



Higher Education Review of Somerset College of Arts and Technology

November 2014

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Somerset College of Arts and Technology. The review took place from 18 to 21 November 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Maxina Butler-Holmes
- Terence Clifford-Amos
- Emma Palmer (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Somerset College of Arts and Technology and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)¹ setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
 - the quality of student learning opportunities
 - the information provided about higher education provision
 - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

In reviewing Somerset College of Arts and Technology, the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2014-15 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,² and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.³ A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)⁴ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code.

² Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106

³ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.

⁴ Higher Education Review web pages: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Somerset College of Arts and Technology

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Somerset College of Arts and Technology.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at Somerset College of Arts and Technology.

- The comprehensive processes for the design and approval of new programmes (Expectations A3.1, B1).
- The effective dialogue between the Learning Resources Services and academic staff and students (Expectations B3, B4).
- The use of the Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback as a reference point for teaching staff (Expectations A3.2, B1, B6).
- The proactive engagement with external stakeholders to design new programmes to meet professional and technical skills needs (Expectations A3.4, B1, Enhancement).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Somerset College of Arts and Technology.

By April 2015:

- work with its awarding body to ensure that all processes for major changes and discontinuation of programmes are followed diligently and any correspondence regarding these processes is formally recorded in accordance with the regulations and partnership agreements (Expectations A2.1, A3.3, B8, C)
- ensure the complaints procedures are clearly communicated (Expectation B9)
- strengthen the procedure for the provision of information to prospective and current students, staff and other stakeholders, to ensure that all information is fit for purpose and trustworthy, and is accessible to those who need it in a timely way (Expectations B2, B9, C).

By October 2015:

- incorporate the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) into future validation documents (Expectations A1, A3.4, B1)
- develop greater consistency of evaluative content in annual programme reporting documentation (Expectations A3.3, B8).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions that Somerset College of Arts and Technology is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The steps being taken to manage and minimise risk in the development of new programmes (Expectations A3.1, B1).
- The steps being taken to embed award board arrangements for Pearson programmes in academic structures (Expectations A3.2, B6).
- The actions being taken to develop further scholarly activity (Expectations B3, Enhancement).
- The actions being taken to train and develop all members of staff to handle student complaints in a timely and effective way (Expectation B9).

Theme: Student Employability

The College gives high priority to student employability and the provision of vocational higher education programmes. It has developed successful long-term, strategic partnerships with local, national and international employers. This has led to the increasing involvement of employers in programme design, development, approval and review. This involvement has been driven by the successful acquisition of Catalyst funding which is also aiding the transition of programmes from Plymouth University to Open University validation. There is also a growing emphasis on successful placements, careers advice, and information, advice and guidance with the development of the Work Academy, the appointment of an Internship Coordinator, and plans for a Student Engagement Hub in Summer 2015.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#).

About Somerset College of Arts and Technology

Somerset College of Arts and Technology (the College) began life in 1856 as the Art School. The foundation stone of the Technical Institute was laid in February 1900. These two institutions subsequently merged to become Somerset College of Arts and Technology in 1956. The College moved to its current site in Taunton in the early 1970s. Its higher education students are recruited nationally.

The College's vision is that it 'will be an educational destination of choice for technical and vocational education and training. The College will have strong partnerships with employers, providing employment opportunities for students local, nationally and internationally'.

At the time of its last QAA review (Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review in 2010), the College had 981 higher education students. The College now has 639 students on higher education programmes, 563 of whom are full-time.

The College offers a range of bachelor's and foundation degrees, top-up degrees, Higher National Certificates (HNCs) and Postgraduate Certificates and Certificates in Education (PGCE/Cert Ed) across Arts and Design, Service Industries, Technology and Construction, and Social and Professional Studies. Programmes are validated by Plymouth University, the Open University, and Pearson. The College has been in partnership with Plymouth University since 1989, but is now in the process of moving all of its non-HNC provision to the Open University. It hopes to complete this process by 2018. Its long-term plan is to gain degree awarding powers allowing it to become a professional and technical University.

The College has identified a number of key challenges facing its higher education provision including: the successful transition of its validated programmes from Plymouth University to the Open University; managing the impact of considerable building works and developments; managing external policy changes, notably the impact of fees on student recruitment; and dealing with variable, though improving, student satisfaction rates.

The College has made satisfactory progress with the recommendations made in the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review. However, there has been considerable restructuring of senior roles within the Quality Team, including the appointment of a Director for Higher Education.

As part of the Higher Education Review, the team also investigated a concern that was submitted to the QAA Concerns Scheme shortly before the start of the review. This concerned students from the previous year's cohort of Fine Art students on the foundation degree and BA (Hons) top-up degree. Reference is made to the concern at appropriate points in the report.

Explanation of the findings about Somerset College of Arts and Technology

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations

Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* are met by:

- positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications
- awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.1 The College designs and develops programmes in accordance with the Open University and Plymouth University academic regulations. The College considers *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) as the essential starting point in designing and developing new programmes and defining the level of the qualification awarded. Alignment with the FHEQ is ensured through programme validation and review procedures. The College has its own internal processes for checking alignment with the FHEQ including an internal scrutiny panel which carries out a checking process prior to the Preliminary and Final validation meetings. The College also delivers HNC provision, and here it is the responsibility of Pearson to ensure that the qualifications align with the appropriate level on both the FHEQ and the Qualifications and Credit Framework. The employment of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements is an expectation for all senior staff involved in programme design and is checked during the validation process. These processes allow the College to, in theory, meet the Expectation in *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards*.

1.2 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining programme handbooks, external examiners' reports, partnership agreements,

validation and revalidation documents, assessment policy and guides, module evaluations, and by talking to senior staff and teaching staff.

1.3 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be effective in practice. The team heard that monitoring of the FHEQ and its concomitants, in relation to new and existing programmes, is carried out effectively by the Quality Team who make academic staff aware of the FHEQ and learning outcomes through a variety of methods including preparation undertaken for initial scrutiny, specific staff development sessions, regular updates, and the Assessment Policy and Good Practice Guide. Staff at the College also make use of a number of external and in-house documents covering all aspects of level descriptors and learning outcomes for levels 4-6. The team heard that a new module template booklet had recently been written for use by staff who are preparing to write documents for new programmes. This internal support is backed up by regular contact with link personnel at the awarding bodies who offer both regulatory and curricular advice.

1.4 The College makes good use of the governance advice and regulations provided by its awarding bodies from the early stages of planning programmes, through to academic scrutiny and pre-validation and final validation events, including the use of appropriate external representation. External examiners' and standards verifiers' reports endorse the alignment with, and appropriate use of, the FHEQ and also the achievement of students at threshold academic standards and above. The team found that the qualifications offered are differentiated by the volume of learning required, and there is variation in the range of intended learning outcomes deployed across modules and programmes.

1.5 At present, the College does not incorporate into its programmes the standards set by PSRBs. The College has stated that this is an area that curriculum teams are now beginning to explore and it is intended that future validations will incorporate such requirements as programmes are reviewed and re-validated. The team endorses this intention and therefore **recommends** that, by October 2015, the College incorporates the requirements of PSRBs into future validation documents (see also Expectations A3.4 and B1).

1.6 While the awarding bodies have ultimate responsibility through their own regulatory frameworks for ensuring that the relevant external reference points are adhered to, there is significant evidence that the College effectively manages its own responsibilities for doing this within its partnership agreements, in particular through its own internal validation events and the use of training and updates to inform academic staff in the use of the FHEQ and learning outcomes when designing and developing new programmes. This is confirmed through a variety of mechanisms including reviews by the awarding bodies and the conclusions from external examiners' reports. The College has recognised the need, in future, to incorporate the requirements of PSRBs into relevant validation documents and the team has made a recommendation to endorse this. Despite the recommendation, the review team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards* is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.

Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.7 The regulatory frameworks of each awarding body determine academic standards for each programme. The College works within the established academic frameworks and regulations of its awarding bodies as outlined in the partnership agreements. With regard to those programmes validated by the Open University, the College wrote its own regulations which were subsequently approved by the University. There are internal checks regarding the design, function and operation of learning outcomes, and also concerning the practice of assessment which, undertaken by academic staff and by approved academic partners, is overseen, moderated and verified by external examiners and standards verifiers. The work of external examiners and standards verifiers is overseen by the Academic Board. Respective qualifications are awarded in accordance with these systemic processes and alignments are made with the requirements of the awarding bodies through the prescribed academic regulations which include programme validation procedures. These processes enable the College to meet Expectation A2.1.

1.8 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining external examiners' reports, partnership agreements, validation and revalidation documents, academic regulations, minutes of meetings, and by talking to senior staff.

1.9 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be effective in practice. The team saw evidence that the College uses its internal mechanisms to ensure that it works effectively within the academic frameworks approved by its awarding bodies and that appropriate use is made of the FHEQ in programme design and approval. This was confirmed by examination of internal and external validation and revalidation processes, the operation of the Academic Board, external examiners' reports, and periodic reviews conducted by Pearson and Plymouth University.

