Quality Review Visit of Southern Regional College

April 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Southern Regional College

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

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

Areas for development

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

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 24 to 26 April 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Richard Alderman (Student Reviewer)
- Professor Mike Bramhall
- Mr Peter Hymans.

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 Southern Regional College

Formed in 2007 from the former Armagh College of Further Education, Upper Bann Institute and Newry and Kilkeel Institute, Southern Regional College (SRC) is the largest Further and Higher Education College outside Belfast, catering for 27,702 student enrolments from Entry Level to Level 7 for the academic year 2016-17. Students are recruited mainly from the two super council areas of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon and Newry, Mourne and Down. The College has six campuses located in Newry, Armagh, Banbridge, Lurgan, Portadown and Kilkeel. However, HE is currently offered on five of the six sites with no HE provision based on the Kilkeel campus.

Enrolments for 2017-18 recorded 2,324 HE students; 535 full-time and 1789 part-time which includes a total of 114 Higher Level Apprentices. The College has 925 staff including 516 lecturing and 409 support staff and in 2017-18 approximately 164 lecturing staff are involved in the delivery of HE curriculum.

HE provision at SRC comprises a range of full and part-time Foundation Degrees (FD), Associate Bachelor's (AB) and Honours Degrees in partnership with three Higher Education Institutions (HEI), Ulster University (UU), Liverpool John Moores (LJMU) and form a part of a consortium of NI Colleges for the delivery of the FD in Early Childhood Studies collaborating with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Stranmillis University College. The College also deliver Higher National Diplomas (HND), Certificates, Awards, post graduate qualifications and a diverse range of professional and technical HE programmes in association with six awarding organisations that include Pearson and City and Guilds. The College also engage with a range of professional bodies such as the Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI), Charted

Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) and Accounting Technicians Ireland (ATI) equating to 4 per cent of full-time HE provision and 48 per cent of all part time enrolments. The ILM part-time provision includes all HE full-time students as they all undertake the ILM employability module.

The College's higher education provision is delivered in curriculum areas across its six schools of Applied Science and Academic Studies;Creative Design and Computing; Engineering and Construction; Early Years and Healthcare; Hairdressing, Beauty and Sport; and Hospitality, Business and Management.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1   Academic standards are set by the awarding bodies who ensure that programmes delivered by the college align with national standards, most notably the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ).

2   The College is accountable to their awarding partners for upholding academic standards in accordance with the respective memoranda of agreement. The College produces annual self-evaluation reports (SERs) for university-validated programmes, with a mirrored College process for professional programmes.

3   External examiners, appointed by the university and awarding bodies confirm in their reports that programmes deliver outcomes comparable with other providers. Programmes are also subject to monitoring visits from the university partners and awarding bodies, which confirm that academic standards are upheld at the appropriate level. The awarding bodies or external assessors have raised no critical issues in recent years.

4   The college works closely with local employers and awarding bodies in the design of new programmes, and reference points from the Northern Irish sector agencies, Subject Benchmark Statements and the FHEQ are used in establishing academic standards.

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

5   Academic governance of the College is overseen by the College's Governing Body and four subcommittees including an Education Committee. The Education Subcommittee oversees all the College's provision including core content, quality and performance. The Subcommittee also advises the Principal on the general oversight of the academic work of the College, such as admissions, assessment, examination of students and curriculum development. The Principal is a member of the committee and the Director of Curriculum attends all meetings. Other senior curriculum managers present at this committee as and when required. The terms of reference of the Education Committee include the requirement to provide assurances to the Governing Body on the College's HE provision. The Higher Education Quality Assurance Statement and Action Plan 2017-2018 prepared to the DfENI template, which is approved by the Education Subcommittee and the full Board of Governors, contains a section on the setting and maintenance of academic standards and provides the Board with assurance that academic standards across higher education programmes are being maintained.

6   The principles of academic freedom and collegiality are not explicitly recognised in the College's policies but there is a recognition of its importance among staff at all levels.

7   The Risk Management Group chaired by the Chief Executive has overall responsibility for the administration and implementation of the risk management process within the College. An Audit and Risk Committee, which has strategic oversight of the risk management system, reports to the Governing Body. The Committee meets monthly to review functional risk registers including the HE Quality Assurance and Action Plan, and to

update the Corporate Risk Register. The Annual Risk Management Report to the Audit Committee refers to academic risks and provides assurance to the Board of Governors that academic risk is being rigorously monitored.

