensive handbooks are provided to students for all programmes. Further meetings with students at all three Colleges confirmed that the student body is well informed about assessment criteria, grade descriptors, and what is required to produce a first class piece of work. Assignment briefs are detailed, and module and programme handbooks are comprehensive, providing details of the module assessment diet and deadlines for submission. Students confirmed that staff are very helpful in communicating to them what is required in assessment at all levels of provision.

75 Programme specifications provide a concise source of information on assessment criteria for staff as well as students. Changes to assessment criteria and practices are discussed by staff at programme and school levels; minor modifications are approved by director of school or Higher Education Manager, and reported to the HEQSC and subsequently to the Higher Education Academic Board. School Higher Education Managers are responsible for disseminating information on all aspects of development and delivery. Staff development is provided to bring internal changes, in terms of policy, and changes externally, such as those to the Quality Code, to the attention of relevant staff, to develop and enhance the higher education ethos. Development of new methods of assessment is encouraged, and assessment strategy needs to be discussed within a programme team prior to validation or periodic review approval.

76 A range of assessment methods is currently used. External examiners confirm that these are pitched at an appropriate level and fit well with the subject concerned. Their reports often compliment tutors on the design of assignments, particularly their clarity, and marking reflects at least satisfactory achievement of learning outcomes. Methods of assessment range from formal exams (few) to different types of coursework involving essays, case studies, mini-projects, and group work. Validation processes require detailed and extensive scrutiny of proposed assessment methodology; this is especially the concern of pre-validation/periodic review events. Such programmes are not progressed unless the

information provided is deemed satisfactory by the panel. Similarly, assessment practices are considered within annual monitoring reports following internal discussion within programme teams, when possible adjustments may be suggested. Observation of the pre-validation and subsequent validation event for the BA (Hons) Leadership and Management, by distance learning, confirmed that assessment methodology for programmes delivered in this manner reflects the distinctive nature of the provision.

77 All evidence reviewed indicates that appropriately qualified external examiners are currently appointed by the Higher Education Directorate, through a rigorous process, for its foundation degree provision, often from prestigious universities. Teesside University and other awarding bodies are currently responsible for appointments to these roles at Levels 6 and 7, usually on recommendation of the Higher Education Directorate. The Higher Education Directorate makes extensive use of external verification of assignment briefs. Scrutiny of documents confirms that NCG's processes for marking and moderation are detailed, consistently applied and appropriate. Detailed process mechanisms are in place to ensure that programme teams respond to external examiners' reports, and the Higher Education Directorate produces a summary of these reports across the provision to highlight good practice and identify any common areas for improvement. External stakeholders are involved in developing programmes and are invited to participate on all validation panels. The Higher Education Directorate interacts with professional bodies as appropriate, although there have been some queries at accreditation meetings, with some subject teams perhaps unclear about the requirements of a specific professional body.

78 Processes are in place and working effectively at module, programme, school and institutional levels, particularly the Higher Education Quality Audit, carried out across the institution and reported to HEQSC in May 2014, which highlighted some problems and identified an action plan. There are few, if any, disputes between internal and external markers. There is evidence for review and monitoring of assessment procedures during regular award meetings and annual monitoring, and changes, usually minor, are made as a result. Poor progression and/or achievement are identified, and this can ultimately lead to discontinuation of a particular programme if actions to improve are not successful. Students themselves can be involved in these developments, such as the identification and inculcation of key employability skills within modules, which subsequently led to revision and a presentation at the NCG Higher Education Conference. These and other such indicators are used in subsequent programme planning, including programme closure where necessary.

79 If programmes become non-viable, or if quality and standards of award become irrevocably damaged and at risk, there is a formal process for programme closure. Appropriate arrangements are made to run out the programme so that students are not disadvantaged and alternative provision may be provided or offered. An example of the use of due process occurred in the context of closure in the first semester of operation of the part-time BSc (Hons) Civil Engineering programme validated by Teesside University. NCG took the decision to terminate this programme as suitably specialised staffing could not be secured for its delivery. Discussions were held by the Director of School with the students, relevant employers and representatives of Teesside University, and some students transferred to courses at the University, while others delayed to consider further options. All students were offered a full fee refund together with a contribution towards expenses incurred.

Criterion B4

An organisation granted taught degree awarding powers takes effective action to promote strengths and respond to identified limitations.

80 Processes for monitoring and review of programmes of study exist in abundance, and are being followed rigorously. Self-assessment is routine, with varying levels of self-criticality. Academic staff have become increasingly aware of what is going to be needed if powers to award qualifications at Levels 6 and 7 are granted. This is shown by the quality of debate observed during recent validation events and a scrutiny of the staff development activities of those involved in higher education. This shows increasing interaction with external and internal events and programmes that are more concerned with subject development, as well as those involving more professional training or pedagogy. Clearly, teaching is already taking place at these levels, and is generally successful.

81 There is evidence in annual monitoring reports that actions are taken in response to external examiner comments, professional body representatives and other stakeholders, and indeed to comments made internally as result of the two processes of Higher Education Audit and Higher Education Quality Review, for example by a school quality manager. Ultimately these diverse reports are reviewed by the Higher Education Academic Board. Increasingly, as staff have become more familiar with the responsibilities and requirements of having FDAP, there are clear indications that more thoughtful and self-critical discussion is taking place at module, programme, school and institutional levels, as shown by the level of discussion in annual review reports, responses to external examiners' reports and the Higher Education Quality Review. Good practice is disseminated and attempts are made to move staff towards working as a critical academic community. The approach of the new Principal of NC is already starting to re-energise schools.

82 Mechanisms are in place for scrutiny, monitoring and review of learning outcomes of foundation degrees, and there is no evidence to suggest that such processes would not work if approval is given for awarding powers at Levels 6 and 7. This is supported by external examiners' comments, annual monitoring, validation and periodic review reports. Current awarding bodies already insist on review and developmental action as part of their own quality procedures and these would be suitable for continuation, in a modified form, if NCG had full responsibility for taught programmes. Responsibilities for assigning and discharging action, and roles and responsibilities of specific post holders, are described in the 2015 NCG Higher Education Framework Definitive Document and are clearly identified in the higher education management structure, particularly by the Head of Quality and Standards. A clear assessment framework facilitating communication between academic and support staff and students has been favourably received as part of the mechanisms to review objectives and intended learning outcomes.

