



Quality Review Visit of South Eastern Regional College

June 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about South Eastern Regional College

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

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.**
- **There can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.**

Areas for development

The review team did not identify any **areas for development**.

Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any **specified improvements**.

About this review

The review visit took place from 5 to 7 June 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Paul Brunt
- Mr Mark Langley
- Mr Harry Williams (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

- provide the relevant funding body with an expert judgement about the readiness of a provider to enter, or continue to operate within, the higher education sector.

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

- ensure that the student interest is protected
- provide expert advice to ensure that the reputation of the UK higher education system is protected, including the protection of degree standards
- identify development areas that will help a provider to progress through a developmental period and be considered 'established'.

Each review visit considers a provider's arrangements against relevant aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements, and in particular:

- the reliability of degree standards and their reasonable comparability with standards set and achieved by other providers
- the quality of the student academic experience, including student outcomes where the provider has a track record of delivery of higher education.

About South Eastern Regional College

South Eastern Regional College (SERC) was formed on 1 August 2007 as a result of a merger of the former North Down and Newtownards, East Down and Lisburn Institutes of Further and Higher Education. The College has campuses at Bangor, Downpatrick, Newtownards, Lisburn and Newcastle, as well as a number of outreach centres across the region. There are just under 32,000 enrolments for 2017-18, of which 1436 are in higher education (540 full-time and 896 part-time enrolments). Higher education provision has remained focused within the Lisburn and Bangor campuses; there are smaller numbers in Newtownards and Downpatrick.

The College delivers a range of full-time and part-time bachelors and foundation degrees on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies - University of Ulster, Queen's University Belfast and Liverpool John Moores University - and Higher Nationals, on behalf of its awarding organisation, Pearson. These awards account for 86 per cent of the higher education provision with professional body awards - including those from the Council for Awards in Children's Health and Education (CACHE) and City & Guilds - making up the remaining 14 per cent.

The College employs 298.2 full-time equivalent permanent lecturers and 52 full-time equivalent part-time lecturing staff. Of these, 128 lecturing staff are directly involved in delivering higher education programmes. The higher education lecturers are supported by a full range of corporate staff.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The College does not have degree awarding powers. It offers a range of full and part-time bachelors and foundation degrees on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies - University of Ulster, Queen's University Belfast and Liverpool John Moores University - and Higher Nationals, on behalf of its awarding organisation, Pearson. It also offers higher education provision on behalf of several professional bodies.

2 The College has well-established relationships with its awarding bodies and awarding organisation, governed by Memoranda of Agreement or equivalent, with clear delineation of responsibilities across programme development, teaching and learning, and student engagement, that assure the maintenance of academic standards. Programme specifications reflect the FHEQ and refer to the relevant subject benchmark statements and other external reference points.

3 The College's internal processes ensure that the academic standards of its awarding bodies and organisations are maintained. The College makes good use of internal and external monitoring reports including the annual monitoring processes and evaluation of data, reflections on teaching, learning and assessment, and student-staff feedback.

4 The Higher Education Review Board (HERB), reports to the Education Sub-Committee of the Board of Governors, which is responsible for internally overseeing these processes. Proposals align to the College Development Plan and Curriculum Plan which are approved by the Board of Governors.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

5 The College adheres to the relevant higher education codes of governance and guidance published by the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfENI) and shows a commitment to the key principles through its published mission and development planning.

6 The College has a strategy to enhance its higher education provision and operates within a hierarchical committee structure for maintaining academic oversight and working towards the implementation of the strategy. Student representation is embedded into the committee structure.

7 The HERB enables the higher education provision to maintain a prominent position in reporting structures to the overarching Governing Body and its Education Committee. The College's governance arrangements demonstrate separation between the corporate and academic responsibilities and the College could evidence organised management structures with clear delegation. Reporting channels were evidenced through annual reports, meeting minutes and updates, where actions are measured against the annual higher education Annual Quality Assessment Review (AQAR) and Development Plan, other performance indicators and data analysis.

8 With the Governing Body, the College had recently codified its existing practices and values to articulate a more explicit approach to academic freedom and collegiality. Staff

could describe their involvement in programme design, assessment coordination and programme modification procedures, designed to address industry relevance and employability issues. The College's emphasis on continual improvement specifically seeks comment and feedback, and both staff and students acknowledged this.

9 The College has mechanisms in place for maintaining oversight of academic risk and provided evidence of meeting minutes and risk management reports that demonstrate effective oversight of higher education risk issues and their mitigation in the College's management processes and strategic planning.

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

10 The College aligns with the awarding bodies and awarding organisation's requirements for the design, approval and re-approval of programmes, with the awarding bodies and organisation being ultimately responsible for ensuring alignment to relevant national frameworks. The College uses university-produced programme documentation where it delivers provision through a consortium arrangement. Examples include its business programmes with Liverpool John Moore's University and foundation degrees with two Northern Ireland university partners.

