Quality Review Visit of Northumberland College

May 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Northumberland College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Northumberland 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 Northumberland College. The review team advises Northumberland College to:

- put in place measures to improve the consistency and completeness of meeting minutes to ensure that committee and board decisions are accurately recorded (Codes of Governance)
- further develop and clarify the approval process for new Pearson programmes (Codes of Governance)
- produce a single definitive document for each Pearson award (Quality Code)
- further develop specific formal representation for higher education students within the College's deliberative committees (Codes of Governance)
- ensure clarity and fullness in information provided to students to enable them to make informed decisions (Consumer Protection)
- puts in place a clear APL/APEL procedure that will guide applicants of Higher National programmes (Consumer Protection)
- put measures in place to improve the consistency of how information is being disseminated regarding course closures (Student Protection).

Specified improvements

The review team identified no **specified improvements**.

About this review

The review visit took place from 15 to 16 May 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Hastings McKenzie
- Mrs Catherine Symonds
- Mrs Sala Khulumula.

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 Northumberland College

Northumberland College (the College) is a general Further Education College established in 1957 and delivering higher education since 2003. It is the only institution of its type in Northumberland with its main campus in the more populace town of Ashington, land-based provision based at the Kirkley Hall campus and other provision at Berwick-Upon-Tweed.

The College offers provision awarded by Pearson, Newcastle University (NU), the University of Cumbria (UoC) and the University of Huddersfield (UoH); the latter validating its teacher education provision. The College recently received funding to create a new STEM centre which will allow it to develop education opportunities in engineering and technology for which there is a local and regional need. The College works closely with the North East Local Enterprise Partnership (NELEP) and local employers to meet the needs of the Northumberland County Council Local Plan for development of the region.

The College is situated in an area of social, economic and educational deprivation. The local economy is still very dependent on hospitality and tourism for which the College provides progression from its further education provision to Higher National programmes. The College has a strong record of providing programmes in travel and tourism, agriculture, horticulture, conservation, animal management and equestrian studies which meet regional need to upskill the workforce and support self-employment. The College has developed programmes in Health and Social Care to meet the demands of an ageing local population. Higher National Programmes in Engineering and a new programme in Applied Chemistry are designed to meet regional demands for newer industries and a more diverse economy. Opportunities in the arts are provided by Higher National programmes in art and design,

fashion and textiles and photography. The gender imbalance: 76 per cent female to 24 per cent male, has been partly addressed by the introduction of Higher National programmes in Sports Coaching, Public Services, and IT and Computing. Full-time foundation degrees were offered from 2015 with Level 6 top-ups from 2017.

The local area served by the College is particularly deprived with only 24 per cent of the population holding qualifications at Level 4 or above (4 per cent below national average). It is in an area designated as a higher education 'cold spot' with 11 out of 14 local schools having lower than expected progression to higher education. Much of this area is included in the 10 per cent most deprived areas in England for health, education, skills and training but with some small areas of relative affluence.

The College currently has 308 higher education students (162 full-time and 146 part-time) which is an increase of 65 over the past two years.

Higher education provision comprises: FdSc Equestrian Performance and Coaching, FdSc Animal Management, FdSc Arboriculture, FdSc Horticulture, FdSc Environmental Conservation, BSc Equestrian Performance and Coaching, BSc Animal Management, BSc Arboriculture, BSc Horticulture, BSc Environmental Conservation, BA Childhood, Family and Youth Studies, HNC/D Health and Social Care, HNC Sports Coaching, HNC Public Services, HNC IT and Computing, HND Art and design, HND Fashion and Textiles, HND Photography, FdA Childhood Workforce Practice, HE Diploma Counselling, FdA Counselling, FdSc Event Management, PGCE/Cert. ED, HNC Hospitality Management, HNC/D Travel and Tourism, and HNC Engineering.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1   The College uses relevant regulatory frameworks of its three university partners; courses are mapped to Subject Benchmark Statements as reference points and all the programmes are designed to meet the required FHEQ at the relevant level with responsibilities detailed in individual partnership agreements. Programme specifications and student handbooks make explicit reference to the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements and learning outcomes are clearly defined by the programme and module specifications.

