# Higher Education Review of South Cheshire College

March 2016

## Contents

# About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at South Cheshire College. The review took place from 7 to 9 March 2016 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Tom Cantwell
- Anthony Turjansky
- India-Chloe Woof (student reviewer)
- Sam Butler (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by South Cheshire College 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 5. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 7.

In reviewing South Cheshire College 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 2015-16 are Student Employability and Digital Literacy,[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.

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[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=2859.
[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.

## Amended judgement - June 2017

### Introduction

In March 2016, South Cheshire College underwent a Higher Education Review, which resulted in the following judgements: the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisation meets UK expectations; the quality of student learning opportunities does not meet UK expectations; the quality of the information about learning opportunities meets UK expectations; and the enhancement of student learning opportunities requires improvement to meet UK expectations.

Negative judgements are subject to a formal follow-up by QAA, which involves the monitoring of an action plan produced by the College in response to the report findings.

The College published an action plan in September 2017 describing how it intended to address the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the review, and has been working since then to demonstrate how it has implemented that plan.

The follow-up process included three progress updates and culminated in the review team's scrutiny of the College's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence, along with a one-day visit on 16 May 2017 with two reviewers. During the visit the team met staff and students to discuss progress and confirm their findings.

The visit confirmed that the recommendations relating to the quality and enhancement of student learning opportunities had been successfully addressed, noting there is work still to do to meet the Expectation relating to student engagement. The visit also confirmed that the good practice was being appropriately disseminated. Actions against recommendations relating to the maintenance of academic standards, which received a positive judgement in the original review, had also been completed on schedule.

### QAA Board decision and amended judgements

The review team concluded that the College had made sufficient progress to recommend that the judgements be amended. The QAA Board accepted the team's recommendation and the judgements are now formally amended. The College's judgements are now as follows.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisation **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.

The review can be considered to be signed off as complete.

### Findings from the follow-up process

The review team found that the College had made progress against the recommendations as follows.

**Recommendation - Definitive records**
The College has now designed a template for Pearson programme specifications, and has provided evidence that all Pearson higher education programmes now have a programme

specification. All specifications are made available via the College's website in summary form and in full length via the virtual learning environment, which is publicly accessible.

**Recommendation - Exam boards**
The College has now introduced assessment boards for Pearson programmes. The College has also made progress on publishing a definitive framework for the Pearson programmes that contain guidance for assessors, as well as the required contextualised regulations as outlined in the list above. The College now has a new deliberative structure, which was approved by its Academic Board. The College has also produced associated terms of reference for its newly created Programme Committee, which include a formal exam board for Pearson programmes.

**Recommendation - Internal programme approval**
The College has revised its approach to the scrutiny of draft programme proposals. These are received by an appropriately constituted Course Approval Panel, chaired by the Vice-Principal Curriculum and Quality and including student representation, which gives academic scrutiny to course documentation prior to awarding body approval. The Higher Education Programme Committee has ownership of the process, which was approved by the recently introduced Higher Education Academic Board.

**Recommendation - Student representation**
The College has re-considered student representation in its newly amended deliberative structure and now seeks to include student representatives at all levels (with the exception of the Assessment Board), including an aim to have two lead student representatives for higher education. The course representative system is now promoted during induction. There are opportunities for training for course representatives. Course representatives are invited to attend Student Voice Committee meetings. A new process exists through which students should be consulted by course teams to capture student voice for the half-termly Continuous (Course) Improvement Plans.

Although progress has been made in this area, particularly within the student representation system, engagement of students in the committee structure has been limited to date and is overly reliant on the lead student representative. The College has identified that more work needs to be done on student representation, and the review team concludes that further work is required against this recommendation.

**Recommendation - Oversight of standards and quality**
The College has introduced a new deliberative committee in which the Higher Education Academic Board, supported by an Academic Quality Committee (AQC), is accountable to the Governors' Management and Performance Committee for higher education quality and standards. A Programme Committee reports to the AQC, while newly constituted assessment boards report directly to the Academic Board. Chaired by the Vice-Principal Curriculum and Quality, and with senior representation from faculties and services, the Academic Board oversees higher education academic policy and strategy and the outcomes of programme approval, monitoring and review procedures. Detailed scrutiny of programme standards and quality is by the AQC, chaired by the Director of Quality and Standards. Both committees contain staff and student representation, with Governor attendance at the Academic Board.

**Recommendation - Enhancement**
The College's executive and strategic management teams have undergone specific training to increase their awareness and understanding of quality enhancement in a higher education context. Higher education staff received enhancement training at course level, and the Higher Education Quality Manual describes the contribution of annual monitoring and Continuous Improvement Plans to enhancing student learning opportunities.

Learning Enhancement features in the agendas and minutes of the Higher Education Academic Board and Academic Quality Committee, and a Higher Education Update forms part of the agenda of weekly Executive Management Team meetings.

## Conclusion

The review team concludes that all recommendations are being implemented in accordance with the action plan, with the exception of the recommendation relating to student engagement, and that the provider is capitalising upon identified areas of good practice.

While there is work still to do to meet the Expectation relating to student engagement, the College recognise this and is putting further actions in place to address the remaining issues. The review team therefore concludes that overall progress since the original review demonstrates that the College now meets UK expectations in relation to the quality and enhancement of student learning opportunities.

# Key findings

## QAA's judgements about South Cheshire College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at South Cheshire College.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of the awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisation **meets** UK expectations
- The quality of student learning opportunities **does not meet** UK expectations
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

## Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at South Cheshire College.

- The scheduled weekly learning hour that forms part of a wider staff development strategy to support higher education teaching (Expectation B3).
- The approach to employer engagement in programme development and delivery as part of a wider strategy for developing student employability and supporting local regeneration (Expectation B10).

## Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to South Cheshire College.

By July 2016:

- produce and maintain definitive records for each Pearson Education programme which constitute the reference point for each individual programme and qualification (Expectation A2.2)
- introduce formal exam boards for Pearson Education programmes (Expectations B6, A2.1 and A3.3).

By September 2016:

- introduce a formal internal approval system which subjects each new programme to rigorous academic scrutiny (Expectations B1, A2.1 and A3.1)
- provide more effective student representation at course and institutional level (Expectation B5)
- develop a transparent system that ensures effective oversight of the College's Higher Education standards and quality (Expectations B8, A2.1, A3.3 and B7)
- routinely consider enhancement within the College's monitoring, reporting and recording structures at a senior level (Enhancement, Expectation B8).

## Theme: Student Employability

The College has a longstanding commitment to enhancing the employability of its students. The College has built strong relationships with local small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) organisations and has developed a local employer advisory board. The College capitalises on these relationships to ensure that its students are supported in a variety of

ways to develop their employability. Work is ongoing within the College to further standardise the way in which different areas of the College engage with external organisations.

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

# About South Cheshire College

South Cheshire College is a further education college with a focus on expanding and developing opportunities for students to gain occupational and employment skills, including specialist vocational higher education. It aims to be the College of choice for students, employers and the wider community, with the intention that anyone trained or educated at South Cheshire College has the most up-to-date skills and knowledge to enable them to enter sustainable careers. This extends to the College's higher education provision, in particular by encouraging non-traditional learners to study higher education or higher level programmes and so assist national and local enhancement of skill levels. The College currently has approximately 290 higher education students.

There have been significant changes at South Cheshire College in the 12 months leading up to the review, including changes in senior leadership and faculty management. There has also been a change in the approach to the higher education qualifications on offer, with a move towards Higher National Certificates/Diplomas and full degree provision. South Cheshire College is also a member of the Cheshire Higher Education Consortium, which has recently undergone changes. This was previously recognised as a funding consortium by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). In 2015 members of the Cheshire Higher Education Consortium applied for direct funding status to HEFCE, and thus each college now receives direct funding.

The College has established collaborative arrangements for the delivery of programmes leading to awards of the University of Derby and University of Wolverhampton, and Pearson. An established partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University is being phased out with the final cohort of students to have completed by the end of academic year 2015-16. Other than some proposed developments with the University of Chester, the College has taken the strategic decision to expand its higher education provision within its existing partnerships rather than seeking to develop new ones.

QAA undertook an Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review of South Cheshire College in June 2011. In relation to recommendations made during the review, the College has made good progress in improving access to core texts and in developing its study skills handbook and mentor guide. A recommendation that focuses on the College's approach to higher education is addressed in the Teaching and Learning Strategy. While the Strategy does make reference to higher education, it is limited. It does not specifically refer to how the Strategy will lead to the improvement in the quality of learning opportunities for higher education provision. This, and similar issues, are considered in the following report.

# Explanation of the findings about South Cheshire College

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.

# Explanation of the findings about South Cheshire College

# 1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or 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 delivers programmes leading to Level 5 and 6 awards of the University of Derby and University of Wolverhampton, and Level 4 and 5 Higher National qualifications of Pearson Education. Programmes leading to awards of Manchester Metropolitan University will have been phased out by the end of academic year 2015-16.

1.2     All degree awards are validated by partner universities according to their own academic regulations, policies and procedures, which take account of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *Higher Education Credit Framework for England*. HNC/D programmes are designed to meet the specification for Pearson awards, which is similarly aligned with these frameworks. This would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.3     In testing the Expectation the review team considered sample programme documentation in association with the regulations and programme approval procedures of awarding partners. The team also held discussions with senior and academic staff.