83 There is evidence of growing numbers of staff taking part in validation events both internally and externally. Additionally, more NCG staff have been appointed as external examiners at a range of other colleges and universities (see paragraphs 92-99). There is a considerable degree of externality within the higher education programme in terms of choice of appropriate external examiners for its programmes, stakeholder involvement in validations, and industrial input to new programme development. Guest lecturers are involved in some areas of delivery. Staff are encouraged to suggest potential developments and new programmes. NCG engages with a range of external advisors and internal expertise, especially where relevant employers provide contextual live scenarios on which to base particular modules, for example in engineering. NCG has developed processes for consideration of new programmes to ensure that there is clear evidence of need and likelihood of adequate subsequent recruitment. The timeline for such processes ensures that

new programmes are well thought out and are not introduced just to satisfy what might be perceived as a short-term need.

84 Processes are in place to facilitate dissemination of good practice, such as annual programme reports outlining improvements made, responses to external examiners' reports, the Higher Education Audit, analysis of student module questionnaires, and the National Student Survey (NSS) which for 2014 was quite critical of certain areas of NCG provision. Reports from awarding bodies also identify good practice and areas for enhancement. The Higher Education Directorate carries out a regular risk assessment to ensure any risks to the higher education provision are identified and appropriate action taken. Student achievement is celebrated whenever possible by NCG, as with its Higher Education Conference and with exhibitions of work. Use of student interns can facilitate a specific project, which can lead to enhancement. However, review of student progression and achievement data suggests continuing challenges. Nonetheless, effective means for improvement exist. The interlinked processes of business planning, budget setting, performance monitoring and quality review encourage a culture of continuous improvement and accountability, and this is more evident since the granting of FDAP.

C Scholarship and the pedagogical effectiveness of academic staff

Criterion C1

The staff of an organisation granted powers to award taught degrees will be competent to teach, facilitate learning and undertake assessment to the level of the qualifications being awarded.

85 At the time of the application, NCG had some 130 staff engaged on higher education teaching duties out of a total teaching staff of 460. In March 2015, NCG provided a staffing update which included its higher education staff in the distance learning team (NCG Direct), West Lancashire College (WLC) and the newly acquired Kidderminster College (KC). The update showed 184 staff, out of a total of 520, engaged in teaching higher education programmes, 25 per cent of whom were employed part-time on fractional or Associate Lecturer contracts. Approximately 40 per cent of the staff teaching higher education taught only on higher education courses. Fifty per cent held doctoral or master's degrees as their highest qualifications and 50 per cent had bachelor's or other qualifications. Since making its application, NCG has put in place a formal expectation that staff will be qualified at least to one level above that which they are teaching. Despite this expectation, the staffing update reveals that 25 per cent of staff are not yet so qualified. At the close of the scrutiny, the scrutiny team heard that from December 2015, directors of school within Newcastle College and senior managers responsible for higher education in KC and WLC are required to update their school/college staffing profiles in February and October each year, to inform the Higher Education Quality Review. Senior managers within schools and colleges will also use the February data in their business plans to ensure sufficient staff development budgets for the next academic year. The team also heard that staff recruitment policies are to be amended to include the requirement for all new staff recruited to a higher education post to hold a +1 qualification or to agree to undertake such a qualification within the first two years of employment. All interview panels for such posts will be required in the future to include a manager with responsibility for higher education.

86 However, NCG is well aware of the disjunction between aspiration and reality, and has embarked upon a substantial programme of investment to redress the position. The Group has committed to requiring new higher education academic appointees to either be already qualified at the highest teaching level plus one, or to be approaching completion of a programme to obtain such a qualification. In addition, a number of established staff in need of a higher qualification are already working towards one, and others will be supported to obtain one. Where possible this will take place on in-house programmes, but if not, on programmes at other HEIs, and for which the budget has already been approved. This action will result in significant improvement over the next two years, and the gap is likely to be close to zero within five years.

87 Whenever a module teaching team changes, new members are formally approved by the Group Higher Education Staff Approvals Panel. The process is robust, formally overseen by the Higher Education Academic Board, reported to Corporation and, where necessary, conditions of approval are imposed, such as the requirement to complete new staff training or appointment of mentors.

88 Eighty per cent of the higher education teaching staff are active and current in their profession. The majority of the part-time staff are recruited for their current expertise, and in the several practice-based disciplines, including Creative Industries and Health and Enterprise, many staff retain their currency through consultancy, part-time practice or formal

secondment. The professional relevance of its programmes, and the professional currency of its staff resonates well with the mission of the institution.

89 During the scrutiny it has been evident that the staffing position has been, and remains somewhat, turbulent, with challenges in appointing and retaining higher education staff in at least three of the schools. A number departed to substantive appointments in the University sector, which points to the competition for well qualified staff. Indeed, in the School of Construction, Engineering and Science, a degree course in Civil Engineering has been closed down due to the inability to attract and retain appropriately experienced teaching staff. A brief analysis of those teaching at Level 6 in the STEM areas makes it apparent that perhaps a third of the staff base has changed since the application. While such matters are evident to school directors and in part to the Higher Education Directorate, and surface within the various academic deliberative processes, the scrutiny team saw no consistent institutional oversight of the higher education staff base at that time, and thus of the very real staffing challenges presenting in some areas.

90 However, despite the challenge presented by the rather limited staff base in some areas, NCG has processes that ensure that its staff are both properly qualified and have appropriate professional experience. Its emerging strategic approach to scholarship (see paragraphs 100-107) has resulted in a significant commitment to creating opportunities and time for staff development, and schools have been able to budget for increased staffing to facilitate this. The staffing stretch should therefore diminish. The support for improving staff qualifications also has the potential to contribute towards this.

