



Quality Review Visit of Stockton Riverside College

May 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Stockton Riverside College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Stockton Riverside 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 Stockton Riverside College. The review team advises Stockton Riverside College to:

- further develop its approach to the formal production of internal quality assurance documents to ensure greater consistency in scrutiny and approval (Quality Code)
- ensure that direct reference to the terms and conditions are made clearer in the information it provides to students at enrolment (Consumer Protection)
- further develop its guidance on programme closure to fully reflect how students are kept informed at all stages of the closure process (Student Protection).

Specified improvements

The review team identified no **specified improvements**.

About this review

The review visit took place from 16 to 17 May 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Peter Hymans
- Mr Mark Langley
- Miss Rebekah Osborne (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 Stockton Riverside College

Stockton Riverside College is a general further education college that serves the Tees Valley area of North East England. The College has delivered higher education programmes for over 20 years and the current provision includes foundation degrees, bachelor's degrees, postgraduate certificates in education and professional awards. The College has 20 higher education programmes delivered across four academic departments in the areas of education, early years, counselling, social care, business, computing, tourism, sport and performing arts. There are approximately 300 students registered on higher education programmes at the College.

All prescribed higher education programmes are delivered under an agreement with Teesside University as the degree-awarding body. The College is part of the Tees Valley Higher Education Business Partnership (TVHEBP), which links five further education colleges with Teesside University to oversee, support and promote higher education learning opportunities within the region.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The College delivers a mix of programmes that have either been developed by the University for delivery by the College and its TVHEBP partners, or have been developed by the College for University validation. The College team plays a full part in the programme development and approval process, including writing approval documentation, developing module and programme specifications and student handbooks, and participating in approval events. Staff are supported in this by the College Head of Higher Education, Health and Social Care (HEHC) and a nominated programme leader from the University, which results in comprehensive programme specifications.

2 Subject Benchmark Statements are used in the development of programmes, which are explicitly aligned with the FHEQ. Module guides clearly align to the FHEQ, with learning outcomes set at the appropriate level and linked to programme-level objectives.

3 External examiner reports confirm that the academic standards of programmes are comparable with equivalent programmes at other UK providers.

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

4 The Corporation Board maintains oversight of the academic governance of all College provision as articulated in the FE Corporation Terms of Reference. The Board receives a range of reports which it uses to inform the College higher education strategy. The HE in FE Committee, the Performance Review and Business Planning Committee, and the Standards Improvement Committee all report directly to the Board. An annual two-day governor seminar is held to determine the strategic direction of the College, which also reviews progress and receives student feedback. The governance structures are embedded and the Board takes the opportunity to respond and challenge, enabling the Corporation to demonstrate effective oversight of academic governance and risk.

5 The Board reviews its membership regularly and there is an annual evaluation of the Board by the Chair, and of the Chair by Board members. The clerk also undertook an audit of the Board against the AoC Code of Governance in 2015, using expert input to ensure transparency and fitness for purpose.

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

6 As part of the TVHEBP consortium, the College shares responsibility for the management of academic standards with Teesside University. For example, the University manages programme approval, drawing on knowledge and experience across the consortium. Initially, the College considers strategic alignment and resource implications of a programme proposal, after which the Head of HEHC confers with key University staff through the TVHEBP. TVHEBP meetings also serve to inform partners of any changes to programmes or to the approval process.

7 TVHEBP maintains oversight of assessment arrangements and each partner leads on the setting and marking of assessment, enabling activities to reflect student needs or

subject developments. The College upholds sound assessment practice through its broader strategic approach and cross-college marking, second marking and verification processes. These ensure that the standard of awards is comparable with similar programmes. Modes of assessment are varied and all modules are outcomes-based. The University maintains a definitive record of student achievement and the University's Award and Progression Boards scrutinise and compare grades across the consortium. College policies and procedures reflect the University's regulatory framework or defer directly to University documents.

8 Review processes, including annual monitoring, involve input at modular, programme, departmental, College, consortium and University levels, and seek student opinion throughout, through various methods. These exacting processes draw on written and oral reports and statistical data. Operationally, the College's performance review and business planning approach tracks action plans, student feedback and data. The Head of HEHC maintains oversight of the higher education aspects of this process and liaises between the College and the University regarding annual monitoring issues. The University also checks on the previous year's action plans through annual Quality Enhancement Visits.

9 The University leads in terms of periodic reviews and external examining. Programme leaders review all examiners' reports and address any actions. Students can access examiners' reports on the College's virtual learning environment. An annual monitoring report provides the University with feedback on actions taken, while the College's performance review tracks responses to the action plans throughout the year, enabling the external examining process to be secure.

