



Higher Education Review of North Hertfordshire College

February 2014

Contents

About this review	2
Key findings.....	3
QAA's judgements about North Hertfordshire College.....	3
Good practice	3
Recommendations	3
Affirmation of action being taken	3
Theme: Student Employability.....	4
About North Hertfordshire College.....	4
Explanation of the findings about North Hertfordshire College	5
1 Judgement: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards.....	6
2 Judgement: Quality of student learning opportunities	16
3 Judgement: Quality of the information produced about its provision.....	35
4 Judgement: Enhancement of student learning opportunities	38
5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability.....	41
Glossary.....	42

About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at North Hertfordshire College. The review took place from 24 to 26 February 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Wendy Gill
- Dr Mark Lyne
- Mr Joshua Smith (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by North Hertfordshire College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK Expectations. These Expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)¹ setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - the setting and maintenance of threshold academic standards
 - the quality of student learning opportunities
 - the information provided about higher education provision
 - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

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

In reviewing North Hertfordshire College the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2013-14 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,² and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.³ A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)⁴ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode.

² Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/higher-education-review-themes.aspx.

³ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus.

⁴ Higher Education Review web pages: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/higher-education-review.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about North Hertfordshire College

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

- The maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body and awarding organisation **meets UK expectations.**
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets UK expectations.**
- The quality of the information produced about its provision **meets UK expectations.**
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets UK expectations.**

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at North Hertfordshire College:

- the personalised and timely approach to providing advice and guidance to applicants (Expectation B2)
- the effective way in which the emphasis on employability is used to contextualise teaching and learning leading to the enhanced engagement of students (Expectation B3) (Enhancement)
- the comprehensive and accessible support provided to students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential (Expectation B4)
- the range of opportunities provided for students to engage effectively at all organisational levels (Expectation B5).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to North Hertfordshire College.

By the beginning of the academic year 2014-15:

- produce contextualised definitive programme information for all Higher National programmes (Expectation A3)
- establish and clearly document College assessment policies and procedures for its Higher National provision (Expectation B6)
- improve the effectiveness of the process by which external examiner reports are routinely made available to students (Expectation B7)
- review the College's policies and procedures for complaints and appeals to ensure clarity across all higher education provision (Expectation B9) (Expectation C)
- review the range and function of handbooks available to students, and develop a process for ensuring their quality and consistency (Expectation C).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- the action being taken by the College, in response to the essential actions raised by an external examiner, to ensure assessment design and decisions reflect the awarding organisation's programme specifications (Expectation A6).

Theme: Student Employability

The College is committed to improving the employability of its students and this is reflected through a number of strategically led initiatives which both enhance the learning experience and support personal career development. The College also works closely with a number of local employers and other colleges, through the Gazelle Colleges Group, to embed an entrepreneurial culture across all its higher education provision.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#).

About North Hertfordshire College

North Hertfordshire College (the College) is a large mixed-economy further education college with over 15,000 students. The College operates from five main centres across Stevenage, Hitchin and Letchworth Garden City. In 2012, the College became a founding member of the Gazelle Colleges Group, a partnership of colleges with a shared strategy for enhancing employment opportunities for students through enterprise and entrepreneurship. This influences the College's mission which is 'to become nationally recognised as the foremost entrepreneurial college in the UK'.

At the time of the review the College had 251 higher education students (195 full-time and 56 part-time). The higher education offer at the College includes 12 foundation degree pathways, a BSc Honours Extended Degree in Science (initial year) and an MSc in Further Education Leadership delivered in partnership with the University of Hertfordshire (the University). The College also offers seven Higher National programmes validated by Pearson.

Since its last QAA review, the College has undergone a number of significant changes. All programmes validated by the University of Bedfordshire and Middlesex University have now been phased out. As part of a periodic review of its higher education provision, the College decided to offer a range of Higher National programmes as a significant progression route for its further education students who may not meet the entry requirements for foundation degrees. The College now also delivers an MSc in Further Education Leadership, exclusively for its staff, as part of its strategy for staff development. In September 2012 there was a change of principal. At the time of the review, the College was undergoing major redevelopment at the Hitchin site to improve existing facilities for its higher education students.

In light of recent sector-wide changes to funding, recruitment to higher education programmes continues to remain a challenge, particularly from the part-time market. Some foundation degrees have not been as successful as anticipated, and this reflects the College's strategic decision to diversify its portfolio by offering Higher National programmes.

The College's last review, which took place in 2009, identified four recommendations and six features of good practice. The present review team found that the College had generally taken effective and timely action in response to the recommendations made in the previous review report.

Explanation of the findings about North Hertfordshire College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

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

1 Judgement: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards

Expectation (A1): Each qualification (including those awarded through arrangements with other delivery organisations or support providers) is allocated to the appropriate level in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*.

Quality Code, Chapter A1: The national level

Findings

1.1 The College's awarding body and awarding organisation are ultimately responsible for setting threshold academic standards and ensuring that each qualification is allocated to the appropriate level in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*.

1.2 Programmes validated by the University are managed through the Hertfordshire Higher Education Consortium (the Consortium), a formal partnership comprising the College, the University and three other local further education colleges. University programmes are developed and managed through the Consortium, and there are clear processes for programme design and (re)approval to ensure all higher education provision is underpinned by reference to the FHEQ. These processes are addressed in the University's regulations for undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes 2013-14 with quality assurance processes and procedures provided within the University's Validation Handbook and the Periodic Review Handbook. These are translated in the University's Collaborative Working Practices Handbook and implemented through the Consortium Quality Handbook.

1.3 Higher National programmes are within the scope of the Consortium, but are not subject to the University's quality assurance processes. For these programmes, which are not validated by the University, the Consortium Quality Committee ensures that a consistent approach is adopted across all consortium colleges. Pearson develops programme specifications for Higher National programmes and ensures learning outcomes reflect the appropriate level of the qualification. Staff use these programme specifications as a reference point in the teaching, learning and assessment of programmes at the appropriate level.

1.4 The team reviewed relevant documents, including validation reports, annual monitoring and evaluation reports (AMERs), external examiner reports, programme specifications and assignment briefs. The team also met with teaching staff to test their use and understanding of the FHEQ as a reference point in the maintenance of academic standards.

1.5 The College rigorously adheres to Consortium processes for the approval and re-approval of programmes, ensuring standard templates are used effectively. There is clear evidence that the approval documentation makes appropriate reference to the FHEQ in defining the structure, learning outcomes and assessment strategies of programmes. Staff the team met with demonstrated an appropriate understanding of the FHEQ. The AMERs for consortium provision also include confirmation by the external examiner that the provision continues to align to the appropriate level, with some external examiners making direct reference to the FHEQ.

1.6 For Higher National programmes, teaching staff make appropriate and explicit use of Pearson programme specifications as a reference point in the delivery and assessment of

programmes. Students the team met with also commented on the increasing level of difficulty of programmes and the requirement to develop more complex skills as they progressed from one level to the next.

