

# Review of College Higher Education of South Gloucestershire and Stroud College

April 2013

## Contents

<b>About this review .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Amended judgement.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Key findings.....</b>	<b>4</b>
QAA's judgements about South Gloucestershire and Stroud College.....	4
Good practice .....	4
Recommendations .....	4
The First Year Student Experience .....	5
<b>About South Gloucestershire and Stroud College.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Explanation of the findings about South Gloucestershire and Stroud College..</b>	<b>6</b>
1      Academic standards.....	6
Outcome .....	6
Meeting external qualifications benchmarks .....	6
Use of external examiners .....	6
Assessment and standards .....	7
Setting and maintaining programme standards .....	7
Subject benchmarks.....	7
2      Quality of learning opportunities .....	8
Outcome .....	8
Professional standards for teaching and learning .....	8
Learning resources.....	8
Student voice .....	9
Management information.....	10
Admission to the College.....	10
Complaints and appeals .....	10
Career advice and guidance.....	10
Supporting disabled students .....	11
Supporting international students .....	11
Supporting postgraduate research students .....	11
Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements .....	11
Flexible, distributed and e-learning.....	11
Work-based and placement learning .....	12
Student charter.....	12
3      Public information.....	12
4      Enhancement of learning opportunities .....	14
5      Theme: The First Year Student Experience.....	14
<b>Glossary.....</b>	<b>16</b>

## About this review

This is a report of a Review of College Higher Education conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at South Gloucestershire and Stroud College. The review took place from 22 to 24 April 2013 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr James Freeman (student reviewer)
- Professor Hastings McKenzie
- Dr Amanda Wilcox.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by South Gloucestershire and Stroud College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - threshold academic standards<sup>1</sup>
  - the quality of learning opportunities
  - the quality of information
  - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 3. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

In reviewing South Gloucestershire and Stroud 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 2012-13 are the First Year Student Experience and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>2</sup> Background information about South Gloucestershire and Stroud College is given at the end of this report. A dedicated [page of the website](#) explains more about this review method and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/rche/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/rche/pages/default.aspx)

## Amended judgement

The report on the Review for College Higher Education of South Gloucestershire and Stroud College was published in August 2013.

In the year following the publication of the report, the College engaged in a process of follow-up action with QAA aimed at addressing the report's recommendations, and particularly those recommendations which underlay the judgements of 'requires improvement to meet UK expectations' in the areas of information and enhancement. This process of follow-up action was completed successfully, leading the QAA Board to decide in June 2014 to change these two judgements to **meets UK expectations**.

## Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about South Gloucestershire and Stroud College (the College).

### QAA's judgements about South Gloucestershire and Stroud College

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

- Academic standards of the awards the College offers on behalf of its awarding bodies **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.
- The quality of the information produced by the College about its learning opportunities **requires improvement** to meet UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **requires improvement** to meet UK expectations.

### Good practice

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

- The effectiveness of the College's personal tutoring arrangements (paragraph 2.6).
- The opportunities for students to participate in field trips and excursions (paragraph 2.8).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to South Gloucestershire and Stroud College.

By the start of the 2013-14 academic year, the College should:

- define, publish and implement a definitive procedure for the assessment of all its Pearson provision (paragraphs 1.8 and 3.6)
- develop and launch a programme of staff development specific to higher education (paragraph 2.3)
- ensure that the results of the National Student Survey are used systematically for the enhancement of students' learning opportunities (paragraph 2.9)
- take additional steps to promote and facilitate the involvement of students in quality assurance processes (paragraph 2.11)
- finalise, approve and publish definitive and comprehensive quality assurance procedures for its higher education provision, to include procedures for the annual monitoring of programmes (paragraph 3.6)
- implement a policy of routinely sharing external examiner reports with student representatives (paragraph 3.6)
- develop and implement a process for ensuring that all information about higher education on its website is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy (paragraph 3.6).

