# Quality Review Visit of Stockport College

**April 2017**

## Key findings

### QAA's rounded judgements about Stockport College

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

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

### Areas for development

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

- specify clearly and implement measures to ensure that current and definitive versions of documents are always identifiable and accessible to students and staff (Consumer Protection Obligations).

### Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any specified improvements.

# About this review

The review visit took place from 26 to 27 April 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Alison Blackburn
- Mrs Jane Durant
- Mr Josh Elderfield (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

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

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

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

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

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

# About Stockport College

Stockport College (the College) has existed as an educational establishment for over 100 years. It provides both further and higher education to the local and regional communities and businesses. The College's vision is to be in the top 10 per cent performing colleges by 2020 and recognised as world class. It states that it will achieve this by: creating the best possible learner experience; supporting staff, and offering rewarding careers; striving for the highest professional standards; being open, fair and transparent; listening to and acting upon learner feedback; and supporting each other through team work. The College offers a broad range of curriculum, from basic education to university degrees and has a key role in widening participation for young people to increase their employability and progression into employment, higher education or higher levels of study.

The College is based in the centre of Stockport and, at the time of the review visit had 597 higher education learners; of these 73 per cent are full-time and 27 per cent part-time. The in-year retention rate is 93 per cent. Higher education provision is largest within the areas of Construction, Arts, Health and Education and includes Higher Nationals, Foundation Degrees and a Degree provision. There is a sub-contract to deliver Higher National Business provision in Central Manchester that accounts for around 10 per cent of the student numbers, though this contract has now been terminated with no further enrolments taking place. The College has three awarding bodies and one awarding organisation, Pearson UK. The three awarding bodies are Manchester Metropolitan University, the University of Chester, and Sheffield Hallam University. The intention is to move to a sole awarding body partnership with Sheffield Hallam University from 2019.

# Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1        The qualification descriptors of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications are effectively reflected in the College's qualifications. The College is taking steps to put increased emphasis on community and employer projects and on the further development of employability. Each partner university has a formal process for programme approval which the College follows. The College has implemented a new higher education curriculum management structure to ensure strong governance and management frameworks for academic standards and the student academic experience. Clear roles have been established to monitor and review academic standards, supported by a clear reporting and governance structure.

2        The College ensures the standards of their programmes are comparable with other UK higher education providers by including external representatives from the higher education sector and industry in course design and approval. Ongoing externality from industry partners and programme advisers from other higher education providers is maintained once programmes are validated. External examiners confirm that academic standards are achieved at a level comparable with the wider UK higher education sector.

## The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

3        Activities of the College's governing body and its committees are determined through published terms of reference, standing orders and a code of conduct. The Board receives reports, data, strategic and policy documents pertaining to higher education for approval and monitoring. Examples include the Higher Level Skills Development Strategy, progress on the College Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP), student outcomes, key performance indicators, outcomes of the National Student Survey (NSS). The recently revised higher education management and committee structures enable governors to maintain effective oversight of academic governance.

4        A nominated higher education link governor enhances the level of oversight by the Board. Along with other members of the Board, the post holder attends training in her role to ensure currency in respect of the national context of higher education. In addition, she undertakes learning walks, attends events, and meets with staff and students.

5        The spirit of academic freedom and collegiality is evident within the College values of openness, transparency and fairness, and is reinforced through staff contracts. College staff and governors challenge colleagues and ideas openly and honestly. Academic staff enjoy the opportunity to develop programmes relevant to local and student needs.

6        Oversight of risk is effectively maintained through the practice of 'RAG rating' and risk assessing items on the CQIP, minutes of the Higher Education Resource Group (HERG), Curriculum Quality and Standards Committee (CQSC), and Board papers. Recent strengthening of this approach includes risk assessment in relation to the student experience and finance.

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

7       The College adheres to the regulatory frameworks of its respective awarding partners and works closely and collaboratively with them. For Pearson Higher National awards the College has developed its own regulations and processes within the Pearson frameworks.

