



Quality Review Visit of South West College

March 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about South West College

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

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

Areas for development

The review team identified the following **area for development** that has the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at South West College. The review team advises South West College to:

- strengthen the reporting of higher education to the Board of Governors in order to fully ensure oversight of academic standards and quality (Code of Governance).

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 6 to 8 March 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr John Simpson (student reviewer)
- Ms Penny Renwick
- Dr Mark Atlay.

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

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

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

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

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

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

About South West College

South West College (SWC) was established in 2007 and operates across four campuses located in Cookstown, Dungannon, Enniskillen and Omagh. It is the most rural college of the six Northern Ireland regional colleges and covers the largest geographical area. The College has approximately 18,800 students with just over 1,300 higher education students. In 2017/18 the College recruited 586 full-time and 718 part-time students, which includes 130 Higher Level Apprenticeship students.

The 2015-18 College Development Plan entitled 'Continuity, Consolidation and Future Proofing' sets out an ambitious programme of work for the College in supporting its position as a key economic driver within the south-west region counties and its ability to compete on an international and global platform. The College has developed strong professional, business relationships with employers and other external stakeholders, striving to work closely and meaningfully with the community it serves.

The College's higher education provision is delivered across the four departments of Business Services, Health and Life Services, Technology and Industry and Training. The scope of higher education provision at South West College includes foundation degrees, which form the majority of its provision, and degree-level programmes developed in partnership with Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast. Higher National Certificate and Diploma programmes developed with the awarding organisation Pearson and the College deliver 16 courses that lead to professional qualifications in partnership with appropriate accrediting bodies, local industry and Sector Skills Councils.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The College delivers foundation, progression and full honours degrees together with Higher National programmes in collaboration with, and validated by, two awarding bodies, Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast and a variety of awarding organisations including Pearson, City and Guilds, Vocational Training Charitable Trust (VTCT), and the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM).

2 The College does not hold degree awarding powers, therefore the ultimate responsibility lies with the awarding bodies and organisations to ensure qualifications meet the appropriate benchmarks. The College is jointly responsible for the delivery of programmes and ensuring academic standards are met. There are agreements and memoranda of understanding that describe relative responsibilities. The College's adherence to these agreements is monitored by the Higher Education Academic Board (HEAB), who has strategic oversight of the college's higher education provision. Each awarding body and organisation reviews its partnership annually.

3 The use of external examiners, the Universities' Subject Partnership Managers and Linked Tutors ensure that standards set for programmes and modules address relevant points including the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements, Foundation Degree Qualification Characteristics and requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) as necessary.

4 The external examiners also ensure comparability of the academic standards with those of other UK higher education providers. Comparability across the provision is achieved through the College's HE Quality Cycle, which includes a rigorous annual course review (ACR) process, ensuring academic standards are consistently maintained.

5 Programme handbooks provide students with clear information of their programme, an articulation of the FHEQ, and an understanding of learning, teaching and assessment for each level, including exit points of achievements for each programme. These handbooks are scrutinised and approved by the relevant awarding partner before publication.

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

6 The Governing Body's composition and tenure are established in Instrument 1, Article 11 of the Further Education Order 1997. It works as the guide for governors of further education colleges, produced by the Department for the Economy. The College's strategic framework for higher education is outlined in the College Development Plan 2015-18 in which the focus is on ensuring the College plays a vital role in improving quality of life and increasing the dynamism of the region. Members of the Governing Body are appointed by DfENI to include a broad representation of interests.

7 The College committee structure includes Finance and General Purpose Committee, Staff Committee, Audit and Risk Committee, which maintains oversight of academic risk, and the Education, Quality and Performance Committee (EQPC). The EQPC monitors performance against the College Development Plan, and its terms of reference

make explicit its responsibility for monitoring the standards of education provision. Consideration of higher education issues is evidenced in its minutes and reports.

8 The Governing Body has ultimate responsibility for academic standards and it discharges this responsibility through receipt of a range of performance reports and an upward verbal report from the chair of the EQPC. The review team noted variation in the detailed scrutiny of higher education matters at board level. In line with DfENI requirements, the College produces an annual Whole College Self Evaluation and Quality Improvement Report that is discussed at the Board of Governors. The attention paid to higher education in this report changes year on year due to shifting demands of the DfENI and consequently there is inconsistency in the oversight of higher education by the Governing Body. The review team advises the College to strengthen the reporting of higher education to the Board of Governors in order to ensure full oversight of academic standards and quality, identifying this as an **area for development**. Governors met by the team during the review were clear of their role in setting the strategic oversight for the College and that within this framework staff have the freedom to develop programmes and projects, thereby respecting the principles of academic freedom and collegiality.

