

# Review of College Higher Education of Stephenson College

April 2013

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## About this review

This is a report of a Review of College Higher Education conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Stephenson College. The review took place on 16-17 April 2013 and was conducted by a team of reviewers, as follows:

- Emeritus Professor Susan Frost
- Mr Kevin Burnside
- Mr Craig Best (student reviewer).

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

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

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 4. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 7.

In reviewing Stephenson College the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [themes](#) for the academic year 2012-13 are the First Year Student Experience and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>2</sup> Background information about Stephenson College is given on page 4 of this report. A dedicated [page of the website](#) explains more about this review method and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.<sup>3</sup>

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

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

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

## Amended judgement

Stephenson College underwent a Review of College Higher Education in April 2013, which resulted in a judgement of 'meets UK expectations' against the academic standards of the awards the College offers on behalf of its awarding bodies. However, it also received judgements of 'requires improvement to meet UK expectations' against both the quality of student learning opportunities and the quality of information produced by the College about its learning opportunities, as well as a judgement of 'does not meet UK expectations' against its enhancement of student learning opportunities. These judgements are regarded as unsatisfactory and are subject to formal follow-up action by QAA, which includes the College's development of an action plan responding to the nine recommendations contained in the report.

The College published an action plan describing how it intended to address the review findings, putting particular emphasis on the weaknesses underlying the unsatisfactory judgements. Dates were set for the completion of each action. The team was clear that the best interests of students would be served by a speedy resolution, and that the action required by the College could be successfully completed within the timeframe.

The follow-up process included scrutiny by the review team of the College's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence along with a two-day review undertaken from 14-15 July 2014. The format of the visit was that of the original RCHE and afforded the review team the opportunity to meet with senior staff, teaching staff and students to triangulate the evidence base received over the preceding months.

The visit confirmed that the actions, germane to the Quality, Information and Enhancement judgements, had been successfully addressed. Actions against recommendations in standards, that received positive judgement, had also been completed on schedule. The team found:

- that the strategic oversight for higher education in the College has been developed and substantially strengthened
- that the recently reviewed observation policy sets out teaching and learning expectations for higher education staff
- that the College now has suitable measures in place to ensure learning resources are appropriate to allow students to achieve the learning outcomes of their programmes
- that the College now has a plan that sets out the aspirational aims of the College relating to learner voice
- that proprietary software is now used for student monitoring and as a support system for the collection and collation of higher education information data
- that a revised admissions policy was developed that clarified the decision-making process to ensure accurate, current, unbiased and appropriate information
- that the College operates a revised complaints policy and procedure
- that a public information working group was established at the College to improve information about learning opportunities, develop and implement protocols for the approval and monitoring of public information and set out threshold standards for the College's minimum expectation regarding the contents, detail and consistency of all publications (including print and electronic media)
- that the College has made good progress in establishing and implementing policies and procedures at institutional level designed to promote and review the enhancement of students' learning opportunities.

## Review of College Higher Education of Stephenson College

The judgement is now formally amended to indicate that the review team confirms that the recommendations relating to quality of learning opportunities, quality of information and the enhancement of student learning opportunities have been satisfactorily addressed and meets UK expectations, and the review can be considered to be signed off as complete.

## Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about Stephenson College (the College).

### QAA's judgements about Stephenson College

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

- The academic standards of the awards the College offers on behalf of its awarding bodies **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the College **requires improvement to meet UK expectations**.
- The quality of information produced by the College about its learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **does not meet UK expectations**.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **feature of good practice** at Stephenson College.

- The tripartite arrangement between major employers, Pearson and the College that is developing new approaches to vocational higher education (paragraph 1.13).

### Recommendations

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

Beginning immediately the College:

- put in place quality assurance systems for higher education which take full account of the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (paragraph 1.17)
- establish and implement policies and procedures at institutional level to promote and review the enhancement of higher education learning opportunities (paragraph 4.5).

The actions contained in these two recommendations are to be completed no later than June 2014.