1.7 The responsibility for allocating each qualification to the appropriate level rests ultimately with the awarding body and awarding organisation. The team concludes that the College is effectively fulfilling its responsibilities in meeting this Expectation through close adherence to awarding partners' policies, and through staff who have a sound understanding of the level of the qualification. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2): All higher education programmes of study take account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements.

Quality Code, Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level

Findings

1.8 The College's awarding body and awarding organisation are ultimately responsible for taking relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements into consideration during the design and approval stages. The processes by which this is achieved are the same as those described in paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3. The College does not have any direct accreditation with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. However, the Higher Nationals are linked to professional body requirements where appropriate, and this is addressed by Pearson in the programme specification.

1.9 The review team tested this Expectation through a review of validation reports, AMERs, external examiner reports and programme specifications. The team also met with teaching staff and a representative from the University.

1.10 For University provision, programme specifications make reference to relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements. There is also evidence that benchmark statements are discussed, and where appropriate acted upon, during (re)validation processes. Staff make effective use of the Consortium Quality Handbook and university-approved programme documentation to familiarise themselves with relevant benchmark statements. For Higher National provision, staff make good use of the awarding organisation's programme specifications.

1.11 The College assures itself that delivery takes account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements through teaching observations, cross-college moderation processes (through the Consortium), and through feedback from the external examiner. Staff involved in the MSc in Further Education Leadership use their experience of managing other level 7 qualifications, and the information provided by the University Link Tutor to ensure the delivery takes account of relevant subject and qualification statements.

1.12 The awarding body and awarding organisation are responsible for ensuring the appropriate use of relevant subject and qualification statements during the programme design and (re)validation stages. The College effectively fulfils its responsibilities to uphold standards, on behalf of its awarding bodies, through the explicit use of programme specifications. The team concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3): Higher education providers make available definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements for a programme of study.

Quality Code, Chapter A3: The programme level

Findings

1.13 For University programmes, information on aims and learning outcomes is provided through programme handbooks, programme specifications and Definitive Module Documents. The College is responsible for preparing these documents using standard university-devised templates, and these are approved by the University before being disseminated to students. For programmes that are common to other colleges in the Consortium, a collaborative cross-college approach is adopted to develop these documents. For Higher National programmes, the College uses the awarding organisation's programme specification as the definitive guide to programme information. Additional information on the achievement of learning outcomes is provided through college-devised assignment briefs for each unit. Staff are also expected to produce programme handbooks for Higher National programmes using a standard content list as a guide.

1.14 Processes for producing definitive programme and module information for University programmes meet this Expectation. However, for Higher National programmes the College does not develop its own contextualised definitive programme information, and instead makes use of the national Pearson specifications. Both the awarding organisation and *Chapter A3: The programme level* of the Quality Code expect providers offering Higher National programmes to take ownership of, and develop their own, programme specifications to provide a concise summary which captures the local dimension of the programme.

1.15 The review team tested this Expectation through scrutiny of a wide sample of programme handbooks, programme specifications, Definitive Module Documents and assignment briefs. The team also met with teaching staff and students to understand the provision of information at the programme level.

1.16 From the evidence provided the team are assured that, for University provision, programme specifications clearly set out the aims of the programme and the learning outcomes and each have associated Definitive Module Documents. Students confirmed that they have access to relevant programme information through the University's virtual learning environment (VLE) and that the documents are helpful in setting the expectations for their programme of study.

1.17 For Higher National programmes, the information provided to students is less clear and there are inconsistencies in the content of programme handbooks (see findings under Expectation C). However, Higher National students the team met with were generally satisfied with the information they receive about their programmes. Teaching staff also confirmed that students are signposted to the Pearson specification and this is supplemented by assignment briefs and verbal information provided during induction and teaching sessions. The review team received one example of a college-devised programme specification for a Higher National programme but it is not standard policy for the College to produce these for all programmes. During the review visit, the College acknowledged this as an area for further improvement. The team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2014-15, the College produces contextualised definitive programme information for all Higher National programmes.

1.18 Overall, the review team concludes that the College makes available appropriate programme-level information and the Expectation is met. However, there are some inconsistencies in the written information provided to students across its higher education provision. In particular, the lack of contextualised definitive information for Higher National programmes may prevent some students from having access to appropriate written information about their programme, and the level of risk is therefore moderate.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (A4): Higher education providers have in place effective processes to approve and periodically review the validity and relevance of programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter A4: Approval and review

Findings

1.19 The College follows its awarding body's and awarding organisation's policies for the approval and review of programmes, complemented by its own internal processes for periodic review. The College participates as a member of the Consortium in the (re)validation of University awards, overseen by the Consortium Management Committee. (Re)validations are carried out on a six-yearly cycle in accordance with detailed procedures set out in the Consortium Quality Handbook, the Validation Handbook and the Periodic Review Handbook. A planning meeting is held to agree the detailed expectations of the process and identify the Programme Development Team members. (Re)validation submissions are then refined following development days held by the consortium colleges. Responses to conditions arising from approval events are signed off at a conditions meeting and recommendations are incorporated into programme AMERs.

1.20 Pearson has responsibility for approval and review of the Higher National awards. The College applies to Pearson for approval to deliver these awards having considered proposals at a Portfolio Development Day that are subsequently signed off by the Senior Executive Group.

1.21 The team tested the operation of these processes by reviewing minutes of Development Committee meetings (for revalidation), records of (re)validation development days and AMERs. The team also met with staff and a University representative to understand how these processes work in practice.

1.22 The extensive and comprehensive documentation produced for (re)validation and records of the (re)validation events themselves demonstrate the robust and effective process in place for approval and periodic review of University programmes. A range of (re)validation reports and the minutes of Conditions Meetings also provide evidence of a thorough process, with the latter being valuable in ensuring that essential issues are fully addressed. The cross-college working (through the Consortium) continues to be a particular strength of programme development and review.

1.23 The College assures itself that appropriate resources and expertise are available for delivering programmes, through consideration at senior staff meetings, prior to applying to the awarding body for the approval of a new programme. The College also periodically reviews its portfolio of programmes, with the most recent review in 2011-12, resulting in an expansion of Pearson Higher National provision. The review team are satisfied that the College has in place appropriate processes to consider and approve those Higher National awards that it wishes to add to its portfolio as part of its growth strategy in this area.

1.24 Overall, the team regards the processes that the College follows on behalf of its awarding body and awarding organisation, and its own approach to approval and periodic review, to be reliable and fit-for-purpose. The Expectation is therefore met and the associated level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A5): Higher education providers ensure independent and external participation in the management of threshold academic standards.

