Higher Education Review of South Tyneside College

February 2014

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 Tyneside College. The review took place from 25 to 27 February 2014 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Elaine Crosthwaite
- Emeritus Professor Jethro Newton
- Professor John Feather
- Miss Gemma Stiling (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by South Tyneside College 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 threshold academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 7.

In reviewing South Tyneside 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 2013-14 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,[2] and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

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

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[1] The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode.
[2] Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/higher-education-review-themes.aspx.
[3] QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus.
[4] Higher Education Review web pages: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/higher-education-review.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about South Tyneside College

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

- The maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding organisations and awarding organisation **meets UK expectations**.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets UK expectations**.
- The quality of the information produced about its provision **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

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

- The involvement of employers in the curriculum to promote student employability (Expectation B3).
- The impact of the teaching and learning coaches in supporting staff to improve the quality of higher education academic practice (Enhancement).

Recommendations

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

By the end of July 2014:

- strengthen the management and academic staff membership on the Quality and Curriculum Committee (Expectation A4)
- strengthen the use of external subject expertise in the internal programme approval and review processes (Expectation A5)
- develop a policy that ensures that second marking is transparent and fair and that the reasons for changes in marks are formally recorded (Expectations A6, B6 and B9)
- ensure consistency of practice in the timeliness and quality of written feedback to students on their assessed work (Expectation B6)
- make external examiner reports available to students (Expectation B7)
- provide information for external examiners and external verifiers about the College's approach to assessment and the process for raising concerns (Expectation B7)
- ensure that all programme self-assessment reports are comprehensive in scope and depth (Expectation B8)
- clearly document and communicate the entitlements of students with regard to the appeals process (Expectation B9).

By December 2014:

- put in place a formal mechanism for reviewing the effectiveness of the internal programme design and approval processes (Expectation B1)
- increase opportunities for student engagement at all levels of the College's quality assurance processes (Expectation B5)

- develop and embed an integrated approach to the enhancement of teaching and learning which is owned and used by the whole College (Enhancement).

Theme: Student Employability

The College's commitment to student employability is evidenced in strategic aims which place clear emphasis on employability and on employer and professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) partnerships. This strategic dimension is underpinned by the College's long-established track record of success in provision for the marine industry. The review team noted the top-level determination to continue to pursue employability initiatives. The team found clearly documented evidence of active and regular employer and PSRB liaison and involvement, and evidence demonstrates active involvement of employers in programme development and review. All higher education programmes have an embedded vocational theme and an applied focus. In the view of the team this enhances the employability of the College's graduates.

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

About South Tyneside College

South Tyneside College (the College) was formed in 1984 by the merger of Hebburn Technical College and the Marine and Technical College, and is located on three sites. The main campus is in South Shields and there is a marine centre on the riverside at South Shields and a Motor Vehicle Centre located in Jarrow.

The College's vision is 'to be an outstanding college providing world class education and training', and its mission is 'Preparing people for the future'.

The vision and mission reflect the role of the College in catering for the needs of local people and students from further afield. It has traditionally focused on technology-based subjects by building on local industrial needs and has gained significant expertise, particularly but not exclusively, around the area of marine engineering. It is one of the largest merchant navy training colleges in the United Kingdom. The College has a number of important relationships with PSRBs, for example the Merchant Navy Training Board and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency.

The College delivers higher education qualifications on behalf of the University of Sunderland, Northumbria University, Newcastle and Pearson. Of the 12,000 students who study at the College, 1,000 are enrolled on a range of higher education courses. The programmes in scope for the Higher Education Review are:

Pearson
HNC Engineering in Electrical and Electronics
HNC Mechanical Engineering
HND Business & Management
HNC Fine Art
HNC Performing and Studio Skills

Validation by Northumbria University, Newcastle
BEng Marine Engineering
BEng Marine Engineering (Hons)
FD in Marine Electrical and Electronic Engineering
FD in Marine Engineering
FD in Criminal Justice

Validation by the University of Sunderland
FdSc Marine Operations

Franchised by the University of Sunderland
FdA Applied Art
FdA Applied Music
Professional Certificate and Professional Graduate Certificate Post-Compulsory Education and Training
FdSc in Computing
FdA in Counselling
FdA in Education & Care
FdA in Health & Care

The College underwent Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in 2009. This had a positive outcome, with nine features of good practice and five recommendations. At the time, the College produced an action plan in response to the review outcomes, which has been successfully completed. More recently, the College has experienced a significantly reduced demand for higher education part-time provision, coupled with a decrease in

student numbers for employer-sponsored provision. The subsequent reduced student cohort numbers have challenged the viability of programmes and led to a reduction in programme offer. Nevertheless, the College has invested heavily in its accommodation and resources and has made significant structural changes, which are intended to better reflect the vocational focus of the higher education provision.

Explanation of the findings about South Tyneside 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.

1 Judgement: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards

Expectation (A1): Each qualification (including those awarded through arrangements with other delivery organisations or support providers) is allocated to the appropriate level in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

Quality Code, *Chapter A1: The national level*

Findings

1.1 The College does not award higher education qualifications; all awards are made through partnership agreements with university partners or other awarding bodies. These awarding organisations are responsible for the alignment of their awards with the FHEQ. External examiner reports confirm that qualifications are allocated and delivered at the appropriate level of the FHEQ. Together, these processes assure the College that qualifications are allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ. The team formed the view that the College's arrangements meet the Expectation in *Chapter A1: The national level* of the Quality Code.

1.2 The team scrutinised partnership agreements, validation, approval and review documentation, programme specifications, and external examiner reports. This evidence showed that awarding organisations hold responsibility for the alignment of their awards to the FHEQ, and for the majority of programmes, the College uses programme specifications prepared by the awarding bodies. Where the College has developed its own programmes for validation, the relevant awarding body has confirmed the qualification levels and volume of study as part of the validation process. In addition, the reports of external examiners appointed by the awarding organisations indicate that programmes are delivered at the appropriate level of the FHEQ. College staff confirmed that when they propose a new programme for validation, the relevant university partner checks that the level is appropriate. The team is satisfied that effective arrangements are in place to ensure that qualifications are allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ.

1.3 Overall, the team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter A1: The national level* of the Quality Code is met with each qualification allocated to the appropriate level in the FHEQ. This is achieved using the awarding bodies' programme documentation, and for College-devised programmes, University validation processes ensure that appropriate consideration is given to the qualification descriptors of the FHEQ. The risk in this area is therefore low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2): All higher education programmes of study take account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements.

Quality Code, *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level*

Findings

1.4   Since the College is not an awarding body, its university partners and other awarding organisations hold responsibility for the consideration of subject and qualification benchmark statements in the design of their awards. In the design of new programmes, the College follows the awarding body processes, and in addition, for marine programmes, account is taken of PSRB requirements. External examiner reports assure the College that programmes take account of appropriate benchmark statements. The team formed the view that the College's arrangements meet the Expectation in *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level* of the Quality Code.

1.5   The team considered the provisions of partnership agreements; the validation, approval and review documentation of organisations including the Merchant Navy Training Board; and programme specifications. This evidence showed that account is taken of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements in the preparation of programme specifications. In addition, the reports of external examiners appointed by awarding organisations confirmed that programmes address relevant subject benchmarks.

