Quality Review Visit of Shrewsbury Colleges Group

May 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Shrewsbury Colleges Group

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Shrewsbury Colleges Group.

- **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 Shrewsbury Colleges Group. The review team advises Shrewsbury Colleges Group to:

- develop a clearer and more coherent approach to the annual monitoring processes to further support the oversight of academic standards and quality issues (Code of Governance)
- review the Recognition of Prior Learning policy to ensure that processes are clear and that opportunities for the accreditation of experiential learning are appropriately addressed (Quality Code)
- prioritise and develop a more structured approach to addressing issues of academic integrity including plagiarism (Quality Code).

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:

- Dr Mark Atlay
- Ms Sarah Bennett (student reviewer)
- Ms Brenda Eade.

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 Shrewsbury Colleges Group (SCG)

Shrewsbury Colleges Group (the College) was formed by the merger of Shrewsbury Sixth Form College and Shrewsbury College of Arts and Technology on 1 August 2016. In September 2017, the College enrolled 3,250, 16 to 19-year olds. SCG's mission is to 'provide outstanding academic and vocational education and training for all 16-19 students and adults, be a local centre of excellence for higher education, and be the college of choice'. This is delivered in a town with a high economic activity rate and relatively low levels of unemployment.

The College's mission indicates a commitment to higher education within the county of Shropshire, which was identified as a higher education 'cold spot' by HEFCE in 2014. The College delivers a range of programmes in collaboration with Staffordshire University in a number of subject areas including education, counselling, computing and engineering. It delivers a number of higher national programmes in collaboration with Pearson in the areas of creative arts, construction and business. Its collaboration with Edge Hill University in delivering education programmes is closing and the last students are being taught.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1   The Shrewsbury Colleges Group (the College) delivers awards in partnership with Pearson, Staffordshire University and Edge Hill University. Responsibility for academic standards rests with the College's awarding bodies and it is their responsibility to ensure that each award is aligned to the requirements of the FHEQ. For degree-level courses, templates and assignment briefs are provided by Staffordshire University. For Pearson provision, programme templates are designed by the HE Lead, in line with CMA guidance. During the visit staff reported that they receive regular training regarding the FHEQ and Quality Code.

2   The College makes use of external reference points, including external examiners reports, standards verifiers and input from local employers to ensure that programmes are set at the correct level, and are comparable to other HE providers. Monitoring procedures involve annual review of course documentation by the Course Tutor and HE Lead and regular link tutor visits. Annual course monitoring by the awarding bodies ensures the maintenance of academic standards. For University-level courses, standardisation meetings ensure that all staff have a shared understanding of the assessment criteria.

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

3   The College Board's composition and terms of reference are set out in its Instrument and Articles of Governance. The Board has subcommittees covering; Finance and Business Operations, Human Resources, Quality, Standards and Curriculum, Search and Governance, Audit, and Remuneration. The responsibility of the Quality, Standards and Curriculum Committee (QS&C) includes the quality of teaching, learning and assessment of the College's provision and student experience and engagement. QS&C's remit covers all provision but it has a specific responsibility to ensure Higher Education 'meets and exceeds the needs and expectations of students, employers, partner universities and other stakeholders'. Oversight of academic risk is the responsibility of the Audit committee which meets termly.

4   QS&C is chaired by a Board member and includes higher education student representation and a designated HE Link Governor. Consideration of higher education issues is evidenced in its minutes and reports. The Chair reports to each full Board meeting and there are termly HE Update reports.

5   Governors that the team met during the review, were clear of their role in setting the strategic oversight for the College and that, within this framework, staff have the freedom to develop programmes and projects, thereby respecting the principles of academic freedom and collegiality as set out in the Board's Instrument and Articles of Government.

6   Within the College, the HE Lead is responsible for operational matters with quality oversight residing with the Group Vice Principal for Quality and Standards who reports to bi-weekly meetings of the Academic Leadership Team (ALT). The HE Lead compiles the annual Higher Education Self-Assessment Report (HE SAR) for consideration by the Senior Leadership Team, QS&C and the Governors. This process is described in more detail in the Quality Code section.

7   The HE SAR covers issues arising out of the annual monitoring process and is structured to reflect key elements of the UK Quality Code. The main report does not comment on good practice and concerns identified by University external examiners and Pearson external verifiers which are summarised in two separate appendices. The associated HE Quality Improvement Plan (HE QUIP) covers College-wide areas for improvement whilst course-related issues in relation to external examiners and verifiers comments are separately monitored through updates to the two appendices. It was not clear to the review team that, at the initial consideration of the HE SAR and its appendices by QS&C, all actions in relation to concerns raised by external verifiers had been appropriately actioned although when the HE SAR and its appendices were considered by the Board, a clear set of actions was in place. The review team concluded that the College's approach to reporting and action planning makes the oversight and monitoring of HE standards and quality issues complex for QS&C and the Board. The review team recommends as an **area for development** that the College develops a clearer and more coherent approach to the annual monitoring processes to further support the oversight of academic standards and quality issues.

