



Quality Review Visit of Oaklands College

March 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Oaklands College

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

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.**
- **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 Oaklands College. The review team advises Oaklands College to:

- clarify the role of the awarding partners in relation to complaints in all relevant College policies and procedures (Student Protection)
- provide further information in the terms and conditions on the arrangements for teaching-out in the event of programme closure (Student Protection).

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 20 to 21 March 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Mike Slawin
- Mr Mike Wing
- Mr Matthew Kitching (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 Oaklands College

Oaklands College is a general further education college in Hertfordshire, with campuses in St Albans and Welwyn Garden City. It offers a wide and diverse range of courses to around 10,000 students. About five per cent of students are undertaking higher education qualifications.

The College's mission is 'to realise the potential of our communities', to help students 'develop as individuals, to realise their future goals and aspirations to enable them to reach their full potential'.

The College's foundation degree and honours degree higher education provision is validated by the University of Hertfordshire as part of the Hertfordshire Higher Education Consortium (HHEC). The College also offers BTEC Higher National programmes under its own licence from Pearson.

The College offers foundation degrees in Animal Management, Business, Early Years, Media and Sports Studies, and an extended degree in Engineering and Technology. It also offers Higher National programmes in a number of subjects including Art and Design, Music, Performing Arts, Computing, Engineering, Construction, and Health and Social Care.

Higher education student numbers have increased over the last three years and are currently around 370, approximately 52 per cent full-time and 48 per cent part-time.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

- 1 The College offers awards on behalf of the University of Hertfordshire (the University) and Pearson. The awarding partners set the standards of their awards through the application of their academic frameworks and regulations, which ensure that qualifications are positioned at the appropriate level.
- 2 The University and the College work together to design the programme curriculum and to ensure that the standards of awards are correctly positioned within the FHEQ, aligned with relevant qualification descriptors, and take account of Subject Benchmark Statements. In the case of Pearson programmes, the role of the College in the design process is to select a coherent set of modules from the Pearson framework for the relevant qualification.
- 3 The College maintains academic standards through appropriate programme delivery and quality assurance procedures, with programme specifications providing the reference point for teaching, learning and assessment of students at the appropriate level.
- 4 Assignment briefs clearly link assessment to the achievement of learning outcomes. Students indicated that they understand the assessment tasks and the link between assessment and the curriculum, and external examiners comment favourably on the academic standards of the awards delivered by the College and their equivalence to other comparable providers.

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

- 5 The College has a comprehensive committee structure including Curriculum Team meetings, Higher Education Programme Managers' Meetings, Higher Education Student Experience Committee, Higher Education Committee and Board of Studies. These committees have distinct remits which are well understood by staff and overseen by the College Corporation. Governors' responsibilities are set out in the College Members' Handbook and meetings of the Corporation are guided by a documented business cycle. The team found that the business cycle is effective and that key issues pertaining to higher education such as complaints and appeals, student engagement and safeguarding are routinely discussed by the Corporation.
- 6 The College requires the completion of Annual Monitoring and Evaluation Reports (AMERs) at programme level and for the whole of its higher education provision. These are written to a high standard and the comprehensive and reflective nature of these documents assists the College in maintaining effective oversight of academic risk. Key performance indicators and quality measures are also considered at each meeting of the Corporation, and these include specific higher education measures where appropriate.
- 7 The College has effective approaches to reviewing the effectiveness of governance arrangements. The Corporation conducts an annual self-assessment, and committee membership and terms of reference are reviewed regularly. The review team was provided with an example of the membership of the Higher Education Committee being reviewed and altered to improve its effectiveness, which included the appointment of the Student Chair to the committee.

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

8 The College discharges its responsibilities in helping to set and maintain academic standards successfully. For Consortium programmes, the University maintains oversight of academic standards and the student academic experience at the College through an annual Key Account Manager (KAM) report of Consortium partners. As part of this, data relating to the College's recruitment, achievement, progression and continuation is reported and analysed. The KAM report is received formally by the College's Higher Education Committee, and discussed by senior management. The Consortium Agreement requires the College to conform to the requirements of the Consortium's Quality Handbook and Collaborative Partners Handbook. It further engages effectively with the Consortium procedures and processes for the maintenance of academic standards, through validation and approval activities, periodic review and revalidation.

