



# Higher Education Review of Stoke on Trent College

October 2015

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## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Stoke on Trent College. The review took place from 5 to 8 October 2015 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Ann Hill
- Dr Christopher Stevens
- Miss Alyson Bird (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Stoke on Trent College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 4. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 9.

In reviewing Stoke on Trent 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 2015-16 are Digital Literacy and Student Employability,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)<sup>4</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code).

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Review themes: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106).

<sup>3</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review web pages: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review).

## Amended judgement August 2016

### Introduction

In October 2015 Stoke on Trent College underwent a Higher Education Review, which resulted in judgements that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body and other awarding organisation meets UK expectations, the quality of student learning opportunities does not meet UK expectations, the quality of the information about learning opportunities meets UK expectations, and the enhancement of student learning opportunities meets UK expectations.

Negative judgements are subject to a formal follow-up by QAA, which involves the monitoring of an action plan produced by the College in response to the report findings.

The College published an action plan in February 2016 describing how it intended to address the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the review, and has been working over the last six months to demonstrate how it has implemented that plan.

The follow-up process included three progress updates and culminated in the review team's scrutiny of the College's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence, culminating in a desk-based analysis of the College's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence by the review team.

The desk-based analysis confirmed that the recommendations relating to the quality of student learning opportunities had been successfully addressed and the good practice appropriately disseminated. Actions against recommendations, affirmations and good practice relating to the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body and other awarding organisation, the quality of the information about learning opportunities, and enhancement of student learning opportunities, which received positive judgements, had also been completed on schedule and contributed to the progress against the quality of student learning opportunities which received a negative judgement.

### QAA Board decision and amended judgement

The review team concluded that the College had made sufficient progress to recommend that the judgement be amended. The QAA Board accepted the team's recommendation and the judgement is now formally amended. The College's judgements are now as follows.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body and other awarding organisation **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

## Findings from the follow-up process

The team found that the College had made progress against the recommendations as follows.

### Recommendation - Expectations B9 and C

Staff, students and other relevant stakeholders are fully and accurately informed about the differences between a complaint and an appeal. The College has now made arrangements to ensure that the difference between complaints and appeals is distinct and has taken a number of key steps to ensure that this is fully disseminated with student representatives at the HE Student Council, with its awarding body, through the virtual learning environment, and through programme teams. The review team concludes that the provider is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

### Recommendation - Expectations B9 and C

Staff and students are fully and accurately informed about the procedures on how to appeal in respect of courses franchised from the degree-awarding body. The College now has appropriate arrangements in place for students on a Pearson programme to make an appeal. The review team concludes that the provider is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

### Recommendation - Expectation B10

The arrangements with Staffordshire University have been formalised to ensure that those students who are studying for Pearson awards are able to complete their programmes. The College has provided the review team with clear evidence regarding the future of the arrangement. A letter from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor offers confirmation of the commitment of the University. The review team concludes that the provider is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

### Recommendation - Expectations B4 and B8

The College has taken deliberate steps to engage employers more consistently in the delivery and monitoring of programmes to allow students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The review team concludes that the provider is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

### Recommendation - Expectation B5

The College has taken deliberate steps to involve students as partners at strategic levels in the assurance and enhancement of their learning experience. It has put in place extensive arrangements to ensure that there was consistent involvement of students as partners and that it can monitor and review that engagement. The review team concludes that the provider is making the required progress in addressing the recommendation.

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about Stoke on Trent College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Stoke on Trent College.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body and other awarding organisation **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **does not meet** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at Stoke on Trent College.

- The current negotiated arrangements for all students to have full access to Staffordshire University resources (Expectation B3).
- The institutional commitment throughout the College to providing individualised student support to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential (Expectations B4, B3).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Stoke on Trent College.

By February 2016:

- ensure that staff, students and other relevant stakeholders are fully and accurately informed about the differences between a complaint and an appeal (Expectations B9, C)
- ensure that staff and students are fully and accurately informed about the procedures on how to appeal in respect of courses franchised from the degree-awarding body (Expectations B9, C)
- formalise the arrangements with Staffordshire University to ensure that those students who are studying for Pearson awards are able to complete their programmes (Expectation B10).

By June 2016:

- take deliberate steps to engage employers more consistently in the delivery and monitoring of programmes to allow students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential (Expectations B4, B8)
- take deliberate steps to involve students as partners at strategic levels in the assurance and enhancement of their learning experience (Expectation B5).

### Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions that Stoke on Trent College is already taking to make academic standards secure and improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The ongoing development of a coherent suite of strategies, policies and procedures for the College higher education provision which is shared and understood by staff, students and stakeholders (Expectations B3, B2, B5, C)
- The ongoing revision and implementation of the policies and procedures for higher education to ensure deliberate steps to enhance the quality of student learning opportunities (Enhancement).

## **Theme: Student Employability**

The College outlines its commitment to developing the employability and work-readiness of students through its mission statement, business plan and revised Higher Education Strategy which focus on employer engagement activities, particularly at curriculum level, and supporting students to obtain employment opportunities.