11 The College develops programme specifications for the Pearson programmes through a recently introduced programme approval panel led by the Head of Quality, Excellence and Development (HQED) and including Heads and Deputy Heads of School and student representatives. Following a successful pilot, the College extended it to include professional award approvals, which also involve an external validation process with the professional bodies. Professional bodies or foundation degree processes underpin the approval of Higher Level Apprenticeships.

12 The awarding partners appoint external examiners or verifiers who confirm that academic standards are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers and that qualifications are awarded only where the achievement of relevant learning outcomes have been demonstrated.

13 The HQED reviews all external reports, identifying any issues or best practice in a cross-college action plan. The HERB monitors the subsequent activity and shares this with the College Management Team (CMT) and HE Co-ordinator group, while the Programme Monitoring and Review processes addresses any issues.

14 The College complies with the marking and moderation processes for each awarding organisation. Three annual 'standardisation' points ensure staff consider assessment preparation, cross-marking, internal verification and examination. This includes cross-college moderation for foundation degree programmes delivered across collaborative networks.

15 The College's Examination Board system ensures centralised oversight and confirmation of results. The HQED chairs Examination and Progress Boards which Ulster University commends as good practice. Where the College Examination Board does not confirm results, it still meets the programme team to review performance and provide oversight. The CMT, HERB and external examiners receive minutes of these meetings.

16 The College operates a comprehensive performance monitoring and review process. All programmes complete a self-evaluation review (SER) or Annual Course Review (ACR) that draws on key evidence sources. The College's development of its own online system provides staff with specific and focused data to evaluate. School managers sign off individual programme plans and feed the outcomes into the CMT, and the Education

Committee scrutinises these reviews prior to sending them to the DfENI to approve. The Higher Education Review connects with the College improvement plan.

17 Action tracking is either online or manual, and team teaching meetings monitor action plans monthly. The College's Integrated Monthly Performance Management System (IMPMS) monitors any resulting actions or quality improvement plans. Heads of School and Unit attend individual slots accompanied by Deputy Heads of Schools or Co-ordinators as required. Ulster University also provides feedback on Annual Course Reviews and action plans which feeds into the subsequent course review, completing the quality loop. The Governing Body's Education Committee receive termly updates to ensure that monitoring is a reflective and complete process.

18 The College's management information system provides timely and current data that managers and teaching teams use to underpin the quality improvement process. The Head of Knowledge Management controls the data to which all key staff have access. The HE AQAR uses data to identify 'at risk' programmes and a Course Assist process supports programme teams to maintain academic standards through a quality improvement plan. A Quality Improvement Mentor with experience in self-evaluation and improvement, leads the process over an academic year. The College also uses 'Know and Show' good practice forums to encourage development and to understand trends. DfENI monitors performance data and trends from strategic and operational perspectives. Data provided by DfENI confirms that the College meets all the required targets confirming the thorough and complete process.

Rounded judgement

19 The academic standards of higher education programmes are set by the awarding bodies and awarding organisation and managed through appropriate mechanisms. The College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards through its governance structures; internal processes and procedures; adherence to the regulations of the awarding bodies and awarding organisations; and engagement with the FHEQ. There are no specified improvements or areas for development in this area.

20 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

21 The College has robust arrangements in place to manage their higher education provision, overseen by the Head of Quality, Excellence and Development (HQED), reporting to the College Management Team (CMT) through the Director of Strategic Planning, Quality and Support (DSPQS). The College has established a number of deliberative committees that have oversight of higher education including the Higher Education Review Board (HERB) and HE Programme Team Meetings.

22 The HERB reports to the CMT and the Board of Governors through the Education Committee. At programme-level, HE Programme Team Meetings are tasked with monitoring student progress and academic standards alongside operational quality management. The minutes of these committees reflect concise but considered discussion of academic standards and matters relating to quality.

23 The College has devised and embedded a comprehensive higher education monitoring and review process referred to as Annual Course Review (ACR) or Self Evaluation Review (SER). This process, which is mapped to the Quality Code, enables the College to meet the strict reporting requirements of its numerous awarding bodies and organisations. The responsibility for ensuring this process is carried out rests with Heads of School or Unit supported by the Quality, Excellence and Development (QED) Unit. Completed ACR and SER reports are scrutinised by peer review panels before feeding into the deliberative committee structure.

24 There are effective mechanisms to capture the student voice through the election of course representatives and a student governor. Course representatives are supported in their role by the College and Students' Union through training at the start of each academic year and with ongoing mentorship. Course representatives are invited to meetings that concern the management of academic standards and the student academic experience, including the HERB and HE Programme Team Meetings. The College also holds student-staff consultations during which students are invited to highlight any problems and suggest possible enhancements to the College's higher education provision.