Quality Code, Chapter A5: Externality

Findings

1.25 For University programmes, the College (through the Consortium) follows the University's processes for external engagement in the design, approval and review of programmes. These processes, clearly laid out in the Consortium Quality Handbook, require external, 'independent, subject expertise' input during the programme development phase and at (re)validation events. There is also a requirement for employers to be consulted on the design of foundation degree programmes. The College is not involved in the validation process for Higher National awards, with Pearson having responsibility for arranging external participation in their design and development. The use of external examiners across all its higher education provision ensures independent and external input into the ongoing management of threshold academic standards.

1.26 The review team looked at evidence of independent involvement in the (re)validation of a range of programmes including the reports of (re)validation events and the minutes of Module and Programme Examination Boards and Programme Committees. The team met with staff to understand how these processes operate in practice and also considered a range of evidence relating to the input of external examiners, including their reports (see findings under Expectation B7).

1.27 The reports of (re)validation events for University awards confirm the participation of an external academic on each (re)validation panel with appropriate subject expertise to confirm that programme proposals are in line with the FHEQ and take account of relevant subject and qualification benchmarks. Documentation for the validation of one programme also provided evidence of consultation with external experts as part of the development process. The team noted that course development typically takes place in conjunction with other members of the Consortium and that this usefully extends the range of input to the process.

1.28 Of particular relevance to foundation degrees, the team can confirm that employers are effectively involved in the development process in a variety of ways: inviting employers to complete a questionnaire; input from workplace mentors; attendance of employers on a programme development committee; and discussions with an organisation providing funding for 25 students from the public and voluntary sector. Teaching staff met by the team also provided examples of the engagement of employers in programme design and, for Higher National programmes, in the selection of units. There is also sound evidence of the effective role played by external examiners in the ongoing management of threshold academic standards.

1.29 The team concludes that the College, through its adherence to the awarding body's and awarding organisation's policies and processes, ensures independent and external participation in the maintenance of threshold academic standards. The Expectation is therefore met and any risk in this area is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A6): Higher education providers ensure the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and that the award of qualifications and credit are based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Quality Code, Chapter A6: Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes

Findings

1.30 The College is responsible for designing assessment, marking and internally moderating student work for all its higher education programmes. The College follows the University's procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of assessment for University awards; these are documented in the Consortium Quality Handbook. The outcomes of assessment are reported to Module and Programme Examination Boards where credit is awarded according to University regulations.

1.31 The intended learning outcomes for Higher National awards are set out in the Pearson programme specifications. Programme teams produce an overall assessment plan for the programme and individual assignment briefs that link assessment tasks and criteria to unit learning outcomes. The College also has processes in place for the internal moderation of assignment briefs and marked student work; these are documented in the College's Internal Verification, Assessment and External Verification Handbook. This is a generic college-wide document which applies to those programmes not validated by the University, including those offered at level 3 and below.

1.32 The team reviewed programme specifications, Definitive Module Documents, minutes of Module and Programme Examination Boards, assignment briefs for both University and Pearson awards, evidence of the moderation of marked student work and external examiner reports. The team also met with staff and students.

1.33 The review team found that, for University awards, the learning outcomes and associated assessment strategies are clearly defined at programme level. The templates used provide an effective framework for securing the quality and standards of assessment and the involvement of colleges across the Consortium is of particular value. The team looked at examples of schedules of assessment for Pearson awards that varied in format but contained the necessary information. The team also found that the assignment briefs for Pearson programmes include detailed information regarding learning outcomes and the tasks required of students.

1.34 There is a robust process in operation for the pre-issue review of assessment briefs and examinations, and for the internal moderation of marked student work for all higher education programmes. Students whom the team met with confirmed that they are clear about the learning outcomes they are expected to achieve and how assessments are linked to these.

1.35 Evidence from external examiner reports confirms that staff at the College are effectively fulfilling their responsibilities to the University through the design of clear and appropriate assessments. However, the first and only external examiner report available for a Higher National programme at the time of the review visit raised a number of issues. These related to the design of assessment and the College's adherence to the programme specification to ensure that all assessment criteria are covered, and that there are opportunities available for evidencing all grade descriptors. The College responded to the concerns raised in a timely and effective manner by putting in place a detailed action plan to address the recommendations from the report. The review team are assured that appropriate action is being taken to prevent this problem occurring on other Higher National programmes, and to ensure assessment is conducted in accordance with Pearson

requirements. The review team **affirms** the action being taken by the College, in response to the essential actions raised by an external examiner, to ensure assessment design and decisions reflect the awarding organisation's programme specifications.

1.36 In reaching its conclusion, the team considered the assessment processes for ensuring the achievement of learning outcomes across all higher education provision. Overall, the team found the processes for managing assessment to be robust, valid and reliable, and where weaknesses have been identified it is satisfied that appropriate action is being taken by the College. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.37 In reaching its judgement about threshold academic standards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook. All Expectations for the maintenance of threshold academic standards have been met with the associated level of risk: low for five of the Expectations and moderate for one. The College's main responsibilities for maintaining threshold academic standards are for adhering to the policies and processes set by its awarding body and awarding organisation. For programmes validated by the University, the College effectively discharges its responsibilities within the context of its partnership agreement.

1.38 Since the last QAA review, the College has introduced a number of new Higher National programmes and is still in the process of further developing its arrangements for the effective management of this provision. For the Expectation (A3) where moderate risk has been identified, this is confined to Higher National provision and the College is aware of the area for improvement.

1.39 In summary, all Expectations have been met and the recommendation and affirmation in this area relate to a small part of the College's provision. The review team concludes, therefore, that the maintenance of threshold academic standards **meets** UK expectations.

2 Judgement: Quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers have effective processes for the design and approval of programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme design and approval

Findings

2.1 For University awards, the College follows Consortium processes for programme approval, which includes programme design; these are described in paragraph 1.19. Pearson is responsible for the design of Higher National programmes and the College's involvement is limited to the selection of optional units and developing assessment tasks against predefined learning outcomes and grading criteria. The College fulfils its responsibilities for Higher National programmes through detailed discussions at programme level to select an appropriate combination of units which allows students to achieve the required amount of credit for the award. The process for gaining approval from the awarding body to deliver a Higher National programme and the College's own processes for internal approval are described in paragraph 1.20.

2.2 The review team examined the way in which policies and procedures are implemented by looking at documentation submitted for the (re)validation of programmes, Validation Panel Reports and minutes of Conditions Meetings. The team also met with staff involved in programme development.

2.3 The University processes for programme design and approval are robust and rigorously adhered to by staff, ensuring that any conditions arising from programme validation events are addressed. Staff who are part of programme development teams follow University guidance to produce detailed and comprehensive programme documentation for (re)validation events. Programme design takes adequate account of relevant reference points, for example the FHEQ, benchmark statements, the requirements of employers and the definition of graduate attributes. The scrutiny of Validation Panel reports demonstrated that the process is effective in enhancing and refining the design of programmes.