8       Programme specifications show an outcomes based approach, aligned to the FHEQ level of award. The descriptors of level and attainment are also included in the programme handbooks, which students access through the College's virtual learning environment (VLE). Assuring a consistently high quality and standard of higher national (HN) programme specifications has been recognised by the College and is being addressed through its CQIP.

9       The College makes effective use of independent and expert input in the setting and maintenance of standards, engaging with external examiners, employers and industry representatives. The College Programme Approval Committee (PAC), chaired by the Deputy Principal or nominee, scrutinises the development of new programmes and changes to existing ones, including consideration of resource requirements. An external academic adviser is included in new programme approval.

10      The College's policies for assessment and internal verification set out the arrangements for ensuring that assessment is carried out in a way that secures academic standards in line with the requirements of its awarding bodies.

11      Assessment outcomes are deliberated and approved at the assessment boards operated by the awarding partners at which the College is represented and at the HN boards which are managed internally. Guidance is provided for all assessment board members. Lessons learned from the assessment round are considered at programme boards and through the annual course monitoring process.

12      External examiners are involved in the assessment process and, in the case of HN provision, visit the College at least once a year to undertake reviews of assessment and programme design. External examiners produce annual reports which are responded to at a programme level. A summary report is drawn up and is reviewed at the HE Quality, Standards and Enhancement Committee.

13      The College engages effectively in annual monitoring in accordance with its awarding partners' requirements. In addition central management information systems provide reliable data, which is used to inform a termly performance update report to the CQSC.

14      Where the College has engaged in collaborative activity it has taken a thorough and robust approach to its management, with evidence presented of a partnership having been terminated when the College found issues associated with the provision.

## Rounded judgement

15      The awarding bodies and awarding organisation set the standards of the College's programmes through the application of their own academic frameworks and regulations, to which the College adheres. The College, through its adherence to its awarding partners' regulations, its engagement with the FHEQ, the relevant code of governance and Part A of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards. No areas for development or specified improvements were identified.

16      The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.

# Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

17      The Higher Education Admissions Policy sets out approaches to the recruitment, selection and admission of students aligned to the UK Quality Code and the Schwartz Report 2004.The admissions process is overseen by the Academic Registrar for Higher Education with oversight maintained by the Dean of Higher Education. A central admission team is responsible for the recruitment process. Staff in this team benefit from ongoing training from UCAS. Programme teams are directly involved in recruitment and selection as required.

18      The College's draft Learning and Teaching Strategy is based on the Expectation and Indicators of *Chapter B3* of the Quality Code, and mapped to the Higher Education Academy (HEA) UK Professional Standards Framework and therefore meets baseline requirements. Its purpose is to enable every student to develop as an independent learner, to study their chosen subject(s) in depth and to enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.

19      Led by the Dean of Higher Education, strategic approaches to further developing practices in learning, teaching and assessment are effective. The introduction of a peer observation scheme is strengthening staff collegiality and facilitating the sharing of practices across subjects. A review of student assessment has identified good practice and aspects for improvement. Outcomes from these initiatives together with feedback from students are used to inform staff development, much of which is peer led.

20      Teaching staff are well qualified, many holding post graduate degrees. Within this mixed economy college they benefit from teaching solely on higher education programmes. Plans exist for the minority of staff who do not hold teaching qualifications to achieve these by 2020. The College is generous in the level of support it provides for teachers, including gaining accreditation by the HEA, funding attendance at external conferences, engaging an external expert on scholarly activity as part of the staff development programme.

21      Learning resources are allocated strategically following new programme approval and student feedback. Managers of professional services inform decisions relating to resources through membership of the Higher Education Resource Committee (HERG). Staff and students benefit from, and appreciate, dedicated higher education learning and social spaces.

22      National Student Survey (NSS) student satisfaction for learning and teaching is good. Satisfaction rates for 'Teaching on my Course' on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Core metrics are at benchmark for full-time students and significantly above benchmark for part-time students.

