



Quality Review Visit of Northern Regional College

May 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Northern Regional College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Northern Regional College.

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

Areas for development

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

- develop a clear reporting mechanism to ensure that all academic appeal information is considered thematically by the Governing Body (Quality Code)
- ensure that all student representatives receive formal training (Quality Code).

Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any **specified improvements**.

About this review

The review visit took place from 1 to 3 May 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Mark Cooper
- Ms Diane Rainsbury
- Mrs Rebekah Osborne (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

- provide the relevant funding body with an expert judgement about the readiness of a provider to enter, or continue to operate within, the higher education sector.

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

- ensure that the student interest is protected
- provide expert advice to ensure that the reputation of the UK higher education system is protected, including the protection of degree standards
- identify development areas that will help a provider to progress through a developmental period and be considered 'established'.

Each review visit considers a provider's arrangements against relevant aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements, and in particular:

- the reliability of degree standards and their reasonable comparability with standards set and achieved by other providers
- the quality of the student academic experience, including student outcomes where the provider has a track record of delivery of higher education.

About Northern Regional College

Northern Regional College (the College) was established in 2007 following the merger of Causeway Institute, East Antrim Institute and the North East Institute. The College serves a large geographic area, covering two counties and four district councils in Northern Ireland. There are campuses in Ballymena, where there are two sites, as well as Coleraine, Ballymoney, Magherafelt and Newtownabbey.

At the time of the review the College had 1,259 higher education students. Of these, 319 were full-time students and 940 were part-time students. The College delivers higher education across 15 subject areas in partnership with two universities, Ulster University and Queen's University, Belfast; and delivers Higher National Certificates and Diplomas in conjunction with Pearson. In addition, the College delivers higher level apprenticeships and higher level professional courses accredited by five professional bodies; City & Guilds and Cisco.

The College's mission is to be an outstanding provider of training and further and higher education, focused on the needs of the modern economy. Its strategic priorities are informed by government strategies and are built around improving the student experience; driving continuous improvement and value for money through the effective use of resources; building a culture of innovation, enterprise and change in business processes; and engaging with external stakeholders.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 In partnership with its 10 awarding bodies and organisations, the College has effective arrangements and agreements in place to ensure that the academic standards of programmes meet those set out in the FHEQ and that programmes have been appropriately benchmarked.

2 The College assures itself that the academic standards for higher education programmes are at a level that meets or exceeds the UK threshold standard through the use of standardisation, internal verification processes, policies and practice.

3 To ensure comparability of academic standards with those of other higher education providers, the awarding bodies and organisations appoint external examiners/verifiers who comment explicitly on comparability in their reports. In addition to this, the College actively encourages academic staff to become external examiners/verifiers to support the development of their own internal setting and maintenance of academic standards.

4 The College is benchmarked against all six Northern Ireland colleges by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI) in respect of a range of key performance indicators including success, retention and achievement. This high-level data set allows the College to compare their provision effectively against other regional providers.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

5 The academic governance of the College is effectively maintained and overseen by the College's Governing Body. This meets six times a year to consider reports from its subcommittees, which consist of a Resources Committee, an Audit and Risk Committee and an Education Committee. The Chair of the Governing Body reviews individual Governor performance annually, while the DfENI reviews the Chair of Governors' performance.

6 The Education Committee reports directly to the Governing Body on higher education curriculum development, student outcomes and relevant Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The Education Committee is informed by the Teaching and Learning Committee, which receives reports from the Higher Education Forum. The student voice is captured through a range of methods and reported through various management levels to the Education Committee. This line of reporting enables the Governing Body to maintain effective oversight of academic governance.

7 The Audit and Risk Committee has oversight of the Risk Register and associated KPIs and meets quarterly to review the effectiveness of the College's identification of, and response to, academic risks. Detailed findings are presented to the Governing Body for consideration, thus enabling the College to maintain effective oversight of academic risk.

8 The protection of academic freedom and collegiality is explicitly written into lecturers' employment contracts. The College is also considering the introduction of a distinct policy pertaining to academic freedom and collegiality.

9 The College has a robust and embedded committee structure that enables clear lines of reporting to the Governing Body. This enables the Governing Body to maintain effective oversight of academic governance and risk.

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

10 The College works within the academic regulations and quality assurance processes of the relevant awarding bodies and organisations. There is consistent application of these processes in practice and staff are conversant with the detailed requirements relevant to their programme of study or range of responsibility.

11 Programme specifications follow the relevant requirements and template of the awarding bodies and organisations with appropriate references to external reference points; relevant Subject Benchmark Statements; admissions criteria; assessment weightings and allocated credits. Learning outcomes are clearly defined in the relevant programme specifications and Student Course Handbooks.