By January 2014, the College should:

- develop a deliberate, College-level approach to improving the quality of students' learning opportunities (paragraph 4.4).

## The First Year Student Experience

The review team investigated the First Year Student Experience at South Gloucestershire and Stroud College, and found that the College's arrangements for admissions, enrolment, induction and transition to higher education were broadly satisfactory. The role of personal tutors in facilitating students' transition to higher education was particularly significant.

**Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the [handbook](#) for Review of College Higher Education, available on the QAA website.<sup>4</sup>**

## About South Gloucestershire and Stroud College

South Gloucestershire and Stroud College was formed in February 2012 of a merger of Filton College and Stroud College.

At the time of the review, the College employed over 1,000 staff and had 15,500 learners enrolled, of whom approximately 250 were higher education students.

The College operates from three main sites: Filton Campus, the West of England Institute of Specialist Education and Stroud Campus. One of its Foundation Degrees is delivered at the Bristol Zoological Gardens.

The higher education courses offered by the College comprise Higher National Diplomas awarded by Pearson (formerly Edexcel), Foundation Degrees awarded by the University of the West of England and a Postgraduate Certificate in Education also awarded by the University of the West of England. The subjects on offer are: Fashion (Foundation Degree), Graphics (Foundation Degree), Photography (Foundation Degree), Performing Arts (Musical Theatre, Acting, HND), Sport (HND), Wildlife Conservation (Foundation Degree), Business (HND) and Early Years (Foundation Degree). The University provides some of the same Foundation Degrees to its own students.

The College also offer professional qualifications at level 4, 5 and 6, which are outside the scope of this review.

The College has recently entered a strategic partnership with the University of Gloucestershire with a view both to offering new higher education courses and moving some of its existing provision to a new awarding body.

Filton College and Stroud College last engaged with QAA Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review in 2007 and 2008 respectively. Both reviews found confidence in the colleges' management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The review at Filton College also concluded that reliance could be placed on the accuracy and completeness of information; the review at Stroud College found that reliance could not be placed on this area.

---

<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx)

## Explanation of the findings about South Gloucestershire and Stroud College

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.<sup>5</sup>

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](#)<sup>6</sup> is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the [handbook](#) for the review method, also on the QAA website.<sup>7</sup>

### 1 Academic standards

#### Outcome

The academic standards of the awards the College offers on behalf of its awarding bodies **meet UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

#### Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 It is the responsibility of the College's awarding bodies to allocate the qualifications they award to the appropriate benchmarks. The information which the College produces for its students makes this allocation explicit.

1.2 The generic handbook for the Foundation Degree in Creative Practices refers to an outdated higher education level descriptor. The College may wish to bring this to the attention of the University of the West of England.

#### Use of external examiners

1.3 The responsibilities for external examining lie with the College's awarding bodies.

1.4 Arrangements for the Foundation Degrees are specified in a formal Academic Agreement. This agreement was made between the University of the West of England and the former Filton College. Although it is updated annually through the Annual Operating Agreements, the original would benefit from revision to recognise the creation of the new College.

1.5 The University provides the College with copies of external examiners' reports and formally responds to those reports, pursuant to its overall responsibilities. The review team saw that the University did not always share its responses with the College in time to allow the College to reflect on those responses in its annual monitoring.

1.6 Arrangements for the external verification of the Higher National provision are specified by Pearson. The College receives and responds to verifiers' reports, and the review team saw evidence of it addressing any concerns these reports raise. However, the procedure for responding to external verifiers' reports is not clearly articulated to those involved. This contributed to the team's recommendation about the publication of definitive quality assurance procedures (see paragraph 3.6).

---

<sup>5</sup> The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However, it is available on request for inspection: please contact QAA Reviews Group.

<sup>6</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>7</sup> See note 4.

## **Assessment and standards**

1.7 Procedures for the assessment of Foundation Degrees are governed by the University of the West of England and specified in detail in the Annual Operating Agreements between the University and the College. These procedures are well understood by College staff.

