Higher Education Review of Sparsholt College

March 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 Sparsholt College. The review took place from 11 to 12 March 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Simon Pallett
- Miss Sarah Riches
- Mr James Lovett (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Sparsholt College and 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 6.

In reviewing Sparsholt 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 Sparsholt College

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

- The maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of the degree-awarding body **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 Sparsholt College.

- The high level of external examiner engagement with both staff and students facilitated by the College during the academic year (Expectations B7 and A5).
- The numerous ways in which the College has systematically fostered engagement with students to enhance the quality of learning opportunities (Expectation B5, Enhancement).
- The strength of the College's links with industry which supports curriculum development and student employability (Expectations B1 and B4).
- The proactive and strategic approach to improving student retention (Enhancement).
- The use of the virtual learning environment to provide a wide range of accessible and student-centred information to current students (Expectation C).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendation** to Sparsholt College.

- In consultation with the awarding body, develop procedures for dealing with cases of academic misconduct, which include clear definitions of what constitutes an academic offence and what academic penalties may be applied, and make these available to students by July 2014 (Expectations A6 and B6).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following action that Sparsholt College is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The incremental development and implementation of the Higher Education Management of Information Protocol to ensure that public information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy (Expectation C).

Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

The College's approach to student involvement is set out in its Academic Strategy, where it defines student engagement as promoting 'the concept of the independent learner, who adopts a shared responsibility for learning and the enhancement of learning to enrich their overall experience'. Students are represented at all levels within the College from the Board of Governors to Board of Studies meetings at subject level. In addition, the Student Council, which comprises elected course representatives and is chaired by students, meets four times a year with College managers to explore ways of enhancing the quality of the provision and the student experience.

In June 2012 the College appointed a Senior Practitioner for Higher Education whose responsibilities include promoting student engagement, implementing communication strategies and overseeing new initiatives such as the recently introduced Higher Education Study Coach scheme, which provides formalised peer mentoring and support for students. Overall, the College is successful in creating an environment within which staff and students can discuss enhancements to the learning experience.

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

About Sparsholt College

Sparsholt College (the College) is one of the largest providers of land-based further and higher education programmes in the UK. The College operates from two campuses located in Winchester and Andover in Hampshire with higher education provision being exclusively based at the Winchester site. The College offers higher education provision through an Associate College relationship with the University of Portsmouth (the University) and has over 400 students studying on foundation and bachelor's degree courses. The College has recently developed new master's provision which is being introduced from 2014-15. The higher education portfolio is based on a core of applied science courses which develop students' understanding, knowledge and skills within an industry and business context. The occupational context is regarded by the College as a key strength and it capitalises on the practical environment and commercial activities available as a resource to students.

The College mission is 'to inspire learners to recognise and achieve their full potential'. This mission is underpinned by the Strategic Plan which incorporates a vision for the College as:

> The specialist Higher Education institution, a key national and international provider of specialist Higher Education in the applied science of land, environment and sustainable resource management which excels in "research into practice" at Foundation, Honours and Master's degree levels.

The Higher Education Academic Strategy provides the policy direction to deliver the Strategic Plan and clear statements on the attributes of higher education graduates.

The Assistant Principal of land-based provision has led the operational management of higher education since the last review, reporting initially to the Associate Vice-Principal and since 2012 taking on a more strategic role reporting to the Vice-Principal. The strategic leadership is facilitated through the Higher Education Strategy Group, chaired by the College Principal and through the fortnightly higher education management team meetings which review progress against operational and strategic actions.

The College received a positive outcome from the previous QAA Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in 2009 with a number of features of good practice, one advisable recommendation for action and four desirable recommendations - all of which have been addressed. In the intervening period, the College has made good progress in building on the features of good practice and in continuing its commitment to the enhancement of the student learning experience. Notable actions include the clearer delineation between the further and higher education experience, a number of resource initiatives for the benefit of higher education students, the introduction of a self-evaluation panel which has since become the twice-yearly Board of Studies, and a continued focus on developing opportunities for staff development and student engagement.

Explanation of the findings about Sparsholt 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 currently delivers foundation and honour's degrees and plans to launch two taught master's courses for entry in 2014-15. All of the College's courses are designed by the College and approved by the University in accordance with the awarding body's procedures for course approval. The four-stage approval process, which involves University-appointed external assessors, is designed to ensure that course outcomes are matched to FHEQ qualification descriptors and that the volume of study is sufficient to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes.

1.2   Learning outcomes are disseminated to students through course specifications and unit descriptors and are made available through online links in the course handbook. Unit descriptors identify how learning outcomes will be assessed and assessment briefs include the specific learning outcomes to be tested by the assessment. External examiners are asked to confirm that the standards set for the assessments are appropriate for a qualification at the relevant level in the subject.

1.3   The review team tested the operation of these processes by reading documents produced by the College for validation and review, including course structures, programme specifications and unit descriptors prepared using University templates, and reports of validation and review events.

1.4   A review of the evidence available to the team confirmed the alignment of learning outcomes to the FHEQ and that the volume of credit for each award meets the University's regulations. The review team concluded that the College meets the Expectation, each qualification is allocated to the appropriate level in the FHEQ and the risk to academic standards is 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

1.5   The College makes use of a range of external reference points in developing its courses. These include subject and qualification benchmark statements; National Occupational Standards; the requirements of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) (the regulatory body for veterinary nursing); the sector skills council for Land and Environment (LANTRA); and relevant Government publications, all of which are clearly referenced in programme specifications. Programme learning outcomes which derive from subject benchmark statements are identified in programme specifications.

1.6   Proposals for most new courses are presented to a panel of industry specialists for feedback prior to engagement with the University's approval procedures. Course teams also draw on feedback from external examiners, external assessors, professional body representatives and students who are involved formally in the validation process. The currency of courses in respect of external reference points is ensured through the Unit Management Approval process which provides an annual opportunity to update units.

1.7   The review team examined programme specifications, validation documentation and the Unit Management Approval process.