12 Where programmes are customised, the Student Course Handbook, contextualised to the programme, constitutes the definitive document, whereas the awarding body and organisation documentation is the principal source of reference for those programmes that are entirely prescribed.

13 Several Ulster University programmes are delivered as part of a Consortium with other colleges in Northern Ireland. There is clear evidence of the Consortium working effectively in practice with the active participation of academic staff facilitating further consistency of marking and academic standards, as well as providing an important mechanism for sharing good practice.

14 For all University awards, the College's response to external examiner reports is submitted to the relevant University. For Ulster University programmes, Subject Partner Managers work closely with the College to ensure qualifications are meeting the academic standards required.

15 The College has clear, documented processes governing assessment verification and standardisation relating to all awarding organisations including cross-College moderation. Equivalent processes for University awards are those of the relevant University. Academic staff at the College demonstrated close familiarity with these processes in practice, which are implemented consistently.

16 Consideration and action planning in response to external examiner/verifier' reports is effective at programme level, including through the self-evaluation report (SER) process, with relevant actions forming part of the overall Quality Improvement Plan. Action planning is also followed up during subsequent external examiner/verifier visits. Notwithstanding, the College acknowledged that it did not employ an institutional reporting mechanism identifying specific themes arising from external examiner/verifier reports. However, the College was aware of the benefits of undertaking such an analysis to support its role in managing and monitoring academic standards and had already identified it as an area for improvement.

17 Students have access to external examiner/verifier reports, mainly through the digital learning environment. Nonetheless, the review team found some variance in practice in how external examiner/verifier reports were disseminated; with students being generally unaware of where reports were located. The College recognises the advantages of developing a more consistent approach to the publication of external examiner/verifier reports and was already taking steps to address this. This included making all reports available in full and promoting greater awareness across the student community. The

College identified that a new post had been established with the appointee having lead responsibility to support this initiative and related projects.

18 All higher education programmes are subject to annual self-evaluation that provides an effective mechanism for monitoring academic standards. University-validated programmes follow the required University template and processes. An equivalent process is consistently applied to Pearson Higher National awards and appropriately reflects and focuses on academic standards. The College has a comparable template and reporting process for its other higher education programmes through the SER. In all instances, there is effective consideration of a wide range of data as a means of monitoring standards and identifying areas for improvement.

19 The College has effective reporting mechanisms to monitor academic standards and the effectiveness and appropriateness of programme delivery, taking account of a wide range of indicators. This includes appropriate reporting at programme, management and Governing Body level with a summary of complaints presented annually to the College's Senior Leadership Team and Audit and Risk Committee.

20 However, the review team notes one exception in relation to the reporting of relevant themes arising from the academic appeals process and any subsequent findings. While the findings from appeals are reported through the Higher Education Forum, there is no routine reporting at Governing Body level. The review team acknowledges there have been very few academic appeals to date and none that merited a potential risk or proceeded to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO). Nonetheless, the team considers that a thematic, high level analysis of any findings together with suitable reflection on the process would be beneficial for consideration by the Governing Body. The review team advises the College to develop a clear reporting mechanism to ensure that all academic appeal information is considered thematically by the Governing Body, identifying this as an **area for development**.

Rounded judgement

21 The academic standards of higher education courses are set by the awarding bodies and organisations and managed through appropriate mechanisms. The College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards through its governance structures, internal processes and procedures; and adherence to the regulations of the awarding bodies and organisations. There are no specified improvements in this area.

22 The review team identified one area for development in this area that relates to developing a clear reporting mechanism for academic appeal information to enable the Governing Body to consider this information thematically.

23 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

24 The College introduced an Online Admissions System in 2015 to facilitate admissions to all College programmes. This is supported by a comprehensive Admissions Policy that ensures consistency, transparency and manages the expectations of applicants in terms of time-frames.

25 The College has produced an online training video for staff to support consistent application of the Admissions Policy. Course Coordinators and Directors offer places based on date of application and entry criteria, which is clearly published within the online and printed prospectus. Students commented that the recruitment, admissions and selection process is clear and transparent and reflects their experiences throughout the process.

26 The Head of Student Experience (HoSE) is the senior manager with responsibility for the coordination of the student experience across the College. Three supporting forums, the Work-Based Learning (WBL) Forum; Schools Engagement and Student Recruitment Forum and Higher Education Forum feed into the College's Teaching and Learning Committee, which in turn reports to the Education Committee where the quality of the student experience is monitored at the highest level. There is a Students' Union Higher Education Officer who sits on the Higher Education Forum and provides vital input.

27 Programme self-evaluation is data driven and formal reports are shared with partner universities. SERs are completed at programme, department and College level, reviewed by Heads and Assistant Heads of Department and feed into the whole College Quality Improvement Plan which is reviewed by the Governing Body.

