



Quality Review Visit of Nottingham College

October 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Nottingham College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Nottingham 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 Nottingham College. The review team advises Nottingham College in the light of the new developments generated by the merger to:

- fully implement the mechanism for maintaining the currency of programmes in relation to relevant external reference points (FHEQ)
- embed and systematically review the effectiveness of the new institutional oversight of the monitoring of academic standards (Quality Code)
- ensure that staff fully understand and engage with the course approval process (Quality Code)
- strengthen the use of data in the monitoring of academic standards to more effectively focus on emerging trends (Quality Code)
- complete the implementation of the module level review process to involve students in the evaluation of their learning experience (Quality Code)
- ensure that all work placements are subject to policies and procedures which are applied consistently (Quality Code)
- further develop specific formal representation for higher education students within the College's deliberative committees (Code of Governance)
- ensure all planned developments for the new College website result in accurate and accessible public information (Consumer Protection).

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 3 to 5 October 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Miss Maxina Butler-Holmes
- Mr Peter Hymans
- Mr John Simpson (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 Nottingham College

Nottingham College was formed on 8 June 2017 as a result of a merger between New College Nottingham and Central College. The College delivers higher education provision across seven campuses in the Nottingham area. At the time of the review visit the College had 934 higher education students, of whom 596 were full-time and 338 were part-time.

The College's higher education provision is delivered on behalf of three awarding bodies; Nottingham Trent University, which is the predominant partner for provision across the College; the University of Derby and Middlesex University. There is one awarding organisation, Pearson Education. There are 43 higher education programmes delivered across the faculties of Construction; Creative Arts; Lifestyle; Professional and the Visitor Economy; Science and Care; Sixth Form and International; Sport and Catering; Teaching and Technology. Provision includes full honours undergraduate degrees; foundation degrees; Higher Apprenticeships and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The awarding bodies and awarding organisation retain overall responsibility for the academic standards of their awards and either provide the programme specifications for the College or validate those written by the College. In either case there is clear alignment with the FHEQ, relevant Subject Benchmark Statements and the foundation degree qualification characteristics where appropriate.

2 Middlesex University and the University of Derby have approved continuation of the existing contract to the merged College however these programmes are closing and on teach-out. Currently the College is running Higher National programmes under pre-merger centre approval from Pearson but have applied for single centre registration.

3 Nottingham Trent University (NTU) undertook a combined Interim Periodic Collaborative Review (IPCR) for both predecessor colleges prior to merger which provided for validation extensions up to 2019. The review included recommendations including the benchmarking of foundation degree courses against the QAA Foundation Degree Characteristics Statement (2015) and ensuring that all courses are formally reviewed against the most recent subject benchmarks. Additionally, the review recommended that the College strengthen mechanisms to ensure continued alignment to national standards and benchmarks. In response to this the College has reviewed its programme specifications against the statements and delegated responsibility for maintaining currency to Course Committees. The University confirmed that the College has responded appropriately to its recommendations. All NTU validated programmes at the College will be revalidated in a programme of events due to complete in early 2019.

4 The review team advises the College to fully implement the mechanism for maintaining the currency of programmes in relation to relevant external reference points such as the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements and qualification statements, identifying this as an **area for development**.

5 The College has updated its internal approval process for 2017-18. The process includes the production of a plan including evidence of demand for the new programme, an implementation plan, resourcing, and employer engagement.

6 To ensure comparability of academic standards with those of other UK higher education providers the awarding bodies and organisation appoint external examiners and verifiers. Comparability of academic standards across the provision is achieved through monitoring at institutional level by means of the annual monitoring procedures with oversight from the Academic Board and the Academic Standards and Quality Committee (ASQC).

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

7 The College's Corporation Board consists of 13 members including staff and students and at least two members have significant experience of higher education. The Board has adopted a Carver model of governance and meets once a month in order to discharge its duty. The Board is supported by a range of deliberative committees.

8 The newly formed Academic Board, chaired by the Vice Principal Curriculum, has responsibility for the strategic direction of higher education; provides updates to the College's Senior Leadership Team and the Corporation Board and approves new policies and revisions to existing academic policies. The Academic Board has oversight of all academic provision through the Higher Education Academic Governance Framework and quality management and enhancement mechanisms.

9 The College's risk register includes higher education. The higher education action plan is scrutinised regularly by the Corporation Board and the Audit Committee, a subcommittee of the Board, which has oversight of the College's risk. The Corporation Board also receives termly information regarding higher education through the Curriculum and Quality Report.

10 The Corporation Board confirms that academic staff are supported in relation to academic freedom and collegiality and this is echoed through the College's values. In meetings with the review team, academic members of staff were able to demonstrate ways in which the College has supported them in maintaining academic freedom.