1.10 Overall, effective practices exist for the internal monitoring and possible discontinuation of programmes (see paragraphs 1.30-1.37). However, significant difficulties were encountered during the academic year 2013-14 concerning discontinuation of a BA (Hons) progression route for students on the Foundation Degree (FdA) in Fine Art. While acknowledging the complexity of the situation and recognising that problems were caused by a variety of factors, the team were of the opinion that processes and decisions regarding the discontinuation of the BA progression route were not adequately or formally recorded by the College or its awarding body. The team therefore **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College works with its awarding body to ensure that all processes for major changes and discontinuation of programmes are followed diligently and any correspondence regarding these processes is formally recorded in accordance with the regulations and partnership agreements (see also Expectations A3.3, B8 and C).

1.11 The awarding bodies have ultimate responsibility for academic frameworks and regulations. The team saw significant evidence to confirm that, overall, the College operates effectively to uphold the frameworks and regulations. The College's committee structure and internal quality assurance processes operate effectively in this respect. However, a significant problem did arise on the College's Fine Art programmes during the academic year

2013-2014, leading to a recommendation being made by the review team. The team has assigned a moderate level of risk to this Expectation because the shortcomings refer to a lack of clarity regarding respective responsibilities between the College and its awarding body and the problems were confined to a small part of the provision. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards* is met both in theory and in practice, but the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.12 The College and its partner Universities share responsibility for programme development, approval and modifications, while Pearson is responsible for developing, approving and modifying the HNC programmes. The College is responsible for producing all the specifications for programmes validated by the Open University. For those programmes that were validated by Plymouth University, the College has developed the majority of programme specifications. The College shares responsibility with its partner Universities for the maintenance of programme specifications although Plymouth University assumes overall responsibility for its programmes. All programme specifications include reference to relevant external reference points such as the FHEQ, appropriate Subject Benchmark Statements, assessment regulations, and information regarding credit and learning outcomes. Programme specifications are made available to students through the virtual learning environments (VLE) at the College and its partner Universities, and in programme handbooks. For any changes to programmes and/or during validation and revalidation of programmes, the College has to complete additional documentation for its University partners in the form of Background or Approval Documents, which are reviewed internally before going to external validation. These processes enable the College to meet Expectation A2.2.

1.13 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining partnership agreements, programme handbooks, validation and revalidation documents, minutes of Academic Board meetings, minutes of programme monitoring meetings, programme monitoring reports, external examiners' reports, change plans, and student transcripts. The team also held meetings with senior staff, academic staff, and students.

1.14 The team found that the practices and processes were effective in practice and demonstrated a shared responsibility between the awarding bodies and the College. Information in programme specifications is accurate and accessible. Students whom the team met knew where to find information about their programmes and explained how they contribute to programme review. The College has effective internal processes at a preliminary stage for identifying and managing changes to programmes, before going to the Academic Board and validation events. The College uses a tracking system to monitor changes to programme handbooks and this helps to provide assurance for developing and amending programmes in accordance with the FHEQ and relevant subject and qualification benchmarks. The team also saw evidence that the College makes use of external examiners' reports and feedback from staff and students during Annual Programme Meetings and Programme Committee Meetings to contribute to any changes to, or validation of, programmes.

1.15 Within its partnership agreements, the College fulfils its responsibilities for maintaining definitive records. The team saw significant evidence of how the College does this, most notably through its engagement with validation and revalidation processes, and through effective programme monitoring and review. Therefore, within the context of the

agreements with its awarding bodies, the team concludes that Expectation A2.2 is met both in theory and in practice, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.16 Overall responsibility for the approval of programmes rests with the awarding bodies. The College, through the operation of its Academic Board, ensures strategic oversight for the systematic and consistent maintenance of the processes for the approval of taught programmes, for example by ensuring that conditions arising from approval and revalidation events are met. For programmes validated by the Open University, the College follows the policies and procedures for programme approval in line with the Open University Handbook for validated awards. The process includes staged engagement from the production of a Background Document through preparation for an internal scrutiny panel and an iterative process prior to final recommendation for approval by the awarding body. For programmes validated by Plymouth University, the College has historically produced an Approval Document as required under the University's Academic Regulations. This has involved using guidance documents to assist with the writing of learning outcomes in alignment with appropriate level descriptors. All new programmes and revalidations are now being approved by the Open University as part of the transitional schedule which is due to be completed by 2018. These processes enable the College, in theory, to meet Expectation A3.1.

1.17 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining documentation relating to programme approval and validation events, in particular in relation to the most recent approvals in Computing and Media Make Up. The team also held meetings with students, senior staff, teaching staff, and support staff.

1.18 The team found that, overall, the processes for programme approval work effectively. The timeline for programme development and approval clearly shows the stages involved in the process. The current cycle is guided by the College Regulations which were developed as part of the devolved responsibility model operated by the Open University. Academic staff, including those on fractional contracts, are actively engaged in preparation for approval. Support in the form of guidance and training is provided by the Director of Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality and Development Manager. The College effectively interprets the Open University's processes and assumes the devolved responsibility for the initial stages of approval. This includes internal scrutiny panels being held for every proposed programme. There is a checklist which includes consideration of programme aims and learning outcomes, intended learning outcomes for each module, elements of externality, assessment strategies and regulatory framework compliance. Feedback is provided by the Higher Education Quality and Development Manager to the curriculum-based teams and documentation is revised if necessary.

1.19 The College ensures that the process for programme development and approval offers opportunities for staff development by enabling peers to act as observers to increase levels of confidence. Staff in Computing are now supporting peers in Business and Management. The background information documentation put together by the College provides a thorough presentation of both the academic and business case. The team saw evidence that the rigour of the approvals process does result in some proposals not being recommended for continuation to final validation, for example in Fine Art, Fashion, and

Engineering. The team saw evidence of the involvement of students and external academic panel members at preliminary and final validation panels. The team found the comprehensive processes for the design and approval of new programmes to be **good practice** (see also Expectation B1).

1.20 The College is planning to strengthen its internal mechanisms for programme approval and discontinuation through the proposed introduction of an Academic Planning and Development Committee. This committee is seen as augmenting the existing mechanisms, particularly in light of the move into more innovative delivery patterns and entry into new markets with their associated risks. The introduction of this new committee has also been influenced by the difficulties encountered with the discontinuation of the BA progression route for Fine Art (see paragraph 1.10). The team therefore **affirms** the steps being taken to manage and minimise risk in the development of new programmes (see also Expectation B1).

1.21 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively fulfilling its responsibilities for programme approval to ensure that each of its qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ. The approval processes are embedded within the College, understood by staff and increasingly being informed by external influences. The team found the comprehensive processes for the design and approval of new programmes to be good practice, while affirming the steps being taken by the College to manage and minimise risk in the development of new programmes. Therefore, the team concludes that Expectation A3.1 is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.22 The College operates under the academic regulatory frameworks of its awarding bodies. At the time of the review, there was a substantial devolved responsibility for the Open University provision with awards operating under the Somerset College of Arts and Technology Academic Regulations for Open University Validated Awards 2013-14. By 2015-16, however, the College will operate directly under the Open University regulations. Academic regulations are systematically reviewed with Plymouth University providing annual updates, and the College currently being responsible for reviewing its Regulations for Open University awards through the Academic Board structure. The HNC programmes operate under the generic advice provided by Pearson via the BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment. The College has a Higher Education Assessment Policy 2014-17 which provides a reference point for staff with regard to first and second marking, and moderation expectations. The Policy incorporates the requirements of its awarding bodies and awarding organisation. It is also aligned to Plymouth University's Assessment Policy 2014-20, as well as being revised in accordance with the requirements of the Open University. These frameworks assure that the design, approval and monitoring of assessment strategies satisfy appropriate academic standards and therefore enable the College, in theory, to meet Expectation A3.2.

1.23 The review team tested the effectiveness of these assessment arrangements through the examination of minutes of meetings for Academic Board, Programme Committees, subject assessment panels, award boards, and external examiner reports, programme handbooks, academic regulations, validation and revalidation events, and the policies and guidance provided by the College. The team also held meetings with teaching staff, senior staff, employers and students.

1.24 The team found that approaches to assessment align effectively to promote the achievement of learning outcomes. The team saw evidence that programme assessment strategies and the achievement of learning outcomes are discussed at pre-validation and validation events, thus providing scrutiny during programme design, development and approval. This information then goes through rigorous programme approval processes with the awarding bodies before being embedded into relevant programme specifications. These specifications are outlined in programme handbooks and this assists students in achieving intended learning outcomes. Assignment briefs include clear assessment and grading criteria. Students confirmed that they understood the requirements of assessment.

1.25 For its Open University provision, a module specification template booklet has been developed which includes the assessment strategy and methods to ensure that credit is based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. For programmes validated by Plymouth University, any alterations to module assessments take place through the 'permitted change' procedure. The team saw examples of how the College had used the latter procedure, for example in the Foundation Degree in Healthcare Practice.

1.26 The range of policies covering academic offences and extenuating circumstances are covered in student handbooks and, for Plymouth University awards, students are referred to the University's virtual learning environment. For HNC programmes, however, the College relies on generic documentation published by Pearson. The handbook for HNC programmes contains only a brief paragraph on academic malpractice and no reference to more detailed policies.