10 All programmes have a placement element and in many instances students study through their work setting. Consortium members often share employer contacts, so the College engages with proven placement providers. The College carefully monitors all placement partnerships, including through visits to providers, to ensure alignment with programme learning outcomes.

Rounded judgement

11 The governance structures and quality assurance arrangements are appropriate in enabling the College to fulfil its responsibilities to its awarding body and to align with the baseline regulatory requirements with regards to maintaining academic standards. The review team therefore identifies no areas for development or specified improvements.

12 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)

13 Students apply through UCAS or directly through the University website in the same way as those applying to the University. The College Admissions Team receives the applications via the University system, arranges interviews if required, and records any offers on the University system. Offers to students are based on the entry requirements of the programme and prior learning is recognised where appropriate. The application process is rigorous and the whole College achieved Matrix accreditation in 2015, with the level of student support provided being recognised as a strength.

14 Monitoring and evaluation of programmes is conducted at all levels and is well developed. Module-level review includes student feedback and is undertaken at the end of each module and aggregated by programme leaders, who complete annual programme self-assessment reviews to a consistent University template. Programme self-assessment reviews include analysis of achievement and progression data, which is also monitored during the in-year performance review held three times each year. Programmes of concern are systematically flagged for particular attention during this process. Performance review is aggregated to a department performance review and considered at Performance Review and Business Planning Committee meetings. Quality Enhancement Visits are also carried out annually by the University.

15 Student feedback channels and engagement mechanisms are well established within the College. Methods for collecting feedback include online surveys, feedback boxes and a student feedback email service. Higher education student feedback is also collected through module evaluations, student representative reports and the Higher Education Students' Forum. Students are involved in the Quality Enhancement Visits and some are eligible for inclusion in the National Student Survey. Feedback is drawn together in a comprehensive Higher Education Student Feedback Improvement Plan. Students confirm the range of feedback opportunities and the College's responsiveness, stating that issues are acted upon promptly and that student views are valued by staff.

16 The College's business planning process ensures that new developments are consistent with the College strategy and that appropriate staffing and physical resources are fully considered. There is a considered approach to provision of resources by means of the performance review and business planning process. The College provides dedicated higher education facilities and students confirm that resources are appropriate for their programme. Support sessions provided by Learning Resource Centre staff are particularly valued.

17 The University approves all teaching staff before they teach on higher education programmes. Inductions are conducted by the University for new staff, and existing staff undertake biannual updating on assessment at the University. Staff are well supported to undertake scholarly activity and to gain higher level qualifications. There is also a comprehensive programme of other staff development involving higher education staff.

18 The quality of teaching is monitored by the College through three processes: management-led graded observations; a peer observation scheme; and learning walkthroughs. All provide a good overview of teaching quality and contribute to the improvement and sharing of good teaching practice, although the documentation relating to these processes does not explicitly demonstrate a focus on the academic level. Students indicate that the quality of teaching received is good.

19 The College provides students with systematic and scheduled tutorial support on a group and/or individual basis. Personal tutorials are conducted three times each year and discuss progress against individual learning plans. Plans are monitored centrally and issues for action are highlighted. Students can also access individual academic support at any time. Learning Resource Centre staff provide students with guidance on aspects such as referencing and plagiarism. The Generic Student handbook details support available both at the College and the University and students confirm that the arrangements are effective.

20 Work-Based Learning (WBL) is embedded in all higher education programmes through workplace study, industry placements and/or projects on real issues. Learners are supported through external visits, guest speakers and smaller block placements to gain an understanding of the relevant sector. All placements are visited and checked for health and safety and to ensure that the employer understands their obligations to the student. A comprehensive framework of policies, including an employer guide and a learning handbook, enable students to receive a quality work-based learning experience.

21 All assessments are run under Teesside University regulations. The College Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy provides a strategic overview of assessment approaches but does not specifically refer to higher education, as such assessment is conducted under the policies and procedures of the University. All assessment briefs are tailored and sent to link tutors for approval prior to being verified by the external examiner. Verification and standardisation takes place across the consortium where appropriate. Students confirm that feedback is helpful, timely and clearly linked to grading criteria and learning outcomes.

22 The College is jointly responsible with the University for the production of programme information for current and prospective students (see paragraph 25 below). The College is, however, solely responsible for internal information on the management of quality, such as policies and procedural notes. New or updated policies or procedures are produced by a member of the management team for approval by either a member of the Senior Leadership Team or at a meeting of the team, depending on the scope. After this they are disseminated to staff by the Head of HEHC. Although there is a shared understanding of the process among senior managers, and no evidence of inaccurate information produced to date, the current arrangements are not sufficiently articulated to ensure that checks are routinely and/or consistently approached for all types of internal information. The review team therefore advises the College to further develop its approach to the formal production of internal quality assurance documents to ensure greater consistency in scrutiny and approval, identifying this as an **area for development**.