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

8   The College currently delivers programmes with three awarding bodies: Staffordshire University, Edge Hill University and Pearson who maintain oversight of standards. The College has been an accredited centre for BTEC programmes since 2010, and conforms to the standards set by Pearson. Agreements with the Universities include details of how standards will be set, monitored and maintained. The partnership with Edge Hill University is drawing to a close at the end of the year, but there is a written agreement outlining the process for managing the phase out of the PGCE programmes. The PGCE programmes currently delivered in partnership with Edge Hill will also transfer to Staffordshire University. The University will take over responsibility for the oversight of standards.

9   The College has an effective internal process for establishing new programmes. A course proposal form is completed and discussed by the ALT. The decision to take the programme forward for approval by the University rests with the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). If approved, the College completes the necessary documentation for the University, and the programme goes through the rigorous formal validation and approvals processes of the University to ensure that standards are set at the appropriate level. This includes external scrutiny to ensure comparability of standards with other HE institutions. The College designs the curriculum for the foundation and top-up degrees and determines the optional modules for the Pearson HNC and HND programmes. For Pearson programmes, the College determines the optional modules and adopts the course which has been validated by the awarding organisation.

10   Programme specifications provide definitive records for all approved programmes. The College maintains programme specifications and makes them available to stakeholders via the College website. Programme and module handbooks which include programme and module specifications are provided for students in hard copy and are available on the College virtual learning environment (VLE).

11   The achievement of the learning outcomes for the programme is tested by the College through the assessment process which is overseen by the awarding bodies. The College is responsible for setting assessments for Pearson programmes which are then verified by the External Verifier. Appropriate mechanisms for marking, moderation and standardisation by the college and its awarding partners, are in place to ensure comparability of standards. External examiners, appointed by the University, confirm that the

assessment tests, learning outcomes and standards are set at the appropriate level.

12   The College holds assessment boards to confer Pearson awards. The outcomes of assessment for University programmes are considered by the University's assessment and awards boards. Students who successfully complete their programme of study receive a transcript which sets out the modules they have completed and the grades they have been awarded.

13   The College is subject to a range of external monitoring processes which ensure that standards are maintained and that there is comparability with other HE institutions. These include oversight of the assessment process by external examiners, University Link Tutor visits, Annual Monitoring Reports, Pearson Annual Programme Monitoring Reports and Quality Management Reports and HEFCE Annual Performance Review visits. All these external monitoring activities provide a positive overview of the standards set by the College and its links with local employers.

14   In addition to the monitoring requirements of the awarding bodies, the College undertakes its own internal monitoring activities which effectively use data collected by its management information system. These include module reviews, programme SARs and Course QUIPs. These are brought together at the strategic level in the HE SAR and an HE QUIP. The HE SAR and the HE QUIP are considered and monitored by the ALT, the SLT, QS&C and the Board. The team found that although the HE QUIP provides the headline issues for improvements identified through the various monitoring activities, it does not include actions required in response to external examiner reports and the outcomes of the consultative groups. This has been identified above as an area for development.

15   The College draws on its links with industry, employer networks and professional bodies to ensure that any new programme development meets the needs of the local industries. The curriculum for the HNC in construction and for the foundation degrees in Engineering has been developed to reflect the needs of the local council and other employers.

16   The College includes a range of different placement opportunities in its programmes. It sources placements with employers and helps to match them to students. It also supports students whilst they are undertaking their placement. The College has a generic handbook which sets out the policy for work placements and volunteering. Where the placement is a compulsory element of the programme, as is the case for the education courses, oversight of the assessment process and management and monitoring of the placement is overseen by the University.

Rounded judgement

17   The review team considered the reliability of degree standards delivered at Shrewsbury Colleges Group and their reasonable comparability with standards set and achieved by other providers. The team concludes that the provider's arrangements, working with its awarding partners, meet the baseline regulatory requirements. The team identified one area for development in relation to oversight of academic standards and quality issues and the recommendation to develop a clearer and more coherent approach.