1.4     New proposals for programmes leading to the awards of the Universities follow their approval processes and regulations. Approval of programmes leading to University of Derby awards is supported by a Development Approval Document and Operations Manual which

name the target qualification and any intermediate exit awards and position them at the appropriate levels of the FHEQ. Programme specifications and associated handbooks for University of Derby awards describe the target qualification, and any intermediate exit awards; Subject Benchmark Statement; programme structure, defined by FHEQ level and credit; and programme learning outcomes, differentiated by subject knowledge and intellectual, subject-specific and transferable skills. Validation documentation for programmes leading to University of Wolverhampton awards defines target and intermediate exit awards, FHEQ levels and credit and is complemented by programme handbooks which describe course structures (modules) and learning outcomes. Neither University's programme specifications define learning outcomes for intermediate exit awards. Module specifications and handbooks describe module titles, FHEQ level, credit and intended learning outcomes. The standard module size is 20 credits in line with University regulations.

1.5    New Pearson programmes are constructed from pre-validated subject-based units and follow the awarding organisation's syllabi and assessment guidelines. The review team was unable to access more than two different College-produced programme specifications for HNC/D awards, which define target and intermediate exit awards, FHEQ levels, course structure (units) and total credit value, but do not describe programme learning outcomes or the credit assigned to individual units.

1.6    Staff who are engaged in programme development and approval receive specific guidance and training covering the use of FHEQ level descriptors and Subject Benchmark Statements. The review team saw evidence of one programme that had been referred by the validating University due to insufficient engagement with the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement, which has been addressed through increased staff training on the Quality Code.

1.7    The College follows the requirements and regulations of its awarding bodies and organisation in naming qualification awards and positioning them at the relevant levels. Documentation for programmes leading to University awards makes appropriate reference to Subject Benchmark Statements and defines final and intermediate exit awards by FHEQ level and credit, although learning outcomes are described for final awards only. Where available, Pearson programme specifications describe final and intermediate exit awards but programme learning outcomes are not defined. The review team was unable to locate more than two programme specifications for Pearson awards, which has led to a separate recommendation under Expectation A2.2. However, in relation to the use of reference points for academic standards Expectation A1 is met, with low risk.

**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**

1.8      The College follows the regulations, policies and procedures of its awarding bodies and organisation for the award of academic credit and qualifications.

1.9      The College has policies, systems and procedures for the delivery, assessment and quality assurance of its higher education programmes. External examiners, appointed by the awarding bodies and organisation, report on the operation of assessment and appropriateness of standards. The College's adherence to awarding body regulations and procedures would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.10      In testing the Expectation the review team examined the College's quality assurance procedures and the terms of reference, agendas and minutes of committees. The team also held discussions with senior and academic staff.

1.11      The College's Executive Management Team (EMT) comprises the Principal and Chief Executive, the Vice Principal (VP) Curriculum and Learner Support, VP Finance and Resources and College Directors, who include the directors of two academic faculties. The EMT oversees strategic and operational planning and quality assurance and enhancement, including awarding body partnerships. Senior management responsibility for higher education resides with the VP Curriculum and Learner Support, to whom the directors of faculties report. A Higher Education Manager works in association with the College's Quality and Standards division and also reports to the VP Curriculum and Learner Support. A Curriculum Management Team (CMT), comprising the VP Curriculum and Learner Support, Director and Assistant Director of Quality and Standards, monitors programme delivery and receives updates from the Higher Education Manager. Assistant faculty directors manage individual curriculum areas in which higher education and further education programmes are co-delivered.

1.12      Initial evidence received by the review team described an Academic Board that met twice a year, with oversight of higher education including an annual Higher Education Self-Assessment Report and Quality Improvement Plan and overview of external examiner reports. Within this structure, the Academic Board was accountable to the Board of Governors through the latter's Management and Performance Committee, of which the College Principal is a member, with other EMT and CMT members in attendance. Higher education is a standing item at Management and Performance Committee meetings, where two suitably experienced governors have designated responsibility for higher education. Following receipt of additional evidence and discussions with staff, the team confirmed that neither the Academic Board nor an associated Quality and Standards Committee with responsibility for higher education course approval and monitoring, had been convened as described in the documentation. The review team saw evidence of a Higher Education Strategic Group operating with broad responsibilities for standards and quality but found that this was now subsumed within the EMT.

1.13      Quality procedures for higher education describe continuous monitoring at course, subject (curriculum area), faculty and College levels. Guidance and information are

signposted and released to staff at appropriate stages within the annual delivery cycle. However, beyond planning approval the review team established that there is currently no internal academic scrutiny of new programmes prior to their validation by the Universities or sign-off by Pearson.

1.14     The Universities operate end-of-year assessment boards at which progression and awards are confirmed under their own academic regulations. External examiners attend assessment boards, verify students' grades and comment on the operation of assessment in line with regulations. While there was evidence that appropriate use was being made of external examiners for Pearson awards, the team established that no Pearson assessment boards had been convened to date.

1.15     The review team found that the higher education committee structure described by the College in its self-evaluation document, which was submitted as evidence as part of this review, had not been enacted and that academic governance currently resides with the Executive Management Team, which reports to the Board of Governors via the VP Curriculum and Learner Support. The team finds that lack of transparency in the College's academic governance poses some risk to the monitoring of standards and quality, which is reflected in a recommendation under Expectation B8. The team could not identify any internal process for the academic scrutiny of new Higher National and degree programmes, nor for Pearson assessment boards, which has led to recommendations under Expectations B1 and B6. The more significant risks in relation to these matters are addressed elsewhere; however, given that there is evidence that academic standards are presently secure the team finds that Expectation A2.1 is met, with moderate risk.

**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**

1.16     The College produces a range of documents at programme level as part of the validation process with its awarding bodies. The College states that the definitive record of each taught award delivered by the College is the Programme Specification which, alongside module specifications, is usually kept with the programme handbook as the definitive record relating to that programme. There is a module specification template which has been recently introduced for a number of the College's University of Wolverhampton programmes to standardise recording below programme level.

1.17     The design would not meet the Expectation as outlined in A2.2. Despite the College's aims to hold definitive records of each programme as validated by the awarding body, there are gaps in the documentation that is produced and held by the College, specifically relating to its Pearson provision.

1.18     The team tested the Expectation by reading a variety of documentation, including programme handbooks and programme specifications for a range of provision, including Pearson provision. The team also met members of staff involved in producing and maintaining programme specifications.

1.19     The College produces specifications for each of the programmes it delivers with degree-awarding bodies, and this constitutes the definitive record of the programme. These are approved at the point of validation and made available to students via their Programme Handbook, which is updated annually and deposited on the virtual learning environment (VLE). Detailed programme information is therefore given to students on some courses at the start of the programme, is available to them throughout their studies and is 'translated' into student-friendly language.

1.20     It is a requirement of Pearson that the provider produces its own version of the standard programme specification; however, this has not been undertaken by the College. The programme specifications provided by the College were the standard Pearson documents, and the College was unable to provide further documentation to outline the process through which it had produced its own version of this standard document. Most of the programme specifications supplied by the College were generic Pearson qualification descriptors. The College provided two of its own programme specifications that define target and intermediate exit awards, FHEQ levels, course structure (units) and total credit value, but did not describe programme learning outcomes or the credit assigned to individual units. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College produces and maintains definitive records for each Pearson programme, which constitute the reference point for each individual programme and qualification.

1.21     The lack of College programme specifications for its Pearson provision is symptomatic of the absence of a robust regulatory framework for this element of the institution's provision, and recommendations are made in section B of this report. While programme leaders are informally aware of the structure and content of Pearson

programmes, and work with the standard specifications, there is no clear process of producing, checking and signing off of regulatory items in relation to Pearson programmes. The only documentation maintained by the College in relation to its Pearson provision is the set of standard Centre Guides. The implementation of this guidance is supported by the external examiner visit from Pearson, as discussed with senior and academic staff during the review visit. While the systems in place at programme level for the Universities' awards are robust and ensure that programme-level information is coordinated effectively and that oversight is maintained, there are several gaps within the institution's documentation, primarily relating to its Pearson provision.

1.22     In summary, the Expectation is not met as the College needs to make significant progress in order to ensure that it produces and maintains definitive records for each of its Pearson programmes. The risk related to this Expectation is moderate, as Pearson represents only a partial element of the institution's provision, information relating to programmes with a university is well maintained, and both students and staff whom the review team met did seem to receive the information they needed about Pearson programmes.

**Expectation:     Not met**
**Level of risk:   Moderate**

**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**

1.23      The College does not have approval powers for new programmes and relies on programmes created, franchised or validated by its two partner Universities or by Pearson, its awarding organisation. In the case of validated programmes, the College is able to design and develop programmes with the assistance of its University partners. The development and approval of these programmes follows University processes and alignment with *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) is checked as part of this procedure. In the case of Pearson programmes the College selects units from the Pearson Qualification Specifications, which are aligned with the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF).

1.24      The College operates an informal system of approval for Pearson programmes or for new programmes that require validation by a university. The informal process involves relevant staff in exploring and discussing the business case for the new programme from the idea or concept stage, as well as the implications for staffing and resourcing, through to preparing a programme specification, handbook and module descriptors for university approval or for the selection of units from an existing Pearson qualification specification. In preparing programmes for validation attention is paid to the views of employers and students and to the alignment of learning outcomes to external frameworks.