By September 2013 the College:

- put in place policies and procedures that ensure that higher education students engage individually and collectively as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience (paragraph 2.13)
- put in place management information systems to enable the systematic use of higher education information data for quality assurance and enhancement at institutional and programme levels (paragraph 2.16)
- review its complaints and appeals processes to ensure that complaints and appeals can be conducted in a timely, fair and reasonable manner (paragraph 2.21)

- put in place effective systems to ensure that information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy (paragraph 3.5).

Prior to commencing the admissions process for 2014 the College:

- implement admissions policies and procedures that are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied to ensure that students are admitted to appropriate programmes at appropriate levels (paragraph 2.18).

Before the commencement of the Spring Term 2014 the College:

- develop and implement a strategic approach to higher education learning and teaching that includes staff development and takes full account of the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (paragraph 2.7)
- develop and implement a strategy for the provision and deployment of learning resources that effectively support higher education students in their learning (paragraph 2.10).

## Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

There is an absence of systematic, consistent involvement of students in quality assurance and enhancement. In its self-evaluation document the College acknowledges that student engagement in quality assurance and enhancement is informal and that the student profile makes regular contribution to quality improvement problematic.

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

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

## About Stephenson College

Stephenson College is a general further education college based in Coalville, Leicestershire, with a second campus in Nottingham. It describes its mission as 'Excellence and Innovation in Learning' which aims to permeate all aspects of College provision. The focus of the College's higher education provision, delivered from its Coalville campus, is to provide local people with opportunities to access higher education that is likely to improve their employability or to enhance their career progression. The College also aims to provide progression routes into vocational higher education programmes for the College's further education, apprenticeships and other mainstream provision to capitalise on the College's industry links. The College aims to widen participation in higher education for non-traditional entrants.

The College has 1,000 full-time further education students, 1,200 apprentices and 239 higher education students plus part-time adult further education, provision for the unemployed and commercial provision. In terms of income, higher education represents just over 6 per cent of the College total.

The College has undergone a significant restructuring since the last review in 2007. This includes the reorganisation in September 2012 of the College into four faculties: Construction, Creative Technologies, Engineering and Services to People. The impact of this reorganisation is outlined in the College's self-evaluation document, in which the College concludes that, in respect of its higher education provision, it requires improvement to meet UK expectations in three out of four judgement areas.

The higher education provision at the time of the review included the following programmes:

### **Pearson (formerly Edexcel)**

Automotive Engineering HNC  
Computer and Systems Development HNC/D  
Construction HND  
Construction and the Built Environment HNC/D  
Electrical Engineering HNC/D  
Mechanical Engineering HNC/D  
Motor Vehicle Engineering HNC  
Vehicle Operations HNC  
Vehicle Operations Management HNC

### **Nottingham Trent University**

Foundation Degree in Construction Management  
Foundation Degree in Business

### **University of Derby**

Foundation Degree in Early Years and Young Peoples Services  
Professional Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector  
Professional Graduate Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector

### **University of Bradford**

Foundation Degree in Dementia Studies

## Explanation of the findings about Stephenson College

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

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)<sup>6</sup> is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the [handbook](#) for the review method, also on the QAA website.<sup>7</sup>

### 1 Academic standards

#### Outcome

The academic standards at Stephenson College **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

#### Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 All higher education programmes within the scope of the review have been allocated to the appropriate level of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The College's four awarding bodies are responsible for ensuring that programmes have appropriate outcomes and suitable volumes of study.

#### Use of external examiners

1.2 The College's awarding bodies are generally responsible for appointing external examiners and verifiers and boards are hosted by the College or awarding bodies as appropriate. Reports are then referred to the College Higher Education Board of Study for consideration and for responses to be approved, to achieve oversight at college level. This is specified in the Higher Education Board of Study terms of reference. Minutes of Higher Education Board of Study confirm only the approval of reports and actions, but do not give an indication of any further oversight at institutional level.

1.3 External standards verifiers are appointed for all Pearson programmes. External examiner reports available to the review team confirm that the quality of student work meets the standards expected and that management of the assessment process is effective. There are detailed forms to ensure external examiners are able to comment on all aspects of the assessment process. Each awarding body has its own form.