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

11 The College adheres to the regulatory frameworks, reporting arrangements and quality assurance procedures of its awarding bodies and organisation. Reporting layers, from strategic to programme level relationships, operate effectively between the College and its University partners. Institutional level feedback on University partnerships and Pearson provision is received through the Senior Leadership Team and Academic Board which also monitor the institutional level Validated College Standards Quality Review (VCSQR).

12 Deliberative structures are appropriate, however, the academic governance framework has only recently been introduced and new structures have yet to be embedded. The Academic Board has met following the merger of the two Colleges and approved several policies, therefore exercising its remit for academic standards, curricular review and policy developments. The ASQC provides operational level assurance and a reference point for staff. Quality Management Committees and Course Committee meetings take place within the faculties. Course Committees, which replaced the previous Course Reviews, were introduced following a recommendation in the IPCR. The review team noted conflicting evidence in relation to the terminology being used and staff were unsure of the new arrangements for the discharging of responsibilities. The team advises that the College should embed and systematically review the effectiveness of the new institutional oversight of the monitoring of academic standards, identifying this as an **area for development**.

13 The responsibility for the formal approval of programmes and the meeting of threshold academic standards resides with the University partners. The ASQC examines new programme proposals prior to presentation at Academic Board ensuring alignment with the College's strategic priorities. A Course Development Policy was recently introduced in preparation for the forthcoming substantial re-approval exercise of all NTU programmes. All course leaders are not yet aware, however, of the process. The review team advises that the College ensure that staff fully understand and engage with the course approval process, identifying this as an **area for development**.

14 College staff are responsible for assessment and moderation of work, under the oversight provided by the quality assurance mechanisms of the relevant awarding body and the organisation. The Higher Education Assessment Policy was introduced following the recommendation of the IPCR. First and second marking take place within programme teams with support provided for new members of staff in ensuring assessment at the appropriate level.

15 Staff attend events at all the University partners which provides opportunities to network and share practice. The requirements for students to achieve learning outcomes are articulated within course handbooks which also provide links to the University website for information relating to academic regulations, progression through a programme and examination board arrangements. Students confirmed that they are provided with a clear view of the assessment process and welcome the introduction of assessment booklets which provide a holistic view of the assessment experience.

16 Effective use is made of independent and expert input in the setting and maintenance of standards, engaging with external examiners, employers and professional bodies. This is reflected in high employment rates. New programme developments and programme changes are informed by feedback from stakeholders including students, industrial contacts and employers. The higher education strategy is being informed by, and aligns with, regional skills priorities.

17 External examiners and verifiers are appointed through the appropriate processes; can attend standardisation days and examination boards and, particularly in the creative subjects, meet with students. Actions arising from reports are discussed through the programme reporting structure. Some reports are posted on the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) for student information, although most students were not aware of this. There is an external examiner information section on the VLE, but reports are not currently consistently uploaded to it.

18 There is effective engagement in the annual monitoring cycle for all programmes. The institutional VCSQR provides the composite portfolio wide summary and is underpinned by the individual programme level reports which are produced for each awarding body and the awarding organisation. Programme action plans are monitored at course, faculty and institutional levels. During the early days of the new academic governance and reporting framework, some confusion over naming conventions was evident and the team has identified this as an area for development above.

19 Performance benchmark targets are not routinely set and a recommendation from the IPCR was to consider the mechanism for the monitoring and management of trends in progression and attainment gaps. The review team advises the College to strengthen the use of data in the monitoring of academic standards to more effectively focus on emerging trends, identifying this as an **area for development**.

Rounded judgement

20 The academic standards of higher education courses are set by the awarding bodies and awarding organisation and managed through appropriate mechanisms. Due to the merger the academic governance framework has only recently been introduced and new structures have yet to be embedded. Notwithstanding, the College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards through its governance structures; internal processes and procedures; adherence to the regulations of the awarding body and organisation; and engagement with the FHEQ.

21 The review team identified four areas for development in this area. The first relates to the full implementation of the mechanism for maintaining the currency of programmes in relation to relevant external reference points; and the second to the embedding and systematic review of the effectiveness of the new institutional oversight of the monitoring of academic standards. The third area for development relates to ensuring that staff fully understand and engage with the course approval process and the fourth, to strengthen the use of data in the monitoring of academic standards to more effectively focus on emerging trends.

22 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)

23 Programme monitoring and review processes for the merged College have been revised for 2017-18. Previously module level review practices have been inconsistent with some programmes not gathering formal feedback from students. A module feedback form has been designed in consultation with students which will better inform programme level reviews. The review team advises the College to complete the implementation of the module level review process to involve students in the evaluation of their learning experience identifying this as an **area for development**.