91 During the course of the scrutiny NCG has been updating, refreshing and developing its portfolio of taught programmes. It is apparent that staff expertise features centrally in the development plans and, on occasion, new staff appointments have been made in advance of the development of provision. Validation documentation and events bring a focus upon the staff base, and where necessary, action has been taken to ensure that this is appropriate. It is recognised that in some areas, for example KC and WLC, considerable staff development or new appointments will be required before Level 7 programmes can be offered.

92 In the application, NCG claims that it encourages staff to take membership of relevant professional bodies. Staff new to teaching are required to undertake formal teacher training, either within the College or elsewhere, and while completion of a certificated course is not a requirement, the very large majority of staff (90 per cent) possess a formal teaching qualification. While the completion of a certificated course is not a requirement, the scrutiny team heard that NCG is now committed to ensuring that staff have an appropriate teaching qualification. Staff also attend a range of mandatory College training sessions, and have access to additional structured pedagogic training and support (see paragraphs 108-115).

93 Arrangements are in place for the induction, appraisal and structured development of staff, and are detailed elsewhere in this report (see paragraphs 108-115 and 106-162).

94 There is a comprehensive programme of pedagogic staff development opportunities, targeted both at formal training for staff new to higher education teaching, and also more developmental activities for all higher education staff. Sixty-three per cent of higher education teaching staff are members of appropriate discipline-specific associations, learned societies or professional bodies, although very few staff are currently members of the HEA. Staff are actively encouraged to engage with discipline-specific pedagogic activities coordinated by the HEA. Indeed NC has been selected by the HEA for funding and participation in a number of national programmes, including the Engaged Student Learning Strategic Enhancement Programme in order to pilot 'Student as Producer' within a vocational higher education setting.

95 NCG has developed a strong relationship with The Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (known as the Lit and Phil), an active learned society in the North East comprising the largest independent library outside London, which hosts a wide range of events including book launches, concerts, lectures, readings and workshops that cover a variety of topics and issues. The relationship has so far been based around joint sponsorship of high profile lectures, which have benefited both organisations, and which in particular have generated opportunities for academic staff and students to network at national level. However, recently the scrutiny team has heard that the relationship has developed to encompass a Heritage Lottery Fund research project in partnership not only with the Lit and Phil, but also with Northumbria University and November Theatre Company.

96 The relationship with the Lit and Phil is but one example of NCG actively engaging in 'bringing scholarship to the College'. Other examples can be seen in the higher education staff conferences, development days and the higher education student conferences run on a regular basis. These involve external speakers from the higher education sector and provide an opportunity for staff and students to engage in topical pedagogic matters with the wider education community. The College's associated 'Lessons in Learning' internal journal is attracting scholarly papers from staff, internally reviewed by staff from the School of Education. While one of the reasons for publishing in-house is to build the confidence of those new to academic writing and publishing, a number of the pedagogic papers were sufficiently impressive to warrant external journal publication.

97 Newcastle College appoints higher education Teaching and Learning Coaches to act as champions within the College academic community; this initiative is being considered for wider adoption within NCG, and demonstrates that despite the geographical spread between NC, WLC and KC, pedagogic initiatives can be shared.

98 NCG has aligned itself with the national 'student as producer' initiative. This has provided a central theme for internal pedagogic developments, and to date appears to provide a pedagogic scaffold to bring a research and scholarship focus to most of the curriculum. It provides a positive vehicle to move the internal culture of scholarship forward.

99 The expertise of teaching teams is formally considered whenever programmes are validated and reviewed, ensuring that staff bring both appropriate pedagogic and discipline-specific experience. Conditions of validation have been seen to have a positive impact on the pedagogic development of, and support for, teaching staff.

100 NCG has a clear, coordinated and proactive approach to developing and spreading the research and scholarship ethos in the organisation. While NCG formally claims that only 25 higher education staff (14 per cent), principally in the Schools of Construction, Engineering and Science, Education, Creative Industries and the Digital Skills Academy, have formally published orthodox research outputs, detailed scrutiny of individual staff CVs reveals that some 40 staff (22 per cent) are currently research or scholarship active, producing publicly available output. Another 74 staff (40 per cent), including a significant majority of the part-time and associate lecturer staff, who are employed for their professional and current experience, are actively engaging within their profession outside the College, and are making a positive contribution to the regional and national community based upon their academic expertise. There are entirely expected variations between academic schools. In both the Digital Skills Academy and Creative Industries, the majority of staff are generating public output (personal research, top-level creative performance, pedagogic research, or in relationships with industry). The Newcastle School of Education is the only Centre of Excellence for Teacher Training outside the university sector, and the School has attracted funded projects for the Education and Training Foundation and BIS; staff are making a notable sectorial impact on practice in teacher education. In other areas, such as WLC Tourism, there is some way to go.

101 As already discussed (see paragraphs 85-91), while it is likely that new staff appointments and recently funded staff development initiatives will have led to a situation where staff are generally qualified one level higher than that at which they teach, there will clearly be pockets where this will not be the case for some time. However, it is clear that in most cases, for example Education, the professional expertise and experience of staff and those currently engaged in study for a higher or research degree brings an appropriate level of skill for delivering at the higher level.

102 NCG expects staff to engage in at least 30 hours of formal staff development each academic year. Some is mandatory, including teacher training, some enabling, and some 10 hours a year focused on subject or pedagogic development. Ten hours' subject development is clearly a notional allowance but it was evident from meetings that many undertake significantly more. Staff in each school or division are registered for higher degrees (32 in total, 17 per cent of the higher education staff) and are often granted teaching remission as well as funding to undertake such development. NCG actively facilitates higher education staff pursuing research and scholarly activity with time and/or financial support, providing that such activity will ultimately be reflected in the teaching and learning; this is followed up formally in staff appraisal.