2.4 Staff the team met with explained how programme teams meet to discuss the development of Higher National programmes. The review team is satisfied that the selection of optional units is informed by the needs of students, and supports academic and career progression opportunities. Although this process is not formally documented, staff are clear about their involvement in programme design for these programmes. Through a review of programme documentation arising from the work of programme teams, the review team are assured that appropriate consideration is given to the planning of delivery and assessment for Higher National programmes.

2.5 Overall, the team is satisfied that the College has in place effective processes for programme approval and design. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B2): Policies and procedures used to admit students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied.

Quality Code, Chapter B2: Admissions

Findings

2.6 There is a college-wide admissions policy which clearly documents the process for admitting students. The admissions process is overseen by the HE Bursar who works in close liaison with the University and programme staff. Entry qualifications for University programmes are agreed and reviewed through the Consortium. The College manages the administrative process for admissions, working to the procedures laid out in the Collaborative Working Practices Handbook, with the University retaining oversight of all students accepted onto its programmes. For Pearson programmes, the College has responsibility for recruiting and selecting students in line with predefined criteria. Detailed information about the programmes on offer, and the application process, is made available to applicants through the website and a Consortium-wide prospectus.

2.7 The team reviewed the information available through the website, the Consortium Prospectus and College brochures, and also considered records of career guidance interviews with prospective applicants. The team also met with staff and students to evaluate the effectiveness of the admissions process in practice.

2.8 Students are provided with clear, comprehensive and easily accessible information about the programmes on offer at the College and the admissions process. The policy is consistently applied across all higher education programmes with close adherence to awarding body criteria. Staff demonstrated a sound understanding of their role in admitting applicants and their responsibilities to the awarding body and awarding organisation. There is also appropriate involvement from programme managers in the assessment and interview of applicants before offering a place on a particular programme.

2.9 Students the team met with were positive about their admissions experience and, in particular, were complimentary about the College's prompt response to their application and the guidance provided to enable them to make an informed decision. The review team came across several examples of students who, after receiving independent advice and guidance, enrolled on to a more appropriate programme than the one for which they had applied. Staff provide face-to-face support for admissions through College open events. Careers and advice guidance is accessible to all prospective students and where the College is unable to offer a programme, students are signposted to other local providers including those within the Consortium. The team considers the personalised and timely approach to providing advice and guidance to applicants **good practice**.

2.10 Overall, the review team concludes that the College has in place a clear, fair and explicit admissions policy. Staff involved in the admissions process ensure applicants are provided with comprehensive information, advice and guidance before enrolling on to a programme. The Expectation is therefore met and the associated level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth, and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.

Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching*

Findings

2.11 The College has a documented Model for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, which articulates the College's approach to enhancing learning opportunities for students, with a particular focus on skills development and experiential learning. The Higher Education Committee has oversight of all higher education and ensures the collective review and enhancement of programmes. Academic staff involved in the delivery of foundation degrees and the Master's programme are approved by the University. The external examiner for Pearson reviews staff curricula vitae during annual quality assurance visits. There is a formal teaching observation process to monitor and enhance the quality of teaching practices, with underperformance managed through the Performance and Development Review Policy. The Workforce Development Strategy makes clear the College's commitment to supporting and developing its teaching staff through a range of opportunities.

2.12 The College's Higher Education Student Involvement Strategy outlines the ways in which students are engaged in their learning, and the processes by which student feedback informs the quality of teaching. AMERs are used as a tool for reviewing the quality of teaching and include the consideration of student feedback.

2.13 The review team looked at the way in which these processes worked in practice by considering a wide range of documentary evidence including samples of minutes of relevant meetings, staff development programmes and records, teaching observation records and AMERs. The team also met with senior staff, teaching staff and students to understand the operation and impact of these processes on learning and teaching.

2.14 Progress with AMER action plans is regularly monitored and evaluated through the Higher Education Committee to support the ongoing review and enhancement of individual programmes. Discussions at the Committee also facilitate the identification and dissemination of good practice across all higher education programmes. For example, feedback from consortium activities encourages staff to adopt consistent practices across all programmes. The College collects and analyses information such as National Student Survey data, feedback from placement providers, and student achievement and retention data to identify areas for improvement to learning and teaching.

2.15 The team found that staff involved with teaching and supporting student learning are appropriately qualified, supported and developed. Opportunities for staff development are regular and varied and members of staff recognise the contribution these make to their professional development. Cross-consortium activities encourage teachers to collaborate with colleagues at other colleges to ensure they are teaching and working at the correct level. The College is also currently exploring how it can support teaching staff in gaining professional recognition from the Higher Education Academy. Several members of senior staff are studying towards the MSc in Further Education Leadership delivered internally by the College. Staff the team met with who are undertaking this qualification were positive about their learning experience and the exposure it provided to research and scholarly activity. The College is also working with the University to provide academic staff with opportunities to engage in educational research.

2.16 Teaching observations for higher education only involve those staff who have experience of teaching at this level. Observations result in comprehensive action plans for individual teaching staff but also contribute to wider enhancement activities. The College identifies the key strengths and areas for development across all higher education teaching observations and uses this to inform the planning of future staff development. This provides staff with tailored support and makes a positive contribution to the enhancement of teaching practices.

2.17 The Model for Teaching, Learning and Assessment puts a high level of emphasis on experiential project-based learning. The team came across numerous examples of how work-based learning is embedded within the curriculum. Students are given extensive opportunities to develop and apply their skills to live work environments and this encourages learners to become more engaged with the learning process. Students the team met with were positive about both the quality of teaching and the impact of vocational learning on broadening their skills and preparing them for work. The team concluded that the effective way in which the emphasis on employability is used to contextualise teaching and learning leading to the enhanced engagement of students is **good practice**.

2.18 There are effective and varied mechanisms in place for ensuring learning and teaching are adequately informed by the student voice. Students can provide feedback by completing a range of surveys and attendance at College meetings, or can feed back informally to their tutor or the Higher Education Manager. Students the review team met with were satisfied that their feedback was being used to review and enhance learning opportunities.

2.19 Overall, the review team concludes that the College works effectively in collaboration with its staff, students and awarding bodies to systematically review and enhance learning and teaching practices. In particular, the integration of work-based learning into the curriculum makes a positive contribution to the vocational nature of the College's higher education provision. The Expectation is therefore met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement

Findings

2.20 The College provides a two-day induction for all its higher education students to orientate them to the College environment and familiarise them with their programme, the learning resources available to them and the support services on offer. The College uses an online Personal Development Passport as a tool to support students in their academic and personal development. There is a dedicated member of support staff who provides students with careers advice and information. The College's Single Equality Scheme describes the support available to enable students with disabilities or learning difficulties to access learning opportunities and achieve the intended learning outcomes for their programme. The College also has a strategic approach to the planning of resources, which includes a formal review before the start of the next academic year, with the overall budget signed off by the Senior Executive Group.

2.21 The team tested the College's processes for meeting this Expectation by reviewing minutes of relevant meetings, the content of the induction programme, records of career guidance provided to students and the VLE. The team also met with students and senior, teaching and support staff.