The higher education qualifications offered by the College are all employability related. Employability skills are built into all programmes, and students speak highly of the way in which the College provides support for embedding transferable skills.

Students are encouraged to develop presentation skills, team working and working to deadlines. There are some good examples of case studies provided by the College which demonstrate students' success in developing a career, starting a business - for example in complementary therapies, and achieving individual aspirations to progress to further study at university or to management positions in the workplace.

Careers advice and guidance is provided by the College's Student Services Unit and teaching staff and professional support staff, including the Learning Resource Centre staff, work effectively with students to develop curriculum vitae skills, prepare them for interviews, undertake research into local industries and provide academic progression and potential career choices.

Students, staff and employers are committed to reinforcing opportunities to further embed the depth and range of student employability opportunities within the College.

The College is in the process of reviewing its higher education portfolio and intends to address local and regional employment needs by using more targeted labour market intelligence, widening participation, increasing choice of higher education routes, and meeting the skills needs of the region. The College seeks to ensure that its priorities support local priorities and national objectives, structured in such a way that enables students to access financial support for their programmes, while enabling and encouraging articulation and progression.

The College is focused on developing the employability skills of students, but recognises that more can be done to engage with employers. An employer survey is undertaken but senior staff are aware that the survey criteria do not sufficiently evaluate higher education. At the present time, there are no employer advisory boards, though employers, such as British Telecom, have been involved in designing programmes with the College.

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

## **About Stoke on Trent College**

Stoke on Trent College is a general further education college based in North Staffordshire and offers higher education provision to over 375 students on three sites: Cauldon in the south of the city; Burslem in the north of the city; and Yarnfield which houses the FdSc in

ICT delivered to BT students. This represents four per cent of the College classroom-based provision. Eight of the College's curriculum schools deliver pathways from further education to higher education.

The College is a member of the University Quarter (UNIQ), a partnership between Stoke City Council, Staffordshire University, Stoke on Trent College and City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College. The UNIQ partnership aims to 'create a vibrant, safe and attractive environment that provides opportunity, investment and a better quality of life for all those living, studying and working there'.

In 2014-15 there were 377 higher education students enrolled at the College. The majority of these were studying Higher National Certificate and Diploma programmes and foundation degrees that are validated by Staffordshire University (the HNC/Ds under the licence arrangement with Pearson). There were 27 students studying Higher National programmes in engineering awarded directly by Pearson.

Schools with higher education provision report to an Assistant Principal who has overall responsibility for academic standards and delivery of provision. There is a central higher education-specific quality and administrative function which serves to assure the College of its academic standards and the quality of its programmes.

The College's mission statement for 2014-15 is: 'Our passion is raising aspiration, unleashing talent, changing lives' and this is delivered through the five 'Strategic Ambitions' - Achieving excellence, Unleashing the talent of staff, Changing lives, Energising our communities, and Securing our future. In addition the College identifies its strategic aims, priorities and implications for higher education as wider and fairer access to higher education; meeting the skills needs of the region; and improving student choice and experience of higher education.

Since the last QAA review in 2011, there have been a number of significant changes within the College staffing and organisational structure. Most recently, in January 2015 the College has undergone a further restructure that has seen the previous Principal and Chief Executive become Chief Executive for the College group with a new Principal being appointed. The post of Executive Director that previously covered Learning and Standards, Finance and Information and Human and Physical Resources has been removed. The College has implemented two new posts titled Group Directors who oversee Human Resources and Finance and Resources respectively. In addition to this, there are now two new Assistant Principals, one with responsibility for Curriculum and Learning and one for Quality. The role of HE Coordinator has continued but has changed hands twice during this period and is now the responsibility of the Head of Business and ICT. There have also been a number of other organisational changes.

As a result of the recent restructure in January 2015, the College has undertaken a review of strategies, policies and procedures which have influenced the various reporting systems within which the College operates. This review has been conducted for all aspects of the College provision including the quality assurance of the higher education offer. This ongoing review has led to an affirmation in the report.

The College identifies its key challenges as:

- ensuring that changes and restructuring are completed effectively and efficiently
- ensuring that changes and restructuring are completed with minimum disruption to the delivery of provision and the student experience
- ensuring the level and quality of provision in the light of continuing funding restrictions and the economic downturn

- continuing to develop provision that meets changing local and regional skills needs.

The College has been slow to respond to the recommendations from the 2011 QAA review report in a number of areas, particularly around student engagement and the use of employers. In both cases this has led to recommendations in this Higher Education Review.



## Explanation of the findings about Stoke on Trent College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

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

## **1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations**

**Expectation (A1):** In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

**a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* are met by:**

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

**b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics**

**c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework**

**d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

### **Findings**

1.1 Stoke on Trent College is not a degree-awarding body and responsibility for setting and maintaining academic standards therefore lies with the awarding body and awarding organisation, though the College also has responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards. The specific role of the College regarding the delivery of academic standards is clearly articulated within the formal agreements with Staffordshire University and Pearson.