1.25      The College has recently recognised the need to have a formal version of this internal approval process so that it can maintain an overview of its entire higher education offer and subject each new programme's documentation to academic scrutiny, as well as the consideration of attendant staffing and resourcing requirements during the design development and sign-off stages. This is particularly applicable to the increasing Pearson portfolio, since these programmes are generic and the final combination of units is not subject to an approval process by Pearson. The processes used for programme approval and updating are discussed further in section B1.

1.26      The system of design and development specifically based upon internal understanding of alignment with UK standards as described in the FHEQ and the QCF, and of sign-off through awarding body procedures and regulations or with awarding organisation processes, would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.27      The review team looked at records of approval events for University programmes, which demonstrated consultation with students, employers and other stakeholders at the design stage. The team met College staff, students and employers, who confirmed that such consultation had also occurred in the case of the Pearson provision. The lack of a formal internal approval process meant that these consultations and deliberations were not recorded anywhere and the final version of the programme was the result of the individual programme teams' own efforts, with guidance and assistance from the College's Higher Education Manager.

1.28    The team also looked at the supplied terms of reference for the College's boards and committees and found that internal sign-off for new programmes is the responsibility of two committees, the Quality and Standards Committee, which has not been convened as described in the documentation, and the Higher Education Strategic Group, which has now been subsumed within EMT.

1.29    In scrutinising the evidence to establish the effectiveness of the approvals system the team found that there are significant gaps in the internal part of the process and that, in the case of Pearson programmes, there exists a serious lack of regulatory documentation and staff or student guidance on key matters. During the review visit the College was able to show new documentation that set out the Pearson regulatory requirements described in the BTEC guidance, but these had only just been put in place and were not embedded or part of any internal approval system.

1.30    Since all University programmes are subject to University approval processes, the system works for these programmes. Pearson programmes are created by centres choosing units from the already approved qualification specifications. This also allows the process to work for Pearson. However, the review team found that although the process has worked it cannot be said to work effectively since the one example of a recent University programme, the BA (Hons) on Counselling, showed that it had not passed the University process, and the new Pearson programmes had not yet been subject to any formal College approval process or academic scrutiny to determine level and credit value of the chosen units or to verify the existence of the required centre-devised regulations outlined in the Pearson Guidance. The College has recognised the benefits of introducing a formal internal process that would assist in the embedding of a higher education ethos and secure academic standards across all of its higher education provision. These matters are discussed further in section B1.

1.31    Based upon the structures and safeguarding of academic standards in place at awarding body and organisation stages of approval, the team concludes that Expectation A3.1 is met but with a moderate risk, due to the informal nature of internal approval processes.

**Expectation:    Met**
**Level of risk:    Moderate**

**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**

1.32    The programmes on offer are all approved as programmes of study by a university or Pearson. Because of this all of the learning outcomes, credit and academic standards of each award are set by others before the College begins to deliver the programme. The University partners maintain oversight of assessment and the achievement of learning outcomes through well-defined processes, procedures and published regulations which are aligned to the FHEQ. Implementation of these standards is checked regularly through annual programme monitoring, external examiner visits and periodic review. Pearson programmes are created through the selection of units from a qualification specification and all learning outcomes are pre-defined by Pearson and aligned to the QCF. Pearson checks these programmes through the yearly or twice-yearly visits of a Pearson-appointed external examiner.

1.33    Since the regulations of the awarding universities are used in relation to their programmes it is possible to see the clarity and effectiveness of the system. However, the Pearson programmes require each centre to publish the academic regulations that cover Pearson policies and procedures in matters such as recognition of prior learning (RPL). The College has recently engaged with this aspect of its responsibilities since expanding its Higher National qualifications offer in September 2015, and now has, and publishes, the required framework. However, at the time of review, this was still to be embedded.

1.34    The awards offered on behalf of the partner Universities are all in alignment with the Universities' requirements and would enable the Expectation to be met. The new regulatory framework for the Pearson programmes would also enable the Expectation to be met for those awards.

1.35    The review team looked at all of the programme specifications for the University awards and read examples of internal moderation. The team also read external examiner reports as well as examples of the supplied guidance from awarding partners that the College uses to guide staff in assessment. Meetings with senior staff, academic staff and students confirmed that the standards of the awards' programme learning outcomes, module learning outcomes and the assessment of the students' work against these outcomes aligns with UK standards and with the academic standards of the awarding bodies.

1.36    The review team also confirmed that the standards of the Pearson awards' programme and module outcomes aligns with UK standards and that the assessment of student work on these programmes aligns with expected standards through scrutinising the Pearson qualification specifications and the chosen modules, as well as the external examiner reports. The team was unable to see contextualised programme specifications for all the Pearson programmes, as in some cases these had not been created. The team was also unable to examine minutes of the exam boards for the Pearson programmes, as these

had not been conducted in a formal manner. However, it was evident that the two established Pearson programmes had been subject to assessment and moderation of marks at programme level before being signed off by the Pearson Standards Verifier.

1.37     At the time of the visit the College had created a regulatory framework for the Pearson programmes and had published it on the College intranet but had not yet finalised the links to the key sections and guidance. The College had also made plans to introduce a new system of formal assessment boards for Higher National programmes in line with Pearson's requirements.

1.38     The review team confirms that the process works for the University awards and that it has worked so far for the Pearson awards. However, there is the need to implement fully and embed the regulations and the assessment boards for the Pearson-validated programmes to deal with assessment formally and to deal with arising matters of assessment such as recognition of prior learning, mitigating circumstances, late submission of student work and academic appeals or malpractice. This is addressed in Expectation B6.

1.39     Based upon the evidence of assessment and the academic safeguarding provided by the structures of the awarding bodies and the awarding organisation the team finds that Expectation 3.2 is met, with a low risk.

**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**

1.40     Responsibility for the monitoring and review of standards is shared between the College and its awarding partners. Since all programmes and all modules or units are the property and publication of the College's awarding partners it is the College's responsibility to maintain these described standards rather than to ensure that their design meets the Expectation, although the College does play a part in some programme design in the case of validated programmes, such as BA (Hons) Counselling.

1.41     All University programmes are subject to periodic review, as well as yearly programme monitoring and external examiner visits. Pearson programmes are not subject to periodic review although this may be invoked by Pearson and centres are expected to engage with the process if and when it occurs. A Pearson periodic review had taken place immediately prior to the review visit. Pearson states that its external examiner also has the role of checking the overarching systems and standards of the centre during their visit.

1.42     The design of the systems for ensuring that monitoring and review of the programmes offered by the College address UK threshold academic standards is the responsibility of the awarding partners, and it would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.43     The review team looked at evidence of University periodic review, annual monitoring reports and external examiner reports. The team also saw the Pearson external examiner reports. The team was also able to meet senior and academic staff to develop a clear understanding of how the currency and academic standards of the programmes and their assessment processes are maintained.

1.44     The process of formal annual monitoring and periodic review for the University programmes works effectively. The Pearson programmes are not subject to these same processes and rely upon internal mechanisms and the regular visit of the programmes' external examiners, whose work includes an evaluation of how College systems support academic standards. A periodic review may be invoked by Pearson at any time and one had, in fact, occurred immediately before the review visit, although no documentation was available. The Pearson process does work in relation to the maintenance of academic standards but needs to be supported by the required formal assessment boards and internally developed regulations that are prescribed in Pearson's BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment Levels 4 to 7 and the BTEC Centre Guide to Managing Quality. These issues are addressed in Part B of this report

1.45     Based on the evidence submitted and the findings during the review visit the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation:     Met**
**Level of risk:     Low**

**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**

1.46    The College operates within the regulations and procedures of its awarding bodies in relation to programme approval and monitoring.

1.47    The College meets the requirements of its University awarding bodies, which use external academic subject expertise as part of programme approval procedures. External examiners, appointed by the awarding bodies and Pearson, verify that academic standards have been set appropriately and are being met by students through assessment. This would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.48    In testing the Expectation the review team considered the procedures for, and reports from, programme approvals and external examiners. The team also held discussions with senior and academic staff.

1.49    The validation processes of University awarding bodies for programmes delivered by the College make use of external academic subject expertise on approval panels. Employers are engaged in curriculum design and development although the College acknowledges that this is variable across subjects and an area for development. Approval panels for University of Wolverhampton awards meet employer representatives to discuss programme design and opportunities for work-based/work-related learning, skills development and assessment. The College is exploring opportunities for professional accreditation, building on established relationships with professional bodies in the subject area of Construction.

1.50    External examiners report on the appropriateness of academic standards and the conduct of assessment. External examiners confirm that standards are being maintained in relation to national level descriptors and Subject Benchmark Statements, and are comparable with those of other providers offering similar qualifications. External examiners comment on the operation of assessment, including its appropriateness to learning outcomes, the fairness and consistency of marking and internal moderation, and the quality of written feedback. Feedback from external examiners contributes to the production of action plans that form part of continuous programme monitoring. The Higher Education Manager produces an overview of issues raised by external examiners. External examiners attend University assessment boards, verify students' grades and comment on the appropriateness of the assessment process. External examiners' reports seen by the review team were mostly positive and endorsed the academic standards set for students and achieved by them. The team saw evidence that issues that had led to one Pearson programme being temporarily blocked by the external examiner had been addressed satisfactorily.