1.6   The team also looked at the minutes of meetings and documentation of the Merchant Navy Training Board. There was evidence that the College considers the requirements of the PSRB for the marine industry, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and their relationship to benchmark statements in the design of programmes for validation. For example, the foundation degree qualification benchmark and subject benchmark statements for engineering guided the College and its industry partners in the specification of programme and module learning outcomes for the FD in Marine Electrical and Electronic Engineering. The team confirmed with College staff that the process for the design of programmes entails application of the requirements of the relevant awarding body, and the responsibilities of the College are limited. Staff use subject and qualification benchmark statements in devising new programmes, for example the FD in Criminal Justice programme. The team is satisfied that effective arrangements are in place to ensure that all higher education programmes of study take account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements.

1.7   Overall, the team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level* of the Quality Code is met and all higher education programmes of study take account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements. This is achieved using the awarding bodies' programme documentation, and for college-devised programmes, University validation processes include confirmation that programmes are referenced to relevant benchmark statements. The risk in this area is therefore low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3): Higher education providers make available definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements for a programme of study.

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: The programme level*

Findings

1.8   The College provides definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements for its programmes of study through a range of publications, principally programme handbooks which contain programme specifications and module descriptors and guides. These publications are largely provided by, or subject to, approval by the College's awarding bodies. The College disseminates definitive information in both hard copy and electronically through its website and has arrangements to maintain the currency and accuracy of information. The team formed the view that the College's arrangements meet the Expectation in *Chapter A3: The programme level* of the Quality Code.

1.9   The team looked at the programme information prepared for different awarding bodies, talked to staff about the procedure for agreeing and maintaining definitive information, and asked students about the information given to them.

1.10   From scrutiny of programme information, the team found that the nature of the documentation varies depending on the partnership arrangement. Although there were minor inconsistencies due to awarding body requirements, there was evidence that appropriate definitive information is provided. For Pearson programmes, programme specifications and module descriptors are created by the awarding organisation, and the College uses these without adaptation. In the instance where the College created a unit to address local needs, the specification was approved by Pearson. For Northumbria University, Newcastle programmes, programme and module specifications are created by the College using University templates, subject to University approval. For University of Sunderland programmes operated under a franchise arrangement, programme specifications and module descriptions are provided by the University. For the FdSc Marine Operations, which is a validated programme, University templates are used to create the programme specification and module descriptors, and are subject to University approval. Students whom the team met confirmed that they are provided with definitive information in the form of a programme handbook and module information, and that they are aware of the intended learning outcomes for their programmes. In discussion with academic staff, the team established that the arrangements to maintain the currency and accuracy of information entail checking handbooks against awarding body guidelines and taking account of student feedback. The team is satisfied that effective arrangements are in place to make available definitive information on programmes of study at the College, which meets the needs of students.

1.11   The team concludes that the College meets the Expectation in *Chapter A3: The programme level* of the Quality Code by providing, maintaining and updating definitive information on its programmes. This is achieved through adherence to awarding body requirements for using their programme documentation, or preparation of College documentation for their approval. The risk in this area is therefore low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A4): Higher education providers have in place effective processes to approve and periodically review the validity and relevance of programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter A4: Approval and review*

Findings

1.12   The College Quality Handbook sets out the procedures for new programme approval and annual monitoring. The College processes for approval and review of programmes are largely determined by the requirements of the partnership arrangements with awarding bodies. External approval and review assure the College that programmes are valid and relevant in relation to other programmes offered by those bodies. The College has an internal procedure for the design and development of new programmes prior to their submission to awarding organisations for validation. It has an established process for the annual review and monitoring of programmes which leads to the preparation of improvement plans. The team formed the view that the College's arrangements meet the Expectation in *Chapter A4: Approval and review* of the Quality Code.

1.13   The team scrutinised programme validation and approval documentation, College self-assessment reports and improvement plans, and the minutes of the Higher Education Operations Group and Higher Education Strategy Group.

1.14   This evidence showed that the approval and review processes conducted by awarding bodies, and the College's engagement with the Maritime National Training Board in relation to maritime accreditation, maintain the external validity and relevance of programmes. The College self-assessment process entails an annual review of each programme; these are collated into a College-wide report and improvement plan which is subject to peer review by a colleague from a neighbouring college. Monitoring of programme improvement plans is undertaken within programme teams, while the HE Operations Group monitors the College Improvement Plan. The final stage of these College processes is presentation to the Quality and Curriculum Committee.

1.15   The programme self-assessment reports show that the annual reviews are largely effective for monitoring purposes, but there are some recurring issues including library provision. Staff confirmed that these issues are being addressed. The team discussed with College staff the arrangements for approval and review of programmes. For new programme approval, an independent internal team scrutinises proposals before their submission to an awarding body for validation. However, the team notes that there is no external participation at this stage, and that there is no procedure for proposals to be given consideration by senior management. The College evaluates its processes for approval and review through in-year and end-of-year reviews, in particular the annual programme self-assessment reports. Actions to address the improvement plans arising from self-assessment reports are checked regularly at quality review meetings attended by senior academic managers.

1.16   The Quality Handbook sets out the College committee structure and includes reference to an annual meeting of the HE Good Practice Group, established following IQER in 2009, to facilitate the dissemination of good practice. However, the team found no evidence that this group is operational, and notes that there has been a recent revision of College governance structures which entails oversight of quality and standards by the Quality and Curriculum Committee. This change appears to reduce the involvement of College academic staff in senior committees. Although the effectiveness of the new governance structure for the management of academic standards is not yet tested, there appears to be a reduction in academic oversight of quality and standards matters. The team

recommends that by July 2014, the College strengthen the management and academic staff membership on the Quality and Curriculum Committee.

1.17   Overall, the team concludes that the internal processes for the approval and review of programmes meet the Expectation in *Chapter A4: Approval and review* of the Quality Code. These processes, together with those of the awarding organisations, are effective in ensuring the validity and relevance of programmes. However, the recent revision of College governance structures poses a moderate risk to the effective oversight of quality and standards matters due to a reduction in academic oversight.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (A5): Higher education providers ensure independent and external participation in the management of threshold academic standards.

Quality Code, *Chapter A5: Externality*

Findings

1.18   The College obtains independent and external participation in the management of its academic standards through the approval and review of College processes by awarding organisations and particularly through external examiners appointed by the awarding bodies. The College considers external examiner reports in the preparation of annual programme self-assessment reports, but there is limited external participation in internal College processes. The team formed the view that the College's arrangements meet the Expectation in *Chapter A5: Externality* of the Quality Code.

1.19   The team tested the College's use of external expertise in quality assurance processes through scrutiny of external examiner reports and programme self-assessment reports. External examiner reports indicate that College programmes meet threshold academic standards, and that action is taken in response to any issues raised in previous reports.

1.20   The team looked for evidence that the findings of external examiner reports are used to inform programme self-assessment reports and improvement plans, and found that the self-assessment reports varied in their level of detail and reference to external examiner reports. For example, the programme self-assessment report for the FD Criminal Justice 2012-13 noted that the written report of the external examiner had not been received, and there was no reference to the external examiner's report in the programme self-assessment report for the FdSc Marine Operations. On the other hand, the HNC Mechanical Engineering 2011-12 self-assessment report and 2012-13 self-assessment report, and the improvement plan for Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (Post-Compulsory Education and Training) in 2010-11 and 2011-12, draw on the external examiner reports to inform their assessment and plans. The college-wide self-assessment report which collates programme-level reports is subject to a peer review by a colleague from a neighbouring college, but there is no use of external expertise in monitoring and review at programme level.