1.2 All awards offered by the degree-awarding body comply with the requirements of the national frameworks which identify and set out the characteristics of typical awards at all higher education levels. *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) is the key external reference point for the awarding body's higher education programmes.

1.3 In the case of Staffordshire University (the University), the collaborative agreement between the College and the University defines the responsibilities for the management, development and quality assurance arrangements within the College. In the case of Pearson, their academic regulations serve as the main points of reference for the awards offered.

1.4 The College is in the process of evaluating its higher education offer, and hence the team was unable to examine recent approval and validation documentation which would ensure compliance of programmes with partners and external regulations and policies. However, the team read a variety of internal documentation which demonstrated appropriate procedures. The College engages with Pearson during its periodic review of their HNC/Ds. However, no review by the College of its own Pearson provision has yet taken place as the awards have not been in place long enough to warrant such a process. In respect of the degree-awarding body, periodic review takes place every five years, in accordance with the academic regulations of the University.

1.5 The College maintains academic standards through appropriate programme delivery procedures. Programme specifications provide the necessary guidance for teaching, learning and assessment of students at the appropriate level. In respect of Pearson, the College selects the units for Higher National programmes, ensuring that the requisite number of mandatory and optional units are incorporated to meet the required number of credits.

1.6 Subject Benchmark Statements are consulted in preparing programme specifications, and staff confirm that the Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark is reflected in the programme design of all foundation degrees.

1.7 The approach taken by the College in respect to maintaining academic awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body and awarding organisation would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.8 The review team examined the College's processes and their effectiveness in maintaining academic standards through consideration of quality assurance procedures, annual monitoring reports (AMRs), minutes of meetings, programme documentation, including programme handbooks, and meetings with staff and students.

1.9 Reports by external examiners and verifiers from the University and Pearson confirm the positioning of qualifications at the appropriate level, that programme learning outcomes aligned with the qualifications awarded and that consideration had been given to Subject Benchmark Statements and the Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark. Some programmes, such as the FD Early Childhood Studies, are also informed by external reference points from the relevant professional body. The teacher education programmes, such as the PGCE and FD Education, are informed by guidelines from the Education and Teaching Foundation. The awarding body and awarding organisation have overall responsibility for ensuring that programmes take into account relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. All higher education programmes offered by the College are aligned to, informed by and mapped as appropriate, taking into account the Quality Code.

1.10 The review team concludes that qualifications are allocated and delivered at the appropriate level of the FHEQ and that effective arrangements are in place to ensure that this is so, and that the College discharges its obligations appropriately. The processes in place to maintain the academic standards of the awards offered by the College on behalf of its degree-awarding body and awarding organisation meet Expectation A1 and the associated level of risk in this area is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.11 Stoke on Trent College is not a degree-awarding body. Its courses are franchised from Staffordshire University or are Pearson HNC/Ds, which the College is approved to deliver. The College works closely with its partners to develop robust systems to assure academic standards within the prescribed regulations set out by its awarding body and awarding organisation. Academic regulations from the awarding body and the awarding organisation are available on the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) and compliance with these is monitored by external examiners.

1.12 The College's own suite of policies and processes, such as the draft Higher Education Strategy, the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy and the Programme Design and Development Procedure, set out the College's approach to promote teaching, learning and assessment and identify where responsibilities lie. The HE Staff Handbook provides a useful overview of the underpinning higher education academic framework.

1.13 The processes for internal and external verification are determined by the quality assurance guidelines set by the College and the awarding body/organisation. The responsibility for monitoring the operational effectiveness of these lies with the Head of School. This is also monitored by Assessment Boards and through the process of annual monitoring procedures.

1.14 The College has recently reconfigured its organisational structure and is in the process of revising its higher education offer. The review has been conducted to include the development of new College senior management team (SMT) groups which include SMT Strategy, SMT Quality and SMT Operations, which oversee the delivery and maintenance of academic standards that are informed by relevant higher education groups.

1.15 College management of the higher education programmes is vested in the Principal, the Assistant Principal Quality, Assistant Principal for Curriculum and the HE Coordinator who hold overall responsibility for the management of academic standards and for the quality of higher education programmes leading to awards validated by Staffordshire University and Pearson. Curriculum development and academic standards are overseen by the HE Academic Board, which reports to the SMT and the Corporation Board. College Quality Boards monitor the maintenance of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of each programme.

1.16 Staffordshire University provides a Programme Adviser to support each programme team and each awarding body and organisation provide external examiners. Following verification of marks by external examiners, marks for all modules and units by all students are presented at University Assessment Boards for their awards and at College Award and Assessment Boards for Pearson awards. The membership and terms of reference for these Boards conform to the regulations of each provider. Teaching staff are familiar with the academic regulations and work closely with the external examiners and Programme Advisers who provide assistance to teaching staff on the application of the academic regulations.