1.8 Procedures for the assessment of Higher Nationals are less clear. While there is a policy for the assessment of Pearson provision at other levels, and a Higher Education Assessment Statement, neither document refers to the assessment of Higher Nationals explicitly. The absence of definitive guidance appears to lead to some minor variations in assessment practices among different courses, including in the number of times a student is entitled to submit an assessment and in the deadlines for the College to provide feedback to students. The review team **recommends**, therefore, that the College defines, publishes and implements a definitive procedure for the assessment of all its Pearson provision.

1.9 Notwithstanding those variations noted above, the information given to students before and after their assessments is both detailed and clear. This information includes the markers' explanation of the marks against the assessment criteria as well as feedback from the lecturer.

1.10 Students whom the team met were generally satisfied with the performance of the College in giving them feedback with a reasonable timeframe. The review team heard that there had been some delays with feedback in Integrated Wildlife Conservation, but this had been a temporary anomaly caused by the need for the University to double-mark all assessments in the first two years of the programme's operation.

## **Setting and maintaining programme standards**

1.11 The College is required by its agreements with the University of the West of England to follow the University's annual monitoring and evaluation processes. In addition, the College undertakes its own annual monitoring for all higher education courses. In 2011-12 annual monitoring was underpinned by the production by each course team of a self-evaluation document, whereas in 2010-11 course teams prepared Annual Monitoring Reports. The College explained to the review team that the introduction of self-evaluation documents was made in part to stimulate more thorough reflection in preparation for the possible move to a new awarding body. However, this did not explain why the Higher National courses had also been asked to adopt a new approach. The confusion was compounded by the absence of a formal policy or written procedure for annual monitoring; the College explained that it gave instructions on annual monitoring to staff annually by email. While the team regarded both the self-evaluation documents and annual monitoring reports as fit for purpose, nevertheless it regarded the absence of a written procedure as a potential impediment to consistency. This contributed to the recommendation about the publication of definitive quality assurance procedures (see paragraph 3.6).

## **Subject benchmarks**

1.12 The use of subject benchmark statements to inform standards is the responsibility of the College's awarding bodies. Staff whom the review team met had little awareness of benchmark statements, with the exception of one course leader who was working on the development of a Foundation Degree with a new awarding body.

## 2 Quality of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at South Gloucestershire and Stroud College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

#### Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 The College tends not to appoint new staff to teach on its higher education courses immediately; instead teachers are drawn from existing staff with a track record of success at other levels. In consequence, there are no higher-education specific thresholds or criteria for the appointment of new staff, although the review team were given to understand this was under review. The evidence provided by the College demonstrated that its existing teaching staff are suitably qualified.

2.2 The College monitors the performance of its teaching staff primarily through peer observation. The observation process is formal; the results are documented and feed into staff appraisals. Students are also asked about their experiences of teaching staff through internal surveys and the National Student Survey (NSS). Internal surveys tend to show students are satisfied with their experiences. In the NSS, however, several indicators (including 'the teaching on my course', 'prompt feedback' and 'well run course') fall below the mean average for the further education sector and, where applicable, below the results for the same courses run by the University of the West of England. This contributed to the team's recommendation about the NSS in paragraph 2.9.

2.3 The College makes limited provision for the continuing professional development (including research and scholarship) of its teaching staff. Subject updating days are included in staff contracts, but the team saw evidence in the minutes of the higher education Board of Studies and in course self-evaluations of staff asking for more time to engage in this activity, particularly as it applied specifically to higher education. Several staff whom the team met highlighted the support the College had given them to complete higher level qualifications, but others gave examples of requests for this support being declined. The review team **recommends** that, by the start of the 2013-14 academic year, the College develop and launch a programme of staff development specific to higher education.