1.8   The team concluded that the College makes effective use of subject and qualification benchmark statements and other industry-specific reference points. The College therefore meets the Expectation and the risk to academic standards is 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

1.9   Course aims and learning outcomes are set out in programme specifications; unit descriptors provide details of unit-specific aims and learning outcomes; and assessment briefs also specify the learning outcomes to be assessed. The College has recently completed a project with the University to ensure that definitive course structures and unit descriptors are held on the University's Unit Management System. These documents are made available to students through links from course handbooks held on the College's VLE to the University's Unit Web Search facility. Award external examiners receive a copy of the programme specification on appointment and are asked to confirm this in their annual report to the University; all external examiners can access unit descriptors through the University's Unit Web Search facility. Course documentation is made available to staff through the College's SharePoint site.

1.10   Courses are reviewed annually and units and assessment strategies may be amended in response to external examiner feedback and the Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review (ASQER) process. If changes to units are agreed by the course team, Unit Management Approval forms must be completed and sent to the University by the specified deadline. Programme specifications must be updated at the same time.
All documents are updated in the University's Unit Web Search site, course handbooks and the College's VLE. All the College's units have a designated coordinator who has overall responsibility for the quality of the unit and for ensuring that the unit descriptor held on the Unit Management System is up to date.

1.11   The review team examined programme specifications, a selection of unit descriptors, course handbooks, the University's Unit Web Search system and external examiner reports, and spoke to staff and students.

1.12   A review of the evidence available to the team and discussions with students and staff confirmed that definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learning achievements was provided by the College. The review team concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to academic standards is 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

1.13   Proposals for new courses and major reviews of existing courses can be triggered by a number of factors, including changes in the industry, recruitment patterns and feedback from students. The College does not have a formal process for considering new course proposals; however, the Assistant Principal and Higher Education Development and Quality Manager work with Learning Managers and course teams to prepare for the University's four-stage approval process. Proposals are discussed with the University contacts and, where appropriate, pre-validation industrial review panels comprising industry representatives review the content of the proposed course and provide feedback to the course team. The Higher Education Development and Quality Manager leads the College's preparations for course approval in accordance with the University's procedures. Courses are validated for a maximum of six years.

1.14   Courses are reviewed by the University through a combined Periodic Partnership and Programme Review process. The most recent review, which took place in January 2014, confirmed the continuing relevance and validity of the courses considered at the event. Courses are also monitored annually through the College's Higher Education Quality and Standards Cycle by Boards of Studies, Unit Assessment Boards and the ASQER process. Unit tutors produce an annual Unit Evaluation Report which feeds into the ASQER.

1.15   The review team read notes of pre-industrial review panel meetings, validation documentation for undergraduate and postgraduate courses, the report of the recent Periodic Partnership and Programme Review and unit evaluation reports. The team also explored the approach through meetings with staff.

1.16   The review team concluded that the approval and review processes are thorough and effective in ensuring the validity and relevance of the courses delivered by the College on behalf of the University. The College therefore meets the Expectation and the risk to academic standards is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter A5: Externality*

Findings

1.17 The College makes use of external expertise in the design, approval and review of its courses. Most proposals for new courses are considered by a panel of industry experts. Where this is not feasible because, for example, the College has identified an emerging market, the College consults a range of external stakeholders including University contacts, external examiners, prospective students and expert practitioners. The University's procedures for course approval and review involve the participation of independent external assessors who are nominated by the College and appointed by the University. Periodic course reviews also evaluate the College's response to feedback from external examiners.

1.18 Subject and award external examiners are appointed by the University following nomination by the College. Prior to 2012-13, external examiners were appointed to a course or group of courses. However, following a change to the University's regulations and procedures, external examiners are now assigned to specific units in their area of expertise. The University inducts new external examiners and provides annual training events. Following appointment, College tutors liaise directly with external examiners concerning visits to the College and their attendance at Unit Assessment Boards and/or Examination Boards. External examiners visit the College throughout the year, meeting groups of students as well as staff, and this is considered good practice under Expectation B7 (see paragraph 2.33). External examiner reports confirm that standards are appropriate to the level and qualification and the standard of student performance is comparable to similar subjects in other UK institutions. The College also draws on other external expertise including University counterparts who deliver training. College staff are also members of a wide range of external networks and industry-specific associations.

1.19 The review team examined the University's procedures for validation and periodic review and the appointment of external examiners, reports of validation and review events from external examiners, and talked with staff and a representative group of students.

1.20 The review team was assured that there was appropriate use of independent and external participation in the management of programmes. The team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the 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

1.21 The assessment strategies for the College's courses are approved, monitored and reviewed in accordance with the University's procedures. Assessment loading is governed by the University's Policy for Maximum Assessment Loads. Course teams prepare assessment plans which adhere to the approved programme specification and unit descriptors. Students are assessed by the College in accordance with the University's Examination and Assessment Regulations for Sparsholt College. The College's policies relating to assessment are set out clearly in the Unit Management and Internal Verification Handbook. Following the publication of definitive unit descriptors on the University Management System, College tutors prepare assignment briefs and specific assessment criteria which are aligned to the University's general grade criteria. These are in turn based on FHEQ level descriptors. Assessment briefs are internally verified by unit coordinators or group/year tutors. Pre-assessment verification is subject to sampling by the Area Learning Manager or as part of an audit of unit files as continuing professional development activity for staff. In accordance with the University's policy, external examiners are not required to approve assessment briefs and examination papers before they are set. All examination papers and coursework are marked anonymously where practicable, and the College has clear requirements for the application of second marking.

1.22 Post-assessment internal verification of a sample of students' assessed work is carried out to ensure that assessment criteria have been applied consistently. Where staff are new to assessment, or assessment at a particular level, all assessed work is internally verified. The internal verification process is reviewed through twice-yearly standardisation exercises, which provide opportunities to share good practice. The Higher Education Development and Quality Manager has oversight of assessment practices and arranges staff development and training sessions on assessment. Assessed work is reviewed by external examiners in accordance with guidance issued by the University.