24 Programme level reviews are completed at the end of the year using Centre Standards and Quality Reports (CSQRs), Annual Programme Monitoring Reports or other partner reports dependant on the awarding body or organisation. Annual monitoring reports completed in the previous academic year show rigorous attention to detail including external examiner reports and student feedback.

25 The College produces an overall review of all its higher education provision on the VCQSR form to ensure comparability across its courses. The VCQSRs demonstrate the College's comprehensive and rigorous approach to annual monitoring. NTU provides detailed feedback to the College on its VCQSR.

26 Course Committees review action plans generated by the CSQR at mid and end-year points. Course Committees have been provided with a new code of practice for the merged College. The Head of Higher Education, Course Leaders and Heads of Faculty also monitor the documents with actions reviewed twice annually at the Quality Management Committee.

27 Annual monitoring reports are considered by the ASQC which has delegated responsibility from the Academic Board to ensure course review is effective and addresses issues or raises concerns.

28 Periodic reviews are the responsibility of the awarding bodies. However, the College has developed a comparable periodic review process for Pearson programmes.

29 The College has recently approved a new Admissions Policy. The policy is comprehensive and references the principles of fair admission. Students the team met confirmed that the College provided them with appropriate information and were responsive to students' needs. The College has dedicated admissions staff for higher education programmes who attend external events around professional development and best practice.

30 The College has approved a revised Student Engagement Strategy for 2017-2018. The Strategy provides for the election of higher education student representatives; the appointment of student ambassadors; student input into quality enhancement and quality assurance processes and for student feedback around the broader student experience through structured mechanisms including engagement of students in staff/student meetings and other reviews.

31 Students are represented on Course Committees as full members, academic board as required and ASQC subject to agenda. The Corporation Board includes provision for two students as full members, but not necessarily higher education students.

32 The College has appointed a Student Engagement and Employability Officer to support students in engaging with the College's student representation processes and gathering the student voice. Students have been consulted during the development of new policies and procedures including the Terms and Conditions Policy; Higher Education Assessment Policy and Academic Appeals policy. Students report that training for course representative positions was a positive approach for students to gain ownership of their experience.

33 The majority of teaching staff are formally qualified as teachers, some are working towards the Higher Education Academy (HEA) fellowship or a relevant teaching qualification and have a range of qualifications including post-graduate degrees and/or relevant industrial experience. All staff attend college-wide training on teaching and learning at least once each academic year. More relevant training has been provided on strategies relating to teaching, learning and assessment for higher education. New staff are also mentored by Course Leaders when they begin teaching on programmes.

34 The peer review scheme has been extended across the merged College with 96 per cent of teaching staff taking part. Scholarly activity, research and disseminating new knowledge or existing expertise is encouraged and its impact is recorded. There is a focus on improving teaching, learning and assessment to ensure students receive the highest quality of delivery, suited to their needs and modes of study. Students confirm that teaching is good.

35 Physical resources are good. Students confirm that they have seen an improvement in resources, noting additional IT equipment and software and the installation of the LapSafe self-service laptop store. Students enjoy being able to access additional books and journals from validating partners, as well as the libraries at College campuses. Students commented on the usefulness of the VLE and online resources.

36 Learning Resources are monitored through the monitoring processes described above with oversight by the Senior Leadership Team and the ASQC. The College has developed an extensive 3-year Resource Plan to ensure resources are maintained and enhanced.

37 The Higher Education Academic Coaching and Employability Skills (ACES) team is valued highly by students. The ACES team give advice either in group sessions or on a one-to-one basis on academic skills including research and study skills, referencing and the avoidance of plagiarism. All students have personal tutors with weekly tutorials and tutor support available outside office hours. Progress reviews are undertaken by personal tutors termly.

38 Learner support is reported on using the same mechanisms as for resources. Staff are consistently praised in the student voice commenting on high levels of support and the commitment they demonstrate to their students which is reflected in the National Student Survey.

39 The College does not deliver any programmes in collaboration with other providers. However Work Based Learning (WBL) is an integral part of its provision. There is no common approach to WBL across the College, some programmes arrange placements for students but in others, students must find their own. There is a work placement form, which is used on some programmes and this includes a health and safety check, but this is not used across all programmes. There is also a working overseas risk assessment form but it is not clear how this is used. Policies and procedures which inform prospective placement providers of their obligations, or for students informing them of their rights and obligations during work placement, exist but are not used consistently throughout the provision. The review team advises the College to ensure that all work placements are subject to

policies and procedures which are applied consistently, identifying this as an **area for development**.

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

40 Arrangements for encouraging student involvement in academic governance is set out in the College's Student Engagement Strategy which identifies the mechanisms in place to support student voice activities.