103 The NCG Research and Scholarly Activity (RSA) Expectations for teaching staff are explicit with respect to the development and outputs expected from staff. For example, staff teaching at Level 6 are expected to inform their teaching with research and to participate in College research activities. Those teaching at Level 7 are expected to be engaged in personal research, to be supporting other colleagues in their research, and to be engaged in relationships with industry and commerce. Although staff made it evident that the concept of 'research-informed teaching' was not yet fully understood or embedded, nor had any key performance indicators yet been developed, the College's 'student as producer' project (see also paragraphs 92-99) is providing a powerful framework within which to embed the concept. In some areas, it is already apparent that staff scholarship is informing the detailed curriculum. These expectations are tested explicitly when staff expertise is considered during validation and periodic review events.

104 NCG is developing a well planned approach to supporting RSA through the development of research clusters within and across schools, and the launch in 2014-15 of its Applied Research Centre (ARC). All school directors have staff development funds, which are generally used to buy staff out from teaching for personal development. They are also able to bid to the higher education Directorate for RSA funding. In recent years the College RSA Committee allocated funds for specific project funding, but this distracted the committee from its academic and support remit, and funding allocation has now reverted to executive rather than deliberative action.

105 The RSA Strategy is focusing upon applied research built upon relationships with industry and commerce, and includes the recent establishment of the ARC. The philosophy builds upon an American approach proposed by the Carnegie Foundation (Boyer). Progress is not yet fully mature, but NCG has provided appropriate launch and continuing funding, and the direction of travel is clear. The use of student interns, working as members of the RSA team, appears to have provided excellent personal development for the students as well as support for staff, and continues for the foreseeable future, taking forward the College's 'student as producer' project.

106 While RSA in WLC, KC and NCG Direct is clearly less mature than other areas, WLC has recently launched its own RSA Committee. The main RSA Committee and Higher Education Directorate staff have already engaged with senior staff at KC, and the most established NCG Direct curriculum leader has established an ambitious experiential pedagogic research programme. Overall there are several signs of active development.

107 While the application did not explicitly address the January 2013 QAA Guidelines on scholarship for higher education teaching staff that suggest that '...the majority of staff are expected to be actively engaged in scholarly activity...that informs their teaching and contributes to the development and enhancement of students' understanding of their subject...', it is evident that the Higher Education Directorate has a clear idea of how the RSA agenda should develop, and school directors have bought into the plan. Significant funding has been made available, and is being used effectively; indeed it is increasingly seen that engaging in scholarship and research may provide the motivation for effective staff to remain at the College. Progress so far demonstrates that the majority of staff are actively engaged in scholarly activity that informs their teaching.

108 Evidence of the arrangements for induction, mentoring and support of new staff shows them to be robust and fit for purpose. NCG's approach to staff development begins with a well structured induction for new appointees. Discrete objectives are established each year during staff appraisal and these, together with feedback from annual monitoring and external examiners' reports, inform the centrally provided teaching development programme coordinated by the Head of Higher Education Quality and Standards. All staff are appointed on a six-month initial probation and all new appointees to leadership roles are required to attend the corporate leadership academy.

109 The Head of Higher Education Quality and Standards is the custodian of the Higher Education Teaching and Development Framework, a comprehensive document that is updated annually. It includes details of the higher education staff induction programme; updating on academic regulatory matters; the programme of pedagogic development, largely delivered by the School of Education, which is available to all higher education staff; and introductory material for early career researchers. NCG intends to seek HEA accreditation for this programme. The detail for higher education-specific activities is developed in the Higher Education Task Group, the HELTAC, HEQSC and the RSA Committee. For example, while the higher education scheme for teaching observation aligns with the College's overall philosophy, it differs in detail from, and provides a more supportive and developmental approach than the further education scheme. The College also operates a formal Teaching Excellence Award scheme to celebrate those who achieve excellent teaching.

110 The College runs a number of staff development conferences each year offering bespoke sessions for higher education staff. These are used both to develop pedagogic skills and also to update on internal higher education regulatory matters. In addition, a number of other focused workshops are offered for staff as the need arises. The higher education-specific material is normally initiated, coordinated and sometimes delivered by members of the Higher Education Directorate. Attendance at the events observed was to some extent compromised by the fact that staff who teach both higher education and further education programmes may not be able to gain the maximum benefit from the higher education offering.

111 RSA is coordinated formally through the RSA Committee. The remit of the Committee is broad, including the disbursement of RSA funding (until 2014-15), the development of the Group's Research Strategy, management of the student research interns, staff training, organisation of internal research conferences and seminars, the development of research and knowledge transfer links with industry and the community, and leadership of the ARC. Much of the work is yet to mature, but the emerging culture and sense of academic community among staff is palpable. A significant step forward has been to allocate staff funding to schools so that permanent staff may be appointed in order to create some slack in the workload allocations, to release staff to undertake personal research and scholarship.

112 Annual appraisals measure progress against the objectives agreed between staff and their line manager. Plans for personal development are identified at appraisal; a number of staff are currently funded to undertake higher taught and research degrees. Other staff are supported in their personal research, both pedagogic and discipline based. Others are encouraged to develop links with industry and business, and some have been seconded into industry to maintain currency in fast-moving disciplines. A particularly far-sighted and interesting approach occurs in the Digital Skills Academy, where the Director operates a rolling programme of mini-sabbaticals to ensure that staff are exposed to the cutting edge of commercial IT developments.

113 NCG encourages staff to take membership of relevant professional bodies. Staff new to teaching are required to undertake formal teacher training (see paragraphs 92-99), either within the College or elsewhere. While completion of a certificated course is not a requirement, some 90 per cent of staff possess a formal teaching qualification and the scrutiny team heard that NCG is now committed to ensuring that staff have an appropriate teaching qualification. Students welcome the experience of industry and work that many staff bring.

114 The NCG Direct staff base is drawn from specialist staff outside the College; validation events gave appropriate weight to scrutiny of the staff base.

115 In summary, there is a well established funded framework for the appraisal of higher education staff, which is clearly having an impact in both pedagogic and scholarship-focused activity. Significant funding has been made available both to release staff for further study, and to release other staff to engage in personal scholarship and research.