1.17 The clear and comprehensive academic frameworks, regulations and processes in place, aligning with those of its awarding body and awarding organisation, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.18 The team tested the operational effectiveness of the committee framework through scrutiny of the relevant committee minutes and through meetings with staff. Communication between the various committees is effective and it is clear that the College's processes and systems are rigorous and understood by staff. Processes are aligned with the Quality Code. The team was able to track issues through from an Assessment Board to action identified within the Quality Improvement Plan and hence reported upon to the HE Academic Board. Such issues included matters arising from external examiner reports, strategic developments regarding consideration of student feedback, and the subsequent approval of a revised Learner Involvement Strategy.

1.19 The review team concludes that the College has transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and that the Expectation is met. The associated level of risk is judged to be low, since the College works with, and is answerable to, its degree-awarding body and awarding organisation.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.20 Each programme has a programme handbook produced to a University or Pearson template. This contains the programme specification and module handbooks and serves as the definitive document used as the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme by College staff. Approval is sought by the College, as an approved delivery centre, to deliver specific units taken from their programme specification and is thus used as the template. Validation documentation and details of any subsequent changes to the programmes are held by the University and College and routinely shared with students. The University and Pearson provide all students with a transcript recording their results at the conclusion of each stage of their studies and on completion or exit. The University also issues the degree certificate for students on successful completion of their studies.

1.21 The procedures put in place by the degree-awarding body and awarding organisation, together with their implementation and maintenance by the College, would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.22 The review team analysed information relating to this Expectation in programme specifications embedded with programme handbooks and (re-)validation documentation. During the review, the team met Heads of School and academic and support staff, and also examined documentation available online.

1.23 The programme handbooks are comprehensive, useful and accessible, and the programme specifications are included. Programme handbooks are kept up-to-date and made accessible to students throughout the year through the VLE. The review team also saw evidence of the programme specifications and module handbooks as individual documents on the VLE, further supporting access to key documentation for students.

1.24 Although the University formally issues records of study to students, the College is responsible for submitting these to the University for verification at Assessment Boards. Students the team met are generally aware of their progression opportunities and information is provided in the programme handbooks. Students expressed satisfaction with the level of information they receive from tutors and programme documentation.

1.25 Overall, the review team considers that the College fulfils its responsibilities to the awarding body and makes effective use of definitive programme records as the reference point for the delivery and assessment of programmes. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

## **Findings**

1.26 The approval of higher education programmes offered at the College is ultimately the responsibility of the awarding body and awarding organisation. The majority of the programmes awarded by the University are franchised programmes and a number are offered by more than one provider. Awarding body approval is undertaken by the University and attended by appropriate staff from the College. Once approved, changes can only be made to programmes through a formal process which requires approval by the University. The University of Staffordshire is the awarding body for the majority of the Higher National awards provided by the College. These are validated by the University under licence from Pearson. A small number of Higher National awards are made by Pearson, for which the College is an approved delivery centre. Approval is sought from them for the College to deliver specific programmes with units taken from their programme specifications.

1.27 The procedures put in place by the College degree awarding body and awarding organisation together with their implementation and maintenance by the College would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.28 The review team tested the role of the College in maintaining academic standards through its contribution to the design and approval of modules, programmes and qualifications by scrutinising a range of documentation submitted as part of programme approval processes. During the visit, the team met staff, employers and students to explore the operation of the University process and the College's internal approvals policy and procedure.

1.29 The requirements of the awarding body and awarding organisation are well understood among academic and professional service staff, and the College makes an appropriate contribution to the production of validation documentation in line with awarding body requirements, contributes to validation events and plays its role in ensuring that conditions are met and the validation process is concluded properly. The module change process operates in accordance with the regulations of the awarding body.

1.30 The review team considers that the College carries out its responsibilities effectively to ensure that the programme design process meets the Expectations of the Quality Code. The College adheres to the approval processes of its awarding body, including those that ensure that programmes are approved at a level which meets the UK threshold standard. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.31 The College is responsible for setting and marking assessments in accordance with the policies, procedures and regulations of its awarding body and its awarding organisation. The College meets its commitments to its awarding organisation through detailed procedural guidance relating to assessment on its Pearson programmes. Definitive programme documentation for both Staffordshire and Pearson programmes includes programme specifications, which set out the aims and intended learning outcomes of the programme and maps these to the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, and module descriptors, which detail how module assessment strategies deliver programme outcomes.

1.32 The policies and procedures of the College, backed up by those of the awarding body and awarding organisation are robust and would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.33 The review team considered the effectiveness of the approach to the award of credit and qualifications by looking at relevant University, Pearson and College policies, regulations and procedures, programme specifications, module descriptors, student handbooks, assessment information and reports from Assessment Boards. The review team also met academic, support and senior staff to discuss the procedures in place.