1.27 Examination and award boards operate under the oversight of the awarding bodies and are attended by the relevant University staff. The team saw evidence that the College's Higher Education Quality and Development Manager produces an annual summary report for Academic Board of the award and assessment boards. The report allows Academic Board to monitor academic offences. These processes have not yet been extended to the provision offered on behalf of Pearson. Award board arrangements for those programmes validated by Pearson have recently been adapted to come in line with other provision as the academic year 2013-14 was the first time that the programmes had not been accredited by Plymouth University. The 'trial' award board was chaired by the programme leader and was attended by the Standards Verifier, but minutes of the meeting were brief and there was a lack of representation from outside the subject and from the Higher Education Quality Team. The paper originally proposed for Academic Board to agree future practice for the Pearson provision has been delayed with the meeting now arranged for January 2015. In addition, the College has yet to receive the published regulations for the Award Board. The team **affirms** the steps being taken to embed award board arrangements for Pearson programmes in academic structures (see also Expectation B6).

1.28 Academic staff are supported by the Director for Higher Education and the Higher Education Quality and Development Manager in developing and reviewing assessment practice, either through the Higher Education Forum or during the weekly staff development sessions. The Higher Education Forum has not met during the academic year 2014-2015. However, the team heard that the Forum would meet again in February 2015 as a result of the value placed on it by teaching staff. Tutors enjoy good working relationships with staff at awarding bodies and have been able to benefit through attending staff development events and subject meetings to develop and maintain their understanding of assessment practices. External examiners provide external overview and confirmation of threshold academic standards through their annual reports and attendance at assessment boards.

1.29 The team found academic staff to have a good understanding of level descriptors, learning outcomes and assessment strategies at levels 4-6. The Assessment Policy covers principles of assessment and a code of practice for marking and moderation. There is also a helpful summary of sources of evidence to assure that assessments are reliable, valid, accessible and managed in a timely way. There is also an Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback which the review team found to be particularly clear and supportive. This publication provides a comprehensive coverage of assessment and grading at each of the levels of the FHEQ and is referred to by programme teams in the development and review of programmes. Staff development sessions have helped to embed the use of this guide. The team found the use of the Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback as a reference point for teaching staff to be **good practice** (see also Expectations B1 and B6).

1.30 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for the award of credit and qualifications. Assessment is used to give students the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the relevant learning outcomes and decisions to award credit or qualifications are based on robust evidence that the programme or module learning outcomes have been achieved. These are confirmed by evidence from validation events, external examiners' reports, and from meetings with staff and students. The team affirmed the progress being made by the

College in embedding award board arrangements for Pearson programmes in academic structures. The team also identified the use of the Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback to be a feature of good practice. Therefore, the team concludes that Expectation A3.2 is met both in design and operation, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.31 The awarding bodies' requirements of the College regarding annual reporting cycles and periodic reviews are described in the partnership agreements. These agreements are supplemented by related handbooks and guidance documents. The College conducts annual monitoring of programmes which result in comprehensive reports being produced for the awarding bodies. Each programme report has an associated action plan which is monitored at curriculum area and programme team meetings. The BTEC Centre Guide provides the point of reference for annual reporting to Pearson. The outcomes of annual monitoring are brought together in an overarching Higher Education Action Plan. This is maintained by the Higher Education Quality and Development Manager who reports on progress to the Academic Board and the Curriculum and Quality Committee. Following the Plymouth University periodic review in 2012, the College produced an action plan which is monitored by the senior leadership team (SLT). The original Institutional Approval for the Open University took place in 2011 with review, including compliance with the regulatory framework, occurring after five years. An annual Quality Review report is produced by Pearson for the HNC programmes. These approaches allow the College's processes to meet Expectation A3.3.

1.32 The effectiveness of these practices and procedures was assessed by examining annual monitoring documentation, periodic review reports, the Open University Institutional Report, minutes of committee meetings, Higher Education Action Plans, and partnership agreements. The review team also talked to the Principal, senior staff, academic staff, support staff, and students.

1.33 Overall, the team found that the processes for programme monitoring and review work effectively. There is a clear process for annual monitoring of programmes and reporting to the University partners. An Annual Institutional Overview is produced for the Open University, endorsed by the College Academic Board, which synthesises all individual Annual Programme Evaluation reports. Written feedback is provided to the College in response. The Academic Board also includes a representative from the Open University. A Joint Board of Studies, chaired by Plymouth University, receives annual monitoring reports for each programme from the University's Faculty Manager and scrutinises the College 'enhancement focused action plan'. This meeting is attended by managers from the College, including the Principal and Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality, along with University Faculty Leads.

1.34 The difficulties encountered on the Fine Art programmes have been highlighted in paragraph 1.10. As the issues also relate to programme monitoring and review, the team again **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College works with its awarding body to ensure that all processes for major changes and discontinuation of programmes are followed diligently and any correspondence regarding these processes is formally recorded in accordance with the regulations and partnership agreements (see also Expectations A2.1, B8 and C).

1.35 Internal oversight is assured through the annual self assessment reporting cycle. The Higher Education Quality and Development Manager produces an overview audit of all annual programme reports and summaries of programme level action plans. These are included in the Higher Education Action Plan and discussed at meetings of the Academic Board. In addition, the Curriculum and Quality Committee receives updates on the progress of the Higher Education Strategy and academic developments. The team found that staff understand the quality cycle and engage with University peers at the subject level to ensure the continuing relevance and validity of programmes.

1.36 The review team did, however, note some inconsistency in the level of detail and evaluative content in annual programme reporting documentation and this was confirmed in the findings of the Open University's scrutiny of the 2012-13 Annual Institutional Overview. The team saw evidence that the College has responded by offering additional training to academic staff and the awarding body did note some improvement in the commentary for the following year. The team also saw evidence of some inconsistent practice in the minutes of Programme Committee Meetings. The team heard that training has been provided for the administrative staff to improve consistency in reporting. An audit of the spring term Programme Committee Meetings had been conducted during 2013-14 but it was not clear whether or when this would be repeated. The team was informed that one of the remits of the proposed Higher Education Implementation and Development Group is to promote greater internal consistency in reporting documentation. However, this Group has yet to meet. Therefore, the team **recommends** that, by October 2015, the College develops greater consistency of evaluative content in annual programme reporting documentation (see also Expectation B8).

1.37 The team was informed that an annual overarching higher education self-evaluation document is under development, including evaluative commentary from the service area self-assessment reports. The proposed new Higher Education Implementation and Development Group will lead on its preparation. The proposed membership of this Group does not include academic staff or students. While there is evidence that student representatives have been involved in meetings of the Academic Board, they have not been members. As the team also heard that teaching staff are not involved in other senior academic committees, such as Academic Board or the Joint Board of Studies, the College might wish to introduce representation for students and teaching staff on such committees.

1.38 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that, overall, the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for monitoring and reviewing its higher education programmes. The College ensures oversight of its programmes, and proposals for the development of new ones, through its deliberative structures. This ensures that academic standards are achieved and that the requirements of the awarding bodies are being maintained. However, the team repeats its recommendation regarding the formal recording of correspondence concerning major changes to, and discontinuation of, programmes. On the whole, programme reporting documentation is adequate but the team also **recommends** that it should contain greater consistency in terms of its evaluative content. The team has assigned a moderate level of risk to this Expectation because the shortcomings regarding the first recommendation refer to a lack of clarity about respective responsibilities between the College and its awarding body and the problems were confined to a small part of the provision. With respect to the second recommendation, the quality assurance procedures are broadly adequate but have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied. The team does recognise that the proposed introduction of the Higher Education Implementation and Development Group should ensure greater internal consistency in reporting documentation and improved processes for the discontinuation of programmes.

Therefore, the team concludes that Expectation A3.3 is met both in design and operation, but the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.39 At the programme design and development stages, external members are appointed by awarding bodies to validation panels for all new programme approvals. External examiners and standards verifiers are appointed by the awarding bodies to monitor, oversee and verify the results of awards based on the assessment of learning outcomes. External examiners' reports comment on whether academic standards have successfully been achieved and maintained by the College. External examiners also ensure that examining processes are effective, that the awarding bodies are held publicly accountable, and that academic standards are being maintained. The College has extensive links with employers, some of whom are directly engaged in programme design and the assessment process, while others feed back to the College in respect of student progress and curricular advice. As stakeholders, students also assist in the review of programmes. These approaches enable the College to meet Expectation A3.4.

1.40 The review team tested the processes by examining a range of College documents on external support relating to curricular matters and support pertaining to student internships, negotiating funding bids, strategic partner development and student employment.

1.41 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. External examiners' reports suggest satisfaction with the maintenance of academic standards, including the appropriate use of the FHEQ. Throughout the academic year, external examiners and standards verifiers assist with refining existing programmes, including recommending adjustments to learning outcomes. The team heard that students often meet with external examiners when they visit the College. There are link personnel for all awarding bodies who liaise with nominated staff on matters of mutual interest, policy, procedural adjustment or change. A significant aid to the College's developmental and external work is the Catalyst funding which has enabled greater liaison between teaching teams and employers, for example in reviewing and updating curricula prior to the validation of new programmes with the Open University.

1.42 The College has successfully developed and achieved a culture of externality and consistently uses external expertise across its academic framework, including programme design and validation, and, where appropriate, assessment. At the final validation stage, the team saw evidence that appropriate use is made of validation panel members external to the awarding bodies and the College. Employers, visiting lecturers and other specialists are influential in the development of students, most notably with regard to their employability. The team found the proactive engagement with external stakeholders to design new programmes to meet professional and technical skills needs to be **good practice** (see also Expectation B1 and Enhancement). However, as noted in paragraph 1.5, the team also found that the College does not currently incorporate into its programmes the standards set by PSRBs and therefore it again **recommends** that, by October 2015, the College

incorporates the requirements of PSRBs into future validation documents (see also Expectations A1 and B1).