116 All 67 staff classified as academic leaders have experience of curriculum development and design. The institution has recently been engaged in a comprehensive programme of curriculum design and re-approval following a change of validating university. Thus all current higher education academic staff have recently participated in approval and validation panels. Senior staff have also participated in institutional approval events with Teesside University and have acted as internal panel members and chairs on programme validation events. While the more junior staff are sometimes feeling their way, those in programme or staff leadership roles are now demonstrating a sense of maturity and a depth of professional and discipline knowledge.

117 Observation of validation activity both for foundation degrees and also for Teesside University bachelor's and master's degrees revealed that the in-house events were typically managed by NCG just as competently as those organised by Teesside. The majority of senior College staff members of validation panels are drawn from the Higher Education Directorate and the Higher Education Managers, who bring an academic maturity to proceedings. Internal validation experience and expertise is developing, and a number of additional staff have been trained and developed through observation to embark upon chairing duties next year. While throughout the early stages of scrutiny it was rare for the school directors to show explicit direction in higher education matters, their recent emerging influence, together with the pool of other 'middle management' higher education expertise, gives confidence for the future. The new NC Principal brings energy and direction to the higher education vision.

118 The pervasive inclusion of members of the Higher Education Directorate in programme approval events, higher education committees, examination boards, higher education planning days, and staff and student conferences clearly pays dividends. Leadership is available as required, and there is a direct conduit back to inform the Teaching and Development Framework (see paragraphs 108-115) for the following year. There is a well managed higher education infrastructure based at Newcastle, including NCG Direct and

the Newcastle School of Education, albeit demonstrably less so at WLC and KC due to both the geographical remoteness and the small volume of higher education provision.

119 The College's higher education staff present a profile of external engagement with other HEIs that is very typical of the rest of the sector, if not higher than most. The Higher Education Directorate's ability to benchmark and network with other sectorial colleagues is clear and they are well aware of change and initiative in the sector.

120 The statistics from March 2015 show that among those staff classed as academic leaders around one fifth (14) had experience of engagement with other providers of higher education through involvement as external examiners, and just under half (32) as validation panel members or external reviewers. Just over one third of all higher education teaching staff have been formally engaged as external examiners or as advisors elsewhere in the sector and the scrutiny team heard from staff of their significant engagements outside NCG.

121 The appointment of a governor with significant senior higher education leadership experience to the Corporation, and the CEO's membership of Durham University's Council, brings some reassurance of future benchmarking at a strategic level within the sector.

D The environment supporting the delivery of taught higher education programmes

Criterion D1

The teaching and learning infrastructure of an organisation granted taught degree awarding powers, including its student support and administrative support arrangements, is effective and monitored.

122 The effectiveness of learning and teaching activities is monitored through NCG's robust series of interlinking processes (see section B) to approve programmes, to monitor them annually, and then to revisit them on a periodic basis in order to confirm continuing approval. At institutional level, the annual monitoring exercise produces and reviews comprehensive student performance data, includes a detailed analysis of external examiner feedback and ensures a detailed consideration at institutional level. Student-facing service areas also review their activities, and the key aspects of their Quality Improvement Plans feed into the NCG Annual Review Report.

123 Feedback from students on their learning experience is also carefully considered together with performance data at award boards, programme committee meetings and annual planning events and thus feeds forward into the Annual Review. In addition to annual appraisals, which identify any staff development needs, academic staff delivering higher education programmes take part in a system of peer review of teaching, designed to support professional development in teaching, learning and subject disciplines (see paragraphs 100-115).

124 Periodic review and annual monitoring processes both draw upon external peer contributions (external review panel membership and external examiners, respectively). The latter are required to comment specifically upon the achievement of intended learning outcomes and standards achieved. External examiners confirm at first hand that the annual monitoring processes work well, and that programmes are achieving the defined standards.

125 Arrangements for the timely and accurate feedback of the outcomes of assessment are in place and effective. Tutors are required by the academic regulations to mark and return assignments within 20 working days of submission, and students from a range of schools who met the scrutiny team indicated no significant problems with the meeting of this requirement; indeed, work is generally marked and returned with useful feedback in less time than the 20-day period. Innovation in assessment feedback has featured a number of times during the scrutiny; the use of podcasts, wikis and the VLE for feedback were all commended by external validation panel members and external examiners as approaches to gain effective communication with students.

126 The student handbook also makes it clear that decisions made at examination boards are formally communicated by a noticeboard pass list and the issue of individual transcripts. Staff were reminded at assessment boards of the need to communicate clearly to students the options to take exit awards if they had exhausted opportunities to complete the programme upon which they were formally enrolled.

127 NCG has clear expectations regarding the conduct of assessment, including the need for constructive and developmental feedback to students. The main principles of the College's assessment strategy are contained in the NC Higher Education Academic Regulations (see also section B3) and are summarised in the various student handbooks. Extensive guidance is given to students on the definition of plagiarism and on strategies for its avoidance. The scrutiny team learned from meetings with students that they generally find feedback to be informative and developmental, although there is some variability.

External examiners have commented favourably on the quality of the feedback provided to students, both formative and summative; some, such as the use of podcasts, has been identified as innovative.

128 Advice and guidance, development and support for staff on assessment is a key feature in the Higher Education Teaching and Development Framework (see paragraphs 108-115), and indeed has been for the last three years. Handbooks for those delivering on the NCG Direct distance learning provision give detailed and helpful guidance. Student handbooks make a clear commitment to timely and comprehensive feedback. Students and examiners confirm that this is generally the case.

129 NCG has clear and well organised processes for obtaining feedback from key stakeholders, students, staff and employers. Employer support and input is both required and obtained during validation and periodic review processes. The proposal documentation for a new programme describes the consultation undertaken by the programme team, and reassures the validation panel that the programme aims and curriculum align with national benchmarks, professional body standards and employer needs.