9 The HEAB is responsible for maintaining oversight of higher education academic standards and for ensuring the governors receive regular reports. Operational responsibility for maintaining academic standards and quality assurance of higher education rests with the Quality and Performance Manager who reports to the Chief Executive.

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

10 The College delivers higher education programmes in partnership with a variety of awarding partners who are responsible for setting and maintaining the academic standards of their awards including their design, approval and assessment and ensuring that UK threshold academic standards are met. Awarding partner requirements and regulations are set out in handbooks and regulatory frameworks. College policies and procedures are aligned with the requirements of the Quality Code and those of its awarding bodies and awarding organisations and are set out in the HE Staff Quality Handbook. Mapping documents articulate the responsibilities of professional and other bodies and those of the College.

11 The responsibility of senior managers for various aspects of the Quality Code is set out in a mapping document, and a Quality Calendar provides the annual timetable of activity for the consideration of quality issues. As a result of this documentation, and associated mentoring, training and development, staff are clear about their responsibilities for quality assurance.

12 The HEAB retains responsibility for College approval for new programme developments taking into account the strategic objectives of the College, the needs of the local economy and the resource requirements of the proposals. Awarding bodies are chosen on the basis of the subject area or the strong links between College staff and an awarding partner as a result of existing provision. The College HE Coordinator supports course design and development ensuring external reference points are used where appropriate. The College uses its close links with industry, commerce and the professions through a variety of mechanisms such as Industry Advisory Boards to ensure that the views of employers inform course design and revalidation. As a result, employer relevance is a strength of the provision.

13 Programme specifications are approved at validation or revalidation by the University awarding bodies, and for Pearson qualifications the College produces definitive records based on Pearson's specifications. This approved information is included in course and module handbooks which are made available to students through the virtual learning environment (VLE).

14 The College carries out assessments in accordance with the requirements and regulations of the awarding bodies and awarding organisations. A variety of assessments are used to meet the needs of individual curriculum areas and assessment practices are also informed by professional body and employer engagement activities. The College ensures that module learning outcomes and academic standards are being met and maintained through the marking and internal verification processes. This is monitored within the HE Quality Cycle and reported as part of the ACR process.

15 External examiners are appointed by the awarding bodies. Their reports confirm that standards are set appropriately. Course committees monitor external examiner comments and those of other external agencies. Course teams respond to the reports as part of the ACR process and its associated action planning. Students have access to external examiner reports through the VLE and opportunities are provided for the external examiner to meet with students.

16 University awarding bodies operate their own examination boards. The College HE Internal Exam Board determines students' assessment results and progression on behalf of the College and partner institutions. The specifications for exam boards and their operation are included in the HE Staff Quality Handbook. After each board, students are notified of their progression status.

17 The College's ACR process monitors student retention, attainment and progression, and feedback from students, employers, external examiners, subject partnership managers and Link Tutors. Monthly Performance Data Management, Curriculum and Quality, and Management meetings, which include key performance indicator (KPI) update reports, and the timetable for ACR activities forms part of the Quality Calendar. The Quality and Performance Manager compiles an annual report for HEAB and there is regular review of progress with action plans during the year. ACRs inform the Whole College Self-evaluation and Quality Improvement Report.

18 Courses undergo periodic review and revalidation according to the requirements of the awarding partners. In 2016/17, periodic reviews of HND/C health and social care, engineering, sport, hair and beauty management and photography provided assurance that the quality of these programmes is appropriate. The College holds its own mini periodic reviews of Pearson provision to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. Annual reports from the awarding bodies confirm the effectiveness of the College's arrangements for approval, monitoring and review.

Rounded judgement

19 The College's quality assurance arrangements are appropriate in enabling it to fulfil its responsibilities to its awarding bodies and awarding organisation, and to align with the main baseline regulatory requirements in the maintenance of academic standards.

20 The review team identified one area for development in this area. This relates to the advice that the College should strengthen and develop a greater level of consistency in the reporting of higher education to the Board of Governors in order to secure full oversight of academic standards and quality.

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

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

22 The College has an HE Admissions Policy and an Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) policy that underpin recruitment and admission processes, inclusive of students with disabilities. It recently introduced an APL Board into its higher education quality cycle to formally consider applications from non-traditional students. Applicants apply directly to the College or via UCAS. Applicants who wish to appeal or complain about any element of the recruitment, selection or administration process may do so via the complaints policy. Students met by the review team spoke positively about their experience of recruitment and admission.

23 Higher education students are provided with a detailed induction. Formal inductions are between two to three days and a follow-up induction is available via the tutorial process. Each student is timetabled for weekly one-hour tutorials and these are valued by students. The College prides itself in operating an 'Open Door' approach so staff are directly accessible to students at any time and provide support as required. Comprehensive student handbooks are provided.