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

8   The College delivers programmes designed and approved by its awarding partners, the Ulster University, Liverpool John Moores University, Queen's University Belfast, Stranmillis University College with a consortium of Northern Ireland Colleges, Pearson and City and Guilds. The College also engages with a range of professional bodies such as the Institute of the Motor Industry (IMI), Charted Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM) and Accounting Technicians Ireland (ATI). The College adheres to the regulatory frameworks of its respective awarding partners and works closely and collaboratively with them.

9   Definitive records of the programmes and their operation are held in the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) as student handbooks, with definitive course records maintained by the College and its awarding bodies. Programme specifications show an outcomes-based approach, aligned to the FHEQ level of award. Course handbooks contain descriptors of level and attainment, which students access through the College's VLE and the review team found these Handbooks to be consistent, with electronic links to full Programme Specifications, College policies and relevant external websites.

10   The College has a course approvals policy and new course proposals go to the Curriculum Directorate Panel, chaired by the Director of Curriculum for approval to proceed. The College uses external panel members as subject experts and industry experts for programme approval through all its partner awarding bodies. The College follows the minor modifications procedures of its awarding partners.

11   The College's policies for assessment and internal verification set out the arrangements for ensuring that assessment is carried out in a way that secures academic standards in line with the requirements of its awarding bodies. Pearson programme teams make use of the Pearson assignment checking service and professional advice from the Pearson subject specialist teams when designing assignments in order to meet the programme specified learning outcomes. Assessments on the Accounting Technicians Ireland (ATI) Level 5 Diploma for Accounting Technicians comprise solely of professional examinations set by the ATI.

12   Assessment outcomes are considered and approved at the assessment boards operated by the awarding partners at which the College is represented. For Pearson awards the College manages assessment boards internally. The College provides training for all Higher Education staff on their awarding bodies' processes and are provided with assessment guidance material.

13   Arrangements are in place to ensure students have achieved the academic standards set and that comparability of awards are confirmed. External examiners are involved in the assessment process and attend examination boards either at the College or at the awarding organisation to review and verify assessment outcomes. External examiners produce annual reports which are responded to at course level. The review team concludes that the College's arrangements for using external stakeholders and external input to assure academic standards is effective.

14   The College engages in annual monitoring in accordance with its awarding partners' requirements. The College has a systematic and responsive review process that requires all areas to produce SER and quality improvement plans as part of the College's annual

self-evaluation review process. Central Management Information Systems provide reliable data that pre-populates SERs with student achievement, awards, entry qualifications, and first destination data, which are used to inform course performance.

15   For the Ulster University programmes, all SERs must be presented and reviewed by the College's senior management team in conjunction with representatives from the Quality Improvement Unit, Heads of School and student representatives. For non-Ulster University programmes the College has a bi-annual periodic review process, which replicates the UU process. SERs are sent to the awarding bodies for review and feedback. The review process culminates in the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) submitting the annual quality assessment return, on behalf of the Governing Body, to the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfENI). This statement takes account of the SER College wide issues and actions.

16   Most of the College's courses have an element of work-based learning, with placement opportunities, and in many instances, such as Higher Level Apprenticeship (HLA) students study through their work setting. The College therefore engages with numerous placement providers. Students are prepared for placement through assistance with applications, Curriculum Vitae preparation, interview skills and placement handbooks. Students are assigned a workplace mentor and visited at least twice during the placement by a College tutor. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the health and safety risk assessment, contained in the Placement handbook, is completed and returned to the College.

17   The review team found the collaborative arrangements to be robust and effective with a good working arrangement with external partners and professional bodies.

Rounded judgement

18   The review team found that the College works collaboratively and effectively with its respective awarding partners to ensure its higher education provision is aligned to the FHEQ and the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). This provision is subject to rigorous monitoring by its awarding partners and through the College's own internal monitoring processes with oversight managed by the College and its awarding bodies through its collaborative structures. These measures together with its engagement with the relevant codes of governance demonstrate its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for Academic Standards.

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

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

21   The College has a rigorous annual self-evaluation process that requires all programmes to produce annual SERs and quality improvement plans as part of the cross college annual self-evaluation review process. Non academic departments such as student support and learning resources also produce self-evaluations annually. At the end of each semester all higher education students complete a module review questionnaire.
The module review format is specified by the awarding bodies and includes detailed student feedback. For non validated programmes the College has developed its own equivalent format.

22   The self-evaluation review process is informed by online student surveys which take place twice per year, staff student consultative committee meetings and focus groups. SERs provided demonstrated that student views are considered within the reviews and enable enhancement of the provision.