1.23 Unit Assessment Boards and Examination Boards are held at the College. The Unit Assessment Board is chaired by the College's Assistant Principal and attended by subject external examiners and course team members. The Examination Board is chaired by a University representative and attended by the award external examiner and course tutors. The College uses the University's procedures in respect of the accreditation of prior learning (APL), although the College has not received any claims for APL in recent years.

1.24 The review team tested the effectiveness of the College's assessment processes by examining relevant University and College regulations and policies and samples of assessment instruments, reading minutes of Examination Boards and external examiner reports, and speaking to staff and students. External examiners confirm the appropriateness of assessment standards and that assessment processes are sound and conducted fairly.

1.25 The College introduces students to good academic practices during induction and through the early stages of their course. The University's Examination and Assessment Regulations for the College state that 'all assessment offences will be dealt with under Sparsholt College's established procedures'. The College confirmed that this referred to the College's Academic Performance and Conduct Policy and Procedures which were approved in July 2012. This document sets out the College's procedures for dealing with student misconduct (general and academic) and poor academic performance but does not define what is meant by an academic offence, nor does it provide the authority for the application of

academic sanctions, other than exclusion. Course handbooks contain limited information about plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct. However, students confirmed that good academic practice is covered as part of the pre-study course, during induction and when completing the first assignment. Wherever practicable, all assessments are submitted using plagiarism-detection software. The review team were informed of one recent instance of plagiarism which had been dealt with by the Examination Board but the regulatory basis for the application of any academic penalty is unclear.

1.26   Overall, the review team concluded that the assessment of students at the College is valid and reliable and that the award of credit and qualifications is based on the achievement of intended learning outcomes. However, the failure to specify what is meant by an academic offence and the academic penalties that may be imposed presents a moderate risk that students may be treated inconsistently. The review team therefore **recommends** that, in consultation with the awarding body, the College develop procedures for dealing with cases of academic misconduct, which include clear definitions of what constitutes an academic offence and what academic penalties may be applied, and make these available to students by July 2014.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

1.27   In reaching its judgement regarding academic standards, the review team considered its findings against the criteria outlined in Annex two of the published handbook. All Expectations relating to the maintenance of threshold academic standards are met and the risk is considered low for all, with the exception of one moderate risk relating to assessment.

1.28   The review team identified that the University procedures for maintaining academic standards were consistently applied and operated effectively. The design and implementation of College procedures were broadly sound and generally met the Expectations of the Quality Code, although the absence of clear procedures for categorising, identifying and managing cases of academic misconduct presents a moderate risk to standards. The review team therefore recommends that, in consultation with the awarding body, the College develop procedures for dealing with cases of academic misconduct, which include clear definitions of what constitutes an academic offence and what academic penalties may be applied, and make these available to students.

1.29   Overall, the team concludes that the maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered at the College on behalf of its awarding body **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   The College uses the University's procedures for course approval, which involve a four-stage process. There is external involvement in the process in testing demand and industry relevance and in the Approval Committee. The external adviser on the Approval Committee is nominated by the College but approved by the University, and is required to have industrial and academic experience to judge both industry relevance and academic standards. Before starting the formal process there is a development phase at the College facilitated by the Higher Education Development and Quality Manager, which normally includes the scrutiny of proposals through pre-validation industrial review panels to assess market demand and industry needs.

2.2   The review team scrutinised the self-evaluation document, the policy and documentation from course approvals and pre-industrial review panel meetings, and asked questions of staff at the College to explore the approach. The documentation reviewed included examples of unit descriptors and programme specifications as well as committee reports.

2.3   From the evidence provided, the team confirmed that the process operates in line with the requirements of the policy and is clearly managed and documented by the awarding body with extensive involvement of staff from the College. As the validation process is that of the awarding body, the College has little scope to evaluate the procedure itself, but has introduced appropriate internal processes to prepare and make good use of its strong links with industry both before and after the start of the formal University approval process. The College consults industrial contacts about demand, but also about the relevance of the curriculum to industry needs and the employability of graduates. The strength of the College links with the industry in this regard is considered **good practice** by the team. The College has recently sought validation for two new master's courses and it is clear that extension into postgraduate study has been considered carefully. Indeed, the subject areas were chosen to capitalise on the academic strength of the teaching team in terms of higher degree qualifications and research activities, and the resource considerations were given high priority to ensure comprehensive resource provision prior to launch.

2.4   The team confirmed that the process for the design and validation of courses is thorough, and therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Admissions*

Findings

2.5   The College has a clear and unambiguous Admissions Policy for undergraduate entrants applying via UCAS or, in the case of part-time higher education candidates, directly to the College, and this includes an accessibility statement which ensures that all applicants have equality of opportunity throughout the process. Full-time HE students apply via the UCAS portal and the College are bound by the UCAS process guidelines to ensure that candidates are kept up to date on the progress of their applications. Part-time HE students apply directly to the College and receive a reply within 10 working days and offers within 21 working days of application or interview. All course entry requirements are published via the College website and are available to students in advance of any application.

2.6   The review team analysed the self-evaluation document and the evidence pertaining to admissions which included the Admissions Policy and College Accessibility Statement. The team also conducted meetings with staff and students to investigate the extent to which the College fulfils its responsibilities in this area.

2.7   The Admissions Policy is easily available on the College's webpage, and there are clear directions for applicants on the sources of additional information within the College. Applications for entry are reviewed by the curriculum teams, leading to decisions which are then signed off by the Learning Managers for each subject area. Failed applicants are entitled to feedback and can formally appeal against a refusal. Entry requirements are benchmarked against institutions with similar provision and are discussed and agreed with teaching teams at the College. Staff and students were satisfied that the admissions process was fair and facilitated entry for suitable candidates.