#### Learning resources

2.4 Overall, internal surveys and NSS results indicate that students are satisfied with their learning resources, with facilities in some areas such as Sports regarded as exemplary. However, this is not typical of all courses: Creative Practices has been unable to appoint a dedicated technician owing to student numbers, even though this was an action point arising from the last periodic review by the University. Students on the Integrated Wildlife Conservation programme have raised concerns about access to a laboratory and modern computers. The College hopes to address the latter by moving the further education provision it has at the Bristol Zoo on to its own campus, which will give the higher education students their own dedicated space.

2.5 Students on several of the Foundation Degree programmes awarded by the University of the West of England also emphasised to the team how reliant they were on resources provided by the University. The College ought to bear this in mind as it considers moving to a new awarding body.

2.6 Students' academic and personal support is provided primarily through regular one-to-one meetings with their personal tutors. All of the students whom the team met confirmed the existence of this system and commended it, as do several external examiner reports. The review team, therefore, regarded the effectiveness of the College's personal tutoring arrangements as an example of **good practice**.

2.7 Personal tutors may refer students for support with particular academic or personal needs to the College's central student support team, or, where applicable, to the support services provided by the University of the West of England. Foundation Degree students whom the team met reported that the University was often their first port of call for requests for support, which may also have implications for the move to a new awarding body. Some students on Higher National programmes reported some problems with accessing the College's central support functions, which appeared to be caused by those functions being located on a separate site to the students' lectures.

2.8 Students on several Higher National and Foundation Degree courses highlighted the opportunities they had to participate in trips and excursions, including internationally. The cost of these trips is either borne by the College from within students' fees, or is additional but made clear to students before enrolling. The trips are geared specifically to giving students an insight into a profession or occupation related to their course, and are regarded by the students who participate as invaluable to their professional development. The review team regarded the opportunities for students to participate in field trips and excursions as an example of **good practice**.

### **Student voice**

2.9 The College runs two internal student surveys - first impressions and end of year - in support of its Voice of the Learner strategy. The results of these surveys are analysed by course and compared with other courses to inform future developments. Students are also invited to take part in the NSS. The College analyses the results of the NSS, too, but this analysis tends not to inform its quality assurance processes, owing in part to concerns about the NSS methodology. Notwithstanding low response rates and small sample sizes, the NSS results are below the average for the further education sector and on a downward trend. The review team **recommends** that, by the start of the 2013-14 academic year, the College ensures that the results of the National Student Survey are used systematically for the enhancement of students' learning opportunities.

2.10 Most higher education courses have nominated or elected student representatives. The College's self-evaluation claimed that these representatives are trained by Learner Services, but the review team found no evidence of this training and little or no awareness of it among representatives themselves.

2.11 Student representatives are invited to attend course team meetings, higher education Voice of the Learner meetings and the higher education Board of Studies, but their attendance, particularly at course team meetings and the higher education Board of Studies, is inconsistent. It was difficult to see, therefore, how students were contributing effectively to quality assurance beyond giving feedback through surveys. Student representatives whom the team met claimed that the meetings they were invited to often clashed with their other commitments in College. The review team **recommends**, therefore, that by the beginning of the 2013-14 academic year, the College takes additional steps to promote and facilitate the involvement of students in quality assurance processes.

## **Management information**

2.12 The College collects and analyses information on student retention, success and destination systematically. The use of this information in the College's quality assurance systems is, however, inconsistent: whereas the review team saw that some higher education self-evaluations reflected on the data in detail, others did not comment on it at all. Furthermore, while the terms of reference for the higher education Board of Studies include monitoring of data related to higher education provision, the Board's minutes suggest this does not happen.

2.13 The College also systematically collects and analyses information on complaints and appeals, disability, equality and the use by students of the College's central support services. Here the team was assured that the relevant services use this information consistently.

## **Admission to the College**

2.14 The College admits students to its Higher National provision under its own admissions policy, while Foundation Degree students are admitted in collaboration with the University of the West of England. The College's own policy is clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied, and there is evidence that it fulfils its responsibilities to the University for the admission of Foundation Degree students effectively.