1.34 Assessment is designed to ensure that programme learning outcomes can be met. Programme specifications and module records demonstrate that each qualification is allocated to the relevant level of the FHEQ and the University validation processes ensure that the level and volume of study are appropriate. The College produces and maintains definitive module records and assessment briefs. Staff met by the review team demonstrated an understanding of the assessment regulations and policies, and provided evidence of engagement with them. There was widespread understanding of the key role that assessment plays in the demonstration of learning outcomes.

1.35 The College procedural guidance for Pearson awards sets out the framework for the moderation and marking of student-assessed work for those programmes. The review team was given no corresponding procedural guidance relating to the award of University programmes, and the document that it did see did not cover the requirements for first and second marking and the moderation of its awarding body assessment. However, from its meetings with staff and the documentation that the team saw, it was able to confirm that the University requirements were well known, disseminated through handbooks and being followed.

1.36 Students confirmed that the academic credit of individual modules or units and intended learning outcomes are clearly communicated to them through induction processes, programme handbooks, information presented on the VLE and lecturing staff.



1.37 The operation of Subject Assessment Boards is robust. In the case of University programmes, Assessment Boards are chaired by the University and attended by College staff. Assessment Boards for Pearson programmes are chaired by a senior member of College staff to ensure independence from the programme team, and follow a clearly defined procedure.

1.38 The College follows the arrangements for assessment set out by its awarding body and awarding organisation and carries out its responsibilities effectively to ensure that the achievement of relevant learning outcomes has been demonstrated through assessment. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.39 All higher education programmes delivered at the College are subject to annual monitoring. This is conducted in line with the processes established by the awarding body and awarding organisation. College staff submit an AMR to the University using a template prescribed by the latter. This brings together module reflection, external examiner views, a commentary on management information, and other relevant annual monitoring data. It is submitted to the University together with an action plan. The University also requires the College to submit a Partnership Annual Summary Report which brings together programme information to provide an overview of all its Staffordshire University awards. The College uses its own annual monitoring process for its Pearson provision. These have been designed to mirror the reporting process for the University provision. Each AMR is considered alongside the Pearson report from the standards verifier. The University undertakes periodic review of each programme. The review team heard that while there had not yet been a periodic review of the provision delivered on behalf of Pearson, the awarding organisation would be carrying out such a review of those HNC/Ds at national level.

1.40 The policies and procedures of the College, backed up by those of the awarding body and awarding organisation are robust and would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.41 The review team tested the approach to monitoring and review by analysing documentation, minutes and actions plans, Curriculum Area Self-Assessment reports, Quality Improvement Plans, and the College overall self-assessment report. During the visit, the review team met staff and student representatives engaged in monitoring and periodic review activities.

1.42 The College undertakes annual monitoring of its awarding body programmes, following a template provided by the University, and submits that to the appropriate University faculty. Annual monitoring for Pearson programmes is undertaken by the College, using a similar template (see Expectation B8). From the evidence it saw and the meetings that it held, the review team was able to confirm that there were appropriate procedures in place for the monitoring and review of programmes and that staff at the College share a common understanding of how programme monitoring works and follow all procedures effectively. External examiners confirm that academic standards are met.

1.43 Overall there are procedures in place from the awarding body and awarding organisation for the monitoring and review of programmes which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual organisation are being maintained. These are understood and followed by College staff. The review team concludes, therefore, that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:**

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.44 Academic standards for the higher education provision are set in partnership between the College and its respective awarding body and organisation. In addition, to support the maintenance of academic standards, the University appoints external examiners for each programme. The external examiner reports annually to the awarding body on the conduct of the programmes. Pearson allocates an external examiner for its awards. The external examiners liaise with the College as its approved centre to negotiate arrangements for standards verification visits and sampling of students' work. Although there is a shared responsibility for the design and approval of programmes, in respect of the degree-awarding body, in practice the team found that there has been limited input from independent and external industry experts as part of the programme approval process. An exception to this is the development of the FdSc ICT with British Telecom (BT), and in addition the team heard that employers were involved in the revalidation process for the FD Childhood Studies.

1.45 The principal reference point used by the College to inform its higher education is the Quality Code. College policies and procedures relating to admissions, teaching and learning, student support and representation are aligned to the Quality Code and staff are familiar with the various precepts. The appropriateness of teaching and learning is also aligned to the FHEQ.

1.46 Within the University's collaborative arrangements provision, there are separate reporting arrangements for each college in the partnership, but only one report. The College extrapolates the relevant comments in respect of its programmes and compiles an action plan relating to any issues raised.

1.47 There is a recognition of prior learning (RPL) scheme and process which is delegated to the College. An example of this taking place effectively is in respect of 12 students claiming accreditation of prior learning (APL) for the Professional and Academic Skills module within the FD ICT.

1.48 The College is responsible for the production of assessment briefs and examination papers in conjunction with the University. In the case of Pearson, the College has operational responsibility for setting assessments in direct compliance with Pearson requirements.