2.8   The review team considered that the design and operation of the policies and procedures to admit students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied. The team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

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

2.9   The College has an active senior management team who have implemented a strong strategic planning approach (based on three-year cycles) to ensure that the College is continually evolving the learning and teaching practice experience. The Higher Education Academic Strategy produced in 2012-13 clearly outlines the development of staff as a key theme and the associated Staff Development Policy and Higher Education Scholarly Activity Policy articulates the approach. The College expects all staff to incorporate best pedagogic practice and research-informed teaching into their practice and gives high priority to the professional training of staff. Those with direct responsibility for teaching are required to have, or be working towards, appropriate teaching qualifications, which are normally provided through the University's APEX award, leading to fellowship status of the Higher Education Academy. New members of staff are assigned a mentor and all staff are subject to annual review and supported with action plans for improvement following observed sessions, and regular formal appraisals. Line managers are responsible for supporting staff, although the College has also appointed Senior Practitioners with a specific remit for promoting improvement in teaching and learning practice. Teaching staff are also encouraged to share professional practice with peers and students through groups such as the Research and Standards group, and professional development activities.

2.10   The team tested the operation of this approach by analysing relevant strategic documents and policies, and documentation demonstrating the peer observation and continuing professional development activities at the College The team also met staff at all levels of the College to explore their experience of teaching and learning.

2.11   Through meetings with staff, the review team confirmed the strong focus on staff development at the College. Staff had appropriate teaching qualifications and around 40 per cent of staff had achieved or were in the process of completing doctorates. The review team met staff undertaking the University's APEX programme, and were informed that course fees are paid for by the College and remission from teaching duties offered. The use of Senior Practitioners as mentors for more junior staff was appreciated by those involved and all staff met confirmed the value of the peer observation scheme which operates under National Student Survey (NSS) criteria to drive improvement in teaching practice. The College also makes use of management information gleaned from their own tri-annual student questionnaires, and from the NSS data to gauge improvements in teaching and learning. The College has higher satisfaction ratings among their students than the sector average. The team found that students were satisfied with the level of teaching and expertise of staff and particularly valued the currency of the provision facilitated by the industrial experience of staff.

2.12   With regards to the facilitation of students as independent learners, an example of the College approach is the 'Flying Start' programme which helps students adjust to the demands of higher education and the Academic Skills Unit taught in the first year, both of which were valued by students.

2.13   The team confirmed that the College articulates, systematically reviews and enhances the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices to enable students

to meet their academic potential. The review team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities 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

2.14   The College's Strategic Plan, as monitored by the Strategic Leadership Team, gives a comprehensive insight into how the College attends to its responsibilities in this area and is underpinned by the Higher Education Academic Strategy. This document provides a framework for monitoring strategies to develop students' academic, personal and professional potential, with annual milestone objectives in the three-year plan serving as a roadmap for achievement of the overall goals. The Higher Education Strategy Group evaluates the resource provision to ensure these meet student requirements and reports progress on strategic decisions.

2.15   The review team analysed documents produced for validation and review, and conducted meetings with staff and students to investigate the extent to which the College fulfils its responsibilities in this area. Documents reviewed included, but were not limited to, the Strategic Plan, Higher Education Strategy Group Minutes, the Higher Education Academic Strategy, the Staff Development Policy, and the Higher Education Scholarly Activity Policy.

2.16   There has been extensive investment in facilities, services and IT and the College provides appropriate physical and virtual resources to support teaching and learning. The College has also provided study lounges and seminar rooms specifically for use by higher education students. It was evident from the recent validation of new master's provision that resource considerations are thoroughly considered prior to a commitment to deliver being made. There is a developed system of pastoral and academic support through a dedicated on-site student support service, with external counselling available to students if necessary. Students have four mandatory 1:1 tutorials every year, and there are group tutorials every week during the first year to ensure that students are facilitated in reaching their potential. Students expressed satisfaction with the College's open-door approach to dealing with academic or pastoral issues, describing it as effective and an important part of the College culture. The library resources are reviewed by teams regularly and the review team heard that library staff are proactive in ensuring that currency in learning resources is maintained. Students also have access to the University's library facilities. Work experience is a feature in most courses and is deemed integral to student professional development, both in terms of practice and developing employability skills to assist when formally joining the job market. Students have use of specialist resources on-site and also exposure to staff and industry representatives who are experts in their field and hold senior roles and responsibilities within the profession, including the opportunities for involvement in externally funded research. The review team considered the strength of the College links with industry to be **good practice** in facilitating student employability.

2.17   The review team considered that the College has appropriate arrangements and resources in place to enable students to develop their potential during their studies. The team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities 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

2.18   The College's approach to student involvement is set out in its Higher Education Academic Strategy and articulated to students through the mutually agreed Higher Education Student Charter. The Higher Education Student Engagement Policy highlights the strategies employed by the College in this area to create an environment within which staff and students can discuss enhancements to the student and learning experience. Students are represented at various levels within the College through the Board of Governors, the Quality and Standards subcommittee and Boards of Studies. The Student Council also provides a forum for discussion of issues. Initiatives in this area are promoted and coordinated by a Senior Practitioner with specific responsibility for engagement with the higher education student body.

2.19   The review team analysed documents pertaining to student engagement and supplemented this information through meetings with staff and students, including student representatives and students who had been recruited as Higher Education Study Coaches.

2.20   It was evident from the meetings with staff and students that student representation is well embedded within the College. Training is provided for representatives and the College has adjusted timetables and reimbursed travel costs to facilitate student attendance at meetings. Students are represented at the recently established twice-yearly Boards of Studies, which provide an effective forum for College staff, students and representatives of the University to monitor courses, and there are examples of how this engagement has contributed to improvements. The Student Council, which comprises elected course representatives and is chaired by students, meets four times a year with College managers to explore ways of enhancing the quality of the provision and the student experience. The Student Council has been consulted on various enhancements including: the development of the Study Coach scheme, the introduction of online marking, the forthcoming development of the higher education student lounge, the introduction of the higher education newsletter, and the HE4U VLE page. The Higher Education Charter is a further example of where this collaboration has proved successful. Feedback is obtained from students both formally through internal and external surveys and informally, for example through group and individual tutorials and ongoing requests by staff for feedback on delivery methods. Members of the Higher Education Strategy Group attend Student Council, Cross-College Learner Voice meetings and Boards of Studies.