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

23 The Corporation Board has two student governor positions that can be held by students studying further or higher education programmes. Although there is no current higher education student in post, the College is working towards ringfencing one of these positions for higher education. The current student governors are encouraged to consult all students, including those registered on higher education programmes. Student governors are enabled to participate fully in Board discussions and receive reports to the Board, including an annual report on student complaints (see paragraph 30 below).

24 The College operates a student representation system and a Higher Education Student Forum. The Chair of the Board attends the Student Forum in an observational capacity and the Board receives a report on the learner voice and resulting action plan, to keep the Board informed of issues pertaining to the student academic experience. Students

note that the Student Forum is a valuable opportunity to direct issues to senior management in an open and transparent way, and that action plans drawn up as a result provide timely and prompt resolutions to issues raised. The College has clear engagement with the student voice, and while this is largely managed by staff rather than led by students, it is effective in encouraging student involvement in academic governance.

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

25 The College is jointly responsible with the University for the promotion of higher education provision through an annual prospectus and other media releases. The College is also jointly responsible for the development of student handbooks, programme specifications and module guides for all programmes. These are consistent and conform to the terms of the partnership agreement. The College produces a separate higher education prospectus and section on the College website with links to individual programme details and application guidance. The College applies the same accuracy to its own publications as it does for those that it shares with the University.

26 The College shares responsibility for admissions with the University. Both agree on recruitment targets for each programme against University entry tariffs. Students apply to the University, although the College conducts interviews and selects candidates in line with the University admissions policy. Students wishing to use certificated or experiential prior learning are subject to a clear and detailed process, using University templates to promote consistency. Applicants who wish to appeal against an admissions decision appeal to the University under its admissions appeal process.

27 The University makes the offer of a place to students through UCAS. For postgraduate students, offer letters provide links to the University's terms and conditions and alerts students that programmes might not run if recruitment is low. TVHEBP meetings discuss viability and decide accordingly on low-recruiting programmes. Up to this stage in the process, responsibility for ensuring that the terms and conditions are easily located, accessible and drawn to prospective students' attention rests with the University.

28 In the case of under-recruitment to a programme, the College sends a letter to the affected students, first to inform them of the likelihood of cancellation, and then to confirm the decision. At this stage, the terms and conditions of the University are pre-eminent. The College induction process directs students to the terms and conditions and although these are accessible through the College virtual learning environment, these are not directly linked in the information provided at the point of enrolment. The team therefore advises the College to ensure that direct reference to the terms and conditions are made clearer in the information it provides to students on enrolment, 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

29 The College complaints and appeals policy is accessible on the virtual learning environment and in the Student Handbook. This policy requires complaints to be dealt with in a fair, proportional and timely manner with prescribed timelines for outcomes. The policy also confirms the confidential and independent manner in which complaints will be received and addressed.

30 The Corporation Board receives an annual report detailing the number and types of appeals and complaints received by the College, the actions taken and the number of complaints which have been resolved or upheld. This enables the College to strategically consider issues affecting the student experience, although the number of complaints received from higher education students to date is too low to enable analysis of trends.

31 Students met by the team clearly articulated the initial informal process should a student wish to make a complaint, and confirmed awareness of the College's formal complaints and appeals policy, including its location and the option of recourse to the University should internal processes be completed. Although awareness among students of ultimate recourse to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator is limited, this option is articulated in the policy.

32 TVHEBP meetings consider recruitment statistics for each programme across the consortium. Its agreement with partners allows the University to suspend programme delivery or close a programme entirely. The agreement, its annexes and the University Terms and Conditions detail the process of ceasing to promote a programme, teaching out a programme or providing delivery at another partner institution. The College guidance note on the cancellation of courses details how it informs students when the University cancels a course, but does not fully outline the measures that the College takes internally to ensure successful programme completion. Although the College has experience of successfully managing a closure in recent years, the steps that the College takes to protect the student experience, including the reassurance it provides to students about the completion of their studies, are not fully reflected in the current guidance. The review team therefore advises the College to further develop its guidance on programme closure to fully reflect how students are kept informed at all stages of the closure process, identifying this as an **area for development**.

Rounded judgement

33 Arrangements at the College for the academic governance and management of the student academic experience are generally appropriate in the context of the baseline regulatory requirements and the responsibilities assigned to it by the awarding body. While overall alignment with regulatory requirements is sound, the review team notes three areas for development pertaining to information, namely to develop procedures for approving internal quality assurance information, to strengthen links to terms and conditions at the point of enrolment, and to more fully articulate internal procedures in the case of programme closure.

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

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