1.51    From the evidence seen by the team of the contribution of employers to programme design and approval for University awards, and of external examiners to the monitoring of all programmes, there is reason to conclude that the College makes appropriate use of externality. On this basis the Expectation is met and the 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/or other awarding organisations: Summary of findings

1.52    In reaching its judgement about the maintenance of academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.53    One Expectation in this area has not been met, in relation to maintaining definitive records of each programme and qualification offered by the College. The review team makes a recommendation in this area for Pearson qualifications. Other expectations are met. A moderate risk has been identified in three of the seven Expectations, with the remainder identified as low risk. The risks are due to the lack of formal and transparent processes for the oversight of higher education provision at the College, in particular relating to programme development, assessment and monitoring. The review team concludes that the informal processes in place are sufficient for the College to meet the Expectations specifically for the maintenance of academic standards, but actions to formalise these processes would help to further mitigate these risks. These actions are set out in recommendations in subsequent sections of this report.

1.54    The review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations at the College **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, Development and Approval*

**Findings**

2.1    The College does not have approval powers and so relies on its partnerships with the University of Derby and the University of Wolverhampton to approve new programmes and to re-approve existing programmes through periodic review. In addition to this the Universities are responsible for approving major amendments that may be required during the life of a programme in order to maintain its currency and relevance. The College is also an approved Pearson centre and is therefore able to offer Higher Nationals. These programmes do not require further approval and are available to all of Pearson's registered centres.

2.2    In developing new programmes the College considers the business case for each programme and assesses demand, resourcing, delivery and quality matters. Franchised programmes belong to the University that devised them and the College is named as one of the delivery partners in the published programme specification. Where the College develops a programme for validation, it is responsible for designing and developing all aspects of the programme before submitting this to a University approval panel. In preparing these materials the College's Higher Education Manager works with the relevant curriculum staff and with the relevant University faculty to put together the entirety of the submission. This process is informal and involves meetings and discussions where academic staff and managers work towards the University approval. There is no formal internal approval panel or system.

2.3    Pearson qualification specifications already exist and so have been through the Pearson approval process. When the College chooses to include a new Pearson programme in its portfolio it selects the qualification specification and then chooses from this document the units it wishes to deliver. The case for including the programme in the College's offer is made in the same way as for the University programmes and the same preparation occurs in terms of consultation with students, employers and other stakeholders, although there is no need to develop the units themselves as these are designed by Pearson. There is no formal approval event at the College to sign off the new programme as ready for delivery, and since the qualifications have already been designed there is no external approval event.

2.4    The system of relying upon university procedures and regulations, coupled with an internal process that contains pre-validation meetings and scrutiny of documentation, as well as making the case for having the new programme, would enable Expectation B1 to be met. However, the internal processes described are not sufficient to give confidence that there is effective institution-level oversight of programme approval, particularly for the Pearson programmes.

2.5     The review team examined records of University approval events and met senior staff and academic staff. Documentary evidence submitted before and during the review visit outlining aspects of approval was scrutinised and the team considered the views of students and employers, who confirmed that they had been consulted in the development of new programmes.

2.6     New programmes offered in partnership with the University of Wolverhampton and the University of Derby are required to go through those Universities' approval processes and are therefore outside of the College's responsibility in this regard. In meeting the Expectation it is reasonable to expect that the College would, however, have in place some form of institution-level oversight of the new programmes that it wishes to offer. This would provide the opportunity for academic scrutiny of programme materials that would, in all cases, result in the production of a published programme specification, which would provide a definitive point of reference for staff, students and assessors. In one example, a programme had been referred back to the College by the validating University due to insufficient engagement with the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement. The programme was later approved after the Programme Team made the required amendments.

2.7     The team also looked at Pearson programmes and found that the College does not consistently produce programme specifications or any kind of definitive document for these programmes. Two examples of College-developed programme specifications that the review team did see did not include programme learning outcomes. Instead, the College generally uses the generic Pearson qualification specification and then chooses the units that it wishes to deliver. In addition to this there is no embedded regulatory framework, as required by Pearson and described in its BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment Levels 4 to 7 and in the BTEC Centre Guide to Managing Quality.

2.8     The review team therefore **recommends** that the College should introduce a formal internal approval system that subjects each new programme to rigorous academic scrutiny, so that a definitive documentary record of the process is produced along with definitive programme guidance.

2.9     The review team concludes that the omission of such formal internal processes leads to shortcomings in the College's processes for programme design, development and approval, which impacts on the appropriate involvement of staff and other relevant people, and on the academic scrutiny. There is insufficient oversight by the College in higher education programme design, development and approval, although staff do make use of the support offered by the Universities and the existence of QCF-aligned learning outcomes in the Pearson specifications. Due to these omissions the review team finds that Expectation B1 is not met and that the risk is moderate.

**Expectation:     Not met**
**Level of risk:    Moderate**

**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 to Higher Education***

**Findings**

2.10     Various arrangements exist with the Universities and Pearson in relation to the admission of students to the College. The College is able to select its own students for some of the programmes that it offers, such as the Pearson Higher Nationals and the validated provision. In the case of franchise programmes the partner University reserves the right, described in the memoranda of cooperation, to select the students. The College website clearly outlines for prospective applicants that higher education courses follow the admissions policies of the particular institution that validates the course, and offers links to each of the awarding bodies' admissions policies. Documentation provided to the team relating to the admissions process clearly outlines the various processes followed by the College as set out by the awarding bodies.

2.11     The admissions process is overseen by an Admissions Team Leader, who is responsible for processing applications from initial receipt through to offer stage. Decisions are made by Course Team Leaders and the Higher Education Manager.

2.12     The College's recruitment, selection and admissions process would enable the Expectation to be met, as it has an admissions policy in place and has a clearly articulated process which is followed by staff, who in turn provide appropriate information to prospective students at each stage of the process.

2.13     The team reviewed documentation provided by the College in relation to its admissions responsibilities and met staff with responsibilities for admissions, including both academic and administrative staff.

2.14     The College has an admissions policy in place and staff whom the review team met were able to outline clearly the admissions process and who is responsible for each stage. The College therefore follows a clear process for admissions and provides comprehensive information to prospective students at each stage of their application. Current students also spoke positively of the guidance the College offers to its further education cohorts regarding access to higher education, and the support provided with the application process and transition from further education to higher education.

2.15     The College has a clear process of appeals and complaints in relation to admissions, which is communicated to prospective students effectively. The University of Derby and the University of Wolverhampton take a major role in admissions to their franchised programmes. Admissions are primarily handled at programme level as decisions are led by Course Team Leaders and the Higher Education Manager, and oversight of the process is maintained at institutional level by the Admissions Team Leader.

2.16     As the College is also seeking to expand its higher education provision, it may want to consider a more comprehensive policy that sets out exactly its own admissions criteria, covering application, selection, admission and induction for all of its higher education offer, reflecting an institution-level approach.

2.17     In summary, this Expectation is met, as the College has effective processes for the recruitment, selection and admission of students. While improvements could be made to formalise further oversight of this process at institutional level, the robust arrangements that currently exist present a low risk.

**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**

2.18     The College's strategic plan and mission statement contain a commitment to 'consistently outstanding' teaching, learning and support. A College-level Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy underpins curriculum design, delivery and assessment at both further and higher education levels. The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy aims to develop an appropriate academic culture and ethos, embed employability, promote scholarly activity and disseminate good practice. Aspects of the strategy with general relevance to higher education include enhancing teaching quality through staff development and mentoring; developing learning resources, including use of new technologies; designing and operating assessment in relation to appropriate learning outcomes; and providing developmental feedback to students . Staff possess relevant academic and teaching qualifications and participate in continuing professional development that is informed by monitoring processes including observed teaching. This would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.19     In testing the Expectation the review team considered the implementation of the College's strategy for teaching and learning in the context of reports from programme approval and monitoring processes. The team noted evidence of staff development and support for research and scholarly activity. The team also held discussions with senior staff, academic and administrative staff, students and employers.

2.20     Higher education programme teams use a range of teaching methods, activities and resources including the College's VLE. A variety of teaching approaches provide inclusive learning opportunities by catering for students' different learning styles and preferences. Over 90 per cent of students surveyed in the production of the student submission to this review rated teaching and learning positively and identified an appropriate balance between theory and practice.

2.21     The College has committed to maintaining a staffing profile that is appropriate to delivering higher education programmes, in line with awarding body requirements. Most higher education teachers also teach on further education programmes, the large majority holding bachelor's degrees in their subjects, and approximately half of them qualified at postgraduate level. All staff hold, or are working towards, a Postgraduate Certificate of Education or other teaching qualification. Many teachers bring additional vocational experience from the relevant industries and professions. Programme approval processes confirm the proposed arrangements for staffing and staff development.

2.22     New teachers receive a mandatory induction in teaching and assessment, with coaching and mentoring provided within course teams and by the faculty assistant directors and Higher Education Manager. Teaching staff engage in 30 hours of continuing professional development (CPD) each year, which aims to develop the potential of individuals, teams and managers. A CPD Framework links staff development with the College's strategic objectives and a Teaching and Learning Action Group plans and evaluates staff development activity with the aim of driving outstanding practice.

CPD activities for higher education include a weekly Learning Hour and Staff Development Days, where staff receive information and share practice. Themes of recent Learning Hours, which were also attended by the Lead Student Representative, have included higher education quality assurance and student representation; writing learning outcomes and assignment briefs; using plagiarism-detection software; and scholarly activity for higher education delivery. Planning of Learning Hours is informed by themes identified through teaching observation. A Staff Training and Development Policy provides funding for a minimum of three to six days per year of scholarly activity and/or industrial skills updating. Staff record and evaluate the learning they have gained from staff development, its impact on students and how it will be disseminated to colleagues. The review team commends as **good practice** the scheduled weekly Learning Hour that forms part of a wider staff development strategy to support higher education teaching.