2.22 The College provides students with comprehensive support for their studies through a number of different mechanisms. All students are provided with a thorough induction which includes familiarisation with their programme and the learning environment. During their studies, students have a high level of contact with teaching staff and are provided with personalised support through individual or group tutorials. Students the team met with were complimentary about the support provided by teaching and support staff in enabling them to develop and achieve their qualifications. Although the team noted that the use of the Personal Development Passport and tutorials is variable across programmes, students are provided with other opportunities for support which are appropriate to their programme of study.

2.23 The Students Services department provides extensive support across a number of areas including careers guidance, how to access and use learning resources, and support for disabled students. Careers staff provide personalised information to both current and prospective students through a tailored approach which involves meeting with students individually. The team was provided with numerous examples of how the College supports and encourages individual students to develop their own ideas for work placements. The College also supports students in their transition into higher education by providing additional Maths and English lessons, where appropriate. Support for disabled students is effectively managed by the Access Centre with appropriate adjustments made for both physical and non-physical disabilities. Students who have used the service report positive experiences. The team identified **good practice** in the comprehensive and accessible support provided to students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

2.24 Staff across the College are fully aware of how resources are planned for and allocated. A particular strength of the resource-planning process is the way in which student feedback is used to enhance the existing provision. For example, the College is currently in the process of redeveloping the dedicated higher education space at its Hitchin site and student feedback is being used to inform the design of this new space. Although some

disruption has been caused by the redevelopment work underway, students were generally satisfied that appropriate arrangements had been put in place in the interim.

2.25 College resources include a dedicated space for higher education students, open access to Wi-Fi, electronic and physical libraries, and the College VLE. All higher education students also have access to the University's electronic and physical resources, including its VLE. Access to the University's VLE for Higher National students has only recently been purchased and the College intends to use this as the main online platform for higher education. Students the team met with were satisfied with the resources available to them and commented on the wide-ranging and useful information available on both VLEs. Some students also use the online Personal Development Passport as a tool to track their academic progress.

2.26 Overall, the review team concludes that the College has in place a range of effective mechanisms for enabling student development and achievement. It is committed to developing an environment which supports its students and has in place processes for continuing to enhance this area further. The Expectation is met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.

Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student engagement

Findings

2.27 The College has a Student Involvement Strategy which demonstrates its commitment to making effective use of the student voice. There is a clear structure for engaging all students; this includes student governors, a Student Sabbatical President, an established Student Executive, a Student Parliament and a student representative system. Individual students are able to provide feedback through their representatives, informally to staff or through the completion of questionnaires.

2.28 The team tested this Expectation through a review of documentary evidence including the minutes of meetings which student representatives are able to attend, the student submission and notes from the most recent Student Parliament. The review team also held meetings with staff, students and student representatives.

2.29 The systems in place for student engagement enable the College to effectively work in partnership with students to improve the quality of its higher education provision. Students and their representatives, whom the team met with, were positive about the way in which the College listens and responds to their feedback. Most students prefer to raise any issues informally through their teacher or directly with the Higher Education Manager and find this an effective and responsive mechanism for providing feedback.

2.30 More formal mechanisms by which students are able to provide feedback include questionnaires used at various points throughout the academic year which inform the annual review of programmes. Students are satisfied that appropriate and prompt action is taken in response to any issues raised. Recent examples of improvements made include the purchasing of additional sewing machines for students on the Foundation Degree in Fashion and Textiles, and a change to the start times of lectures to support those students travelling from further away.

2.31 Student representatives receive training for their role, and this is separate to that provided for further education students. Although student representatives the team met with had not all been able to attend the training, they were generally satisfied that they are able to fulfil their roles effectively. The College actively provides opportunities for student representatives to attend various committee meetings, but these are not always taken up. However, there is a regular Higher Education Forum across several sites which is well attended by students and provides a direct mechanism for students to feed back to the Higher Education Manager. There is also an annual Student Parliament where students and their representatives across the College convene to discuss issues affecting the collective student body. Those issues relevant to higher education students are then taken forward to the next Higher Education Forum.

2.32 The College has a strong and well established student voice which is used to influence decision making at the most senior level. Student governors represent students at the Board of Corporation. Student representatives are able to ask questions directly to the Principal during 'Principal's Question Time'. The Sabbatical President meets fortnightly with the Principal, on a one-to-one basis, to raise any issues that have been identified through engagement with other students and to gather feedback on action taken in response to previously raised matters. The Principal takes forward relevant issues to the Senior Executive Group, and the Sabbatical President disseminates information to other students

on the actions taken in response to these one-to-one meetings. The team identified **good practice** in the range of opportunities provided for students to engage effectively at all organisational levels.

2.33 The team concludes that the College has effective systems in place for articulating and responding to the student voice. Together these provide routes for student involvement at all levels of the organisation and contribute to the improvement of the College's higher education provision. The Expectation is therefore met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit.

Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning

Findings

2.34 The College's responsibilities and the processes it follows for ensuring assessment is robust, valid and reliable are described in paragraphs 1.30 and 1.31. Students are provided with information about the nature and weighting of assessment through Definitive Module Documents (University programmes) or assessment briefs (Higher National programmes). The College follows the University's regulations for assessment, including those governing conduct; these are documented in the Consortium Quality Handbook. For Higher National awards, the College has its own Internal Verification, Assessment and External Verification Handbook; this contains assessment procedures and policies for all of its awards, both higher education and further education, other than those of the University.

2.35 Regulations are in place regarding the late submission of work and for the consideration of serious adverse circumstances. Procedures stipulate that students should receive marks and feedback on their work within four weeks of submission. For University awards, Module and Programme Examination Boards arranged through the Consortium are responsible for approving and recording assessment decisions. For Higher National awards, the College is required to hold an assessment board to record and confirm assessment decisions.

2.36 The policies and procedures for the assessment of students are in alignment with the Expectation of *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning*, although it is not entirely clear from the documentation which sections of the College's Internal Verification, Assessment and External Verification Handbook apply to higher education.

2.37 The review team tested the application of these policies and processes by reviewing a range of documents including the student submission, samples of assessment information provided to students, assessment regulations and Module and Programme Board minutes (for University awards). The team also met with staff and students to understand their experiences of assessment.

2.38 The assignment briefs for both University and Pearson awards are clear and detailed. Students the review team met confirmed that assessment processes are clear and well communicated, and that the workload expected of them is reasonable in terms of volume and timing. Students also confirmed that they receive clear and constructive written and verbal feedback that enables them to identify potential improvements in their work. Most students the team met with agreed that feedback on their work is returned promptly, and frequently well within the four-week turnaround time. Staff and students also confirmed the arrangements for dealing with late work. Students are aware of the arrangements for extensions and serious adverse circumstances, although there appears to be some variation in the terminology used and in the detailed processes adopted.