1.43 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for maintaining academic standards through the use of external expertise. This is confirmed by external examiners' reports and the team saw evidence of extensive relationships with local and national employers. The proactive engagement with external stakeholders in the design of new programmes is highlighted as **good practice**. The team again recommends that the College, in future, incorporates PSRB standards into relevant validation documents. The team concludes that Expectation A3.4 is met both in design and operation, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations: Summary of findings

1.44 In reaching its positive judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. All of the Expectations for this judgement area were met. Apart from Expectations A2.1 and A3.3, where the level of risk is moderate, the associated levels of risk for the Expectations were low. In all sections under academic standards, the College is also required to adhere to the procedures of its awarding bodies.

1.45 The review team makes three recommendations and two affirmations in this section. The recommendations relate to the following: ensuring all processes for major changes and discontinuation of programmes are followed diligently and correspondence is formally recorded; incorporating the requirements of PSRBs into future validation documents; and developing greater consistency of evaluative content in annual programme reporting documentation. The affirmations concern the actions being taken to manage and minimise risk in the development of new programmes, and the steps being taken to embed award board arrangements for Pearson programmes in academic structures;. There were three features of good practice: the comprehensive processes for the design and approval of new programmes; the use of the Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback; and the proactive engagement with external stakeholders to design new programmes to meet professional and technical skills needs.

1.46 The review team therefore concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies at Somerset College of Arts and Technology **meets** UK expectations.

2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes

Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval

Findings

2.1 Other than its HNC provision, the College is responsible for designing new programmes. Overall responsibility for the approval of programmes rests with Pearson and the Universities. As noted in A3.1, the College follows the clear procedures for programme design and approval as laid out by its awarding bodies (see paragraph 1.16). At subject level, programme developments include input from staff, students and sometimes employers. The Academic Board has overarching responsibility for ensuring that proposed programmes meet the requirements of the awarding bodies. The systematic approaches taken by the College with regard to the design and approval of new programmes allows it to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval*.

2.2 The team analysed the process in operation through examining the following information: minutes of team meetings; validation and revalidation reports and background documentation; meetings and documentation relating to the use of the Catalyst Fund; academic regulations; minutes and terms of reference for key higher education committees; Higher Education Action Plans; and Change Plans. In addition, the team held meetings with the Principal, senior staff, academic staff, employers and students.

2.3 Overall, the team found these processes to work effectively in practice. The reports of institutional approval and periodic review processes conducted by the University partners confirm that the College discharges its responsibilities effectively. Regular reporting from the Catalyst Fund Project Steering Group to SLT and the Academic Board aids strategic oversight of new programme design and development. The College uses the Higher Education Action Plan to monitor relevant operational actions. The team saw evidence that the College is making effective use of the Catalyst Fund to research new markets and develop provision in specialised or niche markets.

2.4 The internal scrutiny panels, described in paragraph 1.19, are all attended by the Higher Education Quality and Development Manager which ensures consistency in practice. The process for programme design and approval is thorough and the team saw evidence of iterative changes being made to new programmes. Therefore, the team again notes the comprehensive processes for the design and approval of new programmes to be **good practice** (see also A3.1).

2.5 The College's comprehensive approach to programme design is becoming even more aligned to the requirements of employers with regard to professional and technical skills needs. Senior and academic staff whom the team met spoke of the College's innovative strategy for seeking to integrate vocational qualifications into the foundation degree framework and mapping some of its higher education provision to non-prescribed higher education markets to increase demand. The College already has one Centre of Excellence in Health and Social Care and is being supported by the Local Enterprise Partnership in the creation of another in Advanced Engineering.

2.6 The team identified several examples of programmes being designed and developed through proactive engagement with employers and other external organisations. The College is committed to updating or refreshing programmes to reflect employment trends and changes in professional practice. For example, the team heard about the Foundation Degree in Healthcare Practice being developed in partnership with a local hospital in response to a clinical need. Likewise, the proposed Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care, which aims to offer a simultaneous Qualifications and Credit Framework qualification, has arisen from one of the College's Change Plans. Therefore, the team recognises the proactive engagement with external stakeholders to design new programmes to meet professional and technical skills needs as **good practice** (see also Expectation A3.4 and Enhancement). The College has an ambitious strategic intent to bring 30 programmes to validation by 2016-17 to meet the increased demand for professional and technical skills. The College does recognise the need to mitigate risk and has introduced a new Academic Planning and Development Committee to do this. Therefore, the team again **affirms** the steps being taken to manage and minimise risk in the development of new programmes (see also Expectation A3.1).

2.7 Senior and academic staff whom the team met demonstrated a widespread awareness and understanding of the FHEQ, level descriptors and the sections of the Quality Code which inform programme design and the writing of intended learning outcomes (see paragraphs 1.3 to 1.5). In addition, the team heard that academic staff involved in curriculum design participate in validation panels or act as critical friends to colleagues in other subject areas. The sections of the Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback inform programme design (see paragraph 1.28). Therefore, the team again finds the use of the Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback as a reference point for teaching staff to be **good practice** (see also Expectations A3.2 and B6). As stated in paragraph 1.5, the College does not currently incorporate into its programmes the standards set by PSRBs. Therefore, the team again **recommends** that, by October 2015, the College incorporates the requirements of PSRBs into future validation documents (see also Expectations A1 and A3.4).

2.8 Overall, the College has a comprehensive approach to the design and approval of programmes. The stages involved in the design of, and preparation for approval of, programmes are comprehensive and clearly understood. The team highlighted three areas of good practice, one recommendation, and an affirmation. The College has recognised its weaknesses in this area and has begun to take steps to address them. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval* is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.

Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission*

Findings

2.9 The majority of students apply to the College via UCAS, with alternative routes for part-time provision and progression routes. Recruitment is the responsibility of the College while admissions is a shared responsibility between the College and its awarding bodies. The Admissions Policy has recently been reviewed in light of the restructuring of the Helpzone Team, formerly Student Services and Admissions/Enrolment teams, with the intention of supporting and enhancing the student experience. The College has retained its Matrix accreditation. The College uses the higher education tracker within interviews and also an application process which allows curriculum areas and the Helpzone Team to ensure correct information is held about the applicant. The College is currently carrying out progression activities to encourage further education learners to progress to higher education. This includes activities based around the National Scholarship Programme. These procedures allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission*.

2.10 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these policies and procedures by reviewing the higher education prospectus, the Admissions Policy, the Helpzone customer charter, higher education application process and the higher education tracker. The team also met with senior staff, support staff, academic staff and students.

2.11 The team found these processes to work effectively in practice. The Director for Higher Education updates SLT on the admissions process on a regular basis. The team were notified that staff are being informed of latest developments through attendance at national and regional forums and seminars, and by being given access to the latest literature, for example on student finance. The prospectus is clear about entry requirements and the programme structure.

2.12 The College also has effective measures in place once a student has accepted an offer. The College supports applicants who may use the procedure for recognition of prior learning, thus improving the likelihood of retention for those students deemed to be at risk of dropping out. The Helpzone Team enables access for students who have disclosed a disability and/or a specific learning need.

2.13 Fine Art students whom the team met confirmed that they had received inaccurate information at their interviews about progression routes. The College has accepted there were problems with regard to this particular programme. As a result, staff are currently being offered additional guidance during each step of the admissions process with the higher education tracker and the interview guide sheet. The team also found inaccurate information in the programme handbook in terms of the BA progression route. Therefore, the team **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College strengthens the procedure for the provision of information to prospective and current students, staff and other stakeholders, to ensure that all information is fit for purpose and trustworthy, and is accessible to those who need it in a timely way (see also Expectations B9 and C).

2.14 Despite the difficulties encountered with students on the Fine Art programmes and the subsequent recommendation concerning the provision of accurate information to

prospective students, the overall evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College has procedures which adhere to the principles of fair admission. The College has good support in place for students during application and enrolment, particularly regarding progression activities and the recognition of prior learning. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission* is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.

Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*

Findings

2.15 The College's strategic direction in this area is outlined in its Teaching and Learning Strategy 2012-15 which has its basis in the College's overall strategic priorities. The Strategy grew out of a day's workshop in which many staff were involved and the draft was then circulated to other members of staff. An annual Teaching and Learning Action Plan is produced and reviewed to deliver the strategy based on agreed priorities. The plan is monitored and reviewed by the Teaching and Learning Committee, Senior Leadership Team, and the Board of Governors. Implementation of the Strategy is further supported by the work of Advanced Practitioners. The success of the Strategy is a particular priority for the College as it articulates its purpose around the intended competences, qualities, and transferable skills of its graduates. The College has a number of other systems in place to maintain and enhance the quality of teaching and learning including: students' evaluation of teacher performance; an annual round of graded lesson observations where all higher education teaching staff are observed at least once; Learning Walks by the Governing Body; a range of staff development opportunities including weekly tailored continuing professional development (CPD) sessions and six days paid scholarly activity each year; and mentoring by Advanced Practitioners. These strategies and procedures allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*.