25 The College uses a range of data to monitor the performance of its higher education provision, including the use of module and programme questionnaires. The College rigorously analyses themes arising from these activities while monitoring key performance indicators such as retention, achievement and progression. There is also a comprehensive risk register that includes the quality of the student experience routinely monitored by the CMT and Board of Governors.

26 The College has an established Curriculum Policy and specific HE Curriculum Plan outlining their approach to teaching, learning, and assessment. Students are involved in feeding back on assessment of learning and teaching through module, unit and course evaluations, and their elected student representatives.

27 College documentation and the awarding partners' regulations detail assessment processes for each programme, which students can access on the virtual learning environment (VLE). Staff outline assessment processes during induction and discuss these in tutorials. Along with information on the College's VLE, students confirm that assessment is clear and that feedback is thorough and returned promptly.

28 The review team found clear evidence of supportive and effective relationships between students and their tutors. Students are introduced to the College with a two-week induction period designed by the College to familiarise new and returning students with key College policies. The review team heard from students that this process could be streamlined - especially for students already familiar with the College - and, in response to this, the College confirmed it is evaluating the induction process with a view to minimising the repetition of information. The College assigns each student a named personal tutor for the duration of their studies who is the first point of call for students with pastoral concerns. The College has a range of student support services available including advice on student finance, careers and professional development.

29 The College has recently invested in the physical infrastructure of its learning resources with dedicated higher education study rooms on each of the College's campuses. Learning Resource Centres found at each of the main campuses have been designed to support learning and teaching practices and to improve and enhance the quality of the student academic experience. The College's VLE is regularly updated and, as a result, is well-received, allowing students to access teaching and learning materials remotely and on-site.

30 The College has a structured approach to continual professional development and performance review, overseen by the Chief Human Resources Officer, which aligns closely to the College's strategic aims. The review team heard of examples where the College had supported a member of staff through a higher degree by reducing their contracted hours and other examples of staff being supported through submissions to the Higher Education Academy with one member of staff achieving their senior fellowship.

31 The College has appropriate arrangements in place for work placements. Its Specialist Provision for Industry using College Expertise (SPICE) system stores all the data required for safe and relevant placements. Students use SPICE to access a list of suitable employers and upload CVs, health declarations and travel details. The system tracks student engagement with the placement, including reviews that other students can access to help them decide on their placement. The Work-Placement Coordinator oversees this process, offering employability training and CV advice, and visiting students and placement providers - ensuring that placements meet the 'FE HE Placement Partnership Agreement'. The College has developed this bespoke system and its ability to draw together information from employers, students and staff is exceptionally clear and innovative in the way it underpins the College's commitment to Chapter B10 of the Quality Code.

32 There is an effective process for ensuring that information for current students and staff is valid, reliable and accessible. Students are provided with induction materials and an annually updated 'HE Student Handbook', produced by the HQED, which outlines key College policies. Programme teams are responsible for producing a programme handbook and guides to individual modules that provide more specific information relating to teaching, learning and assessment. The College also produces a 'HE Staff Handbook', updated annually, that outlines the College's management structure and signposts readers to relevant College processes and operating procedures as they relate to higher education programmes.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

33 The College has in place effective arrangements to ensure student engagement in academic governance. The College operates a deliberative structure, which includes student

representation throughout its key committees. Students were able to refer to consultation opportunities from such meetings, and some reported their involvement in the process of providing feedback that resulted in enhancements to resources or facilities.

34 The College undertake surveys of students to identify areas for improvement and areas of good practice. The results inform annual review action planning, and the outcomes have led to improvements of the student learning experience.

35 The College provides access to complaints guidance materials for students appropriate for their programme of study and relevant awarding institution. Students reported satisfaction with the availability and completeness of these materials. The College provided examples showing the effectiveness of its own arrangements in learning from, and ensuring that, student complaints are addressed, and that the welfare of students is secured to a satisfactory standard to meet the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman (NIPSO) requirements. The Governing Body, through the Education Committee and the Audit Committee, reviews complaints and compliments annually.

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

36 The College's Marketing and Communications Standard Operating Procedure provides clear guidance for producing accurate, accessible and reliable information across print and digital media. The College intranet and website are the main sources of information. The website's dedicated higher education pages feature all key course information, associated policies and support. The College updates its website annually following the peak recruitment period. Staff and students can access the VLE which holds all programme information. Following the release of Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) guidance, the College has overhauled its higher education webpages in a scrupulous manner.