28 The College has a range of methods for engaging students and collecting and responding to their feedback. At a strategic level, the Students' Union President acts as the Student Governor and is a member of the College's Governing Body. Student surveys, Student Union engagement, the student representative system, combined campus walks with senior managers and also staff-student consultative meetings are formal mechanisms used to collate a full picture of the student experience from pre-induction to graduation. The DfENI has also introduced standardised questions in two of the College's student surveys in order to benchmark results across the six Northern Ireland colleges.

29 Each cohort elects a student representative who can raise issues and provide feedback to the Course Coordinator/Director regarding the quality of the students' experience. Student representative's attend staff-student consultative meetings to highlight issues affecting the student body and if issues are not resolved at a local level are escalated up through the committee structure. Students the team met confirmed that they felt their voice was heard at all levels of the College and that they were provided with ample opportunity to give feedback. They were also aware of actions taken in relation to student feedback.

30 Student representative training is provided by the Student Engagement Officer; however, the review team noted that not all student representatives had received formal training. The College explained that the dispersed nature of higher education students, including the dispersed higher education timetables, posed challenges for student representatives attending training in person and while online training had been put in place to address this, there was no tracking system which could identify who had undertaken training. The College identified this as an area for improvement and highlighted that campus

based Higher Education Officers could be trained to provide flexible and bespoke training to student representatives. The review team therefore advises the College to ensure that all student representatives receive formal training, identifying this as an **area for development**.

31 Students are given formal written feedback on assessments and this is used to help inform future assessments. Peer assessment sometimes informs part of the overall grade for a module and some areas have adopted this approach in conjunction with their partner university where appropriate.

32 Learning support and resources available to students help them successfully achieve in their studies. During induction the student services team highlight all support services available, including how to apply for an assessment for learning support, which some students subsequently access. The College also provides access to a confidential student counselling service. Students spoke positively of the range and quality of academic and pastoral support available to them.

33 Course validation events and the SER processes ensure students have access to appropriate physical resources on their courses to help them meet learning outcomes. The College has invested in computing resources including the development of WiFi access within key areas of the College and students are encouraged to bring their own devices for learning and research purposes. Course teams are responsible for the development and population of resources on the College's digital learning environment and this is supported by departmental Digital Learning Mentors. These Mentors drive forward the Digital Learning Strategy within each curriculum department. The Digital Learning Team monitors and assesses usage of electronic resources by staff and students and develops resources in response to demand.

34 Students on Ulster University validated programmes also have access to university resources (physical and virtual) including libraries and sports facilities; however, some students have had trouble in accessing these services. Student surveys ask students for their views and feedback regarding resources. At College level, 89 per cent of students reported in the 2017-18 Student Induction Survey that they agreed with the statement: 'I have good support to help me learn and progress'. This is an improvement of 3 per cent from the previous academic year.

35 College policy is for all teaching staff to have a university degree, or a level 5 qualification along with three years' relevant industrial experience. Newly appointed permanent teaching staff who do not hold a teaching qualification are required to complete a teaching qualification within the first three years of appointment. They are further supported by Teaching Mentors, appraisal and the classroom observation scheme. The College supports scholarly activity and eligible staff to apply to become Fellows and Associate Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. Staff are also encouraged to up-skill in non-teaching time and if possible undertake placements. Staff involved in university-validated programmes are also invited to attend associated university training and staff conferences. Teaching and classroom observation helps support the development of teachers with associated personal action plans, monitored formally by the relevant Assistant Head of Department.

36 The College engages well with employers and external stakeholders to support improvements in their provision and the quality of the student academic experience. During programme validation processes the College seeks feedback from employers regarding programme content. Employers also provide work placement and experience opportunities and the College supports students in securing places. Students expressed a high level of

satisfaction with the management of work placements, including effective monitoring by the College, in conjunction with the employer, regarding their progress and the associated supporting documentation made available to them to support their experience.

37 Embedded into the curriculum are activities that include international visits, guest speakers, industrial visits, skills competitions, student placements, student international links and visits. Similarly, the DfENI and Ulster University provide opportunities for staff to engage in knowledge transfer and support innovation.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

38 The College operates a complaints policy which is fair, transparent, and easily accessible on the website, digital learning environment, student intranet and Student Course Handbooks. Students are also made aware of this policy during induction. All formal complaints are recorded by the College's Quality Unit. The policy includes specified stages, timescales, Responsible Owners and template letters to ensure that complaints are dealt with effectively and that the welfare of the student is secured. Students are encouraged to resolve complaints informally in the first instance. If complaints cannot be resolved informally the complaints procedure sets out the steps by which a formal complaint may be made.