2.16 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these policies, procedures and strategies by examining the Teaching and Learning Strategy and its associated Action Plan, and by examining documentation outlined in the previous paragraph. The team also held meetings with teaching staff, support staff, senior staff, and students.

2.17 The review team found these processes work effectively in practice. The difficulties encountered on the Fine Art programmes last year had a negative effect on teaching and learning. However, the current cohort of students on the second year of the foundation degree commented that teaching was now 'outstanding' on this programme. Students whom the team met confirmed the overall quality and range of teaching and the efforts being made by the College to further enhance the provision. The team found that staff effectively use a variety of teaching methods, including the VLE, and there is appropriate emphasis on formative assessment methods. The VLE also provides access to interactive study skills tutorials, which includes help with writing, academic referencing and skills required for research. Students were generally positive about the VLE and the support available from tutors and support staff. However, some do struggle with it, largely due to poor internet access in halls of residence.

2.18 Students whom the team met confirmed their satisfaction with the individualised attention offered by the range of support services. Learning Resources services include a fully equipped Higher Education Study Centre, containing a research hub, facilities for accessing e-books and an integrated media player, IT and bespoke provision for all students either through forums or on a one-to-one basis. The team heard numerous examples of how the library staff and the Learning Support Team engage in support and enhancement processes, aiding both teachers and students. Staff and students whom the team met complimented the support for teaching and learning provided by the library staff. Examples

include support in facilitating action research and research-informed teaching, as well as online and face-to-face sessions to aid study skills, ICT, and use of research methods. The dialogue created between the student and tutor is a College expectation and can be illustrated through the criteria for dissertation supervision and academic tutorials. The dialogue is extended to include the Higher Education Study Centre which supplements tutorial activities with the group and individual study skills' support sessions. The team therefore recognises the effective dialogue between the Learning Resources services and academic staff and students as **good practice** (see also Expectation B4).

2.19 There is a significant amount of support in place for teaching staff to enhance their practice. The Teaching and Learning Action Plan 2013-14 illustrates the systematic procedures in place for the maintenance and development of good teaching practice. For example, the College held a Teaching and Learning Fayre which was a forum to develop and share specialist skills and excellence in teaching and learning. Advanced Practitioners are used in a number of ways to enhance the quality of teaching, including in their role as mentors to new members of staff or those new to teaching in higher education. During the academic year 2013-14, all higher education teaching staff were graded as either outstanding or good during their lesson observations. All academic staff are expected to undertake six days paid scholarly activity each year. The activities of the Research, Scholarship and Ethics Committee and the annual Research Symposium are important and effective in the College's portfolio of scholarly activity. However, not all staff are currently taking up opportunities for scholarly activity and the team heard of issues regarding time for research, funding for some postgraduate qualifications, and opportunities to attend conferences. Therefore, the College has decided to set focused objectives for all staff to undertake such activities and this will be reviewed at their next appraisal. The team **affirms** the actions being taken to develop further scholarly activity (see also Enhancement).

2.20 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College has effective learning and teaching practices. The processes of teaching and learning are faithful to the College's strategic priorities, in that students are at the centre of learning with a strong focus on employment and enterprise. Overall, students are happy about the teaching and learning available at the College. Staff are well supported and have access to a wide range of CPD opportunities. The team affirms the actions being taken to develop further scholarly activity. The effective dialogue between the Learning Resources Services and academic staff and students is **good practice**. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching* is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement

Findings

2.21 The arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential are set out in the College's Higher Education Strategy and Strategic Plan, and monitored and evaluated through the College's Leadership and Management Structure, most notably at weekly meetings of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), fortnightly SLT monitoring meetings and through the Academic Board. These responsibilities are clearly set out in the respective Terms of Reference. One of the remits of the proposed new Higher Education Implementation and Development Group is to execute the Higher Education Strategic Plan and to enable the Director for Higher Education to bring all Curriculum Area Managers together for the sharing of good practice. Staff practices and progress are monitored using a variety of mechanisms including staff appraisals, CPD, Learning Walks, students' evaluation of teacher performance, lesson observations, and mentoring by advanced practitioners. These procedures allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*.

2.22 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these procedures by examining documentation outlined in the previous paragraph. The team also held meetings with teaching staff, support staff, senior staff, and students.

2.23 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. Numerous examples were put forward of students receiving effective support. For example, once an applicant discloses a disability and/or learning need prior to interview, a member of the Learning Support Team will attend the interview enabling an immediate assessment of the applicant's needs. Learning Support tutors work with students to apply for the Disabled Student Allowance and also work alongside academic staff to devise appropriate alternative assessment tasks. The College also provides funding for assessments in dyslexia and plans to do the same in future for dyscalculia.

2.24 The team also identified evidence of a strong and developing careers service, while the Strategy and Practice of Higher Education Work-Based Learning at Somerset College of Arts and Technology illustrates the modular opportunities and support available for students undertaking work-based practice. In addition, the Work Academy supports students towards the gaining of key skills and preparation for employment.

2.25 Paragraphs 2.17 and 2.18 also highlight the resources and support available for staff and students to aid teaching and learning, including the excellent interface between the Learning Resources services and academic staff and students. The team again recognises the effective dialogue between the Learning Resources services and academic staff and students as **good practice** (see also Expectation B4).

2.26 The College is generally sensitive to the Learner Voice and has responded favourably to a range of student requests, as recorded in the document 'Higher Education You Said We Did'. One example was the introduction of a discrete Higher Education Study Centre which offers students subject-specific resources, bookable study rooms and quiet areas for study. Students commented that tutors are accessible, while student surveys are taken seriously and acted upon. The difficulties encountered by Fine Art students during the previous academic year have been described elsewhere in the report but discussions with current students suggest that communication from senior and teaching staff has improved

(see paragraph 2.30). However, students still expressed frustration regarding communication about resources, in particular concerning the rebuilding of the Art House.

2.27 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College has effective processes in place to enable student development and achievement. Teaching and support staff have extensive expertise and are supported to undertake CPD. Students spoke highly of the support they received from teaching and support staff, and the effective dialogue between the Learning Resources Services and academic staff and students was again highlighted as good practice. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement* is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.

Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement

Findings

2.28 The College has a higher education student governor who is part of the Board of Governors and also engages with learner forums. In addition, there is an active Students' Union with a Higher Education Students' Union president who sits on all committees that link to the SLT. Student Representatives are invited to attend every Programme Committee Meeting (PCM) with information from these meetings feeding back into Annual Programming Monitoring for the autumn PCM. As well as its student representative system, the College also gathers feedback via the Student Perception Questionnaire, which has the same questions as the National Student Survey, 'You said, We Did', and module evaluations. The College also has an active Students' Union which has contact with higher education students at various levels from the Learner Voice through to College governance. The College is currently working with the Students' Union to finalise the draft Student Engagement Strategy. These procedures allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B5: Student Engagement*.

2.29 The team tested the College's approach by reviewing the Learner Voice structure, 'You Said, We Did' campaign, training for student representatives, minutes of Annual Programming Monitoring, PCM and SLT meetings, module evaluations, and the scholar research for the proposed student engagement hub. The team also held meetings with senior staff, support staff, academic staff and students.

2.30 The team found these processes to work effectively in practice. Findings from the Student Perception Questionnaire demonstrated that student satisfaction has increased and this is reflected across all feedback mechanisms. The College values students' feedback as a way of identifying strengths and weaknesses and the team heard examples of how the feedback has contributed to changes at programme level and in the wider College environment. Students also feel that their feedback is valued and welcome the opportunity of being involved in decision-making, for example in the redevelopment of the Art House. Fine Art students whom the team met agreed that the College had made improvements this year, for example through improved communication between staff and students. Other meetings with Fine Art staff and students confirmed the recent improvements in student engagement.

2.31 Students whom the team met were able to identify the roles and responsibilities of a student representative, although some part-time students and representatives felt they weren't as relevant as their full-time equivalents and thus can feel isolated. Although the introduction of processes such as 'You Said, We Did' has been successful, the College recognises that it needs to further improve the methods by which student representatives provide feedback to the student community on actions taken and this is currently being reviewed. While the team saw evidence that the Higher Education Students' Union president and Student Governor had attended Academic Board meetings, the College might wish to formally include student membership of Academic Board and other key committees in the relevant terms of reference. The team recognises the potential value of the proposed student engagement hub and feel that this would link strongly with the forthcoming Student Engagement Strategy, as well as strengthening the College's quality assurance and enhancement procedures.

2.32 Overall, the level of student engagement across the College is effective. The contributions of students are highly valued and the College is constantly taking steps to

further engage all students as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their education. For these reasons, the team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B5: Student Engagement* is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning

Findings

2.33 The College's assessment processes are in accordance with the academic and regulatory frameworks of its awarding bodies (see paragraph 1.12). The Higher Education Assessment Policy sets out the College's expectations for ensuring that processes are valid, reliable and equitable; this includes the Recognition of Prior Learning Policy. Policies are available on the VLE. Teaching staff are involved in the systematic annual review of assessment at programme level through the PCMs and subject team meetings. Specific support for teaching staff new to higher education has been noted and acted on as part of the College's risk management approach. Information relating to assessment and learning outcomes is provided to students through programme handbooks, module specifications and assignment briefs. The College's policies and procedures enables it in theory to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*.