23   Higher Education Course Coordinators present the completed SER together with accompanying evidence, which includes external examining reports and responses, Subject Partnership Manager reports and response sheets and minutes of course committee, examination boards and student consultative meetings to a review panel. The panel comprises senior college and departmental managers and student representatives and provides the opportunity for a robust challenge on content and quality of the submission. The session also makes provision to discuss and promote good practice initiatives and agree areas of improvement in the associated action plan. Action plans are a standing agenda item at team meetings throughout the year.

24   The College process for self-evaluation involves analysis of data provided centrally by the College's Management Information Systems Department. Data is validated externally through the consolidated data return to DfENI at three census points in-year. All self-evaluation and review documents supplied demonstrate the College's rigorous approach to the use of data to monitor and enhance the student experience.

25   Students have numerous opportunities to provide feedback on teaching, learning and assessment through Staff Student Consultative Committees, Student Focus Groups, Student Surveys, Module Reviews, and meetings with external examiners and Subject Partnership managers. Currently there are 74 elected higher education class representatives within the College. Class representatives are invited to attend meetings at the Student Council three times per year. The HE Forum, a distinct sub group of the Student Council, comprises all the higher education class representatives and has engaged in consultations on policy updates, including the student equality policy. Discussions at the Higher Education Student Forum highlight key areas for improvement and development in relation to the higher education student voice at the College.

26   The Student Governor works closely with the Students' Union Higher Education Officer in highlighting the needs of, and developing activities for, higher education groups as well as taking forward the wider higher education student agenda through Governor meetings. The Student Governor has also been actively involved in the review of the higher education student handbook, student diary, College website and student surveys carried out throughout 2017-18 academic year. Both the Student Governor and the Students' Union

Higher Education Officer attended the National Union of Students' Conference in Glasgow in March 2018.

27   Resources required to run new programmes are identified at validation and a business case is developed for approval by the senior management team.
For existing programmes resources are monitored through the annual monitoring system and when necessary business cases are developed for approval by the senior management team. The Student Submission indicates that learning resources are good, this was confirmed by students the review team met during the visit.

28   The College employs 104 full-time and 60 part-time lecturers in higher education. All lecturing staff are appropriately qualified to deliver higher education curriculum as defined by the awarding bodies and organisations. Academic staff are experienced both in terms of subject knowledge and teaching with 69 per cent of lecturers having ten or more years teaching experience and 59 per cent of lecturers with ten years or more industrial experience. Fourteen lecturers are PhD qualified.

29   Staff development and scholarly activity is well provided for. The College has an employee Development Plan which includes as a priority that all staff should have a PGCE (FE) at appointment or within two years of starting. The Staff Appraisal Scheme Identifies development needs including subject updating which ensures that staff maintain subject currency. This academic year five staff have applied for fellowship of the Higher Education Academy.

30   The College, in collaboration with Ulster University, has established a framework for Technology Enhanced Learning in order to embed into all higher education provision within the College. A key feature of this approach is industry engagement to inform the higher education curriculum offer, upskill staff to industry standards and to develop staff in technology enhanced learning. To date thirteen lecturers have completed the Ulster University Level 7 Digital Learning Post Graduate Certificate. The Employee Development Committee organises events to enable staff to share good practice. Most recently this involved higher education staff sharing their experience gained as a result of participation on a Level 7 Digital Learning programme.

31   The College's higher education lecturing teams enhance student learning by arranging visiting guest speakers and attendance at industry events. Events include the Hospitality Exchange which in the last two years have involved demonstrations from Michelin starred chefs and supplier exhibitions.

32   Most higher education programmes include an element of work-based learning (WBL). Work placements are well managed and secure with a tri-partite agreement between the College, its students and the placement providers. Tutors visit students on placement regularly and employers provide feedback on student performance but do not assess against learning outcomes. Details regarding WBL are contained in course handbooks.

33   The Marketing, Communications and Student Recruitment Department has a process flowchart to ensure the accurate collation and distribution of higher education information for use in all College publications including the prospectus, course information sheets, course handbooks, the website and all social networking communications.
The College's Communication Policy provides a framework for the publication of all internal and external communications and summarises staff and governors' responsibilities for these processes. For all published information the Director of Curriculum has ultimate responsibility for its accuracy and completeness.

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)

34   The College operates a student representation system that has been developed in partnership with the College's Students' Union and has established a Higher Education Student Forum which meets as part of the Student Council meetings. It consists of higher education student representatives and Students' Union officers from across the College. Student representatives are trained by the College jointly with the Students' Union.