2.23     College staff access the CPD and other activities of the Universities. The College has established links with the Higher Education Academy (HEA), which contributes to its staff development programme. The College promotes and financially supports HEA accreditation of its teaching staff.

2.24     Graded teaching observation informs the College's Performance Development Review (PDR) appraisal process alongside targets for scholarly activity and professional updating. Staff use PDR to identify their individual development needs. Peer observation and 'learning walks' provide further opportunities for teaching staff and managers to observe and exchange practice. Students indicated to the team a strong satisfaction with the support provided by tutors.

2.25     Staff are supported to engage in academic research and scholarly activity, which the College has prioritised as part of its higher education development strategy. With the support of Manchester Metropolitan University, a Research, Scholarship and Ethics Committee has been established to promote an evolving 'research community of practice' by monitoring staff research outputs and providing guidance on developing funding bids and publication opportunities. Membership of the Cheshire Higher Education Consortium provides opportunities to exchange research outputs with staff of other colleges at an annual symposium, and the College has participated in a research project on the role of scholarly activity in higher education. The College is an active member of the Consortium's Teaching and Learning Committee, which promotes good practice across the membership through scheduled meetings and teaching and learning conferences. Staff receive guidance, financial support and remission of teaching hours to study for higher qualifications including master's degrees and PhDs.

2.26     Several programmes, including foundation degrees, contain work placements and/or work-related projects that simulate industry requirements and help to develop students' employability. Programme approval processes consider the management and delivery of placement learning opportunities. A generic Work Placement Policy and associated guidance cover risk assessment, including health and safety; employer and student responsibilities; preparation and support for students on placement; support for employers and arrangements for tutor site visits. Students who are not already in relevant employment are supported to find their own placements, and programmes use industry professionals, including alumni, to deliver guest sessions as well as hosting placements and educational visits. The College also hosts its own work-based learning opportunities; for example, Construction students were involved in designing the expansion of its Higher Education Study Hub while Hospitality Management students use its catering and restaurant facilities. In addition to structured placements, programmes also contain work-related learning opportunities for students, such as working with employers on live project briefs.

2.27      The review team finds that the College has an appropriate approach to teaching and learning at higher education level. Staffing is considered during programme approval and monitored through formal teaching observation and performance review processes. Academic staff are inducted into teaching and there are multiple opportunities to exchange practice through observed teaching and staff development. Scholarly activity to underpin higher education teaching is receiving increased emphasis and support as part of the College's evolving research agenda. Employers are actively involved in the delivery of placement learning opportunities. On this basis the Expectation is met and the 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**

2.28     The College commits to 'ensuring that every student succeeds and receives outstanding care, support and guidance'. There is a strategic commitment to widening participation which includes promoting higher education progression opportunities to existing Level 3 students and other learners in difficult-to-reach groups within the local and sub-regional community.

2.29     The College provides academic and pastoral support for students and prioritises the development of employability skills. It invests in high-quality physical and virtual learning environments and innovative resources including digital learning technologies. This would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.30     In testing the Expectation the review team considered a range of College strategies, policies and procedures. The team also held discussions with senior staff, academic and administrative staff, and students.

2.31     The College aims to provide a suitable environment for higher education study and has developed a Study Hub which offers a designated teaching and learning area for students of Access, Higher National and degree programmes. Subject-themed teaching accommodation is available across the College and areas of specific investment have included a mock hospital ward and laboratory facilities for the HNC/D in Health and Social Care; a law room for the LLB Law; state-of-the-art resources for Construction programmes; and catering and restaurant facilities for the HNC/D in Hospitality Management. Further resource developments are planned as the College's higher education portfolio expands.

2.32     The College's Learning Resource Centre (LRC) includes a dedicated and well-resourced Higher Education Study Centre comprising books, a journals room, quiet study areas and spaces for group working. In response to the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review of 2010 the College has reviewed its library stock and identified key core texts for each programme, which must be in place before delivery commences. Book availability has been increased through the extension of loan periods and library opening hours and more use of electronic resources. Learning resources are considered within programme approval processes and students have access to awarding bodies' resources in accordance with the relevant partnership agreements. Staff and students are consulted and informed about changes to the College's learning and teaching environment. Students whom the review team met spoke highly of the quality of learning resources, including library and IT facilities, and the student submission also indicates majority satisfaction with resources.

2.33     All higher education students receive a first-week induction comprising a general introduction to the College, its resources and services and course-specific information provided by course leaders. A welcome pack, programme handbook, mentorship handbook and guidance on study skills are provided to students along with course timetables and personal tutor information. Students receive a separate induction to their University awarding body. Administrative staff whom the review team met described a holistic support strategy, from pre-entry and admission to on-programme support and preparation for employment.

2.34     The College's VLE hosts programme handbooks and teaching materials. At College level, a Higher Education Portal has been introduced, which provides access to e-books and

online tutorials covering reading and research skills, academic referencing and avoiding plagiarism, note-taking and essay writing, memory techniques and time management, and use of IT and the internet. At the time of the review the College had recently audited its VLE in response to issues raised by students concerning content and functionality. While the audit confirmed that most courses hosted basic course information and study materials, the implementation of Bronze, Silver and Gold standards is hoped to promote more advanced applications of the VLE. In addition to College resources, students access the Universities' VLEs and online learning resources.

2.35     The College's Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy describes the role of personal tutors in supporting students' personal development. All students are assigned a personal tutor whom they meet individually, with a minimum four hours of study skills delivered through the Higher Education Study Centre. Personal tutors refer students to support services that are signposted in a Student Welfare Policy. Students whom the review team met spoke highly of the College's support services, including financial counselling and childcare support. A Student Code of Conduct and associated 'learning contracts' outline the expectations, rights and responsibilities of learners. Students undertaking research projects receive appropriate academic supervision which includes ethics-related guidance.

2.36     The College has developed and implemented policies relating to equality and disability, safeguarding and data protection in line with current legislation. Other policies and procedures cover health and safety, harassment and bullying. Students meet with the Higher Education Manager, Wellbeing and Participation Manager and Lead Student Representative to discuss equality and diversity issues including physical access, learning resources and reasonable adjustments. Students access guidance and support for diagnostic testing and claiming Disability Students Allowance. All policies and procedures are reviewed according to a fixed schedule which may be brought forward in response to new information or legislative changes. Policy development and renewal are informed by 'mapping' to the Quality Code and all policies undergo an Equality Impact Assessment before being signed off and implemented.

2.37     The College provides advice and guidance to students seeking employment or progression to higher study including help with CV writing, job applications and interview preparation. Personal development planning (PDP) is embedded in programmes and modules where students self-audit their skills, set goals and evaluate their progress with a particular emphasis on employability. Where students are not already in relevant employment they are supported by programme staff and the College's Work-Based Learning Team to secure their own work placements. The student submission to this review indicated strong satisfaction with the support provided by administrative staff and personal tutors.

2.38     Learning resources are considered as part of programme development and approval. Academic and support areas come together in staff development sessions and meetings of the Higher Education Operational Group and Curriculum Management Team, where the student learning experience is monitored and evaluated. Support staff liaise with their equivalents in the Universities and engage in continuous monitoring through self-assessment and the production of action plans. Students endorsed the quality and accessibility of support provided by the College, which is aware of the need to maintain these as higher education programmes and student numbers grow.

2.39     The review team finds that the College has systems and processes that support students academically, personally and professionally and which take account of the diverse needs of learners. The College has prioritised investment in higher education-specific learning resources and promoting students' progression and employability. On this basis the Expectation is met, with low risk.

**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**

2.40    The College's approach to student engagement is theoretically structured around the Higher Education Student Lead, who is elected annually and who represents the student body at Academic Boards, providing the board with student views at each meeting. Student representatives are invited to all Course Team Meetings; however, some find it difficult to attend given that the majority also work. There is currently no formal training system for student representatives; however, the College has plans for this be introduced in 2016.

2.41    The College has taken steps to expand the opportunities on offer to students to be meaningfully engaged in the shaping of their educational experience. This has included the introduction of the higher education student voice meetings. The College accepts that there remains progress to be made in this area and the rapid improvement action plan has several points relating to student voice, which highlights the College's recognition of the need for further improvement within its student engagement mechanisms.

2.42    The College also employs several survey, questionnaire and focus group systems to gather the student voice further, and has recently made changes to its approach to such surveys, due to identifying existing survey approaches as too further education-specific. This year, the term one student survey has a directed section for higher education students, thus allowing for a direct response and actions.

2.43    The College has recently made significant efforts to improve student engagement and the mechanisms through which students are able to be involved in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience. Programme representatives are elected by their peers within the first two weeks of their programme starting, and the College is organising training events from 2016.

2.44    In addition to the programme-level representation the College has sought to improve representation on management-level boards. This includes a student representative within the management structures for Curriculum and Learner Support and Learner Services. The College also appoints a higher education student governor.

2.45    The design would enable the Expectation to be met, as the College uses elected representatives from each cohort, various surveys and one higher education student governor, as well as representation on institution-level boards, committees, or other relevant structures, to embed student engagement. The College recognises that this still has room to develop further, but at the present stage it would enable the Expectation to be met. The team tested the Expectation by reviewing minutes of meetings with students and College committees involving students, as well as meeting a range of staff and students during the review visit.