1.21   The team is satisfied that effective arrangements are in place to use external expertise in the management of academic standards. However, this relies on the processes of awarding bodies, and there is limited use of external expertise in the processes for which the College is responsible. The team **recommends** that, by July 2014, the College strengthen the use of external subject expertise in the internal programme approval and review processes.

1.22   The team concludes that the College meets the Expectation in *Chapter A5: Externality* of the Quality Code through a robust external examining process overseen by awarding bodies. Although there is limited use of external subject expertise within College processes, the level of risk to academic standards is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A6): Higher education providers ensure the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and that the award of qualifications and credit are based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Quality Code, *Chapter A6: Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes*

Findings

1.23   The College ensures that the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and that the award of qualifications is based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes through a range of College processes and arrangements, and the implementation and compliance with awarding body processes. Assessment strategies are developed within each award and are embedded within the assessment criteria set for each programme by the awarding bodies. The College has articulated an assessment policy and associated procedures to guide staff in internal moderation and assessment appeals. The College receives confirmation of the robust nature of assessment through external examiner reports. The team formed the view that the College's arrangements meet the Expectation in *Chapter A6: Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes* of the Quality Code.

1.24   The team considered a range of documentation that demonstrated the processes and procedures for the assessment of students. The College Quality Handbook, assessment policy, and procedures on internal moderation and assessment appeals set out the arrangements operated within the College. The reports of awarding body approval and review activities show that assessment strategies and criteria are established for programmes, and programme specifications set out the learning, teaching and assessment strategies to enable learners to achieve and demonstrate the intended learning outcomes. The reports of external examiners appointed by the awarding organisations provide evidence of the rigour of assessment, and confirm that assessment methods enable learning outcomes to be achieved.

1.25   The team confirmed in discussions with staff that the College provides guidance to staff on assessment policies and new staff are mentored on assessment processes in higher education. However, the team was unable to identify knowledge among teaching staff of the annual review of assessment that is conducted within the College to ensure compliance with awarding body requirements.

1.26   Students with whom the team met confirmed that they can relate assessment to the achievement of learning outcomes and are aware of the procedure for assessment appeals. The team notes that at the first stage of the appeals procedure, a student can request second marking of an assessment, provided it has not already been second marked, and the assessor can amend marks through discussion with the curriculum leader. However, the regulation of this practice is not clear, and could potentially lead to inconsistency. The team established that there is no policy on the point at which such a request should lead to comprehensive second marking for the cohort, and the manner of recording the reasons for a change in marks. This is referred to in the recommendation under Expectation B9.

1.27   Overall, the team concludes that College assessment processes are robust, valid and reliable, and awards are based on the achievement of learning outcomes and meet the Expectation in *Chapter A6: Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes* of the Quality Code. The effectiveness of these processes is confirmed by the review and monitoring systems of the awarding bodies. However, the gap in the regulatory arrangements for second marking poses a moderate risk to the reliability of marking practices.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.28   In reaching its judgement about threshold academic standards, the team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the Higher Education Review handbook. All expectations relating to the College's maintenance of threshold academic standards are met, and most of the risks are low.

1.29   There were no affirmations or features of good practice, and two recommendations. The team identified that the College is compliant with its awarding organisations' policies and procedures around the allocation of qualifications to the appropriate level of the FHEQ, and uses programme documentation prepared by its awarding bodies, who also oversee the external examining processes. The team also identified that in the areas of approval and review and externality, while standards of awards are effectively monitored by both awarding organisations and through internal College procedures, the role of both academic staff in senior committees and external subject experts in programme approval and review could be strengthened.

1.30   The team concludes that the maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding organisations and awarding organisation at the College **meets UK expectations**.

2 Judgement: Quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers have effective processes for the design and approval of programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*

Findings

2.1 As noted in paragraph 1.1, programmes are approved and reviewed through the quality assurance processes of either a university partner or other awarding organisations. These awarding body partners are responsible for the alignment of their awards with the FHEQ. These processes assure the College that the content of its programmes is consistent with other programmes offered by those bodies. Arrangements are in place for the periodic review and re-validation/re-approval of programmes by university partners and awarding bodies, on a quinquennial basis, with Pearson being a paper-based procedure. National maritime programmes are reviewed and revised in accordance with changes to the national framework of the Merchant Navy Training Board. The College takes responsibility for informing its awarding organisations of the need to review and revise national maritime awards.

2.2 Where a programme is not available regionally or nationally, the College initiates its own programme proposal. The College follows a two-stage process for such higher education programme approvals. This consists first of an internal approval stage, then external approval by a validating university or awarding organisation. Where relevant this includes collaboration with other national maritime providers and the Merchant Navy Training Board as an employer body and PSRB. One such example considered by the team is the FD in Marine Electrical and Electronic Engineering. The team noted that for marine engineering provision, the Merchant Navy Training Board has significant curriculum requirements and, together with employers, plays a key role in the planning, design and review of curriculum content. Pearson also influences design in provision that they validate. The team noted that employer needs and student employability are key drivers in decisions to initiate new course approvals.

2.3 Internal strategic consideration of new course proposals is undertaken by the Vice-Principal (Higher Education) and the relevant Head of School to ensure they fit with the College's higher education strategy, the School curriculum plan, and the College mission. Thereafter, proposals are considered for approval by the Higher Education Approvals Committee which meets as required for new curriculum areas and resourcing matters. In the view of the team, this process works effectively. However, information provided by the College indicates that the overall process is infrequent, being used in 2008 for the introduction of the FD in Electrical/Electronic Engineering, and in 2012-13 for the HNC in Music and the HNC in Fine Art. The team nevertheless formed the view that the College's processes for the design and approval of programmes meet the Expectation in *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval* of the Quality Code.

2.4 The team noted in their examination of documentation and through their meetings with staff that appropriate use is made of external reference points in the design and development of programmes, and that the relevant awarding body links qualifications to the FHEQ. In meetings with academic managers and programme leaders, the team sought clarification of the documentation supplied by the awarding organisations for adaptation by the College and that developed by the College for approval by the awarding body, including arrangements for the preparation of programme handbooks, programme specifications and module descriptors. The team is satisfied that programme specifications and module descriptors developed by the College are fit-for-purpose in terms of design and are aligned

with the principles of the Quality Code. However, in testing the operation of the College's own internal approval process, the team notes that while there is involvement of an internal peer reviewer from an independent College School, there is no external specialist scrutiny or use of external subject expertise that is independent of the relevant awarding body at the internal approval stage. Moreover, the team also learned through meeting with academic managers that the College does not directly involve students at the design and development stage. Although the team heard that the views of past cohorts may be taken into account when the College undertakes design or development of programmes under its own processes, there is no formal involvement of students in those processes. In the view of the team, this is a matter upon which the College may wish to reflect.

2.5 Furthermore, it was unclear to the team how the College knows that its processes are working effectively. Academic staff whom the team met referred the team to the reflective nature of the annual review process, programme self-assessment reports, and awarding body responsibilities for reviewing the effectiveness of their own processes. However, beyond this the team was unable to establish how the relevant College processes for design and approval are reviewed and evaluated. The team **recommends** that, by December 2014, the College should take steps to put in place a formal mechanism for reviewing the effectiveness of internal programme design and approval processes.