2.34 The review team tested the effectiveness of these assessment arrangements through the examination of minutes of meetings for Academic Board, Programme Committees, subject assessment panels, and award boards; external examiners' reports, programme handbooks, academic regulations, validation and revalidation events; and the policies and guidance provided by the College. The team also held meetings with teaching staff, senior staff, employers and students.

2.35 The team found these processes to work effectively in practice. Assessment criteria in the assignment briefs are discussed with students who confirmed that they understand what is required of them to achieve relevant learning outcomes and in terms of assessment criteria. Evidence from external examiners' reports confirms that assessments are challenging, involve a range of assessment methods, confirm the achievement of learning outcomes, and are successfully contextualised. A summary of the reports for Academic Board highlights any necessary actions relating to assessment. The team also saw examples where programme teams have responded to student feedback, for example to provide more information on the different types of assessment available in Media Make-up.

2.36 Students find feedback to be constructive and developmental. The turnaround for feedback is 20 working days and, with the exception of the Fine Art students during the previous academic year, feedback has been timely. The student submission notes 'outstanding assessment and good feedback throughout all of the curriculum areas'. As in paragraph 1.27, the team would again like to highlight the use of the Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback as a reference point for teaching staff to be **good practice** (see also Expectations B1 and A3.2).

2.37 The College has begun to translate the positive experience of Plymouth University's subject assessment panels across all of the higher education provision. However, it has yet to fully succeed in embedding into its academic structures the award board arrangements for Pearson programmes (see paragraphs 1.26 and 1.27). The team therefore again **affirms** the steps being taken to embed award board arrangements for Pearson programmes in academic structures (see also Expectation A3.2).

2.38 The procedures for the recognition of prior learning are detailed in a policy document which contains a helpful guide for staff. The policy is designed to encompass the whole provision. There have been few cases for consideration to date and the College plans to include this topic in future training plans to increase staff understanding. The team endorse these plans to acknowledge that the recognition of prior learning is likely to become more significant in the light of the expansion and mapping to non-prescribed higher education vocational and professional qualifications.

2.39 In conclusion, the team concludes that the College provides appropriate opportunities for students to demonstrate that they meet the learning outcomes. This is confirmed by external examiners. Criteria and expectations for assessment were clearly presented to students, and feedback received was timely and constructive. The team highlights the use of the Expectation and Good Practice Guide on Assessment Feedback as good practice. An affirmation is made regarding the embedding of Pearson award board arrangements in the College's academic structures. Overall, the team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning* is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.

Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining

Findings

2.40 The College's procedures for the use of external examiners relate to Plymouth University's Academic Regulations, the Open University Handbook for Validated Awards and Pearson's Centre Guide to Assessment Level 4-7. External examiners and standards verifiers are appointed for every higher education programme delivered at the College. There are policies and regulations detailing the nomination and appointment of external examiners which relate to the relevant awarding body. Academic staff are able to nominate candidates to the Universities who may approve any such nominations. The Universities are responsible for all appointments. Pearson appoint their own standards verifiers and inform the College.

2.41 The Academic Board monitors the use and effectiveness of external examining, and has overall responsibility for ensuring that all external examiners and standards verifiers are in place and that they carry out their duties effectively. External examiners and standards verifiers submit an annual report on designated templates which are returned to the particular awarding body and the College. Following dissemination to academic staff, responses are written and checked by the Higher Education Quality Team prior to them being returned to external examiners and standards verifiers. Students now have full access to the reports on the VLE. Briefing packs, with full access to all relevant information including documentation and appropriate induction, are available to all newly appointed and existing external examiners. These arrangements and responsibilities allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B7: External Examining*.

2.42 The review team tested the application of the procedures by scrutinising a range of documentation including external examiners' reports, responses to reports, summaries of reports, minutes of Academic Board meetings, academic regulations, and Higher Education Action Plans. The team also held meetings with students, senior staff, and teaching staff.

2.43 Overall, the review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. External examiners' reports indicate that threshold academic standards and FHEQ levels have been achieved. External examiners agreed that standards of student performance were comparable with similar programmes or subjects in other providers with which they were familiar. Students whom the team met confirmed that they had met with external examiners to discuss matters relating to their work. Standards verifiers are available, on request, to be contacted throughout an academic year. They have also attended Programme Committee Meetings.

2.44 Following its Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review in 2010, the College took action to ensure that its responses to external examiners' reports covered all matters raised, and that responses were consistent in both their application and thoroughness. The College has since introduced a procedure for reviewing responses before their return to external examiners. This process has matured into a helpful dialogue, which enables amendments and any further clarification deemed necessary. Other than a delay in responding to concerns about staffing levels on the Fine Art programmes during the academic year 2012-13 which led to significant problems during the following academic year, the College responds effectively to concerns raised by external examiners. The College identifies issues raised in reports and integrates them into its Higher Education Action Plan.

2.45 In conclusion, external examiners' reports suggest that, overall, the higher education programmes at the College are being managed effectively and that academic standards are being upheld. Reports are easily accessible on the VLE and students whom the team met knew where to find them. The College has tightened up its procedures for responding to reports and for following them up through its Higher Education Action Plan. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B7: External Examining* is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review

Findings

2.46 As well as having its own regular and systematic process for monitoring and reviewing programmes, the College is also required to contribute to the annual and periodic review procedures required by the awarding bodies. The College's approach to programme monitoring and review is described in paragraph 1.30. As with Expectation A3.3, these arrangements and responsibilities allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review*.

2.47 The effectiveness of these practices and procedures was assessed by examining annual monitoring documentation, periodic review reports, the Open University Institutional Report, minutes of committee meetings including those of the Plymouth University Joint Board of Studies, Higher Education Action plans, and partnership agreements. The review team also talked to the Principal, senior staff, academic staff, support staff, and students.

2.48 Overall, the team found that the processes for programme monitoring and review work effectively (see also paragraphs 1.32 and 1.34). The Plymouth University model embeds annual programme monitoring into the procedure for Programme Committee Meetings (PCMs). An audit of annual programme monitoring documentation is conducted at the end of the Autumn cycle. PCMs are held for all higher education programmes using the documentation originally provided by Plymouth University. A structured agenda template contains identified themes including: the student experience; teaching and learning; programme and module management; and assessment and feedback. There is an audit checklist for recording comments or areas for improvement which is collected by the Quality Team. The most effective PCMs see the attendance of teaching staff, the academic liaison partner, the Higher Education Quality Manager, students, and the Student Engagement Manager. Students whom the team met confirmed their active involvement in these meetings.

2.49 The team found some inconsistency with the level of detail and evaluative commentary contained in the minutes of PCMs and in the annual programme evaluations submitted to the Open University (see paragraph 1.35). Therefore, the team again **recommends** that, by October 2015, the College develops greater consistency of evaluative content in annual programme reporting documentation (see also Expectation A3.3).

2.50 The difficulties encountered on the Fine Art programmes have been highlighted in paragraph 1.10. As the issues also relate to programme monitoring and review, the team again **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College works with its awarding body to ensure that all processes for major changes and discontinuation of programmes are followed diligently and any correspondence regarding these processes is formally recorded in accordance with the regulations and partnership agreements (see also Expectations A2.1, A3.3 and C).

2.51 Overall, the evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for monitoring and reviewing the programmes delivered on behalf of its awarding bodies. However, as noted in paragraph 1.38, the team has made two recommendations which highlight a moderate level of risk in this area.

Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review* is met both in design and operation but the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.

Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints

Findings

2.52 Primarily as a result of multiple complaints by ex-students on the Fine Art programmes, the College has since been reviewing its Complaints Policy and Procedure. The Complaints Policy and Procedure is intended to be in alignment with those of its awarding bodies. In addition, the College has introduced a new Persistent Complaints and Harassment Policy. Complaints are reviewed on a fortnightly basis by the SLT Monitoring group. In addition, the Annual Complaints Report is due to go to Academic Board in January 2015. Information about making complaints and academic appeals is available in the student and programme handbooks. Information about Appeals procedures is also available in the Universities' Academic Regulations and when students receive their transcripts. Pearson deals with appeals raised by their students. Appeal outcomes are decided at the Academic Appeals Committee. These policies and procedures enable the College to meet, in theory, the Expectation in *Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints*.

2.53 The effectiveness of these practices and procedures was assessed by examining complaints and appeals policies and procedures of the College and its awarding bodies, Academic Regulations, complaints reports, minutes of relevant committee meetings, programme and student handbooks, action plans, student transcripts, and evidence following the Concern raised in Fine Art. The team also held meetings with senior staff, support staff, teaching staff, and students.

2.54 The team found that the processes for handling student complaints have not been consistently implemented. While acknowledging that the College conducted a lengthy investigation into the complaints from Fine Art students, the team found areas of procedural weakness which had a significant impact on the experience of these students. Meetings with staff and students confirmed that communication between managers, teaching staff and students was ineffective and information given to students about the complaints procedure was at times misleading and out of date. For example, students were provided with an out of date complaints procedure, as well as being given conflicting advice about whether they could go to mediation and still appeal to the University. Students found the University's Complaints Policy difficult to find and were confused over whether the College or University had overall responsibility. While current students on the second year of the Fine Art programme demonstrated a good knowledge of the difference between informal and formal complaints, they also displayed a lack of confidence in the complaints procedure and would tend to bypass the first informal stage. As a result, the team again **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College strengthens the procedure for the provision of information to prospective and current students, staff and other stakeholders, to ensure that all information is fit for purpose and trustworthy, and is accessible to those who need it in a timely way (see also Expectations B2 and C). The team also **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College ensures the complaints procedures are clearly communicated.