41 Each programme has a student representative who is elected by their peers and is a member of the Course Committee; which provides a forum for debate and decision making regarding issues around standards, quality and the ongoing enhancement of student experience across the whole course. Student representative training is supported by the Student Engagement and Employability Officer.

42 Students have been involved in focus groups and this has supported the development of the College's policies and procedures, for example the Complaints Policy. Module evaluation is collected from students however this is not consistent throughout the higher education provision. This is considered in an earlier section of the report.

43 The review team noted the effectiveness of student involvement at programme level, however higher education students do not hold full membership of any other deliberative committee, but attend when required. The review team also noted that while there is an elected student representative on the Corporation Board, this post may be filled by a further education student; therefore higher education student matters may not always be addressed through this system. Therefore the review team identifies an **area for development** and advises the College to further develop specific formal representation for higher education students within the College's deliberative committees.

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

44 There are procedures in place for ensuring the accuracy and consistency of information provided to applicants and students. The Academic Board has an information agenda item and recently approved a Published Information Policy.

45 The review team noted the proactive approaches taken in relation to ensuring consumer protection obligations are met. This was initiated from the Corporation Board and has seen all staff involved in higher education, including Governors, completing online training to ensure understanding and compliance.

46 The website provides information about the College and its higher education programmes but there are two separate websites running, which is described as an 'interim' measure. This has the potential for confusion for prospective students and there is a lack of consistency in terms of access to programme specifications and other information. The review team noted some outdated programme specifications were accessible and an online application form for a part-time course contained a heading from one of the former colleges. Although the College is taking steps to address inconsistencies with the appointment of new senior post-holders, the Transformation Plan indicates that it would be early 2018 before the launch of the new website. The oversight of public information needs to be assured, therefore the review team advises the College to ensure all planned developments for the new College website result in accurate and accessible public information, identifying this as an **area for development**.

47 The Academic Board approved the Higher Education Admissions Policy and the terms and conditions for admissions, having reviewed these in consultation with students. The terms and conditions are published on the website and reproduced in the Student Handbook.

48 Programme handbooks provide comprehensive information. The revised Student Handbook, composed of several online chapters, provides a valuable reference point which is highly regarded by students.

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

49 The Higher Education complaints procedure, which was informed by feedback from a student focus group, was approved at a meeting of the Academic Board. The policy has been strengthened following a recommendation from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). The policy enables a complainant to escalate a complaint to the awarding body and aligns with the guidance set out by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. The complaints procedure is accessible on the College's website. Students are informed of the procedure during induction.

50 There is a formal academic appeals procedure which applies to all higher education students of the College; albeit with slight variations depending on the validating partners of the programme. Students do not have the right to approach the awarding body before the College procedure has been exhausted. If a student remains dissatisfied, they can refer their complaint to the OIA. The College's Complaint Policy and Academic Appeals procedure, which the team considered to be comprehensive, is articulated in the Student Handbook and available on the virtual learning environment.

51 Complaints and Academic Appeals are reviewed and monitored by the College's Quality Office. The Director of Quality compiles an annual monitoring report that is discussed with the Senior Leadership Team and at the Academic Board. A higher education specific report relating to complaints is also delivered to the bi-annual Quality Management Committee for deliberation. Students with whom the review team met had a good understanding of the complaints procedure and stated that in many cases complaints are resolved informally and promptly. Students were able to give examples where outcomes improved the student experience, including the rearrangement of the work schedule to avoid assessment bundling.

52 There is a process in place for course closures and changes. The College adheres to their contractual obligations articulated within their validating partners' collaborative contract for such events. At present the College has applied for collaborative closure with the University of Derby. The University has created an action plan and the College is working closely with the University to ensure current students are not disadvantaged. The Programme Closures Policy was approved by Academic Board but has not been published on the College's website. The review team confirm that current arrangements for closing both Middlesex University and University of Derby provision were formalised into appropriate plans to protect the students.

53 After meeting with College, University staff and current students, the review team confirm the effectiveness of the arrangements for course changes and closures.

Rounded judgement

54 The review team notes that the recent merger has meant that governance structures, internal policies and procedures at the new College have yet to be embedded. Nonetheless the College has demonstrated a clear awareness of its responsibilities as a higher education provider and plans and initial actions are sufficiently developed. The review team considers therefore that the College meets all the baseline regulatory requirements in this area.

55 There are four areas for development in this judgement area where either activity is underway or there are minor omissions or inconsistencies. Firstly, to complete the implementation of the module level review process to involve students in the evaluation of their learning experience; and secondly to ensure that all work placements are subject to policies and procedures which are applied consistently. The third area relates to the further development of specific formal representation for higher education students within the College's deliberative committees and fourthly to ensure that all planned developments for the new College website result in accurate and accessible public information.

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

QAA2032 - R9842 - Dec 17

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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