2.6 Overall the team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval* of the Quality Code on the design and approval of programmes is met, as the College's degree-awarding body and awarding organisations have in place effective procedures to secure the quality of student learning opportunities, and the College operates its own processes for the design and approval of programmes that are also effective. However, the level of risk was seen to be moderate as it is not clear how the College knows its processes are working effectively.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B2): Policies and procedures used to admit students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied.

Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Admissions*

Findings

2.7 The College has clear policies for admissions. The procedures for applications and admissions are detailed in the prospectus which is available in hard copy and on the College website. The admissions policy is also to be found there. Information for prospective students is provided on the website and through the key information set and the prospectus. Information on entry qualifications is also to be found in the prospectus. The admissions process is described in a detailed flow chart.

2.8 For validated and national programmes, admissions are the responsibility of the College, although the awarding body is consulted in special cases such as non-standard entry qualifications. A detailed checklist identifies the respective roles of the College and the awarding body. In practice, responsibility is delegated to the programme leaders. Admissions targets are governed by memoranda of understanding agreed between the College and awarding bodies. Applications through UCAS (the recommended route) are shared between the College and the awarding university, but admissions decisions are taken by the College. Enrolment information for franchised programmes is provided to the relevant University three times a year. Applications are recorded in a database maintained by Student Services, and made available to all appropriate staff. The team formed the view that the procedures the College uses to admit students meet the Expectation in *Chapter B2: Admissions* of the Quality Code.

2.9 The team discussed admissions and enrolment with staff and students. The students whom the team met were aware of the identity of the awarding body for their programmes. The student experience of the admissions and enrolment process is reviewed in the start-of-programme survey. Students referred to this in their meeting with the team. The Student Submission survey data highlighted the disorganisation experienced by some students in enrolment and induction. The same point was raised by the students whom the team met. When induction and admissions issues were raised in a Student Forum, there was a rapid and meaningful response by the College.

2.10 Both the HE Operations Group and the HE Strategy Group consider matters arising from admissions and enrolment including issues arising through awarding bodies.

2.11 The team concludes that procedures used to admit students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied and enable the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B2: Admissions* of the Quality Code, and that the level of risk is low. The team found that the College takes account of differences between programmes and awarding bodies. The College is responsive to student opinion, and while some operational problems occasionally arise, there are processes in place for these to be identified, discussed and resolved.

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

2.12   The College has a Learning and Teaching Policy (LTP) which is written in terms of 'entitlements' and 'responsibilities' of the College and its staff and students. The LTP is learner-centred and emphasises inclusiveness. The responsibilities of the Principal, other senior officers, heads of school, curriculum leaders and individual lecturers are clearly described and differentiated. The Policy is approved by the Senior Executive Group and is the responsibility of the Principal.

2.13   The College has a number of schemes to facilitate the development of its staff so that they can deliver against the objectives of the policy. These include a formal scheme for the Observation of Learning and Teaching (OLT) and a peer-observation process, the results of which are considered by the College Quality Manager. A College-wide profile of the outcomes is prepared and considered by the Senior Executive Group. The staff scholarship scheme provides opportunities for individual members of staff to undertake developmental activities while being freed of their teaching responsibilities for a period of time. This typically takes the form of study for a higher degree, up to and including a PhD. The implementation of the policy is monitored at College level through the higher education self-assessment report. The team formed the view that the College's procedures meet the Expectation in *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching* in the Quality Code.

2.14   Through its meetings with both staff and students and its analysis of documents provided by the College, the team found that the requirements of the LTP are generally understood and implemented across the College. The learner-centric orientation of the LTP was confirmed by the Principal. Students confirmed that they found the support offered through their programme leaders and other staff satisfactory, and that they were given full and timely information about the expectation they had to meet to achieve their learning outcomes and qualifications.

2.15   The Student Submission indicates that there is an environment in which staff are approachable and take account of learning styles; it was clear from the team's meeting with students that this was the case.

2.16   The OLT outcomes feed into both generic and individual staff development. At the individual level this is followed up through performance review. Staff met by the team confirmed that this was a useful process which materially helped them develop their skills and make necessary changes. The higher education self-assessment report identifies developmental activities, including events held jointly with awarding bodies. Staff whom the team met confirmed that these joint activities were particularly valuable.

2.17   The team was also made aware of the substantial involvement of employers in the College's learning and teaching processes and its concern for student employability. There is a strategic emphasis on employability and partnerships with employers and PSRBs which is reflected in programme specifications. The team found substantial evidence for regular and meaningful interactions with both employers and PSRBs. In at least some

instances, employer views are claimed to have led to innovative provision, including new foundation degrees.

2.18   The employability agenda and strategy are strongly supported by careers advisers and other student services and in relationships with partner universities and awarding bodies. Careers advisers provide sessions to respond to academics' requests for helping students towards employment as well as one-to-one sessions for students. The team considers that the College's approach to the involvement of employers in the curriculum to promote student employability is **good practice**.

2.19   Reports from external examiners seen by the team confirm that there is a varied and learner-oriented approach to learning and teaching. Some items on higher education Learner Forum notes and some survey results indicate a more mixed picture, as do some National Student Survey results, but this is confined to relatively small areas of the overall provision. Student comments on programmes are generally favourable, and include recognition of recent improvements in facilities and resources.

2.20   Overall, the team can confirm that the College has systems in place to enable it to meet the requirements of the Expectation in *Chapter B3: Learning and teaching* of the Quality Code, and the risk is low. The College is a supportive learning environment, and its approach to involving employers in teaching and learning processes which reflects a strong employability agenda has a positive impact on student learning opportunities. Owing to the nature of the College's approach, the team confirms that the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement*

Findings

2.21 The College provides services and resources to support students' learning, personal development and employability.

2.22 The College claims that both services and resources are vocationally focused, and that resources are subject to review through the annual programme review process and self-assessment reports. The results of this analysis are fed into the Capital Investment Plan. Other facilities such as teaching space are reviewed as part of the Estates Improvement Plan and the process is informed by student feedback. These processes and associated data (including student feedback) are used to monitor development and achievement, including progression to partner universities. Arrangements are in place for review of student progress, personal tutorials and attendance monitoring. The students were aware of this framework. The team formed the view that the College's procedures to monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential meet the Expectation in *Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement* of the Quality Code.

2.23 Through its meetings with students and staff, and its analysis of the documentation provided by the College, the team was able to test the claims made in the self-evaluation document. The team was informed of substantial recent improvements in learning resources, including library provision and the provision of specialist learning resources. Staff confirmed that student feedback was used in resource planning; students confirmed that significant improvements had been made and that resources were, for the most part, adequate.

2.24 Support is provided for career development and employability, and the team heard of instances where the College had provided generous support for staff to achieve higher degrees, which had improved their expertise and subject knowledge in specialist areas. This was appreciated by both staff and students. Partner universities, awarding organisations and employers are involved in the process of career development, and especially in the development of employability skills. Students confirmed that they were prepared for academic progression, and that transition from one phase or qualification to another was 'easy'.

2.25 The team confirms that the College has in place systems that monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. Because of this, the team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B4: Enabling student development and achievement* of the Quality Code is met and the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B5: Student engagement*

Findings

2.26   The College operates Student Forums (sometimes called Learning Forums) at which students are encouraged to give feedback on a wide range of topics, and the College offers a response where appropriate.