130 Feedback is gathered throughout the academic year through the four 'open' higher education Student Forums, through staff-student consultation groups, through online feedback surveys at the end of each module, and through online course surveys at the end of each year. NCG makes use of an external survey company to administer its in-house student satisfaction and module surveys; it brings the advantage of being able to benchmark with other similar institutions in the sector.

131 The scrutiny team heard that, following student feedback, new modules had been developed to support personal and professional development in online programmes; that 'You said, we did' posters and online notices were used to report actions taken; that student ambassadors (representatives) would be used for rapid dissemination of outcomes; that a VLE helpdesk was launched following a challenging roll-out of the new VLE; and that extra support consolidation tutorials had been introduced following particularly heavy teaching periods.

132 In addition, finalists are asked to participate in the NSS, and the resulting action plans are considered in schools and in institution-level committees, including Corporation. The scrutiny team was told that the Students' Union always ensures officer presence at the institution-level forums to provide a student voice if others fail to materialise. Students have places on most College committees, but it is clear from observations that their choice to attend is inconsistent, and at times this absence is unhelpful. For example, at an institution-level committee, there was strong student input, but at an award meeting in which programme team members and students can tease out issues to address during the annual planning and monitoring round, students missed the opportunity to contribute. Student-facing service areas engage with users through regular surveys, and feedback using 'You said, we did' processes. Both the College and students also pointed out that students may submit confidential and, if necessary, anonymous feedback directly to senior staff.

133 The Higher Education Directorate has recently been working with both staff and students to update its formal higher education partnership strategy (with its students). It demonstrates the intention to position higher education students clearly at the heart of their own learning, and to increase the volume of the student voice significantly. It is an indication of a serious ambition to develop a higher education academic community, supported by appropriate resourcing.

134 In a formal and explicit manner, staff feedback on programme matters is gained through the annual planning meetings, and less formally on institutional matters through the three higher education staff conferences each year. The results of such feedback, seen by

the scrutiny team, are used to inform the discussions at annual planning meetings within schools, which themselves feed into the minor modification of programmes. By tracking the annual monitoring process through programme-level meetings, school-level meetings, written school reports, and the institutional Annual Monitoring Report to discussions at Group committees, it is clear that feedback from both staff and students is heard, and further developments are thus informed.

135 The College provides a well planned, comprehensive programme of induction which introduces students to their learning environment, the various support services and their courses. In addition, it has introduced an online induction in order to capture students who may not have been able to attend; this would include, for example, distance learning students and late enrollers. Students explained that their experience of induction was largely good, albeit with variability. In the more effective cases, scrutiny team members were told about a positive induction programme including general matters to do with the College, as well as the school, the programme and procedures relating to assessment.

136 The scrutiny team read the comprehensive materials available to students on all matters that would typically be included in an induction programme. These include handbooks and the academic regulations, and additional support available for students with disabilities and specific learning difficulties, and point to the wide range of material available on the student pages of the College website. The College provides a detailed student checklist, which would enable students to confirm that they have access to all the key information.

137 Students spoke positively about their detailed course handbooks, and confirmed that they had experienced no problems in accessing academic or personal support from teaching staff, personal tutors or through Learner Services. Observation of a number of planning events, validation and periodic reviews confirmed that student support arrangements in general, and induction arrangements in particular, were explored in detail at approval events. In particular, the personal tutor support arrangements for distance learning students received a thorough scrutiny, and were found to be more than fit for purpose. Specialist support is available for students with specific learning difficulties.

138 NCG operates a business planning cycle that may be simply summarised in terms of 'plan, budget set, deliver, review'. Each unit, be it academic or service area, conducts its business planning process informed by its action plan from the previous year. A business plan and an operating budget is set by the Corporation, and is generally managed locally. Each unit's annual review results in a Quality Improvement Plan, with an action plan. The plans inform the Higher Education Annual Review Report, which includes reflection upon all academic and service areas that contribute to the delivery and support of higher education programmes.

139 The planning cycle operates within, and is moderated by, institutional funding constraints, and also accommodates proposals for new developments. Such proposals generally arise from academic areas identifying opportunities for new provision; these are scrutinised in depth, and only granted strategic institutional approval to proceed if they align with Group priorities and are likely to attract the appropriate funding. The resource provision for new proposals is considered in detail during the academic validation process; service areas are required to comment and confirm that they can support the additional students, and approval is conditional on it being appropriate and sufficient.

140 Alternatively, new proposals are also solicited during NCG's annual 'Big Ideas' process. This seeks contributions from all staff to improve efficiency and effectiveness in the way the Group conducts its business. Ideas may be big or small; for example, in 2014-15, NC took forward proposals for an ambitious but logical reshaping of the higher education

portfolio for Group consideration, which have in part catalysed a very timely and thorough review of higher education provision and organisation within the Group.

141 Students who met the scrutiny team have given generally positive messages in terms of resources, although there is some variation between discipline areas. Recent NSS results have, however, emphasised the variability of student satisfaction, and have re-energised Quality Improvement Plans and management attention. In the various validations observed, all brought a specific focus upon resources and while learning resources have not generally been found wanting, specific matters have been raised which are fed back to service areas. For example, although the Cyber Security panel was positive regarding the physical resources available, the students drew attention to the limited hours during which they could access the facilities for individual work.

142 The wider group of students commented in some areas upon shortages of higher education-level books, and difficulties accessing journals. Staff observed that additional resource had recently been made available to the library. All higher education staff had been asked to identify additional books and journals for purchase, and increased access has been afforded on some sites to higher education students. It was acknowledged in some areas that students did not enjoy access to a particularly wide range of higher education books or journals; reading rights have been secured at local universities to improve the situation.

143 Students, staff and the Executive drew attention to the need to enhance IT facilities, and the scrutiny team observed the significant investment in, and subsequent implementation of, the new VLE. While the roll-out was firstly piloted on one site, its introduction was challenging in some areas. Executive action was taken in response to student and staff feedback to make immediate improvements outside the normal annual review cycle. While academic VLE sites were previously 'audited' for alignment with NCG guidelines, the Group has now adopted a more supportive 'enhancement' model of encouragement and training, supported by staff in the e-learning team. There are moves to explore the proper use of social media within the learning environment, but this is sensibly being managed and properly approved at Executive level with careful monitoring.