2   The College also offers HNCs and HNDs awarded by Pearson, and it adheres to guidance and procedures for their programmes. Pearson retains responsibility for the designing and approval of the qualifications while the College maintains responsibility for the design of assessments and learning materials as well as engaging in internal validation processes for new programmes.

3   The awarding bodies and organisation retain ultimate responsibility for allocating each qualification to the appropriate level of the FHEQ and for considering subject benchmarks and other relevant frameworks. The review team therefore found that the College has in place arrangements that meet its awarding bodies' and awarding organisation's requirements to ensure that the academic standards of the programmes offered meets or exceeds the UK threshold standard for the qualifications offered, as set out by the FHEQ.

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

4   The College has effective governance arrangements which are in line with the Association of Colleges (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges. The College stated that the Governing Body has ultimate accountability for the quality and standards of the higher education provision. There is appropriate higher education expertise within the membership of the Governing Body. The organisational structure includes staff with specific responsibility for higher education. The HE Committee structure which includes the Curriculum and Quality Committee, Academic Board and HE Strategy Group ensures oversight of higher education strategy and operation. The College has an effective relationship with its awarding bodies and organisation and areas of responsibility are clearly understood.

5   The team reviewed meeting minutes and had some difficulty in determining how certain committees were exercising their responsibilities as described in the terms of reference. This was a consequence of a lack of consistency in minute and note taking, resulting in some inaccuracy and/or incomplete recording in the minutes of meetings. While the papers presented at meetings were comprehensive the specific decisions that had been made at certain meetings were not always clear in terms of the College's ability to accurately record assessment decisions, programme approvals and programme withdrawals. It was explained to the review team that this was mainly due to an administrative staff absence, which has now been addressed and no risk to academic standards was identified. The review team advises that the College put in place measures to improve the consistency and completeness of meeting minutes to ensure that committee and board decisions are

accurately recorded is an **area of development**.

6   The College has a validation process for Pearson programmes but once this process is complete the location of final authority for the formal approval was unclear. While the College identified that this approval was the responsibility of the Academic Board there was confusion as to when certain programmes had been approved due largely to the inconsistencies in the recording of meetings. The review team advises that the College further develop and clarify the formal approval process for new Pearson programmes is an **area for development**.

7   The College is committed to academic freedom and collegiality. A newly introduced system of peer review and dialogue enables staff to identify areas they wish to develop. An evaluation of this approach is the responsibility of the Curriculum and Quality committee. This activity is in addition to staff having considerable autonomy for the content of modules and units, assessment, and opportunity for scholarly research.

8   The College maintains oversight of academic risk effectively. The Governing Body approves and monitors the overall College risk register. The use of an annual HE self-evaluation document (SED) and quality improvement plan (QIP) along with clear College procedures ensures a detailed consideration of all aspects of provision and hence academic risk at all levels within the organisation.

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

9   The College is effective at operating within the arrangements agreed with its three awarding bodies and organisation to help set and maintain the academic standards of awards.

10   The College shares certain responsibilities with its awarding bodies for programme development, approval and review. The College provided detailed examples of its internal approval processes, and of the robust and rigorous documentation necessary to complete the formal approval requirements of its awarding bodies and organisation. Reference points include the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements and Pearson centre-defined programme specifications. Students and local employers were consulted when the College was considering the new Pearson provision. The awarding bodies and organisation maintain overall responsibility for programme approval and review, ensuring that UK threshold qualification standards are met.

11   Programme handbooks and programme specifications define the outcomes, structure and content of each awarding body programme. The review team was informed that once the College had approved a new Pearson programme, the definitive documentation then comprised the programme handbook, unit specifications and the awarding organisation's programme specification. This documentation set did not specify the College's overall expectations for each award only for each unit and within the programme handbook programme aims and learning outcomes are only briefly outlined. Pearson expects Centres to develop their own programme specifications as detailed in the BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment 2017-18: Levels 4 to 7 (QCF). The review team advises that the College produce a single definitive document for each Pearson award, identifying this as an **area for development**.