2.55 When reviewing the complaints reports, the team also found evidence that approximately a third of the total number of higher education complaints were still ongoing and had extended beyond the 10-day period specified in the College's Complaints Policy and Procedure. This included the initial complaint raised in Fine Art in October 2013 which took 33 days to formally respond to in terms of providing students with an official outcome. The subsequent multiple complaints took place from March 2014 onwards. For these, the

College worked within the framework of Plymouth University's complaints procedure and kept students informed of delays which occurred due to the volume and complexity of complaints. The College met the extended deadline agreed with students and the University. The College recognises that it needs to make improvements to its systems to consistently meet the deadline for responding to complaints. While it has produced an action plan to address the issues raised by Fine Art students, the College has yet to formalise an overall action plan relating to other complaints.

2.56 The College is currently reviewing its Complaints Policy and Procedure to supplement the awarding bodies' procedures outlined in programme handbooks, although the team heard that current Fine Art students were not aware of this review. Students can seek advice at the Helpzone or Students' Union and information about complaints and appeals will be made available shortly on the College's website and VLE. In addition, the College has recently introduced the Persistent Complaints and Harassment Policy in order to protect the wellbeing of staff, students and other stakeholders within the complaints procedure and to ensure that effective feedback is being used to improve services. The team endorses these developments. At the time of the review, the College had produced a draft complaints report containing lessons learned. This report was sent to SLT and the Board of Governors in September 2014 and will also feed into the College's self-evaluation document and Higher Education Action Plan, all of which will be discussed at the next meeting of the Academic Board in January 2015.

2.57 Senior staff attended a Higher Education Complaints Conference run by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator in summer 2014. Knowledge gained from this Conference was subsequently fed into the revision of the Complaints Policy and Procedure and has also been used to inform staff training events. For example, the Higher Education Quality and Development Manager has run training sessions to improve understanding of the difference between informal and formal complaints, and the procedure for raising issues through the student representative system. The team **affirms** the actions being taken to train and develop all members of staff to handle student complaints in a timely and effective way.

2.58 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College has not, in practice, effectively managed its responsibilities for handling student complaints. The team heard of difficulties with communication, accuracy of information, and timeliness of responding to complaints. The team has recommended that complaints procedures are clearly communicated and the procedure for the provision of information is strengthened. The team has also affirmed the steps being taken to train members of staff in handling complaints. The level of risk is moderate because the procedures are broadly adequate in theory but there have been shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they've been applied. The team also acknowledges the steps being taken by the College to improve in this area, for example through the review of the Complaints Policy and Procedure and the training being provided to staff. However, it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness of these actions. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints* is not met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.

Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others

Findings

2.59 Nearly all of the higher education programmes delivered by the College involve work-based learning or placements delivered in the workplace. All foundation degrees include a work-based learning element, either as a standalone module or across all modules. Some students will already be employed while others need to secure their own placements. With the exception of the FdA Healthcare Studies, where assessments are conducted by a Clinical Mentor, any other assessments within the workplace are carried out by College staff. Students also engage in live project briefs and internships. The College also commits itself to the development of Centres of Excellence in Health, Care and Early Years. The awarding bodies also provide oversight to ensure the equivalence and consistency with national requirements of the awards undertaken by the College and its delivery organisations. This process is achieved through validation processes, annual programme monitoring, involvement in Award Boards, and periodic reviews. These procedures enable the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

2.60 The effectiveness of these practices and procedures was assessed by examining a range of documentation including partnership agreements, information relating to the successful Musgrove Park Hospital Project, programme handbooks, validation and programme review documents, terms of reference and minutes of relevant committees, and the Higher Education Strategy. The team also held meetings with the Principal, senior staff, employers, and students.

2.61 The review team found that partnerships were working effectively. In particular, the team saw evidence of the successful collaboration with local NHS employers and Musgrove Park Hospital to develop the FdSc in Healthcare Practice to meet the local needs of employers through the supply of graduates who could apply for Assistant Practitioner posts. Respective responsibilities are clearly outlined in the programme handbook and are explained further at induction. Clinical Mentors are approved by the awarding body. The College will use Catalyst funding when seeking successful revalidation of the programme. As well as the formal assessments carried out by Clinical Mentors at the hospital, other employers provide regular feedback to tutors regarding students' progress as well as discussing potential changes to the curriculum. The team heard that partnerships are also strengthened by reciprocal visits, employer input into design and approval of programmes, annual awards by some employers to the best students, and use of the College as a resource to fill job vacancies.

2.62 More generally, the team found that employers take advantage of the opportunity to contribute to the review of Foundation degree programmes through annual programme monitoring and revalidation events to ensure that they include up-to-date trends within industry and relevant professional practice modules. This is reflected in the information provided in programme handbooks.

2.63 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College is effectively managing its arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with other organisations. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B10: Managing*

Higher Education Provision with Others is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.

Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*

Findings

2.64 The College does not offer research degrees, therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.65 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All of the Expectations relating to the College's quality of student learning opportunities, except for Expectations B8 and B9, are met with low risk. Expectation B8 was met but with moderate risk, while Expectation B9 was not met, and the associated level of risk is moderate. The review team makes two new recommendations and two new affirmations in this section. The new recommendations relate to the following: ensure the complaints procedures are clearly communicated; and strengthen the procedure for the provision of information to prospective and current students, staff and other stakeholders, to ensure that all information is fit for purpose and trustworthy, and is accessible to those who need it in a timely way. The affirmations concern the steps being taken to develop further scholarly activity, and the actions being taken to train and develop all members of staff to handle student complaints in a timely and effective way. The team repeats three recommendations and two affirmations. There was one new feature of good practice: the effective dialogue between the Learning Resources Services and academic staff and students. The team repeats three features of good practice. The review team concludes that, overall, the quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

Findings

3.1 The College and its awarding bodies publish information about higher education provision in a variety of places, most notably in programme specifications, information packs, programme and module handbooks, the VLE, student handbooks and the website. The College is responsible for producing all the specifications for programmes validated by the Open University. For those programmes that were validated by Plymouth University, the College has developed the majority of programme specifications. The Universities produce guides for branding and information that the College follows. The College also has a review process to sign off information about its higher education provision. The responsibility for checking the information lies with the Higher Education Quality Team, curriculum staff and the Director of Marketing, with the latter having ultimate responsibility for signing off marketing information. These practices and procedures allow the College to meet the Expectation in Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision.

3.2 The team tested the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by reviewing the website, VLE and documentation referred to within the previous paragraph. The team also held meetings with senior staff, employers, students, academic staff and support staff.

3.3 The review team found that these practices and procedures were largely effective, but would benefit from being formalised and strengthened. The College's vision is clearly stated on their website and they have recently developed a 'Somerset College statement of vision purpose and aims; our response to an Evolving Landscape'. However, staff, students and employers whom the team met were unclear about the vision.

3.4 The team found the information on the website for current and prospective students to be accurate and accessible, including clear information about the application process and entry requirements. This was confirmed by students. This is backed up by the College holding open days and workshops to give prospective students a taste of the course and College environment. Information on the VLE for current students is clear and concise and students whom the team met have found this to be a useful repository for course materials and contact details. In addition to the VLE and website, the team heard that information for students is now communicated more effectively, for example through notice boards, group emails, and tutorials. However, part-time staff and students did comment that they still miss out on important information because of their limited attendance on campus.

3.5 Programme handbooks contain information for students which includes the grading criteria and learning outcomes. The Higher Education Quality and Development Manager informed the team that there is a list for checking the accuracy of handbooks that is used at internal scrutiny panels, but that the information about programme content falls under the responsibility of the curriculum teams.

3.6 Despite the difficulties encountered on the Fine Art programmes last year, the team still found inaccurate information in this year's programme handbook with students being led to believe that they could still progress to the BA (Hons) Fine Arts. The team subsequently

heard that the College does not carry out annual checks on every programme handbook due to the workload involved. The team also heard from current Fine Art students who only recently were given conflicting information about the progression route. Although the team did not find inaccurate information in any other programme handbooks, it felt that the procedures for checking accuracy need to be strengthened. In addition, the College itself has accepted that it needs to provide 'better, more informed and timely information'. Therefore, the team again **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College strengthens the procedure for the provision of information to prospective and current students, staff and other stakeholders, to ensure that all information is fit for purpose and trustworthy, and is accessible to those who need it in a timely way (see also Expectations B2 and B9). In addition (see paragraph 1.10 for further details), the team again **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College works with its awarding body to ensure that all processes for major changes and discontinuation of programmes are followed diligently and any correspondence regarding these processes is formally recorded in accordance with the regulations and partnership agreements (see also Expectations A2.1, A3.3 and B8).