2.27   The responsibility for ensuring student representation and selecting representatives is devolved to programme leaders. The College considers that while student engagement is 'improving', it is not yet 'fully effective'. In the Student Submission, the students stated that the class representatives are not always known to their fellow students. The team was told that representatives were typically identified by staff rather than through any process involving all students in the cohort. There is no evidence of the training of student representatives in their role, although the Student Governor receives training from the Clerk of Governors. Although opportunities are provided for student feedback, and have been noted by external examiners, the team considers that this is not yet systematised across the higher education provision in the College.

2.28   The HE Operational Plan highlights the need to further improve the student voice. The team, however, was unable to find any evidence that the issue is being systematically considered at either strategic or operational levels. Students are not involved in programme design, because it is claimed that programmes are 'externally set'. Similarly, student engagement with the programme review process is limited, and seems to be a very recent innovation. Despite these misgivings, the team formed the view that the College's arrangements to engage students in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience, and the College procedures, meet the Expectation in *Chapter B5: Student engagement* of the Quality Code.

2.29   The team examined the limited documentary evidence and met with staff, students and support staff. In considering documentation and the statements made in meetings, the team concludes that although there seem to be generally good and productive relationships between staff and students, this relationship is passive. The representative structures are immature and there are limited mechanisms for student input into development. The engagement process is not student-led.

2.30   The team **recommends** that, by December 2014, the College should increase opportunities for student engagement at all levels of the College quality assurance processes to maximise student engagement in all aspects of the quality system.

2.31   The team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B5: Student engagement* of the Quality Code is met. They were satisfied that the College takes deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience, albeit they identified that these steps are currently immature, and that there are significant opportunities for improvement to enable student representation to have a more meaningful impact. The team concludes that the risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit.

Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning*

Findings

2.32   The College has its own policies for assessment and the recognition of prior learning and each has been subject to an equality impact assessment. The assessment policy has been devised to guide staff on the assessment requirements of awarding bodies. However, the team noted that assessment regulations for higher education awards are defined by the awarding organisations that exercise oversight of assessment matters. The College obtains assurance through the processes operated by awarding organisations that they have appropriate assessment procedures. Matters relating to assessment regulations, appeals, malpractice, plagiarism, and late submission are highlighted in student programme handbooks, as are PSRB requirements. The College's assessment policy includes information on extenuating and mitigating circumstances. The team formed the view that staff and students were aware of regulatory requirements and processes and knew where to find information.

2.33   The College undertakes a review of assessment annually to check compliance with its own policies and with the requirements of each degree-awarding body. Through this the College is able to identify good practice and areas for improvement. However, though the report of this review is discussed by the Higher Education Operations Group, and while issues arising are incorporated into the annual higher education self-assessment report, students were unaware of the review. Moreover, while the review report included areas for improvement, it is not clear to the team how effectively improvement actions are implemented and monitored, who is responsible for this, or how good practice is disseminated and shared.

2.34   The College's involvement in arrangements for programme examination boards is focused at department level for Pearson provision, while for University-validated programmes, the College's Examinations Unit undertakes the administrative responsibility for liaison with awarding bodies. External examiner reports comment positively on arrangements for examination boards and related administration, and on the mix and profile of assessment methods and practices. The team noted that College staff have some opportunities to undertake staff development in assessment-related matters, and that in-house mentoring of new staff on assessment matters such as assessment criteria, marking, and internal verification is a well established practice. The team learned that staff are also guided by comments from external verifiers and external examiners and through validation processes. Staff also benefit from occasional training on assessment from one of the College's degree-awarding bodies. However, in the view of the team, the frequency of staff development in this area was somewhat modest. The College's OLT scheme template includes items on assessment; however, it was not clear to the team how effectively assessment practice could be tested through a mechanism such as teaching observation. In the view of the team, the College's policies nevertheless met the requirements of the Expectation of *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning* of the Quality Code.

2.35   Through scrutiny of appropriate documentation, and in discussions with staff and students, the team was able to test the operation of College assessment processes and the use made of assessment-related practices. The College monitors student academic performance, progress and attendance and these arrangements appear to work well.

Various processes and mechanisms enable the College to ensure that assessment is valid and reliable, while equality and diversity are emphasised in the Student College Handbook and inclusive learning is highlighted in the Learning and Teaching Policy, along with diagnostic assessment. The team notes that assessment strategies are developed for each programme/award but that the requirements vary between awarding organisations and higher education institutions. The approval processes of the degree-awarding body or awarding organisation entail consideration of assessment strategies and the establishment of assessment criteria for a programme. The College's processes and external examiner reports point to the rigour of assessment processes and indicate that the assessment methods used enable learning outcomes to be met. Through meeting with students the team confirmed that students can relate their assessments to intended learning outcomes.

2.36   The team paid close attention to the use of assessment marking criteria and verification and moderation processes, and wished to test the College's claim that it operated rigorous assessment moderation practices.

2.37   The internal verification procedures were governed by the College's Quality Handbook. From the evidence provided, the team formed the view that policy and practice, including use and pre-validation of marking schemes, are well established and, for the most part, generally sound. However, in second marking and where there might be discrepancies between two markers, the team notes that the College lacks a policy that determines when comprehensive second marking should be undertaken. Moreover, the team formed the view that the procedure governing the circumstances that could lead to a change in marks was neither transparent nor clearly documented (this is reflected in a recommendation in Expectation B9).

2.38   The team also considered assessment feedback. It was noted that since the last review a new feedback form has been developed and implemented, in part to ensure that assessment is consistently graded. The College's requirement is that all programmes should provide feedback within two weeks from hand-in to return of work and that students are entitled to feedback that is of sufficient quality to enable them to understand their grade and improve in future assessments. However, from documentation and from meeting students, the team found that students believed that improvement needs to be made on the quality of feedback on assignments and on the timeliness of feedback. The team notes that assessment feedback is also a matter of concern in the College's National Student Survey results. Meetings with staff confirmed a degree of inconsistency in the timing of feedback. In view of such concerns, the team **recommends** that the College should ensure consistency of practice in the timeliness and quality of written feedback to students on their assessed work.

2.39   The team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning* of the Quality Code is met. The College ensures that students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit; however, despite developments in the feedback process, there is some inconsistency in the timeliness and quality of written feedback to students on their assessed work. The team concludes that the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B7: External examining*

Findings

2.40   The College works with the arrangements of its different awarding bodies. Appointments are made by the awarding organisations themselves, but for the Northumbria University, Newcastle provision the College makes recommendations on appointments in areas where the University has no subject expertise. The team tested the College's use of its procedures by scrutinising a range of external examiner reports, the College's responses to those reports, and the way in which the reports' findings are considered through the College's quality processes. The team also discussed external examining with students, including the sharing of external examiner reports.