144 The academic Annual Planning Meetings are part of the annual monitoring process, providing the College with a specific sightline on resource matters. The meetings provide an opportunity for the school Higher Education Managers to remind staff of the opportunities and processes for seeking additional support and resource. It is clear that there are some areas that have received significant capital resource and no major issues surfaced during the year, and on several occasions staff resourcing for new provision was put in place in advance of the programme launch. The College acknowledged that provision in Civil Engineering has been closed due to a long-standing difficulty attracting and retaining academic staff (see paragraphs 85-91). While this may have been a disappointing decision for staff, students and employers, it indicates a level of integrity with regard to a minimum resource baseline.

145 Students intimated that they value the vocational, industrial and business experience that most staff bring to their teaching, and that in itself is an excellent motivational 'resource'.

146 During the scrutiny the team observed meetings and activities in a range of teaching and seminar facilities. In all cases they have been well furnished, well equipped for their role and entirely fit-for-purpose. NCG has invested appropriately in teaching facilities. NCG is currently investing in, and managing, a substantial capital estate updating and refurbishment programme. The Corporation is taking a proper interest and exercising close oversight of the programme, and there is evidence that feedback from staff and students regarding the development of a higher education academic community is influencing the

planning; the latest major refurbishment includes substantial higher education student social and learning spaces, in addition to the pockets of dedicated higher education space in the various schools.

147 In summary, NCG operates a planned cycle of recurrent resource planning, which is responsive to reflection on the previous year of operation and both staff and student feedback. In addition, it is running a major capital investment programme, which appears, among other things, to have recognised the need to focus upon developing the learning environment for the higher education academic community. While experience is naturally variable, strong executive action is taken when student learning is compromised, and the College's approach appears fit for purpose.

148 Support, advisory and counselling services are well provided, largely in a one-stop-shop arrangement in the Student Services team, comprising course enquiries and advice; learning support services; admissions; financial advice; childcare; accommodation; work placements; and counselling. For careers advice, students are referred to the National Careers service. Students appreciated the range of support available, but commented specifically on the paucity of careers support, although this particular matter has apparently not appeared as a significant issue in student feedback or annual monitoring.

149 Service areas that attract poor feedback from the NSS, the internal higher education student survey or other student feedback address the matter as part of their Quality Improvement Plan, with the key points becoming embedded within the Higher Education Annual Review Report. The outcomes also contribute to their rolling improvement plans. Service area representation at the senior management team of Newcastle College and feedback from the higher education annual monitoring process also provide other feedback paths. The annual rounds of budget planning and soliciting Big Ideas (see paragraphs 119-121) is where the action plan from the Quality Improvement Plan evolves into a business plan for the coming year. For example, proposals were made in the 2014-15 planning round for additional staff to meet the significant increase in demand for counselling, and the School of Construction, Engineering and Science highlighted the difficulties that the School had in recruiting, rewarding and maintaining appropriately qualified support staff.

150 Service provision at the other Colleges is structured differently to suit the needs of the smaller student community, but similar parallel processes apply. For example, there is only one Learner Forum at WLC, covering all higher education provision, and which seeks feedback on service as well as academic matters. Where the smaller colleges do not have specific expertise to address student needs, they are able to call on their colleagues in Newcastle.

151 In summary, all NCG higher education students and staff have access to a wide range of advisory and support services, regardless of delivery site. The Group has made a decision to not yet provide an in-house careers service, and students are referred to the National Careers service. Service areas are monitored annually, deliberative oversight is brought through Academic Board, and in-house services appear to be providing an appropriate service.

152 NCG accepts that there have been some difficulties in producing timely and accurate data but improvements were expected following the recent upgrading of the student record system (MIS). During the scrutiny, school directors intimated that the significant (circa £1 million) investment had been made in order to improve the quality of MIS data and rectify errors. Support staff similarly indicated that they were fully confident that many errors previously identified had now been corrected, and that the few remaining matters would be corrected in the first session of operation.

153 The discovery of continuing data errors in examination committees and boards was a surprise to those concerned. Sessions during the higher education professional development day gave confidence that the Head of Higher Education Registry and their team are aware of the remaining issues, and have identified the necessary solutions; many concerned improvements to user awareness and training. However, despite the now largely accurate data, a number of small errors continue to plague data presented to some boards. While module and programme leaders' intimate knowledge of students and careful attention to detail appear to have identified errors before any decisions have been made, the continuing, albeit diminished, error rate raises concern. Module-level data do not contain overall module performance statistics, nor brings together student achievement from different sites of delivery or modes of study. This makes an objective comparison of student/module experience and performance difficult. While not presenting problems with the current small group sizes, if numbers increase it will be extremely difficult for external examiners to make an objective critique. It is reassuring that NCG has made the decision to undertake a redevelopment of the student record system in advance of the next academic year; the separation of higher education and further education systems will immediately reduce the complexity of handling progression and classification regulations.

154 The student record system feeds the generation of award certificates and transcripts. The first production of NCG foundation degree certificates had gone smoothly, in a timely manner. Certificates and transcripts clearly address the various indicators of sound practice in the Quality Code. The system also produces data for the annual HEIFES returns to the funding council; progression, and other, data for the various stages of the annual monitoring process; and also feeds NCG's management accounts for scrutiny at Group Executive and by the Corporation. These latter data have also included benchmarking information with comparator institutions.

155 The NCG e-learning directorate develops many of the in-house data systems, including the new online recognition of prior and experiential learning (RPEL) platform, which enables students to submit RPEL applications, and engage with tutors online. It is currently developing an assignment tracking application, which will record completion of the various stages of submission, marking and moderation.

156 In conclusion, NCG's administrative support systems appear largely fit for purpose. Some challenges appear to persist in the generation of student data for assessment boards and committees, but the strong higher education data team and the attention to detail in assessment boards has ensured that assessment decisions have not been compromised. Appropriate remedial action is in hand and but there can be confidence that the higher education data team is capable of providing timely and accurate information.