1.4 There is evidence of action planning in relation to course outcomes and external examiner feedback and some action planning is very detailed and critical. While this is overseen by the awarding body, there is no detailed internal commentary or institutional scrutiny of the implementation of action plans at college level.

1.5 There is evidence that significant concerns raised by external examiners are taken seriously and effective action implemented. This process is overseen by the awarding body. Action plans are developed and approved at the Higher Education Board of Study in order to

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

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

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



send a response to the partner institution. There is no evidence of a formal review of wider actions at college level as to how the College might monitor processes to ensure that these issues do not arise again on other programmes. The oversight of the assessment process is regarded as the responsibility of the awarding body. College level oversight is absent for Pearson courses which operate almost entirely under faculty scrutiny unless major concerns are raised by external verifiers. There is evidence that some external verifiers' reports raise issues with no audit trail at the Higher Education Board of Study of discussion or action.

### **Assessment and standards**

1.6 Each programme is governed by a formal agreement with the awarding body. The volume of assessment seems appropriate and is determined by the awarding body. Regular monitoring reports are available and confirm compliance with practice in the design, monitoring and review of assessment strategies.

1.7 Regulations are determined by the awarding body who also set marking criteria and support College staff in their application through staff development activities. Staff attend moderation meetings at the partner institution. Staff also attend examination meetings at partner institutions and take a full part in the processes as they relate to College students. Pearson regulations are imposed through the external verifier process.

1.8 Procedures for the management of assessment processes are highly variable. Examples include inconsistency of practice in giving formative feedback on assignments at the draft stage, variation in practice in granting extensions and a lack of understanding of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education in relation to the management of assessments conducted at the College. There are no College mechanisms for the oversight of higher education to address the lack of consistency in practice across faculties.

1.9 Course handbooks are available although not all students receive copies or are clear how to access online copies. Students report that they do not engage with the handbooks available to them although all confirm an awareness of what good academic practice involves and were aware of regulations around plagiarism. Students have access to assignment information on the virtual learning environment and in module handbooks.

### **Setting and maintaining programme standards**

1.10 Approval of programmes designed by the College lies with the awarding bodies. Formal agreements with awarding bodies clarify the College may not make amendments to programmes without their approval. There is an established procedure for the approval of new programmes and for the monitoring and review of existing programmes as part of the curriculum review process.

1.11 All university awarding bodies conduct programme monitoring and review as part of their collaborative provision management. Review reports are clear and detailed and indicate that processes are scrutinised. Pearson programmes are monitored through the routine College self-assessment review process. However, this does not identify higher education related matters other than by exception. The College has no formal programme committee structure that conducts reviews of higher education and keeps records capable of informing academic oversight at college level.

1.12 Within faculties, programme reviews are conducted as part of the validating body approval and review processes, and there is a College internal review process in which the Vice-Principal participates. This draws on faculty reports that contribute to the College Self-Assessment Review. The higher education elements are subsumed into this process and are

distinguished by level of the award. Informal programme meetings are held to identify any issues at faculty level; however, no minutes or records of programme meetings were available to the review team. External examiner reports have reinforced the need for programme-level committees.

1.13 The College has recently begun a partnership with BAM Nuttall to develop an HNC around the needs of the employer. This has been developed through a tripartite relationship with Pearson. The College values this initiative highly and is in the process of establishing review mechanisms to inform other curriculum developments. The review team found the tripartite arrangement between major employers, Pearson and the College that is developing new approaches to vocational higher education to be a **feature of good practice**.

### **Subject benchmarks**

1.14 Curriculum design is the responsibility of the awarding bodies who use subject benchmarks and qualification frameworks in the design of courses. However, College staff do not use the UK Quality Code for Higher Education to inform the delivery of higher education and have limited knowledge of the subject benchmark statement for Foundation Degrees. Staff working with awarding bodies have had some training and development to understand subject benchmarks and other reference points although the impact of this is limited.