9 For Higher National programmes, the College has developed its own Quality Handbook, which is updated annually and details a comprehensive range of processes and procedures for maintaining academic standards. Academic staff have a clear understanding of the requirements, and implement them. The College is subject to an annual Quality Management Review (QMR) by Pearson. The QMR scrutinises a range of quality-related measures including the College's management systems, annual programme review, maintenance of records, student registration and certification details. The QMR report is formally received at the College's Higher Education Committee for discussion and actions. The latest report in April 2016 generated no recommendations or conditions.

10 Definitive records of each Consortium programme are maintained by the University on behalf of the Consortium. For Higher National programmes, these are maintained by Pearson and identified in the Student Handbooks.

11 Clear responsibilities for assessment and checking that students achieve the required academic standards are set out in the Quality Handbooks. Consortium programmes adhere to the University's Academic Regulations. Assessments for all programmes go through comprehensive checking and internal verification to ensure that standards are in line with the learning outcomes, and that achievement is demonstrated through assessment. Student achievement of relevant learning outcomes is checked and confirmed through relevant assessment boards.

12 There is comprehensive annual monitoring at programme level and through the AMER process. The AMERs demonstrate scrutiny of key areas, including the analysis of data such as recruitment, continuation, achievement and destinations of students. External examiner reports are included in AMERs and are subject to analysis and actions as part of the AMER process. AMERs are shared with the Consortium and available to Pearson for the QMR. An annual monitoring overview report for the whole College is produced by the Higher Education Manager and received by the Higher Education Committee; this looks at all of the higher education provision, scrutinises and analyses data such as progression, and generates an action plan. Higher education programmes are also included in a departmental Self-Assessment Report (SAR), which generates a Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

Rounded judgement

13 The College's governance arrangements, its internal policies and procedures, and its adherence to the awarding partners' requirements ensure that academic standards are set at a level that is consistent with UK threshold expectations and that the College meets the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards.

14 There are no areas for development or specified areas for improvement in this judgement area.

15 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

16 The College applies its own policies and processes for student admissions for the Pearson programmes, and College staff interview, make admissions decisions and admit students. In the case of the University programmes the University's requirements, defined in its admissions policy, apply and the University is responsible for approval of applicants. There is an annual review of the admissions data that occurs as part of the annual monitoring process, and there is evidence of careful consideration of admissions data. The Higher Education Committee has the key responsibility for oversight of admissions, which is considered as part of the Higher Education Manager's report submitted to this Committee.

17 All staff teaching at higher education level are expected to have qualifications and experience at an appropriate level. For those staff who do not quite meet these requirements upon appointment to a higher education teaching role, the College supports staff in achieving relevant qualifications. The College operates a higher education peer observation scheme for all staff, and also a College teaching observation process in which teaching is observed by a manager. This observation informs the annual staff performance review appraisal. Staff are encouraged to undertake appropriate staff development and they feel well supported. On an annual basis, the College develops a generic staff development plan to meet its staff development needs.

18 The College follows the awarding partners' regulations for the assessment of students. For the University programmes, assessment is set as part of a cross-consortium arrangement and marking is undertaken by College staff. In the case of Pearson, programme assessment is set, marked and internally moderated by the College. Coursework briefs clearly identify the relevant learning outcomes, achievement criteria, and assessment task expectations. Students confirmed that they found assessment tasks clear and understandable and external examiner reports indicate that arrangements for the assessment of students are sound.

19 Extensive support is made available to students. Academic support is provided by academic staff, who resolve subject-related academic issues. Programme Managers act as personal tutors and as a point of first contact for students with more general issues. The College also has a number of staff whose role it is to provide additional academic or pastoral support.

20 The College has a wide range of learning resources for higher education students. The provision of appropriate resources is considered as part of the approval processes of Pearson and the approval and review processes of the University. The College assures the ongoing suitability of support and resources through the student survey system, student representative system and through an ongoing evaluation of resources by academic staff.

21 The College has a variety of schemes to elicit the student voice. Student representatives attend Programme Committee meetings, the Higher Education Board of Studies and meetings of the College Higher Education Student Experience Committee to provide feedback on the student experience. The Chair of the Higher Education Student Experience Committee attends the College Higher Education Committee, which provides an additional opportunity to provide feedback to the Principal and the Senior Leadership Team. All new student representatives have access to a student representative pack which

provides guidance on the role. The College also undertakes a number of surveys, including the First Impressions Survey, Higher Education Survey, National Student Survey (NSS - Year 2 only) and module/unit feedback surveys. The results of these surveys are disseminated to all relevant staff and are discussed in key forums such as Board of Studies, Programme Managers' meetings, Programme/Curriculum Team meetings and Higher Education committee meetings. AMERs draw on an extensive range of quality assurance information and data (including student feedback, external examiners' reports and student data). Any issues that need addressing are highlighted in action plans and taken forward in the overall Higher Education AMER, and then the SAR and QIP.

22 The University programmes are periodically reviewed every six years, and the process is designed to take a longer-term perspective of the quality and standards of academic provision. These processes include external input. Pearson programmes are also subject to a periodic review process, although Pearson programmes at the College have not yet been running long enough for review to be required. The College considers the outcomes of these processes and tracks arising actions through its deliberative structure, including the Higher Education Committee, which has the principal responsibility within the College for oversight of academic quality of higher education provision.

23 The review team noted that there had been a recent downward trend in terms of the retention metric for full-time students. The College explained to the team how this had been addressed and clarified that this trend related to the impact of an exceptional staffing issue on one of the College's higher education programmes, which is now resolved. The review team was assured that the College has strategies in place for identifying issues relating to retention, and that retention is discussed at Board of Studies, Higher Education Committee, programme meetings and in AMERs. The College has also instituted an additional assessment review point to help to identify at-risk students. The review team considers that the College has appropriate strategies in place for identifying and responding to retention issues.

24 The review team noted the recent growth in undergraduate Home/EU student numbers. It was clarified that this was part of a planned growth in higher education numbers and was, as per the usual planning cycle, first discussed and agreed by the senior management team, which considered the resource implications before approval by the Higher Education Committee, which approves all new programmes (and programme closures). In addition to the College's internal processes, the approval processes of the awarding partners also require the College to demonstrate that there are adequate resources to support additional programmes. The review team considers that the College manages growth strategically and appropriately.

25 Employability skills are embedded within the College's higher education provision, and many of the College's higher education programmes require students to undertake work placement so as to reinforce the employability focus of the curriculum. These placements follow the awarding body placement guidelines and operate within the context set by the College's safeguarding policy. There is clear evidence of the evaluation and review of work placements in order to enhance the work placement process. The College's employability team supports and develops student employability through the provision of employability-related support and guidance. In addition, the College has introduced the Aspire Employability Award, which is funded by the College and further supports and enhances the employability of participating students.

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

26 The College's governance arrangements effectively encourage student involvement in academic governance. The College arranges for the election of student representatives and outlines the requirements of the role through a Student Representative Pack. Students are represented on a wide range of College committees, including the Higher Education Committee, and they consider that their feedback is listened to and acted upon. Students are also asked to present about their experience to development plan panels where senior staff, including the Principal, are in attendance.

27 The College recently took part in the NUS Student Engagement Project and cites this as enhancing the approach to student involvement in academic governance, in particular through the introduction of the Student Chair. This role provides students with a direct channel to senior College staff, and students reported that the introduction of the role had helped to expedite the introduction of designated common areas for higher education students at the College.

28 The College also makes extensive use of surveys to inform decisions made within its academic governance structures. The various feedback mechanisms are valued by students, who believe that their feedback is listened to and acted upon.

29 The Corporation reviews the effectiveness of its student engagement arrangements through an annual report. While there are students on the Corporation, neither of these is currently a higher education student. The link between student involvement in the Higher Education Committee and discussion and decision making at Corporation is less formalised, although the Higher Education Committee receives reports on relevant issues discussed at the Corporation.

30 The team found clear evidence that the College's governance arrangements ensure that complaints and appeals are effectively addressed and that Corporation reflects on any thematic or important issues arising from these procedures.

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

31 The College regularly reviews its admissions policy and procedures in order to ensure that they remain consistent and transparent. For Consortium programmes, the entry requirements are discussed at the Consortium Management Committee (CMC) and agreed annually in advance of the academic year prior to any offers being made. The College aligns itself with the University admissions process for these programmes, and this is reviewed by the Consortium Recruitment Admissions Subcommittee, where the College is represented by the Higher Education Manager and the Marketing Supervisor. For Pearson programmes the College has its own Admissions Policy, which is regularly reviewed. For the Higher National Certificate programmes, students progress directly from level 3 programmes, with applications supported by employers. All staff involved in admissions receive training, to ensure that there is consistency in the process. Students confirmed that their experience of admissions had been supportive and that admissions information had been comprehensive, clear and accurate. Students also confirmed that their views on the information received as part of admissions had been sought as part of the First Impressions survey.

32 The College ensures that prospective students are given the information they need in order to make informed decisions through a range of measures. Students are asked as part of the First Impressions survey to comment on whether they have received sufficient

information in order to make an informed choice of course. This survey is analysed and a report is produced at programme level, with a risk rating attached to the outcome. This allows programme-specific actions where necessary. The overall College outcome in the 2016-17 survey noted that 90 per cent of students felt that they had received sufficient information in advance to choose the right course.

33 The College aims to ensure that information for prospective applicants is fair, transparent, timely and accessible. To ensure accuracy of information, published materials and the College website are audited internally by the Marketing Department. Additionally, programme managers, the Higher Education Manager, and the Marketing Manager are required to keep an ongoing check on all information. For Consortium programmes, link tutors are also expected to check on the accuracy of information related to their specific areas.

34 The College developed its terms and conditions using the University's equivalent as a baseline, adapted where necessary to suit the College's provision. They are contained in the Key Facts document, which is accessible on the higher education course page on the College website, along with fees information. As part of their offer letter, students are explicitly directed to look at the Key Facts before accepting the offer, and informed that by accepting the offer they would be deemed to have agreed to the terms and conditions. Some of the students whom the team met were unfamiliar with the Key Facts Sheet 2017-18, but the team found clear evidence that this information was available online and provided to students in their offer letter from the College.

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

35 The Key Facts document outlines the circumstances under which programmes may be altered and also under which a programme may be discontinued. This includes a need to comply with legal, regulatory and governmental requirements and to respond to changes in partnerships with awarding partners. There are explicit links to the Student Fees Policy and Procedure, which provides information on potential financial implications of a change.

36 The Key Facts document also outlines the College's approach where programmes are closed and students are placed in other institutions. It does not, however, refer to the College's arrangements for teaching-out courses in the event that continuing students remain on the programme, what students should expect where this occurs and how the College will maintain the quality of student learning opportunities where provision is being phased out. The team advises the college to provide further information in the terms and conditions on the arrangements for teaching-out in the event of programme closure, and identifies this as an **area for development**.

37 The College has an agreement with the Consortium that where programmes are discontinued at other higher education providers within the Consortium the College will recruit their students where this is appropriate and possible. The team was provided with an example where this has occurred in line with the terms and conditions. Students also provided the team with an example of an occasion where programme content had been changed prior to students enrolling on foundation degrees in Business, and they had been provided with timely and coherent communication about the changes.

38 The College makes its Complaints Procedure available through its higher education course pages on the website and through forms available in reception areas. In an attempt

to produce whole College policies and avoid a separate set of systems and processes for higher education, the College has attempted to locate any variance in policies and procedures for higher education students in annexes. This approach has been taken for the Complaints Procedure, where the definition of a complaint is outlined in Annex 1.

The procedure places a clear emphasis on informal resolution at an early stage and this is followed by a formal and review stage in line with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) Good Practice Framework. Case studies demonstrate that complaints and appeals are handled confidentially and that the outcomes are used to improve the student experience where this is appropriate.

39 The procedure also incorporates clear timescales and students are directed to the Student Advice Team for support. Students are also informed that they may appoint a representative to act on their behalf and that Completion of Procedures letters will be issued following the conclusion of the appeal stage. While the procedure refers to the role of the OIA, no explicit reference is made to the role of the awarding bodies. College staff informed the team that students on the University programmes could request a further review of their complaint by the Vice-Chancellor, but there was less clarity on Pearson's role in complaint handling. The team therefore advises the College to clarify in all relevant College policies and procedures the role of the awarding partners in relation to complaints, identifying this as an **area for development**.

Rounded judgement

40 The review team concludes that the College is meeting the baseline regulatory requirements in this judgement area through its governance arrangements, internal policies and procedures, and adherence to its awarding partners' frameworks and regulations.

41 The review team identified two areas for development. These related to a need to update procedures that will not require or result in major operational or procedural change. No specified improvements were identified.

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

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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