2.21   The higher education student newsletter and higher education-specific pages on the VLE are key communication tools for the College, and students attested to the effectiveness of these channels. The Senior Practitioner oversees the new Higher Education Study Coach, the implementation of which has been discussed through the Higher Education Strategy Group and Student Council. The scheme involves students on level 5 or 6 providing study support sessions to students in the first year of their course. Interested students are required to apply for the position of Study Coach and are selected through an interview process and trained in their role. The positions are paid and are subject to staff appraisal procedures. Study coaches are attached to year one tutor groups and have timetabled sessions with small groups of students who may have referred themselves or been referred by tutors. Although the scheme is in its infancy and operational details are being fine-tuned, staff believed that is contributing to improved retention and the scheme is welcomed by students. Study coaches also noted the value of the role to their own academic and skills development.

2.22   The College is actively involved in collaborating with students to improve, both individually and collectively, the educational experience for all those in attendance. Students were extremely positive about the College's approach to student engagement, and noted that the management are responsive to their needs and suggestions. The review team regarded the numerous ways in which the College has fostered engagement with students as **good practice**.

2.23   The review team considered that students are actively engaged in the enhancement of their educational experience, and therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

2.24   The College uses the University's Examination and Assessment Regulations as modified for use at the College which outline the arrangements for managing the assessment process. Programme specifications clearly map the assessment pattern across a course and this is also considered as part of the course validation process to ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. The College uses the University's guidelines on the maximum amount of assessment allowed for a particular credit value and assessment mix. It also uses the University's grade criteria, which are used to derive more contextualised marking criteria at unit and assessment level. There is extensive guidance on the moderation processes both before and after assessment. The College uses standardisation workshops as a form of staff development and requires the marking done by new staff to be moderated during their first year. The College policy requires the return of marked work within 15 days of submission, rather than the 20 days specified by the University.

2.25   There are clear procedures for recording, documenting and communicating assessment decisions and the College holds both Unit Assessment Boards to confirm unit marks and Examination Boards to determine progression and classification. The Foundation Degree in Veterinary Nursing Science is the only course with involvement from a professional, statutory and regulatory body and is in the final stages of securing accreditation by RCVS, following RCVS's move from awarding to validating body. The College uses the University's APL procedure to recognise prior learning under which the University has final sign-off on all decisions, although there have been no recent applications.

2.26   The review team scrutinised relevant policies as well as programme specifications, unit guides, grade criteria, assessment briefings, feedback templates and minutes of grade review and Examination Board meetings to assess implementation. It supplemented this through meetings with both staff and students, the latter being particularly important in testing student understanding of assessment and their experience of marking and feedback.

2.27   The review team found that feedback is not always returned within the 15 days specified, although the exceptions are relatively few and are monitored by the College. Students confirmed that they found feedback thorough and helpful and noted that it always included suggestions for improvement. The College recognises the importance of formative assessment and provides an opportunity for first-years to submit a piece of work for formative assessment early in the autumn term. The Assignment/Assessment Feedback sheet contains unit-specific detail on the task, mark breakdown and unit-specific marking criteria. Students are offered access to marked examination scripts but take-up is poor, so group tutorials are being used to provide examination feedback. Most assignments are submitted through plagiarism-detection software and online assessment is being piloted with a view to gradually extending its use where appropriate. Students have access to very detailed guidance on how the College's rules on extenuating circumstances operate. Students who sit an examination declare themselves fit to sit, but students can submit evidence in relation to late submission or deferred attempts. Students can access their results on MyPort, where assessment decisions are stored, and students met by the team confirmed familiarity and satisfaction with the system.

2.28   As referred to under Expectation A6 (see paragraph 1.25), the review team noted an absence of clear written definitions and guidance on assessment offences. The University regulations refer to the College's disciplinary procedures outlined in the Academic Performance and Conduct Policy and Procedures. Although plagiarism is listed as one of a number of possible triggers of disciplinary action, the policy contains no definition of unacceptable assessment practices, no procedure for dealing with academic offences and no details of the academic penalties that may be applied, which poses a risk to the consistency of action. The team therefore recommends under Expectation A6 that the College work with the awarding body to address this weakness in assessment practice. It was clear to the review team that students are aware of the assessment regulations and understand what constitutes good academic practice. Staff also explained that care is taken through induction and preparatory materials to explain good academic practice, so the lack of clear written guidance and definitions does not appear to hinder students' understanding.

2.29   The review team concluded that the policies and procedures used by the College ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes are thorough and consistently applied, with the exception of formally defining academic malpractice and setting out academic penalties. Overall, the team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities 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

2.30   External examiners are nominated by the College and approved by the University. The University has detailed rules on the appointment and role of external examiners, which cover such areas as the qualifications and experience required, the mode of appointment, conflicts of interest and the role including the distinction between subject and award external examiners which was introduced in 2012-13. External examiners can raise serious concerns with the relevant Head of School at the University and have the right to report to the University's Vice-Chancellor. There are clear procedures for following up external examiners' reports and responses are submitted to the University. External examiner reports are also evaluated in the ASQER reports and in the Partner Annual Standards Quality Evaluative Review (PASQER) report which the College prepares and submits to the University. The external examiners' report forms cover all the key areas, with different questions for unit and award examiners.

2.31   The review team reviewed the policy documents on external examining and the ASQER and PASQER process, and reviewed external examiners' reports to determine how these were followed through the annual monitoring process. It also asked questions of staff and students and looked at the College student portal, HE4U, to ascertain what details on external examiners and their reports are made available to students.

2.32   It was clear to the review team that external examiners' reports are carefully considered by the College and feature prominently in annual monitoring reports. The review team did note that a small number of reports were not received in time for the ASQER process, but reports were chased up by both the University and the College and in no case has a report not been received. The team noted that University regulations no longer require external examiners to review draft assessment instruments in advance and the College has therefore discontinued this practice. The meeting with students confirmed the student written submission claim that students have a good understanding of the role of the external examiner, and the team was able to confirm that external examiner reports are made available to students on the HE4U pages of the VLE. Reports are reviewed at the autumn Board of Studies meetings, where students and staff from the University are present. The Higher Education Development and Quality Manager writes to all external examiners to indicate how the report is being responded to and any actions being progressed.