24 The College's approach to higher education learning, teaching and assessment is outlined in the HE Teaching, Learning and Enhancement Strategy. In 2016, this was supplemented by a College Excellence in Teaching Framework. Oversight of learning, teaching and assessment within the College rests with the Excellence in Teaching and Learning forum. A comprehensive Annual Teaching and Learning Report is produced in which excellence is celebrated. The College has invested in a VLE to promote the quality of the student learning experience and ensure parity of experience. E-technologists support the delivery of digital technology in the classroom. Each campus has a Learning Resource Centre (LRC) with electronic library facilities. LRC staff deliver workshops that are academically related and have developed a range of online resources. Through the completion of the online units, students have the opportunity to gain digital badges. The College has an innovation centre located on each of its campuses that promotes the quality of the teaching and learning experience, such as the STEM Centre. Students spoke highly of the quality of their teaching and in particular of the industrial expertise of teaching staff.

25 The College has adopted Ulster University's seven principles of assessment and feedback and these are supplemented by a range of policies that are outlined in the HE Quality Handbook. Students report high levels of satisfaction with the processes of assessment; they confirmed that they are clear about the expectations of assessment, and that feedback is both timely and helpful.

26 The College academic support framework focuses on study skills, employability and exam skills. The appointment of higher education academic mentors who provide practical workshops and support in areas such as academic referencing, research and plagiarism has been positively commented upon by students. Students benefit from a range of support services and a review of student support services last year has enabled additional staffing resources to be invested in this area.

27 Student engagement is facilitated at a number of levels - post-induction survey, completion of module evaluations, 'Snatch 'n' Grab' surveys have been introduced to inform management on the quality of teaching and learning, and elected representatives for each programme. All this information is analysed by the course directors and used as part

of the ACR review process. Student services induct and train student representatives, which includes disability training and an understanding of quality assurance. Student representatives attend Staff Student Consultative meetings (SSCs), which occur each semester. A student governor is appointed to the Governing Body and represents the student body in the EQPC and at the HEAB. In January 2018, higher education students participated in the National Student Survey (NSS) for the first time.

28 The College has a strategic approach to the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment with a robust and comprehensive approach to staff development. In 2014 the Education Training Inspectorate graded the College professional development opportunities as 'outstanding'. The Workforce Development Plan outlines the key priorities for continuing professional development within the College. Staff met during the review spoke very positively about the range of internal and external opportunities for both academic and professional services personnel. There is a programme of teaching observations and these are supplemented by the use of a peer-to-peer process called 'teaching squares' that are viewed positively by staff, though it is too early to evaluate their impact.

29 ACR meetings are chaired by the HE Coordinator and include the Course Director, Head of Department and course team. These meetings are mandatory and provide opportunities for consideration of ACR and the Pearson quality management review reports. The primary purpose of these reviews is to drive continuous improvement and meet the standards and KPIs using a data-driven approach. Curriculum and management meetings report monthly on areas such as retention and course development. These structures enable a rigorous approach to the management of the provision. The quality of data that underpins the College's processes are widely acknowledged throughout the College. The College produces an Annual Institutional Report for Ulster University and an Annual Performance Monitoring Report for Pearson qualifications. These report on programme quality and evaluate retention, success and progression data.

30 The higher education programmes delivered by the College are highly vocational and many involve placements or significant work-based learning, including opportunities to study and work overseas. Students are supported to source placements themselves as part of their development and the College has close links with local industry, commerce and the professions on which it can draw if necessary. Risk assessments are undertaken prior to commencement of placements with monitoring undertaken through regular visits. The College maintains strong strategic and operational links with employers, ranging from the composition of the Governing Body and the provision of industrial advisory forums through to the provision of placements and close relationships that support curriculum development and review. In the 2013 IQER Summative Review undertaken by QAA, the establishment of Industry Advisory Boards was identified as good practice, and these are influential in the work of the College. A work-based learning policy underpins the effective management and organisation of placements and work-based learning. Students spoke enthusiastically about their learning and skills development in the workplace and of the support they receive. A College internship scheme has proved valuable in providing placement opportunities for students with additional needs, who have now successfully progressed to employment or further study. Employers met by the team emphasised the long-term relationships that have built up between employers and the College over many years and the benefits these have for students, employers and the local economy.

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

31 The Education, Quality and Performance Committee (EQPC) is a subcommittee of the Board of Governors with responsibility for the development of strategic objectives, local skills needs and setting KPIs. There is a Student Governor on the Board and she or he is a member of the EQPC to represent students' views.