1.15 Recently the College has secured professional, statutory and regulatory body recognition for its Civil Engineering programme from the Institution of Civil Engineers and has achieved recognition for Technical Status of the Institute of Civil Engineers.

1.16 The College acknowledges a lack of a College quality assurance system aligned to the needs of higher education and has recently established a working group as a sub group of Higher Education Board of Study to address the lack of systematic and consistent quality assurance of academic processes in higher education.

1.17 The College meets the requirements for setting and maintaining standards of its awards as a result of the oversight and scrutiny of its awarding bodies. While these requirements are met, the College does not have effective mechanisms in place to support institutional learning from its higher education experience, inform the quality management of its higher education programmes or the potential to ensure problems do not recur. The review team **recommends** that the College put in place quality assurance systems for higher education which take full account of the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

## 2 Quality of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at Stephenson College **requires improvement to meet UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

### Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 The College does not have a separate higher education teaching and learning strategy in place and relies on mechanisms built around the needs of further education students. For example, the College has a procedure for systematically monitoring and evaluating learning sessions and has recently developed a Higher Education Observation template based on Ofsted grading criteria.

2.2 The College has staff development policies and effective measures in place to support staff who are new to higher education teaching but there is no induction into higher education teaching in a further education setting.

2.3 Awarding bodies approve staff delivering their programmes. However, in its self-evaluation document the College asserts that staffing of Pearson programmes is not subject to Pearson approval. A number of these courses are run for major employers and focus on industry expectations and requirements, and the College relies on feedback from these together with its college-wide monitoring and evaluation processes to ensure that the professional standards for these programmes are upheld.

2.4 Opportunities are available for staff to undertake study at master's level to support their teaching. However there is no formal policy to support research activity to ensure the currency and relevance of teaching.

2.5 The College's Integrated Quality and Enhancement Summative Review report of 2007 identified as good practice staff development opportunities that were worthy of wider dissemination. The College claims the focus has since changed towards giving staff teaching on Foundation Degrees access to master's courses. However, to date this has been limited to tutors in the Construction Faculty. External examiners have expressed a variety of views on the quality of staff development, ranging from evidence of good and regular staff development on HNC Auto Engineering to concerns regarding staff development being focused on further education. The College has recognised the need for staff development in higher education, but to date no dedicated higher education staff development programme has been run.

2.6 The Director of Quality makes decisions regarding deployment of resources for staff development across the College. Funding for staff development does not differentiate between further and higher education, and there is no formal process in place to identify and prioritise the allocation of staff development resources.

2.7 Staff understanding of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education including *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* is weak and relies on feedback from collaborative partners, Pearson specifications and external examiners to ensure that the quality of teaching and support of learning meets the requirements of these standards. The review team **recommends** that the College develop and implement a strategic approach to higher education learning and teaching that includes staff development and takes full account of the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

## Learning resources

2.8 Staff expertise is appropriate and students report that they are well supported by tutors. However, students that the team met expressed concern regarding reductions in staffing levels in some areas which has reduced access to support, notably in Dementia Studies and Computing. Students reported that teaching accommodation is good and that while resources are variable they support learning adequately.

2.9 The College has a dedicated Higher Education Centre. This is managed by the Central Administrative Support Team and provides access to careers advice, books and other learning resources. Although there is no specialist higher education librarian, the librarian function is delivered through the Central Administrative Support Team, which includes a qualified librarian. External examiners confirm that technical facilities and administrative support are good and commend the contribution the Centre makes to the higher education experience. Students were generally positive about the Higher Education Centre, but expressed concern about its size and accessibility. Students that the team met also reported that for some courses the IT infrastructure is inadequate to support their studies, that access is sometimes slow, and access to websites in the Higher Education Centre is limited, but also noted that external access to the virtual learning environment is generally good and that it is well used.

2.10 The Director of Resources manages the allocation of learning resources and resource needs are identified within the faculties. There is no differentiation between further and higher education in the identification and allocation of learning resources. There is no teaching and learning strategy for planning the deployment of higher education learning resources. The review team **recommends** that the College develop and implement a strategy for the provision and deployment of learning resources that effectively supports higher education students in their learning.