1.49 The policies and processes in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.50 The team scrutinised a range of relevant documentation including policies and procedures relating to external examining, such as the operation of Assessment Boards, and external examiner reports.

1.51 The team explored with the College its degree of confidence in its ability to meet and maintain academic standards, especially in relation to familiarity with the Quality Code (in particular Part A) and the work of the examining boards which involved external examiners.

1.52 In meetings, staff demonstrated a clear understanding of their responsibilities regarding externality. The team could evidence that the engagement of programme leaders and teaching staff is continuous, since actions to be taken in relation to external examiner reports are reported upon and monitored throughout the year. This occurs through a variety of annual monitoring processes, such as programme area quality improvement plans, and at committees such as the HE Academic Board and Quality Boards.

1.53 External examiners are recognised as an essential element of the verification of assessment, and their confirmation of appropriate outcomes at the Assessment and Awards Boards at the end of the academic year, which are in the form of a written report for Pearson-approved programmes, confirms the academic standard of the programme. In respect of the University, the Assessment Board confirms the overall standards of all University programmes.

1.54 Assessments are appropriate and at the national standard. External examiner reports are made available to students through the VLE, and students confirmed that the reports are shared with them. The review team noted that while one report was critical regarding the approach to the contextualisation of generic grade descriptors, the issues were satisfactorily resolved by the programme team, for example in Performing Arts.

1.55 The College uses external expertise to some extent to maintain and ensure the academic currency of its awards and to support the vocational relevance of the programmes of study, for example with regard to the FdA Early Childhood Studies, which is sector endorsed. There are no employer advisory boards, but the College does engage productively with some employers, for example BT with whom it has developed the FdSc ICT.

1.56 The team concludes that Expectation A3.4 is met. The associated level of risk is judged to be low, since the systems in place enable the College to fulfil its contractual responsibilities, make use of appropriate external expertise, identify and resolve issues promptly, and prepare appropriately for external participation in the assessment process.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations: Summary of findings

1.57 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.58 All seven of the Expectations for this judgement area are met and the associated level of risk is low in each case. There are no features of good practice, recommendations or affirmations in this judgement area. Moreover there are no features of good practice, recommendations or affirmations located in other judgement areas that relate to this area.

1.59 The review team notes that the primary responsibility for much of this judgement area lies not with the College but with its awarding body and organisation. The College has good relationships with its awarding body and organisation and responds appropriately to their requirements. The College has internal policies and systems to ensure that it can meet the requirements of the awarding body and organisation, and systems are effectively implemented. The College has good policies and processes to maintain academic standards, and staff and students have a clear understanding of standards. Given that all Expectations in this judgement area are met with low risk, the review team concludes that the maintenance of academic standards of awards offered by the College on behalf of its awarding body and awarding organisation **meets** UK expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes**

**Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval**

### Findings

2.1 As outlined under Expectation A3.1, the design and approval of higher education programmes offered at the College are ultimately the responsibility of its awarding body and awarding organisation. These arrangements are supported by the College's own procedures for the planning and approval of programmes. New programmes are considered on the basis of local needs including providing progression opportunities from the College Level 3 programmes. Proposals for programmes are reviewed by heads of school and curriculum managers before submission through the College programme design and development procedure. Final authority for programme approval rests with an SMT panel. Similar processes are used where a programme has to be withdrawn due to changing external or internal circumstances. Where awards are made by the University, programmes will either be submitted there for validation or the programmes will be franchised to the College. Where awards are made by Pearson, the College produces internal programme specifications specific to the combinations of units offered on its Higher National programmes.

2.2 The College policies and processes in place together with the relationship with the awarding body and awarding organisation would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.3 In reviewing the approach to programme approval, the team met a range of College staff, including those involved with the development, design and approval of programmes, and looked at a range of programme documentation, approval reports and minutes, including those of the awarding body.

2.4 There are appropriate procedures for the approval and withdrawal of programmes, and these are fully disseminated within the College. Details of validation structures are appended to the Higher Education Strategy and set out in specific guidance, and staff are provided with a checklist for programme approval.

2.5 Overall, the review team considers that the College operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes and discharges its responsibilities to the awarding body with regard to academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission**

**Findings**

2.6 The College has a clear process for student admissions, which is outlined in the Higher Education Admissions Policy and Admissions Procedure. All higher education students, including those on Higher National awards for which Pearson is the awarding organisation, are recruited through the University. The College has a clear policy and procedure relating to admissions, which aligns with this Expectation, and the role of the awarding body is clearly defined within the recruitment, selection and admissions process.

2.7 The Higher Education Admissions Policy and Admissions Procedure are made available on the website, and entry requirements are also detailed in programme handbooks and on the UCAS website. Responsibility for the admissions process for the University awards is clearly articulated within the collaboration agreement with the University. All students apply to the University via UCAS and the College is responsible for submitting admissions recommendations to the University in accordance with the admissions criteria detailed in programme documentation and following an interview conducted by College staff where required. Equity is managed in the interviewing process by adhering to the entry criteria and making use of the National Academic Recognition Information Centre to check on the translation of non-standard qualifications.