2.39 Although the minutes of Module and Programme Examination Boards scrutinised by the review team showed some variation in style, the review team was satisfied that they are clear and accurately record the outcomes of assessment.

2.40 The College does not currently have documented processes for the operation of assessment boards for Higher National provision. As these programmes are relatively new, at the time of the review visit, the College had only held one assessment board. On the advice of the external examiner for the programme, the College applied the University's regulations for assessment boards. However, the awarding organisation makes clear that centres delivering their awards 'should have a published set of regulations for its Assessment Boards'. Senior staff also reported that the Internal Verification, Assessment and External Verification Handbook had been developed to reflect all College provision and that not all of its content is relevant to Higher National programmes. Apart from through verbal guidance provided by senior staff it is unclear how teaching staff are made aware of which sections are applicable. The review team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2014-15, the College establish and clearly document College assessment policies and procedures for its Higher National provision.

2.41 Overall, the review team considers that the College's arrangements for ensuring that students have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate the achievement of intended learning outcomes for the award of the qualification meet the Expectation. However, the team concludes that there is a moderate risk associated with the need for the College to clarify its policies and procedures for Higher National provision in this area, and the way in which this is documented.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.

Quality Code, Chapter B7: External examining

Findings

2.42 For University awards, the University has overall responsibility for defining the role of the external examiner, and for nominating and appointing external examiners, as set out in the Collaborative Working Practices Handbook. The Consortium Quality Handbook sets out the requirements for external examiners to approve all assessments at level 5 and above, moderate marked student work, attend Module and Programme Examination Boards and submit a report that identifies recommendations for action and instances of good practice.

2.43 Pearson appoints external examiners for Higher National awards who are responsible for moderating grades and submitting an annual report following on from a visit to the College. The College considers and responds to the report through the AMER. For these programmes, the external examiner attends the College during the academic year and is not required to attend the Assessment Board. Programme Committees (for all higher education programmes), to which student representatives are invited, are expected to discuss external examiner reports and respond to them as part of the AMER.

2.44 The review team tested the application of these procedures by scrutinising a range of external examiner reports, minutes of Module and Programme Examination Boards, minutes of Programme Committees and AMERs. The team also asked students about their awareness of the role of external examiners and their access to external examiner reports.

2.45 The team found that the external examiner report templates, for both the University and Pearson, prompt external examiners to provide useful comment on the standards and quality of provision. Programme teams' responses in the AMERs effectively address the recommendations made by external examiners. This provides sound evidence of how the College systematically considers external examiner reports and uses them to enhance its provision. In the case of the one external examiner report available for a Higher National programme, the team found evidence of how prompt action was being taken to address the issues raised. For University awards, the team was able to confirm the attendance of external examiners at Module and Programme Examination Boards and that the College was making good use of their input to assessment moderation.

2.46 The review team heard that the main way in which students are expected to have access to external examiner reports is through their representatives at Programme Committees, although it was noted that they were not always present. Some students the team met with indicated that they could have access to external examiner reports on request but were not aware of any students doing so, while others said that they had not heard of them. The team were also told that a synopsis goes back to students from the Higher Education Forum, and tutors would feed back Programme Committee minutes to students, but that external examiner reports were not available to students through the VLE. The review team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2014-15, the College improves the effectiveness with which external examiner reports are routinely made available to students.

2.47 Overall, the team concludes that the College is making scrupulous use of external examiners and their reports; the Expectation is therefore met. The recommendation in this area relates to a need to improve the effectiveness of existing processes, and therefore the team considers the level of risk to be low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers have effective procedures in place to routinely monitor and periodically review programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review

Findings

2.48 The College follows the University processes for monitoring and review and these are clearly documented in the Consortium Quality Handbook. For each University award, College staff produce an AMER with support from the University Link Tutor. Draft AMERs are considered by the College's Higher Education Committee before sign-off by the Head of Higher Education, following which they are submitted to the University for final approval. The process results in the production of an action plan to address any issues and respond to instances of good practice. Module teams are required to complete a Module Evaluation Form at the conclusion of each module for consideration by Module Boards. Students are also given the opportunity to complete a Student Viewpoint Questionnaire at the end of each module, the outcomes of which are expected to feed in to the AMER.

2.49 The College monitors its Higher National provision using parallel processes to those for University awards and has introduced an AMER template for Higher National programmes. The procedures set out for programme monitoring and review draw on a comprehensive range of data and evidence regarding programmes and allow for timely action planning.

2.50 The review team tested the effectiveness of how these processes work in practice by looking at a range of AMERs, Module Evaluation Forms and minutes of Module Boards. The review team also discussed the operation of the Student Viewpoint Questionnaires and other feedback surveys with teaching staff and students.

2.51 The AMERs examined by the review team are generally consistent in their content and in the evaluation of factors impacting on the success of programmes, for example National Student Survey scores and success rates. Each report gives rise to a comprehensive action plan that effectively incorporates responses to any issues raised by the external examiner. The team also noted that there was an effective process in place for the response in one AMER, for a Higher National programme, to some significant issues raised by an external examiner to be disseminated to other programmes for action. Senior staff also explained to the team how any issues of college-wide significance identified in AMERs were identified and incorporated into the College Quality Improvement Plan.

2.52 The review team did note some inconsistencies in terms of the extent to which consideration of Student Viewpoint Questionnaires was explicit in AMERs. In some examples there was detailed analysis while in other cases they were not referred to at all. The team understood that this may be due to low response rates and/or small cohorts, referred to in some AMERs and by the teaching staff. However, programme review is sufficiently informed by student feedback obtained through other mechanisms, including the informal student voice. The Module Evaluation Forms seen by the review team showed good evidence of input from module teams across the Consortium and most contained useful action plans. However, the review team also noted some minor inconsistencies in the minutes of Module Boards, with Module Evaluation Forms not always being explicitly mentioned.

2.53 Notwithstanding these inconsistencies, the review team concludes that, overall, the programme monitoring and review processes in place are robust, effective and contribute to improvements at programme and College level. The Expectation is therefore met and any associated risk is considered to be low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have fair, effective and timely procedures for handling students' complaints and academic appeals.

Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic complaints and student appeals

Findings

2.54 Student complaints and academic appeals are subject to the College's internal Complaints Procedure and the University's regulations (for University awards). The University requires its partner organisations to provide students with information on the organisation's own complaints procedure, which should include a right to complain to the University. Pearson also requires its approved centres to forward a copy of all complaints received which are not resolved internally by the organisation. The College's Complaints Procedure covers a wide range of complaints and indicates that the College's Governing Body is the final decision-making body for complaints.

2.55 The Complaints Procedure also states that appeals are dealt with through the awarding bodies' processes. This is clear for University awards and the College follows University regulations and makes this information available to students through programme handbooks. However, Pearson requires its approved centres to have in place their own internal appeals process which should include the final right to appeal externally to the awarding body. The College's Internal Verification, Assessment and External Verification Handbook includes a three-stage appeals procedure with the final stage referring to recourse to the awarding body. However, other documents, such as programme handbooks for Higher National programmes, contain references to different appeals processes. The review team was therefore unable to establish the exact process followed for academic appeals for Higher National programmes.