## Student voice

2.11 The College has a Learner Involvement Strategy. It is the responsibility of the Director of Quality, supported by Student Liaison Officers, to ensure that the strategy is effectively communicated, implemented and evaluated, and aligned with the College's self-assessment process. The strategy, which does not differentiate between further and higher education learners, requires the inclusion of the learner voice as an agenda item at management, section and programme team meetings. There are no documented processes setting out how students should be involved in these meetings and in practice, their role is informal and inconsistent.

2.12 Higher education students are eligible to join the Student Council, which is attended by a member of the Senior Management Team, the Student Engagement Officer and Student Services Manager, however none actually attend. The review team were told that study patterns make it difficult for higher education students to participate in such formal meetings but students asserted that they were unaware of representative structures within the College and reported that they had not been asked to elect representatives. Students are not represented on the Higher Education Board of Study, which is the primary forum for higher education quality assurance and enhancement within the College. The College recognises the need to improve its mechanisms for ensuring that students contribute more effectively to quality assurance and enhancement.

2.13 Some students on collaborative programmes are invited to evaluate modules and programmes and participate in the National Student Survey but students indicated that the collection of this data is not systematic and is inconsistent across faculties. Module review is

included within the Higher Education Board of Study terms of reference but no evidence was provided of this feedback being considered by the Board as part of the quality management and enhancement process. Students do not participate in the processes of curriculum design and review. The review team **recommends** that the College put in place policies and procedures that ensure that higher education students engage individually and collectively as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.

## Management information

2.14 External examiners confirm that monitoring systems are well devised and that student records are secure and effective. Module reports are prepared for some Foundation Degree programmes, which provide comprehensive data on student achievement and module management issues, but there is no evidence of an equivalent process for Pearson programmes. Feedback from students noted that module evaluation was inconsistent across programmes. On some programmes, evaluation information is gathered by more informal means and is not formally considered by programme committees.

2.15 Management information is reviewed for some awarding bodies. The College has recently drafted a Higher Education Quality Assurance policy, which refers to the use of data from a wide range of sources to assess compliance with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. This has yet to be adopted and implemented, and currently course evaluation information is not collected systematically across all programmes for use at faculty or college level to promote the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

2.16 The College collects data on disclosure of impairments as part of the application process. However, the review team found no evidence of differentiation between higher education and further education information. Additional learning support needs of students is recorded and Higher Education Funding Council for England funded support identified separately. Recruitment and retention data is reported to the Higher Education Board of Study. Data is considered as part of the college self-assessment process but there is no evidence to demonstrate how this is used to inform the enhancement of student learning. The review team **recommends** that the College put in place management information systems to enable the systematic use of higher education information data for quality assurance and enhancement at institutional and programme levels.

## Admission to the College

2.17 The College has a clear Admission to Higher Education policy, which sets out responsibilities for advice and guidance, the application and acceptance processes, and a complaints and appeals process. The policy requires Programme Leaders or Tutors to provide detailed course information prior to interviewing applicants. The policy states that as part of the College's quality assurance processes it should be monitored and reviewed on an annual basis. There is no evidence that this is the case.

2.18 Students on some programmes reported that they did not feel adequately informed or prepared about what their courses required of them or what prior qualifications or experience they should have before enrolling, and that information provided on the website was inconsistent. Staff expressed reservations that learners were accepted onto inappropriate courses and some students that the review team met reported that extra tuition was necessary to successfully participate in their course. The review team **recommends** that the College implement admissions policies and procedures that are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied to ensure that students are admitted to appropriate programmes at appropriate levels.

## **Complaints and appeals**

2.19 The College has developed clear complaints and appeals procedures. However, in practice, students are unaware of the formal processes and tend to approach tutors or the Higher Education Advisor with any complaints. Students report that complaints are successfully dealt with at this level.

2.20 Complaints are collected, analysed and reported to the Quality and Standards Committee of the Board on an annual basis. Complaints from further and higher education students are undifferentiated. It is unclear how these are reviewed and actions planned.