12   The College is effective in assessing that students have achieved threshold academic standards. Their responsibilities for the setting, marking and moderation of assessments are specified in partnership agreements and external examiners appointed by the awarding bodies and organisation confirmed that threshold standards were met or exceeded. The College responds to all external examiner reports and refers to them

alongside a wider student achievement data set and feedback as part of their annual SED and QIP monitoring and review processes.

13   The awarding bodies convene assessment boards that are attended by College staff while for Pearson programmes the College convenes its own assessment boards. An external examiner's report noted that it was difficult to determine specific assessment decisions from the minutes of a 2016-17 College assessment board. The College identified this concern in its higher education SED and actions are in place to increase staff attendance and improve the recording of assessment decisions.

14   The College has effective arrangements for managing admissions and adopts a personalised approach to providing advice and guidance to students on their higher education study options. Students reported that they found the approach, which includes an interview for all applicants, informative and supportive. The College relies upon the accreditation of prior learning policies of its awarding bodies but its own policy does not cover its Pearson higher education provision. As virtually all students on Pearson programmes progress directly from the College's own further education programmes, there have been no recent applications for accreditation of prior learning.

Rounded judgement

15   The College provides valuable opportunities for progression to higher education in an area of low achievement of qualifications necessary to improve its economy. It is developing relevant curricula to meet employers' needs in partnership with three awarding universities and organisation. In doing so it follows the regulations and procedures of the universities according to their agreements. The procedures followed on its Pearson programmes are less clear but do not appear to affect the maintenance of academic standards at present and actions are being taken to address this. The team identified some inconsistencies and inaccuracies in notes of meetings and some other documents, which did not put the governance structure at risk and is being addressed.

16   The review team identified a number of areas for development; to put in place measures to improve the consistency and completeness of meeting minutes to ensure that committee and board decisions are accurately recorded; to further develop and clarify the approval process for new Pearson programmes and to produce a single definitive document for each Pearson award.

17   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)

18   The student academic experience is maintained effectively by appropriate policies, procedures and mechanisms that underpin the overall student learning experience. The College's approach is outlined in the College higher education cycle, the Quality Procedures Manual and in the committee structure terms of reference. Reference is made to the awarding bodies, where required, in line with the relevant Memorandum of Understanding. The Director of Higher Education is responsible for managing the quality of the provision and the Governing Body has overall responsibility for quality and standards. The Governing Body receives reports and minutes considered by the Curriculum and Quality Committee and Academic Boards. In order to facilitate oversight an overall annual College Self-Evaluation Document is produced for consideration at the Curriculum and Quality Committee and Governing Body. This document includes an analysis of the individual programme self-evaluation documents and results in the production of a Quality Improvement Plan. Close attention is given to data associated with student enrolment, progression, outcomes and withdrawals. Progress against the improvement plan is routinely monitored. The team were confident that the approach to the management and monitoring of the student academic experience is in line with the expectations of the Quality Code.

19   The review team found that the College actively engages with its students across various levels of governance. Higher education students are represented on the majority of relevant College committees and there are plans to ensure higher education student representation on the Academic Board in future.

20   The College has a number of mechanisms for obtaining student feedback. In addition to reports received within committees from student representatives. Information is obtained from the NSS, module questionnaires and other cross programme surveys. The introduction of a Lead Student Representative for each of the three College campuses for this academic year had been a successful initiative as students have an additional focus for feedback at their place of study. Students confirmed that there were a range of both formal and informal mechanisms for providing feedback and that they worked effectively.