39 The College has effective arrangements in place to encourage student involvement in academic governance. The Student Union president fulfils the role of Student Governor and sits on the Governing Body. The Student Governor receives in-depth and appropriate training to enable them to carry out their role effectively and are continually supported throughout their time on the Governing Body. Each campus also has its own Higher Education Officer who reports directly to the Student President to ensure that the higher education student voice is clearly articulated and represented at Governor level. The President and Higher Education Officer also sit on the Higher Education Forum, which reports to the Education Committee, which in turn reports directly to the Governing Body.

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

40 The College works with 10 separate awarding bodies and organisations governing the delivery of its higher education programmes and their associated regulatory and quality assurance frameworks. The College reviewed its terms and conditions to ensure Competition and Markets Authority compliance and implemented changes as a consequence. All documented policies and procedures, including any proposed changes, are also subject to equality screening and are available in accessible formats.

41 Responsibility for admissions and the production of marketing and promotional material is delegated to the College. There is a documented Admissions Policy that provides a clear framework for the provision of information and procedures to be followed at all stages of the recruitment and admissions process to facilitate fair admission. An admissions appeal process is clearly laid out within this. All applicants have access to the Complaints Policy, with details of how to access it and all relevant stages plainly set out and documented. Induction also provides an important opportunity to direct students to complaints and appeals processes.

42 Information on the College website is presented accurately and consistently with detailed protocols for securing the accuracy of information. The College identified plans to extend such mechanisms to the digital learning environment.

43 Applicants receive comprehensive information to ensure that they are fully informed about the nature of the programme and any important terms and conditions that may have influenced their choice or location of study. The College website is the primary source to which applicants and prospective applicants are directed and provides comprehensive information relating to the admissions process, facilities and services and course-related information. Programme-specific information and details of the application process are also provided at various intervals in the admissions process through the online admissions system. Students reported that staff were accessible, helpful and responsive to queries that arose throughout the recruitment and admissions process.

44 Students expressed satisfaction with the comprehensive range of information they received from the College and its accuracy both as applicants and while on programme. All students are required to agree to the College's terms and conditions on enrolment and there is effective practice to ensure applicants are fully apprised of them during the admissions process.

45 Student-facing publications are written in an accessible style that is assured and supported through a consultative process with students prior to issue. The College also intends to implement further student consultation as part of periodic review of its terms and conditions to ensure continued fairness and accessibility.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's (NIPSO) Principles of Good Administration

46 The College has a policy concerning course change, closure and cancellation, which is easily accessible for internal and external stakeholders on the website. The College has effective systems in place to communicate changes to students and applicants. Students the team met confirmed that they had been informed and consulted about material changes to their course.

47 The College has not had to close any higher education programmes to date but staff confirmed that the College has supported other colleges in the past when programme closures occurred at level 3. The same process would apply to supporting students studying on higher education programmes.

48 The College has separate and distinct Complaints and Assessment Appeals Policies. These are accessible to applicants and the public on the College website, and to enrolled students on the digital learning environment and in Student Course Handbooks. Students are made aware of the policies at induction and are effectively supported through the process by members of staff. The policies set out clear timescales and the Complaints Policy was recently updated to include escalation to the Senior Leadership Team, which ensures that complaints are dealt with in a timely manner.

49 Students confirmed that complaints are often resolved informally but that they were aware of the policy and procedure and some cited experience of engaging with it. There was more limited awareness of recourse to the awarding body and NIPSO once the College procedure had been exhausted.

50 The Complaints Policy confirms that complaints processes are appropriately independent and confidential with senior members of staff not directly connected to the complaint involved. In the event of an assessment appeal the process requires the responsible manager within the curriculum to take the matter forward. If the appeal is not resolved the curriculum manager appoints two managers who have not been directly connected with the student's appeal to form a panel. Staff are appropriately trained to investigate complaints and appeals and the outcomes of appeals and complaints are considered by the Quality Unit to ensure parity and proportionality.

51 The Quality Unit records the number and nature of complaints received by the College and the response times, outcomes and impact. A summary report is prepared and this is considered by the College's Senior Leadership Team and Risk and Audit Committee who present the findings to the Governing Body annually for consideration. Where formal complaints are upheld, the Responsible Owners are required to provide recommendations to improve the student experience.

Rounded judgement

52 The College has demonstrated through its governance structures, internal policies and procedures that it effectively meets all the baseline regulatory requirements in this area. There are no specified improvements in this judgement area. There is one area for development in which activity is already underway. This relates to the need to take steps to ensure that all student representatives receive formal training.

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

QAA2233 - R9961 - Aug 18

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2018
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557050
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk