Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Schumacher College (The Dartington Hall Trust), December 2018

1 Outcome of the monitoring visit

1   From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that Schumacher College (The Dartington Hall Trust) (the College; the Trust) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the November 2017 monitoring visit.

2 Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2   The College offers three postgraduate programmes validated by the University of Plymouth (the University): MSc Holistic Science, MA Ecological Design Thinking, and MA Economics for Transition. In December 2018, there were 39 (all full-time) student enrolments compared with 37 (36 full-time and one part-time) in 2016-17. The College limits recruitment to no more than 17 students per programme. There are currently three full-time (including the Head of College) and nine fractional and part-time academic staff.

3   The College's Principal resigned in May 2018 and an Acting Principal is in place. The College is currently undergoing a restructure intended to align its aims and strategy more closely with those of The Dartington Hall Trust, the charity which owns and operates the 1,200-acre estate on which the College buildings are located. The Trust is convening the Dartington Learning Executive with a view to improving the organisation and delivery of educational provision across the Trust.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

4   The College has made acceptable progress against its action plan following its 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER AP) and the 2017 monitoring visit. It has continued the good practice identified in the review relating to building on the relationship with the University of Plymouth; the involvement of visiting speakers; and the community ethos underpinning the College (paragraph 5). While progress was made in dealing with the recommendation to extend the peer observation process, the College's initial response has been reviewed and an alternative approach is being implemented (paragraph 7). The College has continued to successfully develop its work on the affirmations relating to the development and implementation of the College Development Handbook, and the use of marking rubrics (paragraph 6).

5   Good practice identified by the HER (AP) has been maintained since the last monitoring visit. The relationship with the University remains strong and supportive, with regular dialogue and interaction between the two institutions, as well as University staff giving lectures at the College. The College continues to attract visiting experts who enhance the student learning experience, while the community ethos provides academic and personal support enhancing students' professional potential.

6   The College has addressed the affirmations from the HER (AP). A handbook for the design and development of new programmes was introduced from January 2018 and the

approach to marking rubrics was reviewed and amended from August 2017. Students were clear about the relationship between learning outcomes and assignment requirements.

7   The recommendation to 'extend the peer observation process across and between all programmes to facilitate the sharing of good practice' generated the development and implementation of a peer-review process in October 2017. However, staff feedback considered at the Postgraduate Quality Committee in April 2018 suggested that the process felt cumbersome and overly bureaucratic. Following further discussion, a new approach was developed for introduction in October 2018. The aim is for all permanent teaching staff to undertake peer review. Initial findings from staff are that the new approach is more supportive and positive. The intention is to evaluate findings from the observations at the new Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC) to inform staff development and encourage the sharing good of practice.

8   Since the last monitoring visit, and as noted at paragraph 3, the College has recognised a need to formalise and document its decision-making structures and quality assurance policies within the wider context of the Dartington Hall Trust. In discussion with the Trust, the College has commenced the introduction of a new committee structure, with a revised set of responsibilities and lines of accountability. The aim is to develop a new approach to quality assurance and enhancement, as well as to determine, monitor and review targets and action plans. A Teaching and Learning Committee, Research and Enterprise Committee, and AQSC have been constituted with inaugural meetings agreeing terms of reference. It is intended that the committees will report to an Academic Board. However, the Academic Board has yet to be constituted or agree terms of reference.

9   The College's approach to recruitment and admissions is sound. The detailed Admissions Policy, supported by an Admissions Procedures document, sets out requirements for admission which are also published on the website. These are reviewed annually to ensure that they remain fit-for-purpose. Policy has been developed with reference to *Chapter B2* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), as well as Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) good practice.

10   All prospective students are required to have an interview to assess suitability and capacity for study at master's level. They are also required to submit a personal statement and, in some cases, an additional piece of written work. International applicants from outside the UK and European Union (EU) (Tier 4) must submit a certificate to prove they have met the standard required by UK Visas and Immigration. Students are expected to achieve IELTS Academic, scoring 6.5 overall, with a minimum 5.5 for each component. EU applicants for College programmes are given the option to provide an alternative test taken within the last two years, with the College currently accepting the Pearson Test of English Academic. Students confirmed that the College's approach to admissions and recruitment was clear and transparent, and they felt supported throughout the entire process.

11   The College's approach to assessment is fully aligned to the University's Assessment Policy. While there is an awareness that the Quality Code has recently been updated, the College's current approach to assessment was designed with reference to *Chapter B6* of the previous Quality Code. Assignment requirements, including learning outcomes and assessment criteria, are made clear to students in briefing documents. Formative assessment takes place through individual and peer tutorials. Students are made fully aware of the consequences of plagiarism and confirmed that they are clear on what is expected of them from an assignment. Students are appreciative of supportive and constructive assessment feedback. A College requirement for assignments to be returned to students within 20 working days is met. If further feedback is required, students meet with staff individually for further explanation of feedback and grading.

12   The College has experienced a small increase in recruitment from 37 to 39 students for the 2018-19 academic year, and despite a fall in applications, all programmes are over-subscribed. Retention on all programmes is strong at 100%. Completion rates are also high, with the 2017-18 cohorts achieving 100% pass rates, with the exception of MA Economics for Transition, which had a 92% completion rate (1 student from a cohort of 13).

4   Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

13   There has been continued engagement with the Expectations and Indicators of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) to provide guidance on development of policies and procedures. The College is aware of the recent update to the Quality Code, and proposes, in consultation with the College's awarding bodies, to engage in a mapping exercise to ensure policies, systems and processes are aligned with the revised Code.

14   As noted, in the development and revision of its Admissions Policy, the College has utilised the Quality Code but also sought feedback and advice from Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA).

5   Background to the monitoring visit

15   The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

16   The monitoring visit was carried out by Mike Slawin, Reviewer, and Dr Neil Casey, QAA Officer, on 13 December 2018.