21   Some students were concerned that while there were ample opportunities to provide feedback they did not always receive a response. While the introduction of an online 'You said, we did' mechanism was useful staff are aware that they must ensure a consistent approach to the provision of information to students in response to their feedback. Plans are in place to ensure this happens in future. Students have raised concerns about IT resources in specific locations and the physical resources associated with certain programmes. The College has made a number of recent changes and have clearly articulated plans to respond to these concerns. Students confirmed that improvements had been made and they were aware of the plans to further develop resources.

22   The College operates formal and supportive processes for the observation of learning and teaching. Associated feedback and appraisal systems identify improvement opportunities for teachers that lead to relevant professional development activities including obtaining post graduate teaching qualifications. Teaching staff have scholarly research targets which are reviewed annually. Staff involved in the delivery of higher education also undertakes College professional staff development activities and attend activities organised by awarding bodies. The newly established HE Community of Practice provides a further forum for consideration of academic matters related to programme activities and the sharing

of the outcomes of scholarly activity. Staff were enthusiastic about the range of opportunities available to help develop their approach to teaching and learning and areas of research.

23   The stated mission of the College includes a commitment to an employer-led curriculum. As a consequence the College provides a range of programmes that meet the needs of the employers and communities it serves. The students confirmed that their academic experience is underpinned by close links with employers. Students are either in employment while undertaking their programme of study, undertake placement(s) or, in the case of art students, work on live projects with local organisations. Appropriate systems are in place to ensure that students and employers are appropriately supported. The students commented favourably on the support available to individual students by tutors but believed that the College could further develop the placement support mechanism to ensure it more effectively meets their needs.

24   There is a clear process in place to ensure that the information is clear, accurate and accessible. The Director of Higher Education has overall responsibility for the provision of information about higher education. A matrix details who has responsibility for the various aspects of public information, who provides the input and how it is reported. As an example the Head of Marketing has responsibility for the provision of information about higher education available on the website and in the hard copy prospectus. Regular audits are undertaken of the external facing website and of the information available to students on the virtual learning environment (VLE). The College is moving to a new platform from September 2018 and is using this as an opportunity to further enhance the information provided. The review team is aware that further clarification is required in some specific areas of information around APEL, complaints and appeals which is being addressed.

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

25   There is a higher education Lead Student Representative for each campus location and the review team learned how they meet with course teams and other student representatives during the academic year to discuss and help resolve issues affecting students. The College has two student governors that sit on the Board of Governors but at the time of the review the College did not have a higher education student governor. The review team learned that higher education students only attend the HE Strategy Board but noted that the College had plans to introduce student representation at Academic Board. The review team advises that the College further develop specific formal representation for higher education students within the College's deliberative committees and this is an **area for development**.

26   Students have access to information about complaints and academic appeals in programme handbooks with College policy documentation available on the VLE. Although this information lacks some completeness and consistency, the review team concludes that College's governance arrangements address student welfare with the higher education SED providing an annual overview of complaints and appeals for Governors.

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

27   The College website is the main source of information to prospective students on programmes the College offers, with the mission and vision clearly visible. The Higher Education courses page has links to the fact sheet summary of each programme. Each provides a clear outline of the entry requirements, delivery mode, units, progression routes and (where available) UNISTATS widgets, with a link to the full course handbook/

programme specification. The Director of Higher Education oversees all information regarding CMA and all higher education public information. The team noted that for Higher National courses, the information provided varies with some programmes giving full details on units that students will take on the programme, while others have not preselected the units or have no unit information at all. The students the team met confirmed that they received the full programme outline and specifications at admissions and induction. The review team therefore recommends that the College ensures clarity and fullness in information provided to students to enable them to make informed decisions as an **area for development**.

28   Students applying for full-time programmes apply through UCAS while those applying for part-time programmes apply through the College's application form online. Prospective students are interviewed and students with additional needs are identified and referred to the ALS staff. Students are then given an offer/rejection letter with the next steps outlined including the terms of conditions, course information and the process for making a complaint or appeal the decision.