2.21 The College appeals process, together with the appeals processes of the university partners, are set out in student handbooks. While university partners provide independent review of academic appeals and complaints for Foundation Degrees and other collaborative programmes, the College Higher Education Board of Study both ensures consistency in the design and application of grading criteria for higher education and arbitrates on any appeals against grading decisions for Pearson programmes. The roles of those involved in the process need clear separation to guarantee impartiality throughout the process. The review team **recommends** that the College review its complaints and appeals processes to ensure that complaints and appeals can be conducted in a timely, fair and reasonable manner.

## **Career advice and guidance**

2.22 The College provides a broad range of information, advice and guidance. Its approach to career advice and guidance is quality assured and validated by MATRIX accreditation. This is underpinned by a Statement of Service, which clearly sets out the services available, contacts and mutual expectations. The Higher Education Advisor, supported by the Student Services Team, draws upon a local network of colleges and universities to ensure all information and guidance is up to date.

## **Supporting disabled students**

2.23 The College is committed to supporting disabled learners. This is demonstrated in its Equality policy which sets out the values and key principles which ensure equal access to learning for disabled students. The College Statement of Services clearly sets out the range of support that is available. Student handbooks reinforce this; however, students report that they are not always aware of the availability of these services and rely on referral from their tutors.

2.24 The College Admissions policy makes no specific reference to equality and diversity and it is unclear how processes supporting admissions, enrolment, registration and induction of students are structured to ensure that entitlements of disabled students are identified and met. Students report that support for disabled students is good and that adjustments the College makes to reflect their needs are effective.

## **Supporting international students**

2.25 The College currently has no international students.

## Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.26 The College does not offer higher education programmes delivered through flexible and distributed arrangements.

## Work-based and placement learning

2.27 The College does not deliver learning opportunities through work-based and placement learning. A number of courses in the higher education portfolio are delivered to meet the specific needs of industry employers. The majority of courses are part-time and typically the student is in full-time employment. There are no work placements but staff commented that each module has real-life relevance.

## Student charter

2.28 The College does not have a higher education charter but outlines general expectations within the student handbooks. The College sets out what they expect of students and what students can expect of the College with further information provided within programme handbooks. Students report that they are satisfied with the information provided in their handbooks; information is also accessible online if required.

2.29 The review team agrees with the College's assessment that it requires improvement to meet UK expectations for the quality of student learning opportunities. However, most expectations have been met and those not met do not present any immediate or serious risks. Nonetheless they could, without action, lead to serious risks over time.

# 3 Public information

## Summary

The College makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is not clear, accessible, accurate and up to date. Students the review team met did not find the information useful in helping make an informed choice when applying to the College or informing them adequately of the expectations of the programmes. The quality of information produced for applicants and students at Stephenson College **requires improvement to meet UK expectations**. This reflects the College's self-evaluation of this area. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

3.1 Information about higher education on the College website is incomplete and inaccurate. A number of programme pages have little or no information for students and others have not been updated for some time. There is no standardisation of the higher education pages and templates for minimum standards are not consistent. While College staff report that they understand their responsibilities for ensuring accuracy of information there is no effective College process to ensure the accuracy or currency of information.

3.2 The Key Information Sets are available on the College web pages for each Foundation Degree programme.

3.3 External examiners' reports are not shared as a matter of course with student representatives or students. External examiners' reports go to the programme leaders and are shared with their line manager and stored on a shared system for all quality assurance reports.

3.4 The Higher Education Board of Study has recently set up a working group to improve information about learning opportunities. The working group has been set up to improve the systems and process that assure the quality and consistency of information available to students. There is no evidence that any actions have taken place to date.

3.5 The review team agrees with the College's assessment that it requires improvement to meet UK expectations for the quality of information produced by the College about its learning opportunities. Some moderate risks exist which without action could, over time, lead to serious problems. The review team **recommends** that the College put in place effective systems to ensure that information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

## 4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at Stephenson College **does not meet UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 There is no strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities. Limited enhancement appears at a number of levels but on an unplanned and opportunist basis. There is no formal mechanism to identify or disseminate such practices at college level. College staff met by the review team have a limited knowledge of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, in particular with regard to the enhancement of learning opportunities.