2.8 The College policies and processes in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.9 The review team tested the College's approach to recruitment, selection and admissions through meeting with senior staff, staff responsible for admissions, students and a representative from the University. The team also reviewed various College documents relating to admissions, including the admissions policy and procedure, and information and guidance available on the website.

2.10 The College clearly outlines and understands its responsibilities in relation to admissions and the requirements of its degree-awarding organisations, and staff within the College undertaking admissions interviews are trained and supported. The College has a complaints and appeals process in place, detailed within the Higher Education Policy. The new admissions and selection policy is part of an ongoing development of a suite of policies and this has led to an affirmation in Expectation B3. The College does not have its own directly funded HEFCE numbers and as a consequence has entered into an arrangement with the University to ensure all higher education students at the College are recruited and enrolled through the University as well as the College (see also Expectation B10).

2.11 A number of students progress to higher education after completing further education at the College. Students met by the review team spoke positively about the support and guidance from the College in making this transition. The College also has progression agreements with Staffordshire University and Keele University.

2.12 The team considers that the policies, procedures and practices for recruiting and admitting students are clear, fair and explicit. The review team therefore concludes that the College meets the Expectation and the consistent application of the admissions policies means that the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

#### **Findings**

2.13 The College's approach to teaching and learning is informed by a range of policies and strategies, and in particular the Higher Education Strategy, which has recently been revised. The aim of the Higher Education Strategy is to link the College's key priorities to other strategic documents, policies and procedures. These include the College's Strategic Plan, Business Plan, Stoke on Trent College Educational Character statement, Stoke on Trent College Statement of Intent, a revised Learner Involvement Strategy and the Teaching and Learning Development Procedure policy, which articulates the College's approach to teaching and learning, including continuing professional development. The majority of the policies and strategies have been recently developed or revised, in line with the new organisational restructure.

2.14 The range of policies is informed by four key objectives, which are underpinned by a commitment to aligning strategies, policies and procedures to meet the Expectations of the Quality Code for the assurance of academic quality and standards and the development of teaching and learning. Application of the procedures provides opportunities for students' development of independent learning and higher-level transferable skills, and ensures that their experience is distinctive from their previous learning experience.

2.15 The College operates a lesson observation procedure which is explicitly aligned with the Quality Code and is a feature of the quality improvement process. Peer observation of staff teaching higher education is undertaken by peers involved in delivery at a similar level. Staff performance is monitored through lesson observations which are graded and enable staff to identify continuing professional development opportunities and scholarly activities, such as the promotion of the VLE. Observations are underpinned by a College process of themed 'Learning Walks', which include, for example, observation of e-learning teaching activities. This process identifies useful improvement strategies to increase the exploitation of the VLE as a major learning and teaching tool.

2.16 The College has strategies and policies in place to review and potentially enhance teaching and learning activities, the learning environment and student engagement. The approaches taken by the College would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.17 The review team scrutinised documentation, processes and policies and met teaching and professional support staff, a small group of employers and students to determine the ways in which the College enhances the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner and enhance their analytical, critical and creative thinking.

2.18 The production of the HE Deal charter is key to the development of a higher education ethos which promotes students' independent learning and the College's commitment between higher education staff and students to promote high levels of achievement. However, the team heard that this key document for setting out student entitlements is not routinely monitored. As a result of recent restructuring, the College has undertaken a review of strategies, policies and procedures. The team considered the range



of new documentation which is more specifically relevant to the higher education provision, including the draft Higher Education Strategy. The review team **affirms** the ongoing development of a coherent suite of strategies, policies and procedures for the College higher education provision which is shared and understood by staff, students and stakeholders.

2.19 However, although policies and procedures are being put into place, they have not all been implemented or evaluated and consequently it is not yet clear how effective the impact will be. For example, the team examined documentation such as the Learner Involvement Strategy, which has not yet been fully implemented across the higher education provision.

2.20 The quality of learning and teaching at higher education level is rigorously monitored, reviewed and evaluated in line with further education processes, including quality improvement planning. Policies are monitored through the Principal and Chief Executive to the Corporation and it is clear that the committee structure assures an effective underpinning framework for the consideration of higher education matters. For instance, the team was able to track discussion regarding the revised HE Deal through to Corporation approval.

2.21 Staff are encouraged to participate in a broad range of staff development activities at all levels and heads of school prepare an annual teaching and learning development schedule in liaison with their allocated continuing professional development contact as appropriate. Activities are rigorously monitored, evaluated and routinely reported upon through the committee structure, for example at HE Academic Board, and good practice is shared at the Higher Education Teacher's Group. The team noted that there is currently no engagement with the Higher Education Academy. All College staff contributing to the delivery of higher education are approved by the degree-awarding body and have Associate Lecturer status, which allows them access to the University's library and electronic resources. Staff are encouraged to enhance their academic qualifications by undertaking fee-waivered higher-level qualifications delivered at the University. The review team heard that staff value the variety and extent of staff development opportunities provided by the College.