2.41   The team notes that for University of Sunderland and Northumbria University, Newcastle awards, the awarding organisations themselves are formally responsible for progressing actions in response to issues raised in reports, though under validation arrangements with the former the College provides a draft response to the University. For Pearson, the College responds directly to external verifiers during their visits. External examiner reports indicate that assessments are well planned and confirm responsiveness to issues raised in previous reports. The procedure for circulating external examiner reports is overseen by the College's Quality Manager who lodges a copy of each report in the relevant course file. The report is forwarded to the Programme Leader and Head of School who are required to discuss issues with the degree-awarding body and to resolve them in a timely manner. Procedures require that the Programme Leader develop an action plan in the annual programme self-assessment report in response to issues raised by external examiners. These plans are monitored by the Quality Unit and issues may be discussed at the HE Operations Group. However, the team notes that the programme self-assessment reports varied in the level of detail on and reference to external examiner reports, with some making no reference. The team formed the view that the College works with the arrangements of its different awarding organisations and that its procedures meet the Expectation in *Chapter B7: External examining* of the Quality Code.

2.42   In testing the College's procedures, the team met with managers, programme leaders and students and examined appropriate documentation. The team notes that there is no College overview report that draws together issues raised by all external examiners in any given assessment and external examining cycle or academic year. While some aspects of the issues raised by external examiners are raised in the annual higher education self-assessment report, none are raised in the annual Higher Education Assessment Review. In the view of the team, fuller use could be made of each of these annual overviews for addressing matters raised by external examiners. The students whom the team met were generally aware of the existence of their external examiner, though reports were not routinely made available to students. The team **recommends** that, by the end of July 2014, the College make external examiner reports available to students. Moreover, while issues raised in reports are normally discussed with students, practice varied and occasionally this was not the case. For Pearson provision external verifiers routinely met with students, but for other awarding organisations practice was variable.

2.43   Notwithstanding that the responsibility for making arrangements for the induction and training of external examiners resides with the awarding body, it is not apparent to the team that the College has any policy or consistently applied procedure for providing college-focused information to external examiners on taking up their appointment. Even though the documentation provided to the team indicates that 'information provided to external

examiners is in accordance with the requirements of the HE Quality Handbook', the team was informed that while external examiners might themselves request information about college-related matters, this was not routinely provided. Moreover, when the team sought clarification on the procedure whereby an external examiner might raise concerns of a serious nature regarding an aspect of College higher education provision, with the exception of the franchised and validated provision of one degree-awarding body, it was unclear where the point of contact was or what the procedure would be. In view of the foregoing, the team **recommends** that, by July 2014, the College provide information for external examiners and external verifiers about its approach to assessment and the process for raising concerns.

2.44 The team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B7: External examining* is met and that the risk is moderate. While the College does not routinely provide college-focused information to external examiners on taking up their appointment, and external examiner reports are not routinely made available to students, the team is satisfied that the College makes scrupulous use of external examiners.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers have effective procedures in place to routinely monitor and periodically review programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review*

Findings

2.45   The College has detailed requirements and arrangements for monitoring programmes. This includes programme self-assessment reports that are completed annually for all franchised and validated programmes. These reports then feed into the College higher education self-assessment report in which issues from across study programmes are collated and added into the College Improvement Plan. This oversight mechanism indicates that programme self-assessment reports are not viewed in isolation. For Pearson provision, the College uses its own template, while for University-validated programmes the degree-awarding body processes and reporting format are followed. The College's programme self-assessment report template has been recently modified to reflect the emphasis on improving the student experience in the Quality Code. The team notes that College staff effectively assimilate the demands of the different quality monitoring systems of the partner awarding organisations.

2.46   Processes used for the periodic review and re-validation of programmes are undertaken on a quinquennial basis and are those of the College's awarding bodies. For University awards, events are organised by, and are the responsibility of, the degree-awarding body, while for Pearson programmes review arrangements are paper-based. For maritime provision, the relevant PSRB and employer body (the Merchant Navy Training Board and Maritime and Coastguard Agency) also invoke their own review and audit processes and framework requirements. The College takes responsibility for identifying to its awarding organisations the need to review and revise national maritime awards. Taken together, these processes assure the College that the content of its programmes is consistent with other programmes offered by those bodies. The team formed the view that the College has detailed requirements and arrangements for monitoring programmes and that its procedures meet the Expectation of *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code.

2.47   The team tested the operation of College annual monitoring processes by examining documentation and meeting with managers and support staff. Where a programme self-assessment report highlights that minor changes are required, the College obtains approval from relevant external bodies, including PSRBs. Each programme self-assessment report includes an improvement plan, and these plans are collated to form the overall Higher Education Improvement Plan for the College. Programme self-assessment reports are required to consider matters such as external examiner and student feedback, learning and teaching issues, and also programme-specific data. From their scrutiny of programme self-assessment reports, the team formed the view that there is a tendency for some reports to contain brief and cryptic comments that may not be fully comprehensible to all stakeholders. In some reports no mention was made of external examiner feedback. The team notes that for reports to be fully fit-for-purpose they should be discursive and evaluative. Accordingly, the team **recommends** that, by July 2014, the College should ensure that all programme self-assessment reports are comprehensive in scope and depth. The team learned that students are not formally and directly involved in the monitoring and review processes. Although use is made of student feedback for monitoring and review purposes, and while all students have access to the higher education Learners Forum and can raise issues there, the team concludes that there is no provision for the direct involvement of students in the self-assessment report process.

2.48   The team took a close interest in the College's higher education self-assessment report and the use made of this report. The team notes that the higher education self-assessment report is considered by the HE Operations Group as well as senior executives, with the former body monitoring the self-assessment report and the College Improvement Plan contained within it. An arrangement is then made for the self-assessment report to be evaluated by an independent external reviewer and College Governor with the outcomes of that evaluation considered by the HE Strategy Group. The team was impressed by the initiative shown by the College in seeking independent views on this aspect of its monitoring and review arrangements. Moreover, evidence provided to the team regarding the Performance Monitoring meetings, held on a termly basis at School level, pointed to the usefulness of such meetings. These meetings, which include deliberation on academic matters, and scrutiny of data and key performance indicators on matters such as student success and retention, are a joint responsibility shared by the Head of School, the Management Information System (MIS) Manager and the Quality Manager. In the view of the team these meetings, and the data monitoring that takes place, add an important dimension to College quality processes.

2.49   The team tested the effectiveness of the College's monitoring and review processes being used for enhancement purposes. Reporting processes and discussion forums, both internal and external, pointed to the recurrence of a number of issues in areas such as assessment feedback, communication, and course organisation and management. The team explored the extent to which matters were being resolved, lessons learned, and good practice disseminated. The team formed the view that the overall picture was somewhat mixed. On the one hand, programme-level quality improvement plans are considered by the Quality Manager and Head of School. Moreover, the team was provided with examples of the Higher Education Improvement Plan prompting actions that led to improvement and good practice dissemination. However, on the other hand, monitoring of programme quality improvement plans is undertaken by programme teams, with curriculum leaders coordinating regular staff meetings to discuss operational issues regarding the student experience; the evidence provided of such meetings led the team to draw a similar conclusion to that for programme self-assessment reports. Accordingly, in the view of the team, minutes of the regular course team meetings, while adequate, do not provide a sufficiently comprehensive or informative record of discussions on matters that are central to effective quality monitoring.

2.50   In their deliberations, the team considered matters relating to programme withdrawal with the phasing-out of some programmes in recent years due to low student recruitment, albeit on the initiative of University partners. The team notes that commercial matters relating to programme creation or closure were included in the remit of the HE Strategy Group, while matters relating to the protection of student interest were dealt with by the HE Operations Group. The team is satisfied that any such withdrawal and closure has been managed out effectively by the College using accreditation of prior learning procedures and transfer, where necessary, to an alternative programme aligned academically to that being withdrawn.