23      The College identifies the need to improve services to support students as an area for enhancement within the 2016-17 CQIP. Evidence presented to the review team showed that considerable progress is being made. Students now benefit from a common generous tutorial entitlement. Individual online tutorial records are accessible to staff and students. Teaching staff are supported by experienced mentors in their role as personal tutor. Students comment favourably on these formal arrangements as they do on the significant amount of informal support available to them.

24      Students have access to a range of services through central support teams such as finance, careers and the library. Help available includes support with assignments and research through Library +, and a drop-in support service offered in a higher education study room. Students value highly the level of support they receive. The appointment of a dedicated disability coordinator is pending. Students are encouraged to declare any additional support needs prior to entry and throughout their course.

25      Employability skills are embedded within programmes in a number of ways. Students studying for foundation degrees engage in work placements. Students in the Arts, Computing, Construction, and Engineering undertake live project briefs for employers and community causes.

26      In addition to assessment boards, student performance at programme level is monitored through programme committees, programme and module reviews. Initiatives to create central reports on student achievement are ongoing. Senior managers maintain robust oversight of performance through monitoring performance against core Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of retention, attendance, achievement, and plan to align future reviews to external metrics such as the TEF.

27      Student voice is strong. The College places considerable importance on listening to and working in partnership with students. Student engagement is evident through unit and programme surveys; a survey on the library service; the NSS; and student representation at programme, senior management and Board of Governor levels. Student representatives meet each term with the Dean of Higher Education, following which, meeting outcomes are published through 'You said, we did' posters. Students express appreciation for the proactive approach staff take in responding to concerns they raise. They acknowledge they are listened to and are respected as partners.

28      The College is further developing its approaches to engaging students in the quality of their academic experience. The Higher Education Student Engagement Coordinator has been appointed. A well-considered student engagement strategy awaits imminent approval. A training programme for student representatives is planned for implementation in 2017-18.

29      In accordance with formal agreements, programme level monitoring for programmes validated by partner higher education institutions involves the completion of annual programme reviews. In 2015-16 equivalent reports were produced for HNs as part of a pilot study by Pearson. For 2016-17 the College is introducing a programme self-evaluation aligned to external regulatory frameworks.

30      Programme committees and team meetings discuss aspects of programme performance. However the College acknowledges that it could make better use of programme monitoring reports to identify common trends. Termly reports from the Dean of Higher Education to CQSC present headline outcomes with analysis from a range of data including: TEF, DLHE, NSS, completion, retention, achievement, attendance, enrolment, risk. Partner universities periodically review College programmes. Plans to introduce panels for the internal periodic review of HNs are in development with the stated aims to focus on the strategic fit of programmes, applicant and employer demand, resources, and historical performance.

31      The review team considers that arrangements for monitoring and reviewing programmes exist. However, as identified by the College, further improvements can be made, and plans are in place to address this. In particular, a drive to develop a more strategic and collective approach to programme monitoring and review to support assurance and enhancement.

32      The review team confirms that the College's arrangements for working collaboratively with others are effective. Formal agreements underpin collaborative arrangements with partner awarding organisations. Records of changes to partnerships are maintained. Where a partnership is to end, a closure or termination plan is developed and put into operation.

33      Links with local employers are made strategically and used to inform curriculum planning and programme development. Students undertaking placements benefit from thorough preparation and support provided by the Higher Education Work Placement Team. In addition to undertaking legal checks, staff endeavour to place students according to personal needs, provide detailed placement and mentor handbooks, promote their service through a newsletter, and provide a networking opportunity for work place mentors.

## The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

34      The College's governance and reporting structure, revised in January 2017, includes a higher education Curriculum, Quality and Students Committee (CQSC) which reports directly to the Board of Governors. A higher education student governor is a member of the CQSC and of the Board. Student representatives are also members of the higher education Quality, Standards and Enhancement Committee and the HERG Committee, which report in to monthly Senior Management Team meetings. Minutes of the Quality, Standards and Enhancement and the HERG Committees are made available to all students through the College's VLE. Students are confident that their feedback is listened to and acted on and they speak very positively about the responsiveness of senior College staff.