2.15 The College's website contains clear information on the process of application and the admissions policy is available to download. There is also a dedicated Higher Education Admissions Officer who can provide applicants with further information.

2.16 Heads of department make admissions decisions, sometimes having interviewed applicants. The College provides feedback to unsuccessful applicants, who can ask for a review of the decision if they can present new evidence. There is no complaints process specific to admissions but the generic procedure is adequate.

2.17 The first impressions survey asks new students for feedback on their admissions experiences. The results of the survey are mixed: most respondents are generally positive about the experience but in two courses a significant number felt that they had not been given accurate information.

## **Complaints and appeals**

2.18 The College has effective generic complaints and appeals procedures for learners at all levels. Both procedures make clear that students can escalate their concerns to awarding bodies once they have exhausted the College's own processes.

2.19 The procedures are published on the College's website. They are also referenced in the College handbook and in some course handbooks, though others do not mention them. Students whom the review team met confirmed they were likely to seek advice and guidance from their personal tutors about appeals and complaints before engaging with the formal procedures.

## **Career advice and guidance**

2.20 The College runs a comprehensive and effective Careers Education and Guidance service, offering students a range of support online, in a dedicated Careers Library and through one-to-one appointments. The service is evaluated annually, making use of student

feedback and impact analysis to set improvement targets. Foundation Degree students can also access the University of the West of England's equivalent service.

2.21 The students whom the team met had little demand of the central careers service; they tended to seek advice and guidance from their personal tutors and other teaching staff. Given that most teaching staff have experience of related occupations, they are well placed to give this advice. Learner Services supports this practice by offering teaching staff training in giving careers guidance.

### **Supporting disabled students**

2.22 The College's Equality and Diversity Policy makes a commitment to monitoring the participation, performance and progress of learners with disabilities, and to identify and tackle barriers to disabled students' success. The review team saw evidence of this policy being discharged effectively under the auspices of the Equality and Diversity Committee, although the monitoring data does not deal with higher education students discretely.

2.23 Students with disabilities either identify themselves during the application process or are identified by their personal tutors. Some course handbooks also describe what support is available for disabled students (including from the University where applicable).

2.24 Depending on the nature of the disability, students may be referred to Learner Services for further assessment, support and/or advice on making reasonable adjustments. The review team saw a number of examples of the College making adjustments to reflect the needs of disabled students in several different subject areas.

### **Supporting international students**

2.25 The College tends to recruit very few students from outside the UK (at the time of review they accounted for less than one per cent of the total higher education enrolment). In consequence, the College does not have separate or additional systems for supporting international students, with the exception of part of the admissions policy and some pre-arrival information for international students on the College's website.

### **Supporting postgraduate research students**

2.26 The College has no provision at this level.

### **Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements**

2.27 The College is not responsible for any collaborative arrangements as they are defined by the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). Although the Foundation Degree in Integrated Wildlife Conservation is supported by the Bristol Zoo, the responsibility for the management of this arrangement resides with the awarding body, the University of the West of England.

### **Flexible, distributed and e-learning**

2.28 The Foundation Degree in Early Years is delivered in part using a weekly virtual tutorial session, the arrangements for which meet the Expectations of *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching* of the Quality Code. Student feedback on this element of the course is overwhelmingly positive and it is also praised by the external examiner.

2.29 Other courses also make use of the College's virtual learning environment (for example to disseminate lecture notes) although this is largely at the discretion of the teaching staff. Foundation Degree students may access the University of the West of England's virtual learning environment.

### **Work-based and placement learning**

2.30 All of the College's higher education courses contain either discrete elements of work experience or professional practice. Where work experience is an integral part of the course (predominantly for Foundation Degrees), students are expected to organise and undertake 100-150 hours of experience for a 20-credit module which is assessed by a presentation, essay or reflective log. There is little contact between work experience providers and the College and providers are not involved in assessment.