37 The College's Director of Strategic Planning, Quality and Support (DSPQS) has oversight of marketing and communications, admissions, and customer and community services. To ensure the accuracy of published course information, Heads of School and programme teams complete the awarding partners' prescribed online templates, which reflect CMA guidance. Key committees and senior staff approve prospectus and programme information. The prospectus is available online. Programme teams review content annually, with the relevant awarding body giving final approval. For Pearson programmes, the programme co-ordinator works with the programme team and Students' Union using College templates, which the College Compliance Manager monitors before documentation passes through the committee structure for approval. The College reviews its policies and procedures regularly and approves any changes through the CMT and Governing Body.

38 The DSPQS has the final sign-off for all admissions processes, defined in the Admissions and the Higher Education Programme Standard Operating Procedures. The Senior Customer Services Officer (Admissions) checks the information and the Director of Curriculum and Information Services (DCIS) checks the information with awarding partners ensuring accuracy. The College manages all higher education applications. The DCIS, the DSPQS and the Senior Customer Services Officer (Admissions), plan and annually monitor admissions processes supported by the involvement of the HQED, the Higher Education Course Co-ordinator group and HERB. The HE Admission and Course Cancellation policy specifies timeframes and responsibilities.

39 Higher education open days detail the 'four-step' application process for prospective applicants that includes online application, pre-entry advice and guidance sessions, interview and checking of entry requirements. The enrolment process is a 'whole college'

activity with live updates posted on the staff intranet throughout the enrolment period. The College evaluates the process at the end of the admissions cycle. The College has made changes because of this process, such as the implementation of interviews for applicants to ensure that each student is on the right course.

40 The College created a group to review its terms and conditions, chaired by the DSPQS with the aim of considering CMA guidance. The College's solicitors commented on terms and conditions for fairness and the Student Governor gave comments on the clarity of the text. In future, the HE Student Representative and Student Governor will be involved in an annual review of the text. Students can access the terms and conditions in the prospectus, on the Admissions webpages and receive a paper copy at the time of offer. Additional costs have been itemised within the course descriptors and the terms and conditions highlight the complaints procedure. College terms and conditions also outline the context and arrangements for making changes to programmes. The College has had no complaints about course changes.

41 The College publishes its complaints and appeals processes on its higher education webpages, ensuring that from application to completion of studies, students have access to appropriate systems for complaint or appeal. Students also have access to the policy in the HE Student Handbook and can request a paper copy from any reception point or email a central source managed by the Senior Customer Services Officer. The website layout provides greater clarity for higher education students over when to use the complaint or the academic appeal processes. Academic appeals align with the requirements of the awarding organisations.

42 The Directorate of Strategic Planning is responsible for the complaints policy with the Senior Customer Services Officer and the Head of Communications, Engagement and Admission having operational oversight. The policy clearly defines informal and formal stages and rights to appeal to the College and ultimately NIPSO. Where applicable, students can progress their issue to the awarding organisation, but the internal process must be exhausted before proceeding to the external body.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's (NIPSO) Principles of Good Administration

43 The College operates various transparent channels of communication for programme closures and changes that are accessible to both existing and prospective students, and coordinated in a timely manner to keep all parties fully informed. There is a formalised approach with clear responsibility for communications, referencing the CMA guidance for the different types of change. In accordance with relevant student protection measures, decisions to cancel programmes would be made at an appropriate stage, with clear data being provided for the CMT to make suitably informed decisions.

44 The College is aware of its role in supporting students to find alternative higher education programmes, where this is necessary. There is evidence in policy documentation that the College endeavours to ensure continuity of provision for students when a programme is closed, and to provide individual student support. The review team was provided with evidence of how the commitment to enabling students to complete their studies had been enacted in the few cases where programmes were closed and subsequently taught out. The College has assisted the wider education sector in the region when another college closed a programme, and the College took on the students to its equivalent programme, enabling them to successfully complete.

45 Complaints and appeals guidance materials (including those from the relevant awarding body) are made available in the student handbook, some programme handbooks

and on the College website. These detail, for example, the stages of complaints and the emphasis on informal resolution. Students are aware of the processes for appeals and complaints relevant to their programmes and were able to confirm access to these materials and the availability of further guidance. The responses to complaints and appeals are in line with CMA guidance to ensure that the outcomes of all complaints and appeal processes are proportional, timely and fair.

46 The Complaints and Compliments Policy is overseen by the CMT and HERB to monitor and analyse complaints and thereby improve performance. Complaints information is provided to Governors by the Education and Audit committees. The College demonstrated how the outcomes of the small number of complaints received had resulted in improvements more widely for the student experience, and that learning from complaints is of great importance to the College.

Rounded judgement

47 The College has demonstrated, through its governance structures and internal policies and procedures, that it effectively meets all the baseline regulatory requirements in this area. There are no areas for development or specified improvements in this judgement area.

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

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