32 The HEAB is the main College committee with responsibility for the quality of higher education provision. Its membership includes representation by the President of the Students' Union. At the time of the visit the College did not have a Students' Union, although this was under active consideration, and the Student Governor who is currently a higher education student attends the HEAB to represent students' interests. The review team concludes that current arrangements ensured student representation on key decision-making bodies.

33 The HE Student Handbook states that class representatives attend course team meetings and that the College will seek nominations from students to sit on key College committees such as the HEAB, Senior Management Team meetings and Curriculum and Quality meetings. The terms of reference of the Course Committee, which are not included in the HE Staff Quality Handbook, state that membership may include all members of academic staff of the College, as well as immediate members of the course team; student representatives may be involved but the circumstances under which this is appropriate or expected are not fully specified. The notes of course committee meetings show that students' views are actively considered through the outcomes of SSCs, the College's Snatch 'n' Grab surveys and other means and that these inform the ACR process. The review team considered that, although the membership of course committees might be clarified, students' views were effectively considered at course level.

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

34 Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education programmes is articulated in the College's Admissions Policy. The Policy takes into account the principles and good practices set out in the UK Quality Code and the 'Schwartz Report' to ensure fair and transparent admissions to higher education.

35 Students applying for courses through Ulster University and the awarding bodies apply directly to the College whereas courses validated by Queen's University Belfast apply via UCAS; in all cases the College's Admissions Policy covers all applicants/students.

36 Students are categorised into two groups, Standard and Non-Standard applications. Standard applications are those students who fully meet the entry requirements. Students who do not fully meet these requirements are known as Non-Standard, and for those students the College takes into consideration their background, knowledge and previous experience which is discussed at an internal APL board and approved by the awarding body. In both cases, students will attend an interview with the Course Director before being accepted on the course. Students with additional needs are referred to the Student Engagement Officer for support and guidance.

37 Students spoke positively about the level of information they had received pre-course allowing them to make an informed decision about studying at the College. Course information, student support and funding are available on the College's website and in the

higher education prospectus. Information regarding degree-awarding bodies and relevant policies, such as complaints, appeals and assessment, are accessible in programme handbooks and on the VLE, and are discussed as part of the higher education induction for new students.

38 The College has recently created its own Accuracy of Public Information Policy to ensure consistency of information between College departments and that the College is adhering to their consumer protection obligations. In addition, the College holds staff development sessions on the compliance requirements for the Competition and Markets Authority.

39 Teaching and support staff met by the review team confirmed that an internal process is in place prior to information being made available to prospective students. The provision of information is a shared responsibility between the College and the awarding partners, although no information is publicly available without agreement from the latter. The Digital Marketing Officer periodically reviews the website to ensure the accuracy and currency of information. All information is reviewed annually by the HE Coordinator, the Quality and Performance Unit, Marketing Department and Student Services.

40 The review team agreed that prospective and current students receive appropriate information to enable them to make informed decisions.

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

41 The College's Complaints and Compliments Policy articulates the process that students can use if they are unsatisfied with any aspect of the College. Where possible the College encourages complaints to be dealt with informally and for all parties to reach an amicable resolution. More formal complaints are submitted in writing and a receipt given within five working days. These are managed by the College's Compliance and Legal Officer who decides on the best person to deal with the complaint. The College, under normal circumstances, aims to respond to formal complaints within 20 working days.

42 There is a formal academic appeals procedure which is the responsibility of the awarding body. The College's HE Quality Handbook includes the Academic Assessment Appeals Procedure, which is articulated within the student handbook. If a complainant remains dissatisfied, they can refer their complaint to the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman. All these policies are included in the course handbook and are available on the VLE.

43 Complaints and appeals are reviewed and monitored by the College's Risk and Compliance Committee, chaired by the Quality and Performance Manager, who compiles an annual report that is presented to the Finance and Risk Committee, a subcommittee of the Governing Body. Students that met the review team had a good understanding of the complaints procedure and stated that in most cases complaints were resolved informally. Students were able to give examples where outcomes improved the student experience, including extra support in mathematics to ensure students were able to meet the learning outcomes in specific modules.

44 There is a process in place for course closures and changes through the College Approval, Suspension and Closure Policy. Each partnership agreement outlines the College's contractual obligation for closing a course. If a Head of Department wishes to close a course within their department approval must be sought from the College HEAB. Once the decision has been made to close a course there is a robust system in place to

ensure students are not disadvantaged, for example agreeing a timescale to ensure existing students complete their course and notifying potential students regarding alternative arrangements.

Rounded judgement

45 Arrangements at the College for the academic governance and management of the student academic experience are appropriate and effective in the context of the responsibilities delegated to it by its awarding partners, and the baseline regulatory requirements.

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

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