2.46    The College's higher education student voice meetings are a relatively recent introduction to the College, and while students are not currently involved in programme development and approval, the College does have plans to introduce this in 2016. Difficulties in recruiting representatives for all programmes, particularly part-time evening provision, is typical across the sector and while the College has made efforts to respond to this challenge, there is still progress to be made in this area. At present, student representatives are not trained but there are plans to introduce training. Student representative training was

listed as an action in the higher education programme action plan in April 2015 and the College has now produced a training schedule.

2.47    Each year the student body elects a Higher Education Lead Student to represent the higher education learner voice and experience. This role has the potential to be exceptionally useful; however, at present the College is not using the full potential of the Higher Education Student Lead as their relationship to the College is relatively informal and centres around links with the Higher Education Manager and the Equality and Diversity Manager, who represents the higher education student body at governance level.

2.48    The College provides other, informal routes through which students can provide feedback on their experience at the College, which are primarily demand led. This includes a 'You Said, We Did' process, and the Principal meets with the student body to gain feedback on points that arise as part of this process. Course Directors also have an open-door policy, and in turn pass on any issues to the Higher Education Manager. This is not a formally documented process; however, the students whom the team met are largely happy with the informal arrangements for student engagement that are in place.

2.49    Students at the College are involved at various levels of programme design and institutional development. This varies by programme because of challenges in recruiting student representatives and it also varies at institutional level due to the College's ongoing work to implement and embed greater student engagement. Examples of higher education-wide student engagement initiatives include student representatives elected by their cohort peers on every programme; however, engagement is variable because of challenges in recruiting them.

2.50    The College participates in the National Student Survey (NSS) as part of a consortium and, as such, does not have its own data. It has instead used its own student survey twice a year, which is used to monitor student experience. The College also uses this survey to monitor the effectiveness of student engagement, and this year the term one student survey has a directed section for higher education students, thus allowing for a direct response and actions. Responses from the higher education-specific section are analysed by Programme Directors, who offer comment and develop action plans. Overarching themes are then identified by the Higher Education Manager and sent to the Executive Management Team for review. However, the review team considers that the College could be doing more to monitor student engagement formally, in order to provide better institutional oversight of the student voice, although this is a challenge due to the absence of a clear definition of what student engagement means to the College and its members.

2.51    While the design is considered effective in theory, the lack of committee structure, as considered in section B8, means that there are issues, in particular in relation to student engagement at top-level meetings such as the proposed academic board. Although measures such as student voice meetings have been introduced and have encouraging initial results, the College does not currently have a clear reporting structure for the outcomes of these meetings, and as such there is little institutional oversight of the student voice and the channels for student representation are underdeveloped. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College provides more effective student representation at course and institutional level.

2.52 In summary, the College has taken steps to encourage student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement, and although formal mechanisms for this have previously been somewhat lacking, there is strong evidence that informal mechanisms exist, and that informed conversations between students and staff take place. The level of risk is moderate as further development is required to ensure that efforts are made to offer students opportunities to engage with their broader educational experience across all levels of the College.

**Expectation:** **Met**
**Level of risk:** **Moderate**

**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**

2.53     Assessment of University programmes follows the frameworks provided by the Universities. These include detailed memoranda of agreement and academic regulations that set out clearly the responsibilities for the design, structuring and timing of assessments, feedback, grading and moderation, as well as the terms of reference and conduct of assessment boards and any arising matters that may affect individual students, such as mitigation and recognition of prior learning. The Universities also provide guidance documents to assist staff by providing a point of reference for assessment practices alongside the academic regulations.

2.54     The College does not have its own assessment policies or regulations but at the time of review had begun to develop a framework for the Higher National programmes in line with Pearson's requirement that each centre publishes contextualised regulations.

2.55     Assessment of student work on Pearson programmes follows the general Pearson guidance and is supported by the external examiners during their visits. Ratification of marks occurs at the external examiner visit, before which the individual programme teams conduct standardisation and moderation meetings. During these informal meetings the programme staff may consult with Pearson's published policy documents to assist in matters such as cases of academic malpractice or mitigating circumstances. The College does not hold formal assessment boards for Pearson programmes, although this too is required by the awarding organisation and stipulated in its guidance documents.

2.56     The review team found significant gaps and weaknesses in the College's processes and procedures with regard to assessment. In the case of the Pearson provision the lack of the required contextualised policy documents does not provide for the consistent application of Pearson regulations, such as those for academic malpractice, mitigating circumstances, reasonable adjustment, academic appeals and the correct constitution and conduct of assessment boards. For this reason the structure, in the case of the Pearson awards, would not enable Expectation B6 to be met.

2.57     Despite the lack of formal assessment boards, external examiner reports show that assessment decisions are fair, appropriate and in line with assessments made at other institutions. These reports also show that moderation and internal verification occur appropriately. This is evidence that programme level assessors are familiar with general assessment procedures in their own programmes. However, the lack of the required regulations, or guidance towards such regulations, and the lack of formal assessment boards for Pearson programmes, means the system in place at the College does not have formal scope to consider all possible situations and to record decisions made at assessment boards that are based upon consideration of the attendant regulations.

2.58     The team reviewed external examiner and Standards Verifier reports, the Universities' academic regulations and guidance, assignment briefs, programme specifications, and policies governing regulatory matters for University programmes. The team also met the College's senior staff, support staff, academic staff and students.

2.59     The College does not publish an overview of assessment that would enable assessors to gain understanding of how it approaches assessment of higher education and how it recognises the different requirements of its awarding partners. Neither does the College make use of the Pearson templates provided in the BTEC Centre Guide to Managing Quality that would allow assessment boards, were they to be introduced, to have a regulatory framework to which they could refer when making assessment decisions that fall outside of routine marking.

2.60     The College accepts that it does not have assessment boards for Pearson programmes but plans to introduce these now that the Pearson provision has increased significantly. The College has also made a start on publishing a definitive framework for the Pearson programmes that contains guidance for assessors as well as the required contextualised regulations. The review team concludes that the introduction of such boards would allow the College to develop confidence in the assessment conducted in its name and would provide coherent, definitive and reliable records of assessment decisions. The team therefore **recommends** that the College should introduce formal exam boards for Pearson programmes whose constitution and remit are described in terms of reference and where discussions of assessment decisions are recorded in formal minutes, as required by the awarding organisation and set out in its published guidance.

2.61     Because neither the regulatory framework nor the assessment boards for Pearson programmes are in use the team identified significant gaps in the college's procedures in relation to the Expectation, and find that Expectation B6 is not met and that the risk is serious.

**Expectation:     Not met**
**Level of risk:    Serious**

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

**Quality Code, *Chapter B7: External Examining***

**Findings**

2.62    External examiners are appointed by the College's awarding bodies and organisation to comment on the appropriateness of academic standards and assessment. External examiners evaluate assessment decisions to assure their robustness and that they have been taken appropriately.

2.63    External examiners report annually to the Universities and Pearson. External examiner reports are reviewed by the Director of Quality and Standards and passed on to programme teams, who produce or contribute to formal responses. External examiner reports inform continuous programme monitoring. This would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.64    In testing the Expectation the review team considered procedural documents and sample external examiner reports and responses. The team also held discussions with senior and academic staff, and students.

2.65    External examiners use the template forms provided by the Universities and Pearson to confirm that academic standards have been set appropriately and are being maintained in relation to FHEQ level descriptors and Subject Benchmark Statements, and that the standards are comparable with those of providers of similar qualifications. External examiners receive supporting information and guidance including programme handbooks, assignment briefs, marking criteria, assessed coursework and internal moderation records to undertake their role.

2.66    External examiners comment on the operation of assessment, including its appropriateness to the intended learning outcomes, the fairness and consistency of marking and internal moderation, and the quality of written feedback. Examiners of University awards comment on the conduct of assessment boards in accordance with awarding body regulations. They also provide informative comment on features of good practice with potential for wider dissemination. External examiners comment on the support they have received to undertake their role and how their previous recommendations have been responded to. Feedback from external examiners informs continuous programme monitoring, although this was not transparent in the course and subject-level action plans seen by the review team.

2.67    University assessment boards are attended by external examiners, who verify marks and comment on the appropriateness of the assessment process and the standards set for, and achieved by, students. The Higher Education Manager produces an overview of issues raised by external examiners, although it was unclear to the review team where this report was considered. College-level scrutiny of issues from external examiner reports appears within the remits of three committees - the Academic Board, Quality and Standards Committee and Higher Education Strategic Group - through consideration of a Higher Education Action Plan. However, the team confirmed that neither the Academic Board nor the Quality and Standards Committee had been convened and that the minutes of the Higher Education Strategic Group demonstrated scant consideration of external examiner issues. This has contributed to the recommendation under Expectation B8 that the College develops a transparent system that assures effective oversight of higher education standards and quality.

2.68     External examiner reports are made available to students through the VLE Higher Education Portal. Reports are considered at course team meetings, to which student representatives are invited but may not attend. External examiners visit the College and meet students. Programme handbooks contain details of external examiners but the College acknowledges that this has so far been inconsistent.

2.69     The College makes use of external examiners in accordance with the regulations and procedures of its awarding bodies and organisation. Students are made aware of their external examiners and given access to their reports, although the students whom the team met had not accessed them directly. While it is evident that issues raised by external examiners are considered and responded to at programme level, and that academic standards appear secure, the College's current governance systems do not provide for full and transparent consideration of external examiner feedback at provider level. On this basis the Expectation is met and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation:     Met**
**Level of risk:   Moderate**

**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**

2.70    The College is responsible for annual monitoring of all University-approved programmes. University programmes are also subject to periodic review and revalidation by each university. Pearson programmes are also subject to periodic review but only when initiated by Pearson.