2.56 The College's written procedures for handling complaints and academic appeals are unclear and do not fully meet the requirements of its awarding organisation. Therefore, the team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2014-15, the College reviews its policies and procedures for complaints and appeals to ensure clarity across all higher education provision.

2.57 The team looked at the way in which complaints and appeals are dealt with in practice through a review of the College's procedures, records of complaints and appeals, the student submission, and discussions with staff and students.

2.58 General concerns and complaints are dealt with informally through student voice channels or directly to teachers. The Higher Education Student Forum or Operational Group records concerns raised by students and identifies actions to be taken. Students consider student representatives to be a useful first step in making complaints. They feel that any concerns raised are responded to and that they receive effective and timely feedback.

2.59 There is evidence of academic appeals and complaints and responses to these including an example of an appeal being upheld and the University providing a thorough response to the student concerned. There is also evidence of a student complaint being addressed at a senior level within the University.

2.60 Students the team met with were not aware of where to find information on formal processes for complaints and appeals, but explained that this is because they have not had cause to find these. They confirmed that they know who to speak to if they need formal processes and they can use the University's website as a source of further information.

2.61 Discussions with staff indicate that information on complaints and appeals is provided to students through induction and in handbooks for some students, and that staff

talk them through this as necessary. The team noted inconsistencies in the information on complaints and appeals between different programme handbooks for Higher National programmes (see findings under Expectation C). However, through discussions with staff and students the review team were assured that students are supported and signposted as necessary, including to the College's website where students can access the complaints procedures.

2.62 The review team concludes that there are inconsistencies and a lack of clarity in the internal procedures for handling student complaints and academic appeals. The design of the College's processes does not fully meet the requirements of its awarding organisation and therefore the Expectation has not been met. However, there is evidence of appeals and complaints being dealt with appropriately in practice. The risk in this area is moderate as it relates to a lack of clarity in the College's policies and procedures and the way in which these are communicated to students.

Expectation: Not met

Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.

Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others

Findings

2.63 The College does not have degree awarding powers. The awarding body and awarding organisation are ultimately responsible for the academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities of the awards the College delivers on their behalf. However, the College does have responsibilities for managing arrangements with employers for the delivery of work-based learning, where this contributes to the achievement of intended learning outcomes. Some elements of foundation degrees and Higher National programmes require students to undertake learning in the workplace. The College follows the University's processes for managing work-based learning for its foundation degrees and these are clearly laid out in the Consortium Quality Handbook. Work-based learning modules are required to follow the University's cross-college moderation procedures. Employer Handbooks are provided for foundation degrees and these set out the arrangements for the students and include an expectations statement.

2.64 The review team looked at handbooks for employers, AMERs and documentation for work-based learning modules. The team also met students and teaching and support staff.

2.65 Work-based learning is a key feature of the higher education provision at the College and students report very positive experiences of this, including the support provided while on placements. This is reinforced by staff who confirm that they work directly with employers, particularly in relation to their Higher National provision. Students either select their own organisation to work with or the College provides them with support for obtaining a suitable placement. Students the team met with were positive about the support tutors provide while they are on their work-based learning activities, and that support is available through the dedicated careers support staff if required.

2.66 The College provides comprehensive information to employers involved in facilitating work-based projects. This includes both written information in the form of a handbook and training for workplace mentors. This ensures employers are well aware of their responsibilities and are able to fulfil their roles effectively. Employers are also invited to provide feedback on student performance to support personal development. Responsibilities for the assessment of work-based learning rest with the College who ensures the quality assurance processes followed are the same as for other assessments.

2.67 Overall, the team concludes that the College has effective processes in place for managing and monitoring work-based learning opportunities provided through arrangements with employers. The Expectation is therefore met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.

Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research degrees*

2.68 The College does not offer research degrees and this Expectation is therefore not applicable.

Quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.69 In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook. In summary, all but one of the ten applicable expectations in this area have been met, with the associated level of risk low in most cases. The team identified four features of good practice across the areas of admissions, learning and teaching, student support and student engagement.

2.70 The team also identified a number of areas for improvement and these relate mainly to the need for establishing clearer policies and processes, and to communicating these more effectively to staff and students. For the Expectation that has not been met (Expectation B9), this relates to the design of the College's complaints and appeals process not being fully aligned to the Expectation. However, there is evidence of appropriate processes being followed in practice and therefore the team considered the level of risk to be moderate.

2.71 In reaching its judgement, the team gave consideration to the nature of the recommendations in this area and concluded that they do not, individually or collectively, pose any serious risk to the present or likely future management of the quality of student learning opportunities. In general, recommendations relate to a minor amendment to, or oversight of, existing processes. Therefore, the team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

3 Judgement: Quality of the information produced about its provision

Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit-for-purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

Quality Code, Part C: Information about higher education provision

Findings

3.1 The College provides a range of information for prospective applicants, staff and students. The website is the main source of information for those considering studying at the College and a consortium-wide prospectus is also available. The College is responsible for the information produced on its website and ensures it is fit-for-purpose and trustworthy through regular reviews.

3.2 Students enrolled on a University programme are provided with an overarching programme handbook, individual module handbooks and a Definitive Module Document which provides information on assessment. The information is prepared by College staff in collaboration with the Link Tutor using standard templates and then approved by the University. Higher National students are signposted to the Pearson programme specifications and the College expects staff to provide students with an overall programme handbook and assignment briefs for each unit. Programme-specific information is made accessible through the VLE and in print during teaching sessions. The College also has a range of policies, procedures and handbooks which it provides to its staff and students for use as internal reference points. Processes are in place for the annual review and updating of information coordinated by the Higher Education Bursar and Head of Higher Education.

3.3 The review team tested this Expectation through a review of a sample of programme and module-level information provided to students across all higher education provision. The team also reviewed the College's website and met with staff and students.

3.4 The review team found that students are generally satisfied with the information provided to them both before arriving at the College and during their study. Students reported that the expectations built from the information they received as prospective students were met on their arrival. Key information sources, such as the website and prospectus, are checked by various members of staff to ensure the accuracy of the information, and students are invited to comment on the prospectus design.

3.5 Students on University awards are aware of the range of information available to them and can easily access handbooks and other useful programme information through the University's VLE. Higher National students find assignment briefs particularly helpful in guiding them in their assessment, and this is supplemented with verbal information provided by teaching staff. These students are also able to access relevant programme information, including handbooks and session notes, through the VLE.

3.6 A review of a sample of handbooks across all higher education programmes revealed some inconsistencies in format and content. For foundation degrees, some handbooks follow a standard University format and make specific reference to aims, learning outcomes and learning achievements, while others do not. The College provides standard guidelines for the preparation of handbooks for Higher National programmes; however, they vary in style, content and detail. In particular, the appeals process contained within

handbooks for Higher National programmes is inconsistent between handbooks and different from the documented process available to staff (see findings under Expectation B9).