2.51   The team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* of the Quality Code is met and that the risk is low. The College has effective procedures in place to routinely monitor and periodically review programmes; however, some self-assessment reports contain brief and cryptic comments and incomplete information, and this may hamper their usefulness.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have fair, effective and timely procedures for handling students' complaints and academic appeals.

Quality Code, *Chapter B9: Academic complaints and student appeals*

Findings

2.52   The College has its own complaints and internal appeals procedures. All students, regardless of awarding body, should follow the complaints procedure and the first stage of the College's appeals procedure. The procedure documents are made available to students via the website, and also within the Student Handbook. The advice provided to students regarding appeals and complaints varies by programme, as evidenced by the programme handbooks. Some documents refer to a School appeals procedure in addition to a College procedure, whereas others only indicate the awarding body procedures, or omit any reference to appeals. The College complaints procedure is specified in the handbook for FdSc Computing, but is omitted from the remaining handbooks. The College keeps a complaints log which is reviewed by the Quality, Curriculum and Community Group at the end of each year. The HE Operations Group reviews any appeals received.

2.53   While the procedures the College has put in place for complaints meet the Expectation in *Chapter B9: Academic complaints and student appeals* of the Quality Code, the procedures for appeals do not. This is because the procedures do not provide clear grounds for an appeal and appear to suggest that students can, through consultation with a staff member, have their mark amended.

2.54   The team tested the operation of the complaints and appeals procedures by discussing with students their awareness of the procedures, asking staff what they would advise students, and questioning how these processes are reviewed and monitored.

2.55   The students who met with the team, while not all aware of the specific procedures, were all confident that they would know who to talk to if they needed to raise a concern. The academic staff, when asked what advice they would give a student who was dissatisfied with their mark, broadly described the first stage of the appeal process and went on to note that a student's mark could be amended at any stage of the appeals process. The complaints procedure and their application were clearly articulated during the meeting with support staff. It was stated that any complaints would be reported to and reviewed by the Senior Executive Group. To clarify their understanding, the team referred to the College appeals policy and met with the Facilitator. Through this the team identified that an outcome at stage one of the appeals process could be to 'modify the decision', and learned that stage one offered students an opportunity to have their work remarked if this had not already taken place. This is not made explicit within the appeals documentation. The team **recommends** that, by July 2014, the College clearly document and communicate the entitlements of students with regard to the appeals process. Additionally, the team found that the College does not define when the difference between first and second markers is substantial enough to trigger second marking for the entire cohort. The team therefore **recommends** that by July 2014, and in connection with *Chapter A6: Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes* and *Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning* of the Quality Code, the College develop a policy that ensures second marking is transparent and fair and the reasons for changes in marks are formally recorded.

2.56   Overall, the team feels confident in the design, application and review of the complaints procedure, but has some reservations about the design and application of the appeals procedure. The team concludes that the Expectation in *Chapter B9: Academic complaints and student appeals* of the Quality Code is not met, and that a moderate risk is posed. This decision was taken because the team feels that the appeals procedure is not

fair, effective and timely, either in its design or operation. The procedure allows for individual students' marks to be changed, in consultation with their module leader. In addition, stage one of the process does not require any documentation, therefore the team concludes that the College has no way of recording the number of stage one appeals received or if any marks have been changed as a result.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding organisations 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

2.57   The College does not have degree awarding powers, and is consequently not responsible for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, but rather for their maintenance. This said, the College is responsible for managing its relationship with employers and PSRBs.

2.58   The College has three programmes with PSRB requirements: FD in Marine Engineering, FD in Electrical and Electronic Engineering and FD in Marine Operations. The self-evaluation document states that 'the curriculum' for these programmes was 'devised with input from employers via the Merchant Navy Training Board together with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in their role as PSRB'. The College also offers students the opportunity to go on a work placement and take part in work-based learning modules which are integral to the programme. On the FD in Computing, students are given the opportunity to take a year-long industrial placement between the first and second years of the programme. The team formed the view that the College procedures for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively and meet the Expectation in *Chapter B10* of the Quality Code.

2.59   This was tested at the review visit by the team in the meeting with senior managers. It was stated that in programme design at the College, PSRB requirements inform the design. This is then checked by, in these examples, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. Only when the programme has been through several iterations and received PSRB approval is the programme then submitted to the appropriate awarding body. The College is therefore able to prioritise the needs of the PSRBs.

2.60   Overall, the team concludes that the College meets the Expectation in *Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others* of the Quality Code, and that the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research degrees*

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

Quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.62   In reaching its judgement about the quality of learning opportunities, the team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the Higher Education Review handbook. All but one of the Expectations relating to the quality of learning opportunities are met, and the risk is low in most cases.

2.63   The team made no affirmations, but identified one area of good practice and eight recommendations.

2.64   The team found good practice in the area of learning and teaching, where employers are involved in the curriculum in promoting student employability.

2.65   However, the team also identified areas where the College should take action. These relate to the areas of programme design, development and approval; student engagement; assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning; external examining; and programme monitoring and review. While these areas contain recommendations, the Expectations are all met. The team notes that it was unclear how the College knows that its processes for programme design, development and approval are working effectively. In addition, while the College takes steps to engage students as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience, these steps are currently weak. The College has taken steps to improve written feedback to students; however, there is more work to be done to ensure greater consistency of practice. The team also identified a lack of consistency in the self-assessment report process, which hampered its effectiveness. Additionally, the team identified that external examiners would benefit from information about the College's approach to assessment when they assume their role to enhance their effectiveness, for instance in understanding how to raise serious concerns regarding an aspect of College higher education provision if necessary.

2.66   The one Expectation that is not met is in the area of academic appeals and student complaints. Here the team confirmed that the College has a complaints policy that is fair, effective and timely but that the procedures around both the appeals and the second marking policy need redeveloping to ensure that they meet the needs of students and the requirements of the Expectation. This was considered to pose a moderate risk.

2.67   Overall, the team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.

3 Judgement: Quality of the information produced about its provision

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 publishes information on its website, provides key information sets published on the Unistats website and provides current students with information in both a programme and generic student handbook. It uses data to inform its quality assurance mechanisms such as within programme-level self-assessment reports.

3.2 Information produced by the internal marketing team, such as in the prospectus and on the College website, is checked and verified by the Heads of School or Principal to ensure accuracy and content. The Student Handbook is also produced by the marketing team and approved by the College's Senior Management Team. The team notes that programme handbooks are not always consistent, with different information available in each. The team concludes that inconsistencies were mostly limited to programme handbooks, which are subject to different awarding body criteria. However, the team also found that some cross-college information varies, for example information about complaints and appeals. The team also notes that the College provides a College Student Handbook and all College policies are available on the College website. The team formed the view that the information the College is responsible for is fit-for-purpose, accessible and trustworthy and that the College procedures meet the Expectation in *Part C: Information about higher education provision* of the Quality Code.

3.3 At the review visit, the team tested the College's understanding of its information approval processes. Staff whom the team met confirmed the information provided in the self-evaluation document. The College was also asked what data was used to inform quality assurance processes such as the creation of programme self-assessment reports. The team heard that the College has an MIS system which allows staff to access 'curriculum data' such as progression information. The team also heard that while little data is generated for higher education programmes, what information is available is used to inform self-assessment reports. It was also stated that the College would be participating in the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey from the next academic year.