2.31 The students whom the team met were generally positive about the work-related and professional practice elements of their courses and said that tutors supported them well in achieving the relevant learning outcomes.

### **Student charter**

2.32 The College produces a student charter and a learner handbook which describe what is expected of students and what students may expect of the College. In combination these documents meet the Expectation of Part C: Information about higher education provision of the Quality Code.

2.33 Foundation Degree students are also given the University of the West of England's student charter, which the College regards as complementing its own document.

2.34 Staff and students told the review team that the views of students had informed the development and revision of the College's student charter and learner handbook, but there was no evidence of this having happened.

## **3 Public information**

### **Outcome**

The quality of the information produced by the College about its learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

3.1 The College's 2012-13 part-time prospectus contains a limited amount of information about the Higher National courses on offer, but does not mention the Foundation Degrees. Minutes of the higher education Board of Studies indicate that the production of the 2013-14 prospectus for higher education had been abandoned due to financial restrictions and lack of time.

3.2 The information about higher education on the College's website is more expansive, but for some courses also ambiguous. For example, the College is advertising a number of courses as being either Higher National Diplomas or Foundation Degrees, presumably pending approval of the latter by the awarding body. Moreover, some courses do not display the information detailed in the Key Information Sets, and those that do only display this information on the higher education summary page and not on the individual course pages. With regard to the Wider Information Set, the reviewers could not identify a higher education strategy.

3.3 Course-specific information is produced by course teams and approved by the relevant Head of Faculty. There is no central oversight of this process and, perhaps because of that, course-specific information, such as course handbooks, is inconsistent in its structure, format and content from one faculty to another. The lack of oversight also limits any opportunity for the College to identify and disseminate good practice in the production of this information.

3.4 Information for staff with responsibilities for academic standards and quality (particularly for those involved with the Higher National provision) is partial and fragmentary. There is, for example, no written guidance on the number of times a Higher National student is entitled to submit an assignment, and no formal policy on annual monitoring.

3.5 Although the College's self-evaluation document claimed that the College makes external examiners' reports available to student representatives, the review team found no evidence of this happening. Indeed, student representatives and teaching staff whom the team met were not aware of this expectation. The only opportunity the team could identify for student representatives to see external examiners' reports was through their participation in course team meetings when these reports were discussed, but the minutes of these meetings indicated that, even when student representatives attended, the reports were only considered indirectly as part of other processes.

3.6 In conclusion, the review team identified several gaps and inconsistencies in the information the College produces for prospective students, current students and staff with responsibility for standards and quality. While these gaps and inconsistencies do not present serious risks to standards and quality (because, for example, teaching staff are generally aware from a number of different sources, and from experience, of their responsibilities for quality assurance), nonetheless they could, without action, lead to serious risks over time. The team also regarded the problems it identified as symptomatic of insufficient emphasis or priority given to the management of this area, and was not assured from the discussions it had with staff that the College was fully aware of the significance of the issues. The review team, therefore, judged that the quality of information produced by the College requires improvement to meet UK expectations, and **recommends** that, in order for the College to make this improvement, it should:

- define, publish and implement a definitive procedure for the assessment of all its Pearson provision
- finalise, approve and publish definitive and comprehensive quality assurance procedures for its higher education provision, to include procedures for the annual monitoring of programmes
- implement a policy of routinely sharing external examiner reports with student representatives
- develop and implement a process for ensuring that all information about higher education on its website is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

## 4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at South Gloucestershire and Stroud College **requires improvement to meet UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 The enhancement of the quality of the learner experience is a key part of the College's strategic plan. At higher education level, however, the opportunities to realise this strategy are fundamentally constrained by the fact that those processes which staff may use to identify and promote good practice, such as the annual monitoring process, are carried out inconsistently, and the results not disseminated to other faculties. Thus, while teaching staff were able to provide the review team with several examples of good practice being recorded and shared within faculties, there was no evidence of a strategic College-level approach.