35   The Student Governor is a member of the College's Education Committee and although a Further Education student, supports and endorses the Students' Union higher education officers in taking the lead in liaising with and disseminating feedback from the higher education perspective through the Higher Education Student Forum. The review team found these arrangements to be effective.

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

36   The College has an admissions policy outlining the process by which applications are processed and admissions decisions made. The policy is available on the College website for prospective applicants. Following application, students are invited to a pre-enrolment advice sessions (PEAS) at which further information on programmes are provided and an admissions decision made. The admissions and enrolment process is subject to an annual review received by the senior management team that considers the effectiveness of the policy and processes. The College has recently moved to an online system for the processing of applications that facilitates the consideration of additional support needs for a student at PEAS. As part of application correspondence, students are alerted to the College's Terms and Conditions in their invitation to PEAS. The document is also available on the College website, and students confirmed their familiarity with the document.

37   Programme information is available through the College website, open days, hard copy prospectuses and course handbooks for enrolled students. The College has an established procedure for the approval of marketing publications through the Head of Marketing, Communications and Student Recruitment, incorporating approval from the awarding body where specified. The College has a cyclical process for the update of course information, with final approval from the Director of Curriculum; from this, published materials are produced.

38   Programme handbooks are available on the College's VLE. Students confirmed that the handbooks and College-wide Student Diary are accurate and contain the full range of student information required, including access to the complaints procedure and information on rights under consumer protection legislation. Staff confirmed that publication approval for internal documents mirrors that of external publications.

39   A safeguarding policy approved by the Governing Body with an annual register of issues raised that have been effectively acted upon, allow for the welfare of students to be secured.

40   The review team found that the College is fully aware of its responsibilities for compliance with consumer protection obligations. Students confirmed that they are provided with information that was accurate, that they are treated fairly and have opportunities to resolve complaints informally and formally, meeting baseline standards.

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

41   The College has recently established a course closure, suspension and substantial change policy, with minor amendments captured through course approval and curriculum planning processes. The policy outlines the process for consultation with key stakeholders as part of significant changes. This policy is available on the College website and VLE alongside a published course information sheet for each programme. The review team considered a recent change in awarding body for programmes in Tourism and Hospitality Management. Current students would be taught out with the current awarding body. Students confirmed they had been consulted on the proposed changes and staff confirmed that an assessment had been made on the impact of the change on progression routes for new students.

42   The College also provided examples of other programmes where they had suspended recruitment or closed in recent years, for which the College policy and Ulster University course suspension process had been followed, including, in one case, transfer of a small number of students to another local college.

43   The College Complaints and Compliments Policy had been revised since the previous review to mirror practice of other Colleges in the sector, and is accessible on the website, VLE and as part of programme handbooks. The policy is compliant with Northern Ireland Standards for Complaint Handling in the Public Sector; for all formal complaints an independent Responsible Owner is appointed to investigate and the process ensures turnaround for formal complaints and appeals within twenty working days. The process is overseen by the College's Corporate Compliance Manager, with a summary of complaints and year-end analysis received by the senior management team and reported to Finance and General Purposes committee, with robust follow up on lessons learned. Students were confident in their understanding of this process.

44   Complaints are managed effectively through a Complaints and Feedback database detailing the handling of both formal and informal complaints and ensuring compliance with response deadlines and an audit trail for the public ombudsmen. This database is also used to capture recommendations arising from complaints received, for which a responsible owner and implementation date is recorded. This process enables the College to capture outcomes for the purposes of improving the student experience, which supported the College's achievement of the Matrix Quality Award for Student Services.

45   The College has received no complaints that have proceeded to appeal or escalation to the public service ombudsman or Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). Students confirmed that issues were typically resolved informally, and could evidence changes made as a result of student feedback.

46   The review team concluded that the College has a robust process for consulting and agreeing significant changes to courses, and processes for complaints and appeals taking deliberate steps to learn from and enhance the student experience, thereby meeting baseline expectations.

Rounded judgement

47   The College demonstrates effective operation of processes that monitor and enhance the student experience whilst working effectively and in alliance with their awarding partners. The College has policies and procedures that cover the key principles and expectations of the UK Quality Code and adherence to the relevant code of governance to include sound and effective student representation. The College processes align to CMA

guidelines with clear monitoring and recording of complaints and appeals. Student opinion is regularly gathered and considered at programme and senior level and is incorporated into all its overarching College reports.

48   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.

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