2.71    Annual monitoring forms part of the reporting cycle for each programme through the University system. Pearson external examiners are expected to comment on the general quality of the provision as well as on the delivery and assessment of the programme that they are verifying. The College does not operate a formal system of higher education programme review, although its entire offer, from further education through higher education, is subject to yearly evaluation in terms of performance and quality. In addition to this, the Universities' requirements for annual programme monitoring reports and embedded periodic review assure that all their programmes are subject to formal review.

2.72    The system would enable the Expectation to be met since each programme is part of a faculty in which all programmes are evaluated in the faculty-level annual self-assessment reports (SARs). In addition to this, the College teams reflect upon external examiner reports and monitor the opinions of students and employers in relation to each programme. However, reliance upon programme-level monitoring of quality and faculty-level monitoring of performance means that there is no institution-level oversight of higher education quality that would allow consideration of, for example, external examiner reports and responses, assessment board output, approval system findings or programme team and committee agreements. Minutes of the Management and Performance Committee, and of the executive Management Team, focus on matters of further education with only occasional mention of higher education.

2.73    The team reviewed evidence including records of approval events for University programmes, confirmation of approval to run Pearson programmes, annual monitoring reports, and minutes of boards and committees. The team found that matters relevant to higher education provision were not discussed in any of the senior management minutes other than a general update on higher education as an agenda item. The team also spoke with senior and academic staff as well as employers and students.

2.74    The College relies upon its awarding partners for setting and maintaining academic standards and for assuring the quality of enhancement and learning opportunities offered through these programmes. The use of these individual systems occurs chiefly at programme level, where individual programme teams make direct use of, or reference to, partner regulations in the routine running of their programmes. In this respect the College cannot be said to have effective oversight of its higher education portfolio. The review team found numerous examples of where this lack of oversight had led to gaps in quality assurance. These include the lack of an internal approval process that should lead, in the case of Pearson programmes, to a definitive programme specification or equivalent that could be held and published by the College as a point of reference for students and assessors and contribute to the definitive records that the College keeps of the programmes it offers. These points are addressed in Expectations A2.2 and B1.

2.75    The College also lacks a form of programme committee meetings that would offer the opportunity for programme review to occur at regular meetings with programme-level cohorts of students and shape the input of new design and development initiatives. Students are consulted through focus groups and the elected representatives have the opportunity to meet one another or to attend part of the programme team meetings. In practice this rarely occurs due to availability of students at the time of the team meetings. Formal staff-student liaison meetings do not occur at any time for this same reason and are also not held in classes when students are present, which means that the College misses this vital opportunity for student engagement.

2.76    Although the College does consider the performance of its provision, the lack of a quality-based annual review system means that key matters of quality are left to programme teams or are not dealt with at all. This includes institution-level internal review of assessment boards, external examiner reports and programme specifications for the Pearson awards. The team therefore **recommends** that the College should develop a transparent system that ensures effective oversight of the College's higher education standards and quality, and which encompasses the systems of its awarding partners and covers matters such as approval, re-approval, external examiner reports and responses, assessment board records, staffing, resourcing and matters of externality and enhancement over time.

2.77    Due to the absence of an effective system of oversight and definitive documentation that would enable governors, senior staff, academic staff, students and other stakeholders to have confidence in the portfolio of programmes on offer, the review team concludes that Expectation B8 is not met and the level of risk is serious.

**Expectation:    Not met**
**Level of risk:    Serious**

**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**

2.78    The College has both an appeals policy and a complaints policy. The College clearly identified the need for more robust overarching procedures in these areas and has worked to ensure that the necessary policies are in place and communicated to students. This is evident from the Higher Education Quality Improvement Plan, which clearly states that, 'An overarching complaints policy and procedure is required …A robust procedure is required.' The deadlines set within this document are April and September 2015, and the College has already made progress in this area as demonstrated to the team during the review visit.

2.79    Students are informed about the College's processes for complaints and appeals via their programme handbooks and the policy is also available on the College web pages. The complaints policy makes no mention of different arrangements for the various awarding bodies and organisation; however, the College staff were able to articulate clearly how the process works in practice. Complaints are reported to the Governing Body and responsibility for monitoring and reporting to the Corporation on surveys of student opinion and complaints is included within the terms of reference of the management and performance committee.

2.80    The College would meet the Expectation, as it has clear policies in place and students are made aware of these procedures via a range of channels.

2.81    The team reviewed documentation including the Complaints Policy and the complaints report to the Governing Body, and met a range of staff with responsibility for appeals and complaints, during the review visit.

2.82    Complaints and concerns are effectively tracked and handled as part of the College's Complaints Procedure and reports and details are presented to governors on the Management and Performance Committee.

2.83    The College has clearly made good progress in this area, having previously identified the need for a more robust overarching complaints policy. The most recent complaints summary received by the Management and Performance Committee clearly shows that the newly adapted process is working well, and staff whom the review team met during the visit were able to articulate clearly how the process works in practice.

2.84    The College also has an Academic Appeals Policy, which works alongside policies from its awarding bodies. Students are informed of the process for appeals against the decision of the assessment board when they receive their transcripts.

2.85    In summary, the College meets the Expectation as set out in *Chapter B9* of the Quality Code, as it has in place clear complaints and appeals policies which are made available to students, and there is evidence that these policies are being followed and the information reviewed at a senior level. The risk is therefore low, as the procedures in place appear to be fair and accessible to students.

**Expectation: Met**
**Level of risk: Low**

**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**

2.86    The College works in partnership with its awarding bodies and organisation to deliver programmes that lead to their awards. The College collaborates with employers and other stakeholders to develop and deliver industry-relevant curricula. There is a strategic commitment to promoting students' employability by developing higher-level qualifications that offer progression from the College's Level 3 courses.

2.87    As described elsewhere in this report, the College meets the requirements of its awarding bodies and organisation for the approval, delivery and monitoring of programmes leading to their awards, and awarding body relationships are underpinned by written agreements. Employer relationships are developed and nurtured through sector networks and accreditations and support curriculum design and delivery, including the provision of work placements. The College supports students and employers in the delivery of work-based learning. This would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.88    In testing the Expectation the review team considered procedural documents and reports. The team also held discussions with senior staff, academic and administrative staff, students, and employers.

2.89    The College seeks to contribute to regional economic development by developing collaborations with small, medium-sized and large employers, local councils and other external stakeholder. An Employers' Charter, developed by the Work-Based Learning Team, describes the benefits to industry of working with the College in developing and delivering higher education programmes. Current delivery partners include Bentley Motors and British Aerospace for Electrical and Mechanical Engineering; AstraZeneca and other pharmaceutical employers for Applied Science (Applied Biology); and several home building companies for Construction. Employer engagement is through a range of channels that include face-to-face meetings, employer forums, business breakfasts, alumni dinners, twilight sessions, and other networking events; for example, representatives of local and regional construction companies attend an annual College event that includes a tour of the Construction course facilities. A new Customer Relationship Management system holds contact information for employers and placement providers. While it is well developed in some subjects, the review team found employer engagement to be variable overall and noted that the College has identified this as an area for development.

2.90    Several programmes, including the foundation degrees in Construction and Children's and Young People's Services, contain placement learning opportunities. The College supports employers in the organisation, management and delivery of placements; however, students queried whether current placement capacity was sufficient. In addition to structured placements, programmes provide work-related learning opportunities in which students work with employers on live project brief. Employers with whom the review team met spoke positively of students' commitment and performance while on placement, the preparation and support they received from staff, and the College's general contribution to widening access and employability.

2.91     The College engages with Chambers of Commerce and Sector Skills Councils and works closely with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), including the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) and Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) for its Construction programmes. Construction students are able to join both the RICS and CIOB, obtain RICS qualifications and access CIOB networking events hosted by the College. The College is currently exploring opportunities for formal PSRB accreditation of its higher education programmes.

2.92     The review team saw evidence that the College has secure relationships with its awarding bodies and organisation through the implementation of clearly defined operating agreements and procedures supported by appropriate quality assurance processes. Employer relationships make an effective contribution to curriculum design and delivery including the provision of placement learning opportunities. The College acknowledges that employer engagement is better established in some subject areas than others and there is potential for greater consistency across programmes. Nevertheless, the team commends as **good practice** the approach to employer engagement in programme development and delivery as part of a wider strategy for developing student employability and supporting local regeneration. On this basis the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation:     Met**
**Level of risk:     Low**

# The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.93      In reaching its judgement about the quality of learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.94      Three Expectations in this area are not met, with two having an associated serious level of risk. The two areas with serious risk are in the areas of assessment of students and programme monitoring and review. A recommendation is made to the College to provide transparent processes that enable the College to have more effective oversight of its higher education provision. There is also a more specific recommendation to introduce formal exam boards for Pearson provision. Similarly, the College is recommended to introduce a formal internal approval system to support its programme design, development and approval, which is the other area that does not meet Expectations, and which is attributed a moderate risk.

2.95      All other Expectations are met, with two having a moderate risk. One of these is in the area of student engagement, where the review team makes a recommendation to provide more effective student representation, and this is linked to the recommendation for more effective oversight of the College's higher education provision stated above. The other moderate risk relates to external examining, and is again linked to the recommendation for such oversight.