2.33   It is normal College practice to arrange for external examiners to visit once or twice during the academic year in addition to their attendance at the assessment boards to meet with staff and students. External examiners' reports confirmed this practice and it was evident that both students and external examiners value this level of engagement. College staff noted that the contact with external examiners is valuable in keeping it in touch with developments in the fields of study and aligning with the best practice in higher education. Based on the evidence and commentaries of students and staff, the review team confirmed that the high level of external examiner engagement with both staff and students facilitated by the College during the academic year was **good practice**.

2.34   The review team concluded that the College adopt a scrupulous approach to the use of external examiners. Therefore, the College meets the Expectation and the level of risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

2.35   The College has more closely aligned its monitoring and review processes for higher education provision with those of the University. These are set out in the University's Programme Monitoring and Review Procedure and its Collaborative Provision Policy. ASQER is based on a template and involves reference to course data, external examiners' reports and unit evaluation reports, which have their own short pro forma. The monitoring process involves review, reflection and action planning, as well as noting quality enhancements. The ASQER reports are considered at Board of Studies meetings, which are held twice a year and are attended by students and staff from the University. The Higher Education Development and Quality Manager prepares the annual PASQER report which is a summation of the course ASQER reports and submitted for review by the University. Every six years the University holds a Periodic Partnership and Programme Review (PPPR) - the last was in January 2014 - and this leads to reapproval of the courses. The College follows the University's procedure for programme withdrawals, which takes account of the needs of current students.

2.36   The review team scrutinised the self-evaluation document, policy documents as well as examples of unit evaluation reports, course ASQER reports, the PASQER documentation relating to the recent PPPR, and evidence demonstrating consideration of courses being withdrawn. This was supplemented by questions at meetings with staff held during the review visit.

2.37   The examples of monitoring at unit, course and College level scrutinised by the team demonstrated that the College, in conjunction with the University, has thorough procedures that make use of relevant information from external examiner reports, student surveys, and data on progression and student achievement. The system works in an effective hierarchical way and University staff are involved in the process through membership of the Board of Studies and the University's review of the annual returns submitted by the College. The procedure used for programme suspension or withdrawal in practice includes safeguards for continuing students and requires approval by the University.

2.38   The policies and procedures followed by the College for routinely monitoring and periodically reviewing provision are largely derived from the University and operate effectively. The review team concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

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

2.39   Appeals are handled in line with the University's policy which allows for appeals against decisions made by Extenuating Circumstances Officers, Unit Assessment Boards and Examination Boards. The regulations set out the grounds for appeal and the process for making an appeal and how these are handled. The same policy also allows students to request a remark, but only where there has been an administrative error or procedural irregularity. The remark can result in a higher or lower mark than awarded previously. Appeals are made to the University's Academic Registrar who handles consideration of the appeal. Students are urged in the first instance to seek an interview either with the Extenuating Circumstances Officer, the Chair of the Unit Assessment Board or the Chair of the Board of Examiners to clarify the position.

2.40   The College's Feedback Policy and Procedures cover both formal complaints and commendations from students, although the self-evaluation document also stated that good informal mechanisms exist within the College for students to raise issues of concern. The procedures set clear timelines for dealing with a complaint and allow two stages of escalation to a higher level if the complainant is not satisfied. The Higher Education Development and Quality Manager provides support for students who need advice on making appeals and complaints.

2.41   The review team examined the self-evaluation documentation and the evidence provided pertaining to appeals and complaints, including the relevant policy documents. In addition, the team questioned staff and students on the operation of the process and examined the log of complaints.

2.42   To date there have been no appeals from students on higher education programmes. The students the team met had low awareness of the appeals process, but were clear on the channels available for further information should they be dissatisfied with an academic issue. The College places great emphasis on working closely with students to address concerns at an early stage and obviate the need for a formal complaint to be submitted. The student written submission and the meeting with students indicated low student awareness of the formal complaints mechanism, but students noted that the College was very responsive to issues raised and sought to address concerns promptly. There is a log of complaints, which is monitored by the Strategic Curriculum Group, and the number of higher education complaints is low.

2.43   The team found that the University appeals policy and the College's feedback policy provide fair, effective and timely approaches for handling students' complaints and academic appeals. The review team concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies 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

2.44   The College is not a degree-awarding body and uses the University of Portsmouth to validate its foundation degrees, honour's degrees and master's programmes. It has been accorded Associate College status by the University since 2010 and makes extensive use of the policies and procedures of the awarding body. The University has responsibility for setting standards and monitors them through external examiners, monitoring and review processes and engagement in Boards of Studies meetings and Examination Boards. The University issues the transcripts and degree certificates to students.

2.45   The College's main partnerships are with employers who provide work placements for students and opportunities for work-based learning. The majority of higher education students undertake a placement in the first year of their undergraduate course and some courses require placements in subsequent years as well. The placement provider may be an external employer or the College, depending on which environment can provide the best experience for students in their chosen area of work. For example, in some areas the College has specialist facilities which are superior to those offered by employers and in other cases employers offer opportunities unavailable within the College. The College is in the process of formally aligning its policies and procedures with the Quality Code, *Chapter B10* and has developed Higher Education Work Placement Guidance.

2.46   The review team reviewed the guidance on placements as well as examples of placement logs and placement handbooks, supplementing this with questions to staff and students. It investigated the College's relationship with the University through scrutiny of the documents provided and through meetings with staff and students.

2.47   The relationship with the University appears to be strong and suits the College well. The College has chosen to have all its higher education provision validated by the University because of the academic fit and quality of the relationship and particularly values the University's expertise in scientific disciplines. Regular attendance of University staff at Board of Studies meetings and Examination Boards was evident. The University manages and plays a significant role in course approval, periodic review and reviewing the outcomes of the annual monitoring undertaken at the College through ASQER and PASQER reports. Students were well aware that they were studying for University of Portsmouth qualifications, benefiting from the use of University library resources and used to obtaining their marks from the MyPort system. Recently the College has changed its systems to allow greater alignment with the University's systems and has chosen to adopt its nomenclature, in part to help distinguish its higher education provision and ensure that it is viewed in the right context.