3.7 Overall, the College's information about its higher education provision is clear and accessible and therefore the Expectation is met. However, the team did find important errors and, at times, a lack of communication with, primarily, Fine Art students, that led to messages being confused and misinterpreted. The team has therefore made two recommendations to the College; one to strengthen its procedures for making information more accessible, fit for purpose and trustworthy, and the other to diligently follow and formally record processes for major changes and discontinuation of programmes. The level of risk is moderate because the College does have procedures in place but problems have been caused for various reasons including lack of clarity about responsibilities and shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they've been applied. The problems that have been identified are confined at present to a small part of the provision. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation in *Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision* is met both in design and operation but the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.8 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The Expectation for this judgement area was met but the associated level of risk was moderate. The team makes no new recommendations in this section, but repeats two from previous sections. The first one is about ensuring all processes for major changes and discontinuation of programmes are followed diligently and correspondence is formally recorded. The second is about strengthening the procedure for the provision of information to relevant stakeholders. There are no affirmations or features of good practice in this section. The review team therefore concludes that the quality of the information produced about its higher education provision at the College **meets** UK expectations.

4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Findings

4.1 The College's vision is to become 'the professional and technical university at the heart of Somerset'. The five-year Higher Education Strategy is underpinned by an implementation plan designed to realise this ambition. The College's Strategic Plan commits to enhance the student experience through key strategic objectives. The College has an 'integrated package' built around the expansion of the higher education curriculum, research and scholarship, the financial commitment to the physical development of the campus and the continued improvement of the student experience. There is also an exemplary strategic commitment towards 'best employer engagement' that seeks to achieve employer leadership of all courses, internships and training for future employment opportunities. The College received significant HEFCE Catalyst funding as a result of its successful 'Transition in Somerset' project bid. This has driven the development of new programmes, effectively facilitating employer engagement through the creation of specific posts. These include the Project Manager and the Employability and Internships Coordinator who works with subject-based teams. The College's strategies and procedures allow this Expectation to be met.

4.2 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these strategies and procedures by examining documentation relating to the College's mission and value, strategies including the Higher Education Strategy and Strategic Plan, partnership agreements, Academic Regulations, programme handbooks, minutes and terms of reference of key committees, operational reports and minutes of meetings for the 'Transitions in Somerset' project. The team also met the Principal, senior staff, employers, teaching staff, support staff, and students.

4.3 Proactive leadership resulted in changes to the academic structural arrangements in 2012 as the College entered a strategic relationship with the Open University. This move was underpinned by a strategic objective to significantly increase the contribution of higher education to the overall College provision. The Academic Board and its subcommittees were introduced which have enabled the continued development of the higher education portfolio and the nurturing of an enhancement-led culture. The Academic Board provides the structure to agree priorities for development through the higher education action plan in alignment with the Higher Education Strategy. Although the Academic Board is constituted specifically for higher education, the College took the deliberate step to encompass both further and higher education provision in the subcommittees for Teaching and Learning and for Research, Scholarship and Ethics to reflect the College-wide commitment at all levels towards the learning vision. The team heard, however, that the membership of the committees does not include general teaching staff, only those with management responsibilities.

4.4 A further deliberate step was to launch the Scholarly Activity and Research Fund in 2012. This has seen the introduction of an internal publication which showcases the activities of a range of academic and support staff. Good practice is disseminated through the annual research symposium which includes external speakers in addition to staff presenting sessions. One of the remits of the Research, Scholarship and Ethics committee is to take the lead on creating an ethos of scholarly engagement and the review team again **affirms** the actions being taken to develop scholarly activity (see also Expectation B3).

4.5 The Higher Education Strategy includes several objectives focused on student engagement. While the evidence suggests that the College listens to the student voice and that students actively participate in Programme Committee Meetings and in the development phase for programme approvals, the College is planning to maximise student involvement in module and programme design. While the team saw evidence that the Higher Education Students' Union president and Student Governor had attended Academic Board meetings, the College might wish to formalise student membership of Academic Board and other key committees in the relevant terms of reference (see also paragraph 2.31). Student survey data is gathered in several ways including the National Student Survey, internal surveys and module evaluations but the College does not currently use such data across disciplines to identify opportunities for enhancement. The team was informed of a very early draft of a Student Engagement Strategy but, at the time of the visit, it was not ready for circulation. The College might wish to consider reviewing and formalising staff and student membership of its key committees and groups to create a more distinctive higher education experience. This should further strengthen the College's strategic approach to the enhancement of higher education.

4.6 While the current Higher Education Action Plan fulfils its quality assurance commitment for the monitoring of actions at a senior level, the College is planning to introduce a higher education annual self evaluation document. This represents a further deliberate step to promote portfolio-wide evaluation and development of the provision by synthesising the verbal and written evaluations presented to the awarding bodies and the Academic Board. Furthermore, the College is planning to capture evaluative commentary relevant to higher education from the Service Area self-assessment reports.

4.7 The team heard several examples of how programmes are being strategically developed to enhance their currency and relevance in industry, in addition to integrating employability skills. This reflects the College's clear and extensive strategic objectives centred around employer engagement as a way of embedding enterprise, employability, and professional and technical skills into all programmes as part of the enhancement of the student learning experience. The team saw evidence that the Catalyst Fund Project Steering Group, as part of the 'Transitions in Somerset' project, has clearly identified areas for development with ongoing targets. This includes the aim of ensuring that all future programmes undergoing validation by the Open University have an embedded employability and enterprise strand. The Business Enterprise team play an integral role with subject teams in the development of these awards. In addition, a key role for the Internship Coordinator is to promote the integration of internship and work placement opportunities into all higher education programmes.

4.8 The College has a Centre of Excellence in Health and Social Care and, at the time of the review, was in the process of bidding to establish an Advanced Engineering and Computing Centre of Excellence. The model developed by building on the partnership with Musgrove Park Hospital and aims to create a dynamic forum which engages local and regional employers and training providers to develop attractive vocational and technical programmes. This initiative is supported by the Local Enterprise Partnership and is regarded as meeting regional skills needs. The College is committed to the capital investment for the campus to create the 'professional and technical university college' as presented in its strategic plan. As a result of these strategic and dynamic initiatives, the team again highlights the proactive engagement with external stakeholders to design new programmes to meet professional and technical skills needs as **good practice** (see also Expectations A3.4 and B1).

4.9 The College has a clear strategic commitment to further develop and enhance its higher education provision. This can be seen most notably in the development of its curriculum and resources, scholarly activity, and employer engagement. The team affirms

the actions being taken to develop further scholarly activity. The team also recognises as good practice the College's proactive engagement with external stakeholders to design new programmes to meet skills needs. Therefore, the team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.10 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The Expectation relating to the College's enhancement of student learning opportunities is met with low risk. The review team repeats one affirmation and one feature of good practice in this section. The affirmation concerns the actions being taken to develop further scholarly activity. The feature of good practice relates to the College's proactive engagement with external stakeholders to design new programmes to meet professional and technical skills needs. The review team therefore concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

Findings

5.1 The College gives high priority to student employability and has achieved considerable success in long-term, strategic partnerships with employers, and in preparing students for employment. Evidence of this partnership is manifest in the employment successes of students who continue from their placement into full or part-time work. In addition, long-standing professional relationships with the College have witnessed a valuable and growing involvement of employer stakeholders as partners in the development and amendment of the curriculum and the evaluation of student performance. Staff who work at Musgrove Park Hospital are the most fully engaged with the College, having considerable involvement in the assessment of students.

5.2 The higher education portfolio reflects the College's emphasis on offering vocational programmes. The College secured Catalyst funding under the 'Transition in Somerset' project to manage the transfer of programmes from validation with Plymouth University to validation with the Open University. The funding is also enabling the development of new and existing partnerships with employers, including their involvement in programme design, delivery and assessment. The College is currently working on a bid to extend this funding for the next five years, which, for example, will help to assist in extending computing and gaming links with employers. Employers whom the team met endorsed the readiness, ability, and resources of the College to meet fast-moving developments in local growth industries, for example in the engineering and ICT sectors.

5.3 The Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy 2014-15 sets out a workable set of guidelines for achieving student employability. In 2012, the Work Academy was established to assist students in gaining employment. As a means of enhancing students' prospects of gaining work, the College's Recruitment Consultant has initiated a service fee to employers. This will include high-level curriculum vitae profiling and competences, in line with the promotion of high-quality graduates who will be screened and recommended personally by the service to prospective employers. The recent appointment of an Internship Coordinator should further enhance employment prospects for higher education students. The new appointment will be expected to develop additional international links. Currently, there are such links with Norway and, historically, work placements have been secured with international companies.

5.4 The College has a dynamic vision for careers development which involves bringing employers and agencies into College for face-to-face contact and using more electronic resources to aid students' career paths. By the summer of 2015, the College is planning to create a Student Engagement Hub to liaise more effectively with the Work Academy and Student Services for the development of soft and hard skills, and to mobilise top-class curriculum vitae preparation, interview techniques and career pathways.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 27-29 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#)

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx

Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'.

See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

Enhancement

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

Expectations

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

Flexible and distributed learning

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations.

See also **distance learning**.

Framework

A published formal structure. See also **Framework for Higher Education Qualifications**.

Framework for Higher Education Qualifications

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FHEQIS).

Good practice

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

Learning opportunities

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

Learning outcomes

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

Multiple awards

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

Operational definition

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

Programme (of study)

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

Programme specifications

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

Public information

Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

Quality Code

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** that all providers are required to meet.

Reference points

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

Subject Benchmark Statement

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

Threshold academic standard

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **subject benchmark statements**.

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

Widening participation

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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