3.7 The team also noted differences between the range of information provided for foundation degree students and Higher National students. For example, Higher National students are not aware of unit-level guides, only assignment briefs, and students the team met with acknowledged that more comprehensive written information is available for foundation degrees. The team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2014-15, the College review the range and function of handbooks available to students and develop a process for ensuring their quality and consistency.

3.8 Notwithstanding the inconsistencies in handbooks, students the team met were satisfied with the written and verbal information they receive about their programmes. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation has been met. However, there is a need for a more standardised approach to the provision of information to students and this has been acknowledged by the College. The team therefore considers the level of risk to be moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Quality of the information produced about its provision: Summary of findings

3.9 In reaching its judgement about the quality of the information the College produces about its provision, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook. The team found that the College uses a variety of methods to communicate information to prospective and current students and, overall, information is fit-for-purpose, accessible and trustworthy. However, there are some inconsistencies in the information provided in handbooks and the range of information available to higher education students across different types of provision. The team has made a recommendation to address the latter, but concluded that the level of risk is moderate as the College has acknowledged the need for action in this area. The review team therefore concludes that the quality of information **meets** UK expectations.

4 Judgement: Enhancement of student learning opportunities

Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Findings

4.1 The College's strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities is through its Strategic Plan 2013-16, the Higher Education Strategy and Plan, the Model for Teaching, Learning and Assessment, and the Student Involvement Strategy. These combined strategies are addressed through the Strategic Risk Register and the documents reinforce the College's commitment to placing students at the centre of their College experience and enhancing their learning opportunities.

4.2 The review team tested the College's strategic approach to taking deliberate steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities through a review of College strategies, minutes of relevant meetings and the student submission. The team also met with the Principal, staff and students to understand the College's strategic approach to enhancement.

4.3 The College, as a founder member of Gazelle Colleges Group, has established an entrepreneurial culture. This provides opportunities for students to learn through a wider network and creates an applied learning environment for all its students. Through the Gazelle network, College staff can bring examples emerging from industry to the College.

4.4 Recent strategically led developments at the College include a new VLE, a Link Lounge which is associated with the Gazelle initiative and 'an entrepreneurially designed Student Services department'. The Link Lounge provides employment opportunities for students which are either associated with their career aspirations or study themes and enable them to fit work around their studies. Various student support services are located within the Link Lounge and provide drop-in services for students. 'Student Crew' is a College initiative created by the student voice that provides opportunities for all students to gain paid employment at the College. Students the team met were highly complimentary about the initiative and provided several examples of the benefits to their learning and career development opportunities.

4.5 The College integrates initiatives such as work-based learning and developing employability skills in a systematic and planned manner across all its higher education provision (see findings under Expectation B3). The review team received comprehensive evidence of how the College engages with employers to enable students to develop relevant graduate attributes. The Higher National provision at the College is developed by listening to students and working closely with local employers, and is also based on providing academic progression opportunities for those students already at the College studying at level 3. Jobs on graduation are important for the College and students comment positively on their work-based learning experiences, which are explicitly embedded across all higher education provision.

4.6 The College's strategic approach to enhancement is effectively informed by the student voice. The Sabbatical Student President, currently a higher education student, is a member of the Senior Leadership Team and provides a channel through which student views are considered in strategic decision-making processes. Course representatives are invited to attend the Higher Education Committee where all higher education provision is discussed, although the team noted low attendance rates at these and other committee meetings where students are invited.

4.7 The Higher Education Committee acts as an effective forum for the identification and dissemination of good practice across programmes and different types of provision. For example, the Committee is currently considering how the good practice identified in University programmes and consortium practices might be applied to its Higher National provision. The College's interaction with other local colleges through the Consortium facilitates the sharing of good practice at College level, and discussions from consortium meetings are fed back through the Higher Education Committee.

4.8 The College is committed to enhancing learning opportunities for its students, and its strategic approach in this area focuses on providing contextualised work-based learning opportunities and developing employable graduates. Overall, the review team concludes that the College has taken deliberate steps to improve the quality of student learning opportunities, thus the Expectation is met and the level of risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.9 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook. The College has a clear and evidenced approach to the strategic enhancement of learning opportunities for its students, with a particular focus on enabling student development and achievement through entrepreneurship. Enhancement activities are also appropriately informed by the student voice.

4.10 The team did not identify any recommendations or good practice. However, the team acknowledges the positive impact of the good practice identified under Expectation B3 on this area: the effective way in which the emphasis on employability is used to contextualise teaching and learning, leading to the enhanced engagement of students. The team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

5.1 The College's Strategic Plan and its Higher Education Strategy and Plan outline the College's commitment to entrepreneurship and employability. The College is a founding member of the Gazelle Colleges Group which gives students opportunities to participate in innovative employability-enhancing opportunities such as competitions, events, employer engagement and meeting entrepreneurs.

5.2 Individual students are provided with comprehensive and tailored support to guide them in realising their career aspirations. The Link Lounge is a central part of the employability offer at the College, providing an opportunity for students to explore and discuss their career options and pathways. Students who have used the services on offer through the Link Lounge report positive experiences. The careers guidance service offered by the College gives students the opportunity to receive one-to-one careers advice, both in person and by email.

5.3 The College offers an 'earn while you learn' scheme, helping students to find employment either at the College, through the Student Crew initiative, or with other partners. The work is flexible around their study and allows students to balance their course while having a source of income, in turn developing their employability through additional work experience.

5.4 Student employability is effectively embedded across all curriculum areas and students value the exposure they gain to employment opportunities. Many programmes involve an element of work-based learning, which students find valuable in giving them access to real-world experience and helping them to contextualise theoretical knowledge (see findings under Expectation B3).

5.5 The College interacts with employers when designing new programmes and developing assessments for modules. This helps to ensure that students have the opportunity to develop graduate attributes desirable to employers and relevant to their field of study.

5.6 Overall, the review team found that the College has a number of varied and innovative approaches to effectively promote student employability across all its higher education provision. The team considers this to be a particular strength of the College and employability is the central focus for the College's enhancement activities.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 27 to 29 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality.

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

Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'. See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning.

Enhancement

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

Expectations

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

Flexible and distributed learning

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

Framework

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

Framework for higher education qualifications

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

Good practice

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

Learning opportunities

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

Learning outcomes

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

Multiple awards

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

Operational definition

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

Programme (of study)

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

Programme specifications

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

Public information

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

Quality Code

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

Reference points

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

Subject benchmark statement

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

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

Threshold academic standard

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **subject benchmark statements**.

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

Widening participation

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

QAA748 - R3717 - May 14

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2014
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel: 01452 557 000
Email: enquiries@qaa.ac.uk
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786