2.96      There are two features of good practice identified as part of the College's quality of student learning experience. One relates specifically to the higher education learning hours that are scheduled weekly and which provide an opportunity for staff to come together as part of a wider staff development strategy specific to higher education. The other relates to the College's approach to employer engagement within higher education provision, which supports both student employability and local regeneration.

2.97      The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the College **does not meet** UK expectations. The review team identified significant gaps in processes and procedure in relation to programme design, assessment and programme monitoring and review. The gaps present serious risk to how higher education is managed in these areas, and provide limited controls and oversight to the senior management of the College.

# 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 makes available a range of information to prospective and current students via its web pages and online prospectus. Students whom the review team met spoke positively of the information they received prior to and during the application process. The website does not make a great deal of reference to the College's awarding bodies or organisation; however, these relationships are clearer at programme information level and in relation to specific policies, for example admissions.

3.2      The College has recently developed a VLE. It is currently developing the VLE platform, which will contain learning materials specific for each higher education programme as well as a higher education portal containing generic learning support materials. The College undertook a VLE review in 2015 and outcomes of this will be taken forward over the coming months to improve further the online offering to students.

3.3      The College does not have a formally documented process for the checking and approval of information, and does not have a formal system to ensure that published information is accurate; however, guidance is provided to staff by the Higher Education Manager and templates are used for producing marketing materials. The College also offers its staff guidance on version control and this appears to be working well in practice.

3.4      The College also has social media accounts, and offers guidance to staff on how these should be used effectively within its Internet, Email and Social Media Policy. Social media accounts are primarily managed by the communications team with contributions from other staff.

3.5      The information published appears to be fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, and this would allow the Expectation to be met. However, the College does not have formal processes for the monitoring of information.

3.6      The team reviewed information published by the College, including information for prospective and current students, and met staff responsible for the checking and approval of information during the review visit.

3.7      The College's mechanisms for the checking and approval of published information are mainly informal, although all information is signed off by the Higher Education Manager. The approval process generally includes course team leaders and programme leaders and is then ratified through the faculty before being finally approved by the Higher Education Manager. As higher education provision increases the College may benefit from more robust overarching coordination of its approach to the information it produces for a range of audiences; however, the current system appears to be working well at the moment.

3.8     The College has also recently introduced a cross-institution higher education student handbook to bring together information provided to students about central support.

3.9     When students complete their studies they are provided with a transcript which clearly states what they have achieved in line with national requirements and those of the relevant awarding body. Thereafter they are provided with an official certificate from their awarding body.

3.10    The Expectation is met, as the College has mechanisms in place to ensure that information that it produces is checked and approved appropriately, albeit through mainly informal channels. The risk is low as the informal approach to this appears to be relatively secure; however, further progress could be made in relation to making programme specifications available on the College web pages, in line with HEFCE requirements for wider information.

**Expectation:     Met**
**Level of risk:    Low**

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

3.11      In reaching its judgement about the quality of the information about learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.12      The Expectation in this area has been met, with a low risk. The quality of information is demonstrated to be fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, albeit through mainly informal channels.

3.13      The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities 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 has made significant changes in the past two years to its higher education curriculum offer, the resources that support it and the opportunities available to students. However, it has not used the term enhancement, or made reference to equivalent discussions and actions in relation to quality improvement of higher education, in its higher level meetings, such as the Executive Management Team, the Management and Performance Committee or the Governors' meetings, or in any strategy documents, and in this sense cannot be considered to have engaged directly with the concept.

4.2 The team found numerous individual examples of developments that contribute significantly to the improvement of the higher education student experience and the opportunities offered to these students by the College. The creation of a new higher education centre within the College, the introduction of the Higher Education Learning Hour (see paragraph 2.22) and the move to using a plagiarism-checking submission system are such examples.

4.3 The College has also offered support to staff wishing to undertake continuous professional development opportunities or to pursue higher degrees, although the level of support for these matters varied by faculty and according to whether or not the staff were able to benefit from University-facilitated events and opportunities due to being involved in a University programme. These same or equivalent opportunities were generally not available to Pearson programme teams, as Pearson does not routinely run staff development exercises in the same way as universities, although the Higher Education Operations Group presentations do demonstrate some College-facilitated events.

4.4 The review team looked at policy and procedure documents, terms of reference for key boards and committees, minutes of these meetings and other potential sources of evidence such as annual programme monitoring reports, approval documents and external examiner reports. The documents described were numerous, and covered all potential areas for the inclusion of evidence to show enhancement through deliberate steps being taken at institution level. However, the documents showed no discussion of enhancement, or equivalent, or consideration of how enhancement might be implemented or influenced.

4.5 In practice the implementation of enhancement, from idea to realisation, is largely dependent upon the work and actions of key individuals, rather than systems, and the review team found no clear path to facilitate the development of an enhancement-led strategy or equivalent for higher education within the College's strategic planning. This is in large part due to the lack of a transparent system that ensures effective oversight of the College's higher education standards and quality, as identified in Expectation B8.

4.6 Although the College has shown that it is familiar with the Expectation by including it in its mapping of the Quality Code, it is clear that the opportunity to demonstrate explicit engagement with the concept has not been taken. In addition, while examples of improvements do exist, the lack of strategic-level deliberation, planning and action do not allow the College to develop opportunities to enhance their higher education provision fully.

4.7      The team discussed enhancement with the Principal, senior staff, academic staff, support staff and students and was made aware of numerous examples of cross-College developments that have been implemented specifically to improve the opportunities on offer and the higher education student experience. These include the new higher education centre, the Higher Education Learning Hour and the support for staff development, all of which were considered at length and in depth by the review team.

4.8      In practice, the Higher Education Learning Hour is a scheduled session each Wednesday for higher education staff to meet and share experiences and ideas. It is a forum for programme teams and managers to reflect upon best practice and to share the outcomes of student opinions and suggestions. Facilitated by the Higher Education Manager, this session has allowed numerous benefits to be shared across teams to develop the overall provision.

4.9      The review team concludes that these developments, such as the Learning Hour, are clear examples that some steps are being taken to enhance the student experience and the learning opportunities, and that these are being considered to an extent at institution level. However, the review team concludes that this requires further development so that more formal consideration of enhancement is considered at senior level meetings, enabling enhancement to become a routine part of the way in which higher education is managed at the College. The recommendation in section B8 goes some way towards addressing this issue, but the team also **recommends** that the College should routinely consider enhancement within its monitoring, reporting and recording structures at senior level.

4.10      Based upon the documentary evidence and the findings during the review visit the team concludes that the Expectation is not met and that the risk is moderate.

**Expectation:      Not met**
**Level of risk:    Moderate**

# The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.11      In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.12      The Expectation in this area is not met, with a moderate risk. While the College demonstrates clear examples that some steps are being taken to enhance the student learning opportunities, further development is required so that formal consideration of enhancement is undertaken at an institutional level so that enhancement is embedded in the College's operational planning for higher education provision. The recommendation under Expectation B8 on student learning opportunities, regarding developing processes to provide more effective oversight of the College's higher education provision, goes some way towards addressing this issue. The review team makes an additional recommendation in that section for the College to ensure specifically that enhancement is considered in its quality assurance structures.

4.13      The review team therefore concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **requires improvement** to meet UK expectations.

# 5    Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

**Findings**

5.1    The review team met a range of staff, students, employers, placement providers and alumni. Throughout the visit it was apparent that the College has a longstanding commitment to enhancing the employability of its students. This is evident in the strong relationships that the College has built with local SME organisations, including the Chamber of Commerce, providers' skills board and the local enterprise partnership. The College has developed a local employer advisory board, which engages 22 local employers, and it is clear that the College has capitalised on these strong relationships with local organisations to ensure that its students are supported in a variety of ways to develop their employability.

5.2    Work is ongoing to standardise the way in which different areas of the College engage with external organisations, and as part of the new Higher Education Strategy, the Work Related Team will be working to link three employers to each higher education qualification. The College accepts that provision for employability varies across its programmes, with good practice in some areas, acknowledged in section B10 of this report, and others requiring further attention to reach the same high standard. Senior staff also emphasised that employer engagement is inconsistent and the College is keen to share best practice to ensure that strong examples are shared across provision. The Work Related Team and the Work Based Learning and Employer Engagement Manager are exploring how this can be further improved.

5.3    The College has made a sustained effort to engage employers in programme-level design and delivery, which ensures that curricula are industry-relevant. Employers sit on College advisory boards and are involved in the provision of work placements, the delivery of guest lectures, and advising on programme and module content. The employers and placement providers whom the review team met during the visit spoke highly of the College and its reputation for working with business and sector bodies.

5.4    The College places a high value on employers, including those with whom it engages, and has worked over a prolonged period of time to build strong relationships with businesses. These relationships enable the College to provide a broad range of work-related activities for its students, including work placements and work-related projects and live project briefs which simulate the workplace and support students in developing their employability. The College also delivers a dedicated careers service for its higher education students, which is accessed via the Careers Team, located in the Student Hub.

5.5    The College also clearly considers employability as a standalone, holistic concept at a higher level than their graduates simply 'getting a job', and offers its students support in developing relevant skills and knowledge above and beyond that which might make them attractive to an employer. The College places a high emphasis on transferable skills, which is evident from the guidance provided to students in programme handbooks, the consideration given to assignment design and the careful planning of teaching and learning activities to ensure consideration of related career paths.

# 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 30 to 33 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* (FQHEIS).

**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.