157 NCG has non-academic complaints procedures for both its own foundation degree students, and also for those registered on degrees of its awarding bodies. For foundation degree students it operates its own academic appeals process, and for those registered on awards granted by other awarding bodies, NCG signposts the appropriate appeals process during induction, in handbooks and on the VLE. NCG will be subscribing to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) from 2015-16.

158 The decision to subscribe to the OIA has resulted in plans to separate the further education and higher education appeals and complaints processes; the latter will henceforth include a final recourse to the OIA for higher education students. NCG's annual reflection on appeals and complaints currently results in a single report covering both higher education and further education students being considered by Executive and Corporation. The new procedure is likely to provide summary oversight reports for each meeting of the Higher Education Academic Board, permitting a more informed analysis of higher education student

concerns. In addition, NCG has taken the opportunity to embed an informal stage in the processes at course level.

159 Students and staff at all levels spoke with confidence regarding the complaints and appeals processes for students. The student information web pages are particularly helpful, containing detailed information on appeal processes, complaint processes, and associated procedures to address mitigation, plagiarism and unfair practice. The processes are detailed and well documented. The Higher Education Academic Regulations contain the definitive regulations for academic appeals, and the principles of the complaints process are contained within an NCG Policy, which is updated annually. The various Colleges then develop and publish their own implementation procedure. An annual summary of complaints and appeals receives proper institutional deliberative scrutiny through the Higher Education Annual Review Report and executive scrutiny by both NCG Executive and the Corporation.

160 Administrative and support staff who met the scrutiny team reported that they were given adequate opportunities for professional development; similar arrangements for appraisal apply across the entire organisation (see paragraphs 108-115). Personal and professional training needs can be identified through the appraisal system. Service heads are fully aware of the importance of training for their staff.

161 Development or training relating to 'in-house' packages or systems can be met with relative ease, and the College has taken opportunities to involve external speakers from the higher education sector in the higher education staff conferences, thus providing an opportunity for staff to engage with the wider education community. Scrutiny of the detailed training records of several support staff from a number of service areas revealed that attendance at pertinent external conferences and training events was supported.

162 A number of senior support staff clearly engage in sector-wide organisations relating to their service area, and thus benchmarking with others in the sector is possible, and reports from senior staff undertaking induction were positive.

163 NCG has an Information Strategy that is reviewed and updated annually. The strategy has been benchmarked against Part C of the Quality Code, and had undergone wide consultation throughout the Group before being approved at the Higher Education Academic Board. The discussions there precipitated NCG's later decision to develop and launch its Higher Education Partnership Strategy (Student Charter).

164 Each College develops its own implementation plan within the framework set by the strategy. The central tenet is that the most senior member of staff with detailed knowledge of the matter being published is required to approve publication; for example, a programme leader might approve a module guide, whereas the higher education appeals material and the key information statistics/wider information data would be approved by the Director of Higher Education. This clarity has resulted in greater pan-institutional consistency in published material; for example, module guides are now all in the same format.

165 Material for external printed publication is developed by a central NCG team. If the material is course related then it draws upon the electronic prospectus, which is continually updated to reflect programme validation, closure and amendments properly.

166 Observation of validation and review events, and discussions with staff and students, confirmed that published material was generally fair and accurate; errors were most likely at an operational level in the early weeks of a programme, before timetables and conflicting demands were resolved.

167 During the course of the scrutiny, the team has consulted numerous public documents, which were found to be both detailed and comprehensive. However, at one

point the public website was found to contain inaccurate information regarding a programme that had yet to be validated and the WLC website was found to contain equal opportunity material from the previous Equality and Diversity Strategy, not the most recent version.

168 The overarching NCG Information Strategy is aligned with national expectations, frames the subordinate College information policies, and provides a framework for oversight of published information. Overall, the public information provided by NCG is comprehensive and largely accurate.

169 NCG is committed to the promotion and monitoring of equality and diversity and was awarded Grade 2 by Ofsted in 2008 for equality and diversity (E and D). A culture of E and D is well embedded in the activities of College life.

170 NCG has a detailed Equality Strategy. Regular updating is conducted by Group-wide consultation, collated by the Clerk to the Corporation (also Group Head of Equality and Diversity) before a final draft is approved by the Corporation. The Strategy is detailed, and has been benchmarked against the Equality Act, the Quality Code, Office of Standards in Education expectations, the Skills Funding Agency and Department of Work and Pensions requirements. Consultation discussions were rich and detailed, and provided useful feedback, which has resulted in the introduction of additional material on equality and diversity in teaching and learning.

171 The Equality and Diversity Strategy is published on the College website and in student handbooks. An associated commitment to raising the profile of this area is headlined by the College's annual 'celebrating diversity' awards. An Equality Impact Assessment Tool is in wide use to enable staff to assess new policies for diverse needs within current discrimination legislation. Advice and support is available for staff either from the Head of E and D or from nominated departmental E and D advisors; in observations it was clear that all staff took E and D matters seriously. NCG conducts a comprehensive E and D review each year, in which progress against the Group's equality aims is judged. Each College/division is reviewed as part of the process, and the Corporation receives a detailed annual report which includes priorities for the subsequent year.

172 The Student Handbook places the College's stance on equality in a prominent position, moving on to detail the comprehensive approach to supporting students with disabilities or specific learning difficulties. Students are aware, in broad terms, of the College's approach, and were able to signpost the details.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers.

FD	foundation degree
FDAP	foundation degree awarding powers
HELTA	Higher Education Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee
HEQSE	Higher Education Quality and Standards Committee
KC	Kidderminster College
MIS	management information system/student record system
NC	Newcastle College
NCG	Newcastle College Group's official name
NCG Direct	the school providing online programmes of study
NSS	National Student Survey
RSA	research and scholarly activity
TDAP	taught degree awarding powers
VLE	virtual learning environment
WLC	West Lancashire College

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