3.4 The team is satisfied that while the self-assessment reports appeared to be predominantly discursive documents, analysis of data formed part of the process. This is also demonstrated in the minutes for the HE Operations Group, where the reports are discussed. The team therefore concludes that the College meets the Expectation in *Part C: Information about higher education provision*, and there is a low risk posed. Staff or students raised no concerns about the information provided to them, and regarded it as fit-for-purpose and trustworthy. While the team identified some inconsistencies in information, these largely reflected the differing requirements of the awarding bodies.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Quality of the information produced about its provision: Summary of findings

3.5   There is an effective approach to the publication of information and a method of assuring its accuracy. Information is generally clear, accessible and trustworthy, although the team found some examples of inconsistency, which were largely reflective of the differing needs and formats of each awarding body. There were no recommendations, affirmations or features of good practice in this area. The team therefore concludes that the quality of the information produced by the College about its provision **meets UK expectations**.

4   Judgement: 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 engages in a number of activities which are designed to enhance the student learning experience on its higher education programmes. These enhancement activities and mechanisms include the well established programme for the OLT, and the staff development activities that result from it. There is also the programme for staff scholarships which relieves selected individuals of some or all of their teaching duties to develop themselves, enabling them to make a fuller contribution to the academic work of the College including the delivery of learning to students. Another enhancement mechanism is the role of the teaching and learning coaches in working with academic staff to improve their teaching and learning delivery and skills. Also, consideration of the outcomes of the self-assessment reports leads to the development of an improvement plan at programme level, each of which contributes to an annual College Improvement Plan. The implementation of these plans is undertaken by programme teams (at programme level) and by the HE Operations Group at College level. The team formed the view that the College procedures meet the enhancement Expectation.

4.2   The team consulted the College Improvement Plan, held meetings with staff and were told that enhancement was driven by the Principal, who is responsible for the enlargement of the coaching scheme. The Governors are aware of the information that comes from the OLT scheme and are confident that they are well informed about enhancement from this source. Staff explained that the principal formal mechanism for the consideration of enhancement issues is the HE Operations Group when it considers self-assessment reports and seeks to identify and disseminate good practice. Enhancement activities were noted by a number of the staff whom the team met, and they also expressed appreciation of the Performance Review scheme and the provision of an area on the College intranet in which good practice can be shared.

4.3   The team concludes that there are some enhancement activities that are having a positive effect on the student learning experience in the College. These include the OLT scheme and the staff scholarship scheme; the team was told by one participant in the latter how his professional development had fed into the content and style of his teaching. Some enhancement emerges from internal quality procedures and associated staff development. Other initiatives are at programme or School level, or are the result of specific individual activities. These include changes made in response to comments in programme-level self-assessment reports and the College-wide higher education self-assessment report. The team also heard about the impact of the role of the teaching and learning coaches in working with academic staff to improve their teaching and learning delivery and skills. These coaches had initially been implemented as a mechanism for support following teaching observations that revealed specific needs, but had been extended to provide more generic support for teaching, leading to improvements in higher education academic practice. This was appreciated by staff met by the team. The team considers the impact of the teaching and learning coaches in supporting staff to improve the quality of higher education academic practice as **good practice**.

4.4   The team was not, however, persuaded that there is a systematic approach to enhancement in the College, or that opportunities for the identification and dissemination of good practice are being systematically exploited. The team took the view that the groups and

committees, such as the HE Operations Groups and the HE Strategy Group, have only partial oversight, and have neither the deliberative approach nor the executive authority to lead to a systematisation of enhancement. The College should reflect on how this can be addressed. The team **recommends** that, by December 2014, the College should develop and embed an integrated approach to the enhancement of teaching and learning which is owned and used by the whole College community.

4.5   Overall, the team concludes that the College meets the Expectation that deliberate steps are being taken to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities, with some examples of positive enhancement. However, there is limited evidence of a systematic approach to enhancement and opportunities for the identification and dissemination of good practice are not being systematically exploited. The team concludes that the level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Enhancement of learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.6   The team made no affirmations, but identified one area of good practice and made one recommendation.

4.7   The College takes deliberate steps to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. This is evidenced through a number of quality assurance processes, including a programme for staff scholarships and the role of the teaching and learning coaches. However, the College does not articulate its approach to enhancement at a strategic level through a planned approach to enhancement that would enable opportunities for the identification and dissemination of good practice to be systematically designed and exploited.

4.8   The team concludes that the Expectation is met but there is some moderate risk. The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

Findings

5.1   The College's commitment to student employability is evidenced in strategic aims which place clear emphasis on employability and on employer and PSRB partnerships. This strategic dimension is underpinned by the College's long-established track record of success in provision for the marine industry. The team notes the top-level determination to continue to pursue employability initiatives regionally, notwithstanding the current challenges of difficult employment markets. The team also observed that employer representation at governing body level and on higher-level committees is a prominent feature of governance arrangements.

5.2   The team found clearly documented evidence of active and regular employer and PSRB liaison and involvement. Evidence demonstrates active involvement in programme development and review. The curriculum for maritime programmes has been developed with significant input from employers through the Merchant Navy Training Board together with the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in their roles as PSRBs and employer bodies. Programme specifications provide clear evidence of employability and employer responsiveness and involvement, and of alignment with the training, employment and employer requirements of PSRBs. Although employers and PSRBs are not routinely engaged on periodic review panels, the team notes that external involvement does include periodic Maritime and Coastguard Agency audits of quality and curriculum matters. The sound evidence of employer support for programmes is illustrated by 41 per cent of students receiving sponsorship. Since the last external review, the College has built on good practice in the area of links with employers. Employer feedback from various sources is recorded and analysed and discussed in a number of College forums. From its enquiries the team concludes that the involvement of employers in the curriculum in promoting student employability represents **good practice**, as identified in Expectation B3.

5.3   The team notes evidence of curriculum development that is innovative in the area of Electro-Technical Officer provision with training being offered in areas not available through other providers. The team was also impressed to observe that employer reviews had led to development in 2009 of innovative foundation degree provision in marine engineering. The success of the College in its employability initiatives is manifested in student employability data and this success was confirmed by students whom the team met. Graduate surveys show that a high proportion of graduates are in employment or further study, and a low number are unemployed. Proactive and focused use is made of such data and the outcomes of the externally commissioned Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey are considered by the Senior Management Team and the Senior Executive Group.

5.4   All higher education programmes have an embedded vocational theme and an applied focus. In the view of the team, this enhances the employability of the College's graduates. Programme self-assessment reports and handbooks highlight employability skills. Work-based placements and placement learning are a traditional and mandatory part of maritime programmes. Here, employers provide professional and wider skill development for students, and formal agreements define the on-board training. Similar learning opportunities are also characteristic of other provision, in areas such as performing arts, education and health care. Appropriate levels of careers support are evidenced in documentation and in discussions with staff and students. External examiner reports endorse the College's employability strengths, while work-based learning is also highlighted in employer and PSRB-related documentation, as is work-based assessment in the FD in Marine and Electrical and Electronic Engineering. In the view of the team, design, delivery and support for work-based and placement learning are consistent with the guidance in the Quality Code.

Glossary

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

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

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.

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

Award
A qualification, or academic credit, confer**red 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 organisations** 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 organisations** 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 organisations 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.