2.48   The procedures and practices for managing placements ensure that employers are suitable and have the right insurance cover in place. The College reviews the experience with placement providers before allowing students to apply for future placement positions. It is the students' responsibility to obtain a placement which is seen as an important employability skill. Nevertheless, the College does provide support including a placement finder on HE4U. When placements fall through or a student cannot find a suitable placement, arrangements are made to place the student within the College environment in an area appropriate to their skill development. Only in the Foundation Degree Veterinary Nursing do placement providers contribute to formal assessment, although it is normal for

placement providers to give feedback to students. On the veterinary nursing course, those involved in assessment are appropriately qualified and approved by RCVS; the external examiner also has additional duties in checking the workplace assessment.

2.49   The review team noted the high quality and productive relationship with the College's awarding body. Although the College is still working to further develop its policies and procedures for work placements, the review team concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities 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*

Findings

2.50   The College has no research degree provision, therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

Quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.51   In reaching its judgement on the quality of learning opportunities, the review team considered its findings against the criteria outlined in Annex two of the published handbook. All Expectations relating to the quality of learning opportunities are met and the risk is considered low in all areas.

2.52   The team found a number of features of good practice which all exhibited the College's willingness to engage others in developing the quality of learning opportunities. The College has systematically fostered engagement with students through a number of mechanisms including the student representation system, the Student Council, Higher Education Study Coaches, and other activities coordinated by the Senior Practitioner for Higher Education. Notably these initiatives have arisen from suggestions made by staff, students and external examiners. The College has also developed strong links with industry and uses these proactively to support curriculum development and provide opportunities for student employability within the curriculum and through the provision of work placements. The College has also embraced the relationships it has with external examiners to the benefit of both staff and students.

2.53   Overall, the team concluded that the quality of learning opportunities provided by 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 has a protocol for managing information which sets out responsibilities clearly, as well as who monitors and evaluates the information. The protocol covers information for potential applicants, outside stakeholders and current students. The website and prospectus are seen as the key tools for prospective applicants. Sign-off is by the Vice-Principal and the Director of Marketing at College and the University also requires final sign-off on the materials. Current students receive information through course and College handbooks and the VLE is used as a key tool for providing access to definitive programme information.

3.2 The review team reviewed the protocol and other documents supplied to it about the management of information, the relevant sections of the self-evaluation document and the student written submission, and asked questions of both staff and students. It also reviewed samples of the documentation available to potential and current students such as the website, the prospectus, the College Handbook, course handbooks, unit guides, the higher education newsletter, the HE4U student portal and course materials available on the VLE.

3.3 The student written submission indicated that pre-entry information is helpful but not sufficiently detailed, but from its review of the website and the prospectus, the team considered that the current information provided to potential applicants was of high quality and at an acceptable level of detail. Furthermore, the students the review team met also noted that pre-entry information was very good. The review team did notice one isolated error on the website in that the fees schedule was labelled 2012-13 although the fee levels quoted were correct. In addition, the HEFCE audit of Key Information Set (KIS) data had revealed some errors, which the College had moved quickly to address, revising the protocol as necessary to ensure that systems are in future better able to deliver what HEFCE expects. Indeed, the team received three iterations of the protocol in the space of just a few months, as the College adjusted to meet the Expectations of the Quality Code and responded to outside requirements relating to the Wider Information Set and the KIS.

3.4 Information is provided to students via course handbooks and the College Handbook, which are generally very thorough and student-friendly, although lacking sufficient material on good academic practice. There is also a higher education newsletter made available through HE4U and prepared by the Senior Practitioner in Higher Education. HE4U is also where external examiners' reports are made available to students. Programme specifications and unit specifications meet expectations and are informative documents. The course handbook is useful and informative with links to other documents, an assessment map, key contacts, support and facilities, how to raise issues, the role of externals, student representation, assessment, and extenuating circumstances. Unit guides are very student-friendly and cover staff and student responsibilities. The College has been particularly inventive in using short PowerPoint presentations in HE4U to prepare students for Higher Education Review and to raise their awareness of the process. The students the review team met stated that they had good information about all aspects of the courses and particularly appreciated that HE4U made all this available in one place.

3.5   The team concluded that the wide range of information available to current students through HE4U, combined with the fact that it was provided in an easily accessible and student-centred format, was exceptional and **good practice**. In relation to outward-facing information, the team recognised the College was still developing its arrangements to ensure external requirements are fully met and **affirms** the action taken by the College to develop and implement its protocol for information management to ensure that public information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. Overall, the team concluded that the College meets the Expectation and the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

3.6   In reaching its judgement on the quality of information produced about its provision, the review team considered its findings against the criteria outlined in Annex two of the published handbook. The Expectation in this area is met and the risk considered low.

3.7   In assessing the effectiveness of the College in this area, the review team noted a difference between information provided to current students and the public-facing information provided for outside stakeholders, including potential applicants. The approach to the provision of information for an internal audience had a number of strong features and the presentation and accessibility of information to current students was an example of good practice. By contrast, the team noted that information provided through the website for an external audience was less robust and that policies and procedures for the management of such information were evolving. The team therefore affirms the actions being taken by the College to strengthen its approach in this regard.

3.8   Overall, the team concluded that the quality of information provided 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 identifies enhancement initiatives through different levels and activities within the College and has produced an overview of the components within the quality assurance structure which have a role in considering enhancement. These include monitoring and evaluation activities such as the ASQER reports and Examination Boards alongside developmental activities such as the Student Council and the teaching and learning observation cycle. The College uses a number of performance indicators in this regard such as NSS and College survey results; recruitment, retention, progression and student attendance data; and learner voice outcomes. The Higher Education Strategy Group provides strategic leadership in this area and enhancement initiatives are also presented to the College's Governing Body through the Quality and Standards Committee, which meets three times a year. The College has appointed Senior Practitioners who have specific responsibilities for supporting teaching and learning practices within higher education and since 2012 have had a specific Senior Practitioner role with responsibility for engagement and communication with students on higher education courses. More recently, this Senior Practitioner has overseen the new Higher Education Study Coach scheme which has formalised peer-to-peer support for learning. The College cites enhancement initiatives around student engagement and retention as having a bearing on the year-on-year increases in student satisfaction.