4.2 The review team was given details of a new process for the periodic review of higher education courses, which promised to provide a useful vehicle for promoting enhancement. However, this process had not yet been implemented and there seemed to be little awareness of it among teaching staff.

4.3 The review team also observed that the lack of a programme of staff development specific to higher education further limited opportunities for the dissemination of good practice across the College.

4.4 The review team concluded that, while the College promotes an ethos of enhancement, which appears to facilitate the identification and dissemination of good practice within faculties, the lack of a College-level strategy or framework represents a moderate risk to the quality of students' learning opportunities to which the College is giving insufficient priority. The vehicles for addressing this risk, including the College's annual monitoring process and higher education Board of Studies, are present but not consistently used or applied. The review team concluded, therefore, that the enhancement of learning opportunities at the College requires improvement to meet UK expectations, and **recommends** that in order to make this improvement the College should develop a deliberate, College-level approach to improving the quality of students' learning opportunities.

## 5 Theme: The First Year Student Experience

Each academic year, a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for special attention by QAA's Review of College Higher Education teams. In 2012-13, the themes are the **First Year Student Experience** or **Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement**.

The review team investigated the First Year Student Experience at South Gloucestershire and Stroud College. It found that the College's arrangements for admissions, enrolment, induction and transition to higher education were broadly satisfactory. The role of personal tutors in facilitating students' transition to higher education was particularly significant, which contributed to the team identifying personal tutoring as a feature of good practice.

## **Supporting students' transition**

5.1 The College provides an induction programme for all higher education students, which includes talks by representatives of Learner Services and the Learning Resource Centre. Foundation Degree students are also inducted by the University of the West of England.

5.2 To emphasise the distinctiveness of higher education, and in response to student feedback, the College has recently created a higher education common room on the West of England Institute of Specialist Education campus, which non-higher education students are prohibited from using. The common room is of particular benefit to the Higher National students, who do not enjoy access to the University of the West of England's facilities.

## **Information for first year students**

5.3 All new students receive a generic Learner Handbook, the College's student charter (and the University's charter where applicable) and a course handbook specific to their programme of study.

5.4 The College conducts a first impressions survey in part to measure new students' perceptions of the information the College provides. As paragraph 2.17 describes, the survey results show that most students are satisfied with this information, although students on two courses appear to have concerns.

## **Assessment and feedback**

5.5 The information the College produces for all higher education students about assessment is detailed and clear (albeit inconsistent in some areas among different faculties).

5.6 Academic support for first year students, including around assessment, is provided primarily by their personal tutors through weekly one-to-one meetings. New students whom the review team met commended the support provided by personal tutors in helping them make the transition to higher education. This contributed to the team's identification of the personal tutor system as a feature of good practice (see paragraph 2.6).

## **Monitoring retention and progression**

5.7 The retention and progression of new students is monitored by departments monthly and reported at the end of the year in the annual monitoring process. The data is analysed to pick up any trends among particular types of students, and Learner Services also records the effectiveness of any interventions it has made.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions; for example, pages 17-20 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of threshold academic standards, learning opportunities and enhancement.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx).

If you require formal definitions of other terms, please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **glossary** on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx).

**academic standards:** The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

**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.

**enhancement:** Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

**feature of good practice:** A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution or college manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

**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*.

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

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

**operational definition:** A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

**programme (of study):** An approved course of study which 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.

**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.

**threshold academic standard:** The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications **frameworks**. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standards**.

**widening participation:** Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

**RG 1166 07/13**

**The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Tel        01452 557000  
Fax       01452 557070  
Email     [enquiries@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@qaa.ac.uk)  
Web      [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2013

ISBN 978 1 84979 869 3

All QAA's publications are available on our website [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk).

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786