4.2 There are significant gaps in the College's higher education quality assurance policies, structures and procedures and there is no evidence as to how other college-wide procedures ensure that quality. The structures and reporting processes have not given rise to a high-level awareness of the need to consider improvement. The Higher Education Board of Study is the main strategic and quality assurance body within the College. It is through the Higher Education Board of Study that the College satisfies itself that an appropriate learning environment is being provided. Higher Education Board of Study minutes do not suggest that enhancement is a standing agenda item.

4.3 Students are not systematically engaged in the design or review of their programmes. Students do not participate in the processes of curriculum design and review. They are not represented on the main committees including the Higher Education Board of Study. Student involvement in quality enhancement is limited to module and programme evaluations and the National Student Survey.

4.4 There are limited opportunities made available across the higher education provision for staff development that would contribute to the enhancement of student learning.

4.5 The enhancement of learning opportunities at the College does not meet UK expectations. The College has not addressed the Expectation that deliberate steps are being taken at institutional level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. Although the College has recognised some of the issues raised by the team, plans for addressing them have not progressed. There are significant gaps in the College's higher education quality assurance policies, structures and procedures relating to the College's higher education quality assurance, which prevent the enhancement of learning opportunities. Additionally the College has failed to take action in response to the recommendations made in the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review, which overall may have contributed to the enhancement of learning opportunities. The review team **recommends** that the College



establish and implement policies and procedures at college level to promote and review the enhancement of higher education learning opportunities.

## **5 Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement**

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

5.1 The review team investigated Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement at the College. The review team found that there is an absence of systematic, consistent involvement of students in quality assurance and enhancement other than at programme level through individual members of staff. Students who met the review team were interested in participating in quality assurance and enhancement of their higher education and students who had progressed from further education report that they felt more involved through the representative system that included the Student Council. Staff believe that while higher education students are not represented specifically on the Student Council they have the opportunity to nominate a representative if they wish to be considered. This presupposes systematic communication systems across the college for higher education students. No such systems are in place.

### **Innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement**

5.2 Higher education students have no formal mechanisms to engage with quality assurance and enhancement. Some students engage in curriculum meetings but these meetings make little if any contribution to the management of quality assurance in the College. Other than participation in the National Student Survey, student involvement is limited to programme level. This is largely related to giving feedback on their module experience. This is managed more systematically for courses that are approved by partner institutions. Students following Pearson awards are able to give feedback informally and to raise issues about their course but little formal evidence is available.

5.3 The College conflates the dissemination of good practice with the much broader notion of quality enhancement. As such, there is little if any evidence of systematic and deliberate steps being taken at college level to assure the continued improvement of the student learning opportunities.

### **Staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality**

5.4 Staff who met the panel regard student feedback as useful and make an assiduous effort to address concerns that are raised. Students have noted this and report to the review team that issues are addressed effectively when concerns are raised.

5.5 Staff reported that students have not taken up opportunities to participate in formal meetings such as the Student Council and suggest that it is difficult to get students to participate in the mechanisms offered through partner institutions.

### **Acting on student contributions and 'closing the feedback loop'**

5.6 There is little evidence that student contributions are managed through a process of feedback loops. Student cohorts are relatively small and students notice any changes and get direct informal feedback from their tutors. Where major changes are made, such as

when staff leave the College, students get no explanation and are left feeling distressed at the loss of key specialist staff. Information about such changes to programmes seems to be missing or is very weak and not communicated effectively to students.

## Glossary

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

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

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

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

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

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

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

**credit(s):** A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education programmes of study, expressed as 'numbers of credits' at a specific level.

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

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

**framework:** A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

**framework for higher education qualifications:** A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

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

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

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

**programme (of study):** An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

**programme specifications:** Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes of study**, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

**public information:** Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

**Quality Code:** Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of reference points for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the Expectations that all providers are required to meet.

**subject benchmark statement:** A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

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

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

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