18   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)

19   The College's admissions policy includes an appeal process and has been mapped against the requirements of the Quality Code. Depending on the course, applicants apply direct to the College or via UCAS. For Pearson programmes, the College sets the entry requirements whilst those for other awarding bodies are agreed with partners at approval and reviewed periodically. Admissions are managed centrally and all applicants are interviewed with HE tutors having final responsibility for admission decisions. Students with disabilities are welcomed and appropriately supported through the admissions process. Students spoke positively about their experience of the recruitment and admission process.

20   The College is supportive of students entering with advanced standing either via University processes or via the College's Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) Policy which applies to applicants for Pearson awards. This policy states that the processes for Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning (APCL) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) are different although, as described, they are essentially identical with curriculum leaders responsible for making recommendations to the HE Lead for approval. The policy is designed to support students without the standard entry requirements and appropriate guidance is given. However, unlike APCL, the policy states that only general credit is given for APEL so there is no provision to map experiential learning against the outcomes of modules and hence give advanced standing. Therefore the review team recommends as an **area for development,** that the College reviews the RPL policy to ensure that processes are clear and that opportunities for the accreditation of experiential learning are appropriately addressed.

21   New students undergo induction and are provided with programme and module handbooks. The College's approach to the delivery of its HE provision is set out in the HE Teaching and Learning Strategy and places an emphasis on student-centred autonomous learning and research-based learning. To further enhance the learning environment, the College is developing a dedicated HE Centre which has been designed with input from students, staff and governors.

22   Students have access to Moodle and to Blackboard for University provision. The College has minimum expectations for the use of technology which are monitored by curriculum leaders and by the Information Learning Technology coordinator. Where issues are identified, action is taken to ensure that the minimum expectations are being met. Whilst the College is actively engaged in using augmented reality to support effective learning, the virtual learning environment is mainly used as a repository for information rather than to support the learning process. This approach to the use of learning technology is currently under review.

23   There is a structured process to identify and address staff development appropriate to HE teaching including a peer review process supported by Learning Coaches and designated funding. HE staff meet regularly as the HE Tutor Forum to share good practice. Staff development activities are recorded in the HE SAR. Students commented favourably on the quality of teaching and the support they received.

24   The College's approach to assessment is set out in an HE Assessment and Feedback policy. Assessment plans are produced for all programmes and are checked and signed off by the HE lead. External examiners are positive about assessment tasks and the

Pearson annual report confirmed the quality of teaching and assessment process. Students were clear about assessment tasks which became progressively more challenging and reported that they received timely and developmental feedback.

25   University partners require students to submit work through Turnitin and the College is piloting its use for other HE provision in one subject area following a wider FE pilot the previous year. Whilst the review team heard of the guidance on correct academic practice provided to students at induction and through their tutors, in discussion students reported that where Turnitin submission was required, a variety of different levels of matched text might be acceptable. The team heard that few issues of plagiarism were reported which the College attributed to the nature of assessments. The team concluded that the College was behind sectoral practice in working systematically with staff and students on the use of text matching software, or equivalent, to support effective assessment practice. The review team recommends as an **area for development** that the College prioritise and develop a more structured approach to addressing issues of academic integrity including plagiarism.

26   A dedicated unit, The Agency, delivers a range of services and enhancement opportunities to College students. The College has an Information, Advice and Guidance Policy covering aspects of learning and employability and is Matrix accredited. There is a dedicated Student Support Tutor for Higher Education and an HE Careers Adviser. The Agency also supports the work of the Student Union Executive. Students are positive about the support and careers guidance they receive.

27   The College obtains feedback from students via a number of mechanisms including surveys, HE student focus groups, consultatives, module reviews, personal tutorials and student representative meetings. Feedback is considered widely across the College including as part of annual monitoring, by the Academic Leadership Team, HE Education Enhancement Group and the Governors with timely action taken where appropriate.

28   Course teams review their programmes at the end of each academic year and produce a course QUIP which informs the College HE SAR. Course QUIPs are also scrutinised by the Principal in course review meetings with the HE lead tutor, the curriculum leader, HE lead and the Group Vice-principal. Annual monitoring reports are produced for partner HEIs according to their specifications. Arrangements for programme monitoring and review are effective in enhancing the quality of provision.

29   Arrangements for securing work placements vary depending on the requirements of the course. Arrangements for setting up placements are described in the academic standards section. College expectations of placements are set out in a Work experience and volunteering policy and procedure which covers provision at all levels. Where there are specific course requirements then additional guidance and handbooks are provided. The College's HE SAR has a section specifically covering placements and students spoke positively about the support they received and the value of their experiences. The review team concluded that the College's arrangements for work placements were effective.