4.2	The team analysed the self-evaluation documentation and other documents pertaining to this area which included but were not limited to the College Strategic Plan, Higher Education Strategy Group minutes, the Higher Education Academic Strategy, the Higher Education Student Charter, information on the Flying Start and Study Coach initiatives, staff development activities, Board of Studies minutes, and the student written submission. In addition, the team met with staff and students, including students recently recruited as Higher Education Study Coaches.

4.3	The review team heard how the College makes use of its extensive industry links, and the comments and suggestions of its students and external examiners to enhance learning opportunities for students. The College runs staff development days during which good practice is disseminated and implementation is followed up by the Learning Managers for each subject area. The College actively supports academic and professional development of staff, particularly through sponsoring higher degrees and through the activities of the Research Study Group for staff. Examples of the College's approach to enhancement include the Flying Start Programme, which was initially introduced to help mature students in their transition to higher education, but the College have since agreed to offer this to all students in response to student requests. Another example is the introduction of the Higher Education Study Coach Scheme which facilitates peer teaching and support, the implementation of which has been closely monitored by the College. This scheme is still in its infancy although the College has plans for its evaluation. The communications strategies coordinated through the Senior Practitioner and the introduction of Student Council consultative forums offer further examples of the ways in which the College has systematically fostered engagement with students to enhance the quality of learning opportunities, which are considered good practice under Expectation B5 (see paragraph 2.22). The review team also saw evidence of the careful consideration of performance indicators such as the NSS and internal statistics to identify areas for improvement. One notable example was the action taken in response to lower-than-average retention

figures on one course, following which recruitment was suspended while investigative work was carried out. A suite of activities geared at improving student attendance were introduced, including monitoring and analysis of attendance as part of retention data, the deployment of a Senior Practitioner responsible for student engagement, the tailoring of pre-entry advice and guidance, and the provision of initiatives such as the Flying Start Programme. This is leading to improvements in retention and achievement College-wide, and the team considers this proactive and strategic approach to improving student retention to be **good practice**.

4.4   The team concluded that the College meets the Expectation as deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of student learning opportunities, and the risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.5   The College takes deliberate steps to improve the quality of student learning opportunities which is evidenced through statements on strategic intent, quality assurance processes, formal developmental opportunities and responses to feedback from internal and external sources. The review team particularly noted that the approach taken to improving student retention was an example of good practice.

4.6   The review team concluded that the College **meets** UK expectations for the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Findings

5.1 The choice of theme was determined by student representatives through the Student Council and chosen because quality assurance and enhancement is perceived by staff and students as a high priority that draws on all aspects of the student experience at the College.

5.2 As outlined under Expectation B3 (see paragraph 2.9), the College's approach to student involvement is set out in its Academic Strategy where it defines student engagement as promoting 'the concept of the independent learner, who adopts a shared responsibility for learning and the enhancement of learning to enrich their overall experience'. It is the ethos of the College to create an environment within which staff and students can discuss enhancements to the student and learning experience.

5.3 Students are represented on the Board of Governors and are full members of its Quality and Standards subcommittee. Although there is no reserved position for higher education, for the last five years, one of the student governor positions has been occupied by a higher education student. The Student Council, which comprises elected course representatives and is chaired by students, meets four times a year with College managers to explore ways of enhancing the quality of the provision and the student experience. Training is provided for representatives and the College has adjusted timetables and reimbursed travel costs to facilitate student attendance. The Student Council has been consulted on various enhancements including: the development of the Study Coach scheme, the introduction of online marking, the forthcoming development of the higher education student lounge, and the introduction of the higher education newsletter and HE4U VLE page. So far the Council has been used by College managers primarily as a consultative forum rather than students setting the agenda. Students are also represented at the recently established twice-yearly Boards of Studies, which provide an effective forum for College staff and students and representatives of the University to monitor and review courses and identify potential enhancements.

5.4 External examiners meet groups of students throughout the year and students commented that they derived benefits from this regular contact with the external examiner, who provides an independent perspective and acts as a source of sector good practice, such as peer-assisted mentoring and support which at the College has become the recently inaugurated Higher Education Study Coach scheme. The scheme involves students on level 5 or 6 providing study support sessions to students in the first year of their course. Interested students are required to apply for the position of Study Coach and are selected through an interview process. The positions are paid and are subject to staff appraisal procedures. The scheme is coordinated by the Higher Education Senior Practitioner, who provides training to the study coaches. Study coaches are attached to year one tutor groups and have timetabled sessions with small groups of students who may have referred themselves or been referred by tutors. Although the scheme is in its infancy and operational details are being fine-tuned, staff believed that it is contributing to improved retention and is welcomed by students.

5.5 The College states that student engagement is integrated into College processes and structures. Feedback is obtained from students both formally through internal and external surveys and informally, for example through group and individual tutorials and ongoing requests by staff for feedback on delivery methods. Members of the Higher Education Strategy Group attend Student Council, Cross-College Learner Voice meetings and Boards of Studies.

5.6   In June 2012 the College appointed a Senior Practitioner for Higher Education whose responsibilities include promoting student engagement. The Senior Practitioner introduced the student newsletter and is also responsible for HE4U.

5.7   Students report that the College promotes student involvement at all levels and that it is responsive to student feedback. The presence of senior staff at the Higher Education Student Council and Boards of Studies enables the College to identify student views and suggestions and to take action promptly. For example, at a recent Board of Studies meeting student representatives recommended that the pre-study course should be delivered to all students rather than targeted at mature students; this recommendation was taken to the Higher Education Strategy Group and has been approved for implementation for the next intake of students in September 2014. Students are kept informed of the outcomes of their feedback through a variety of means including: reports to the Higher Education Student Council and Boards of Study, the higher education newsletter, and briefings by staff at group tutorials. Student representatives also disseminate the outcomes to their peers.

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 bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Award
A qualification, or academic credit, conferred 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 bodies** 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* (FHEQIS).

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 bodies** 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 bodies 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.