35      While at present there is no formalised training for student representatives other than for Student Governors, the College intends to introduce this in September 2017. Students representatives are currently supported in their role through individual advice and guidance from staff.

36      To ensure that complaints are managed effectively a tracker is used to log them and the stages they have reached. The Board receives a summary report. A safeguarding policy has been approved by the Board, which also receives regular reports, allowing for the welfare of students to be secured.

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

37      Recruitment, selection and admission to higher education at Stockport College is governed by the Higher Education Admissions Policy. The policy makes clear statements about how the College interacts with admissions processes and takes account of the five principles of fair admission to higher education as referred to in the Quality Code. The admissions policy highlights the processes applicants need to undertake for admission to higher education programmes for both full and part-time courses. Clear statements about selection criteria and information about interviews and auditions are included. The College recognises good practice in higher education admissions as provided in the UCAS and Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) group tool kits and guidelines. The College provides prospective students with the information needed to make informed decisions through a number of methods, including its website, prospectus, leaflets, the UCAS website and Open Day events, all of which are accessible through various mediums. Students confirmed they had been provided with enough information to make informed decisions, and were very satisfied with the level of support from College staff.

38      The College's Higher Education Student Terms and Conditions of Enrolment clearly set out the processes in place in the event of a course closure and the review team saw evidence of this operating in the context of a current course closure at one of its partners. The College's complaints process is applicable to all higher education students at Stockport College including those on courses validated by its partner universities. Both the higher education student complaints policy and higher national academic appeals policy place an initial focus on informal resolution at the local level, incorporating good practice from the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). All complaints and appeals received are reported to the College and Senior Management Team with reports ultimately being received at the Board of Corporation meetings, in line with the OIA Good Practice Framework. Students generally appear to understand the complaints process and have been informed about it, as well as knowing how complaints can be resolved.

39      The College recognises the need to improve the management of document control, and are introducing a revised document change control policy. This sets out the process for managing document change but in its current form does not specifically address version control. The team therefore advise the College to specify clearly and implement measures to ensure that current and definitive versions of documents are always identifiable and accessible to students and staff, identifying this as an **area for development**.

## Student protection measures as expressed through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) Good Practice Framework, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's (PHSO) Principles of Good Administration, and HEFCE's Statement of Good Practice on Higher Education Course Changes and Closures

40      The College makes clear in its higher education terms and conditions the arrangements for making any changes to programmes, and explains the reasons for making potential changes. It also contacts applicants by letter regarding any changes and the reasons behind those changes. The College makes all reasonable attempts to avoid making changes to a programme later than 28 days before a programme starts.

41      The College's arrangements for ensuring continuity of provision include teaching-out a programme to existing students registered on a programme that is proposed for closure, along with consulting with students, discussing concerns and providing a clear plan for them to complete their study. Plans may include transferring to a similar course within the College or outside of the College. The College demonstrates a commitment to ensure any applicants or students affected by a course closure or change are supported.

42      The College makes clear in its complaints policy and appeals policy of the timescale in which a complaint should be made after the complainant has become aware of the matter, as well as any added timescales in the case of exceptional circumstances. The College records all complaints, appeals and their outcomes on a central database to enable consistency in the process of determining outcomes and ensuring proportionality of processes. Both the complaints policy and the appeals policy have a staged approach to resolving issues that allow both students and staff to ensure that the issue is dealt with at the appropriate stage, proportional to the concern raised. The staged processes referred to in both policies are managed by different staff within the College which promotes independence and autonomy of investigation. There are clear statements within both of the policies about promoting and embodying the principles of confidentiality and independence. Students confirmed they are aware of the appeals and complaints policies and know where to find them.

## Rounded judgement

43      The College has demonstrated through its various governance structures and internal policies and procedures that it meets all the baseline regulatory requirements in this area effectively. There is one area for development that relates to a minor change to policy and procedure, which aims to ensure that the definitive versions of documents are always identifiable and accessible to students and staff. There are no specified improvements in this area.

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