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

30   The College actively promotes student involvement in academic governance through the student representative system. It holds regular consultatives with students, the outcomes of which are considered by the College's deliberative committees and inform the College's SAR. Students are briefed about the student representative role at induction and then elected by their peers. A student representative attends the QS&C and there is also a Student Governor who attends meetings of the Board. Students are currently being

consulted about the design of the new HE Centre which will open in September 2018. At the visit students confirmed that their voice is heard and the College responds positively to their suggestions for change.

31   The College has a robust complaints system which is set out in the Quality Handbook. Students are informed about the policy during the admissions process and at induction. Copies of the policy and forms are available on the College website and the VLE. The policy contains clear guidelines in relation to processes and the timescales to be followed, ensuring the complainant understands the different stages, the right of appeal and the role of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). Students are encouraged to resolve their complaints through informal channels. They confirmed, to the team, that they were aware of the complaints policy.

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

32   As noted above, the College has effective arrangements in place to ensure that their methods of admission are consistent. The College HE Admissions Policy applies to all prospective students applying for full and part-time HE courses. The policy is widely available to prospective students, staff and students on the College website.

33   Entry requirements for each course can be found on the College website, and in the prospectus - also available on the College website. This details a course factsheet and programme specifications for each course offered. Support offered to applicants with additional needs or disabilities are made clear. For students with prior learning, applicants are signposted to the Recognition of Prior Learning Procedure. On enrolment, successful applicants are invited to a summer term Welcome Event and enrolment, while Staffordshire students enrol online.

34   The College clearly outlines what applicants can expect from them, and the responsibilities and obligations of applicants to the College. On successful application, prospective students are emailed an offer letter, an HE Offer Acceptance Form, links to the website policies and procedures, and the relevant course specification. Students are satisfied with the information provided to them prior to starting at the College and at induction; NSS scores for 2016-17 average 82 per cent satisfaction for advice and guidance in relation to their course and choices. At the visit students indicated that the information they received prior to starting their course was accurate and helpful.

35   The College's terms and conditions were devised in 2015 and are reviewed annually by the HE Lead, Contracts Manager and College lawyers to ensure transparency. These are available to prospective students on the 'Applicant Space' page on the College website. Important terms are defined in a plain-English glossary at the start of the document. While students on partner programmes are subject to the terms and conditions of the partner university, the College ensures that students are made aware of the policies and procedures relevant to them.

36   The Complaints Policy is clearly located through the 'Concerns' page of the College website. Students are signposted to the College policies and procedures at induction. The policy outlines options for formal and informal complaint resolution clearly, in accordance with published timescales. Most students in the Student Submission were aware of how to make a complaint and the process, which is also covered at induction. Students questioned were all aware of how to make a complaint and access information regarding complaints and appeals, though none had needed to do so.

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

37   In the event of course changes or closures, staff follow the HE Course Closure, Suspension or Substantial Change Policy, which is available to staff, prospective and current students on the College website. In the event of course closure, students would be notified immediately by the Admissions Team, and any new or revised policies between accepting their offer and starting at the College are communicated via email. Current students at risk of course closure would be invited to meet with the HE Lead, Curriculum Leader and Lead Tutor to advise of course closure, completion arrangements, and discuss any concerns. Information about the course will be removed immediately from the College website and UCAS pages.

38   To ensure continuity of provision, students who are already registered on a course will continue to be 'taught out'; continuing to progress and complete the course. An example was given of students completing the Edge Hill University PGCE course, who were being taught out at the time of the review. Where this is not achievable, current students will be offered an alternative course or a transfer to another provider. Although not mentioned in the policy, in the event of a provider closure elsewhere, the College has accommodated students who have been subject to course closure at other institutions.

39   The College Complaints and Academic Appeals policies are conducted in accordance with agreed published timescales. The policy aims to be impartial, employing an independent third party to resolve issues of confidentially. Complaints are overseen and tracked by the Quality Team to ensure adherence to schedules. Students who met with the review team indicated that they would approach course tutors informally before escalating to a formal complaint. Staff are required to complete a Lessons Learned Proforma and return it to the Assistant Principal Quality and Curriculum Support within two weeks. An annual Complaints and Compliments Report is distributed to the Governors and relevant committees to ensure that outcomes can be utilised to improve the student experience.

Rounded judgement

40   The review team considered the quality of the student academic experience at Shrewsbury Colleges Group, including student outcomes. The team concludes that the provider's arrangements, working with its awarding partners, meet the baseline regulatory requirements. The team identified two areas for development. The first related to the RPL policy with specific reference to experiential learning; the second related to the College's approach to academic integrity including plagiarism.

41   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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