29   There is a clear admissions policy and appeals process for the higher education programmes which indicates that overall responsibility for admissions and recruitment lies with the Director of Student Services. Student terms and conditions are accessible online and made available to students at application. The admissions process entails written communication on acceptance/denial onto the programme and the next steps and relevant terms and conditions with links to the fact sheet page. The College's arrangements ensure that the approach to admissions is consistent and transparent.

30   The admissions policy is supported by the complaints policy, APL/RPL policy, fee policy, FOI policy, data protection policy, equality and diversity policy. Higher education APEL requests are considered at the academic board. The College APL/RPL policy is designed for further education programmes and it indicates that students on higher education programmes will be referred to the relevant awarding body. Students applying for the Pearson Higher National programmes have to follow the College's internal APEL policy and in the documents provided the team recognised Pearson guidance to writing an APL/RPL policy, while the HE APL/APEL policy and procedure provided also reads as a guidance document. The team therefore advises the College to puts in place a clear APL/APEL procedure that will guide applicants of Higher National programmes as an **area for development**.

31   The College is externality accredited through the Matrix accreditation process with regards to the quality of information provided to students.

32   The College Complaints and Appeals policy is available online with links in the prospectus and the VLE sites and highlighted at induction. Complaints follow a 4 tier process of informal complaints, formal complaints, appeals and independent review; students having exhausted the College processes are encouraged to follow the awarding body's complaints procedures, while those on Pearson programmes are signposted to the OIA. Complaints are monitored in Academy School Boards of Study, Senior Management Team, and Governors meetings with regular evaluations to inform improvement strategies. All complaints are overseen and recorded in a Complaints Register held securely in the Quality Office; examples were given by both staff and students that showed positive changes as a result of student feedback.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) Good Practice Framework, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's (PHSO) Principles of Good Administration, and HEFCE's Statement of Good Practice on Higher Education Course Changes and Closures

33   The student protection policy details support on course closures, course changes and the cancellation policy, with the Governing Body approving the overall College Risk register to monitor progress on course closures, additions and amendments. Course closures are discussed at the Academic Board and the team were informed that the College is currently closing eight of its programmes. The staff the team met stated that they follow policy on course closures and they inform students verbally and update them on the progress; while the students the team met had varying experiences with some not immediately included in the communication loop while others felt included in the process. Due to the disparity in the communication of information on course closures, the review team advises the College to put measures in place to improve the consistency of how information is being disseminated regarding course closures as an **area for development**. The team refers to its earlier area for development that the College ensures clarity and fullness in information provided to students to enable them to make informed decisions.

34   All complaints and appeals are monitored at the academic board. Academic Appeals follow the guidelines of the awarding organisation or body. If students are not happy with the outcomes of the complaint or appeal, students are directed towards the procedures of the awarding body for students on university accredited programmes, while those on the Pearson programmes follow the College's regulations and are advised by the independent reviewers on taking the issue further. All students are advised that they can take complaints to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator.

35   The College has in place an academic appeals process and the College's processes for academic appeal are accessible on the VLE and in student handbooks. However, the academic appeal processes provided to students does not consistently refer to the associated processes of the awarding body or organisation should the processes of the College be exhausted. The review team learned that students had raised academic appeals within the College but upon the processes being concluded the students had been advised that there was no further option for appeal. The review team noted that the College's policies on complaints and appeals do not include explicit reference to the awarding bodies and organisation processes. The team, therefore, reiterates that the College ensures clarity and fullness in information provided to students to enable them to make informed decisions as an area for development.

Rounded judgement

36   The College demonstrates effective processes to monitor and enhance the student experience which was supported by students met by the team. There were some inconsistencies identified in information given to applicants and students particularly on Pearson programmes but the team felt, that while there are areas for development, students were generally given appropriate information. As almost all higher education students have progressed from the College's own further education courses students were able to access most relevant information prior to enrolment.

37   The review team identified a number of areas for development: to ensure clarity and fullness in information provided to students including that on course closures to enable them to make informed decisions; to put in place a clear APL/APEL procedure that will guide applicants of Higher National programmes; to further develop specific formal representation for higher education students within the College's deliberative committees

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