2.22 Staff development activities ensure that teaching staff have a clear understanding of the FHEQ and its implications for course design, delivery and assessment. Programme teams use the VLE to maintain programme documentation and develop a wide range of teaching and learning materials. Staff are expected to use the VLE to communicate with students. Programme specifications are produced by the awarding bodies, unless the programme has been devised and designed by the College, in which case a full programme specification is produced as part of the external validation process. Where the College delivers a programme, franchised from the University, its programme specification is used. For Pearson programmes, a general programme specification is produced by the awarding organisation, and one is produced by the programme team which is specific to the delivery at the College.

2.23 The effectiveness of programmes is evaluated on an ongoing basis by the programme team through evaluation of teaching sessions, retention and achievement data, programme meetings, analysis of student surveys and the annual monitoring processes. Any actions raised as a result of monitoring activities inform the future planning and development of the programme. Higher education programmes validated by the University are subject to their evaluation process and periodic review. Students confirmed to the review team that they read their programme handbooks and find the information contained in them useful.

2.24 Students benefit from a wide range of support and guidance mechanisms including learning support services, which are tailored to provide individual support for the transition of students from Level 3 to Level 4 and above. This has contributed to the good practice

identified for Expectation B4. Learning and teaching activities are supported by an appropriate level of learning resources at the College. Students, including students on Pearson programmes, also benefit from full access to the learning resources provision at the University. The review team heard that students receive an introduction to the learning resources facilities at both institutions, and that they make effective use of the services provided, such as access to e-resources. The team considers that the current negotiated arrangements for all students to have full access to Staffordshire University resources is **good practice**.

2.25 The review team heard from students and student representatives that feedback at course level is taken seriously and has led to improvements in their learning experience; for example, extending the opening hours of the Learning Resource Centre. Students are able to benefit from a range of opportunities which enables them to provide feedback on aspects of learning and teaching, including induction processes at course level. Student feedback is a standing item on the agenda of Quality Boards and this includes, among other topics, consideration of the National Student Survey.

2.26 The review team concludes that it has confidence in the College's approach to working with their staff, students and other stakeholders to articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking. Therefore the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.27 The College's Higher Education Strategy reflects the Strategic Plan, and prioritises student acquisition of graduate skills to equip them for further studies and employment. The College monitors and evaluates support for student development and achievement through various annual review processes, such as AMRs, self-assessment reports and the Quality Improvement Plan, which are subject to regular monitoring. The College has produced a revised Learner Involvement Strategy, underpinned by an action plan which identifies key performance indicators, but it is too soon to measure the impact of this. A formal agreement is in place to allow students access to the resources of the University. Support is provided for disabled students in accordance with policy and procedural guidance issued by the University Student Enabling Centre.

2.28 The strategies and processes that the College employs to monitor the arrangements and resources in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.29 The review team considered a range of documentary evidence and met staff and students to investigate the approach the College takes to ensuring that students develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

2.30 The College provides an effective infrastructure for student support which includes admissions, learning support services, information and careers guidance and library services. The review team heard that these services are highly regarded by students, and that the available services are personalised to support the individual requirements of students.

2.31 Students are supported to identify areas of employability to be developed to facilitate progression and achievement so that their transferable skills can suitably be promoted. The visibility of employability skills is also ensured within programme specifications and module descriptors, including, for example, a module on entrepreneurship. Personal tutors are allocated to each student in accordance with the degree-awarding body's personal tutoring policy and the College's Curriculum Policy. All students are entitled to one tutorial each term with a nominated tutor.

2.32 The Accelerate programme is specifically designed for students on higher education programmes and provides support and guidance to ensure that students are equipped with higher education and employability skills. Students are able to access additional workshops which include information technology skills, research skills, Harvard referencing, presentation skills, curriculum vitae preparation and reflective learning, and they confirmed that they find these activities helpful.

2.33 Professional support services staff undertake annual monitoring of their services and this is effective in securing improvements which are integral to the College's commitment to the development of students' academic, personal and professional potential.

2.34 Additionally, the review team heard about a variety of initiatives to provide individual support for students, such as assisting with late enrolments, providing study skills sessions, proofreading students' assignments and bespoke maths and English workshops where there is identified need. The team considers that the institutional commitment throughout the

organisation to providing individualised student support to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential is **good practice**.

2.35 Students were very positive about the resources provided by the Learning Resource Centre and also in respect of their access to the learning resources provision at the University. The team explored the full extent of exploitation of the College's VLE and considered that it was effectively used as a major learning and teaching tool by staff and students. Staff are trained by a range of dedicated professional support staff to use the VLE and students are familiarised with it at their initial induction. The continuing development of learning materials and resources is assured by the introduction of a merit system which is subject to rigorous monitoring and target setting.

2.36 In meetings with staff and employers, the review team was unable to confirm that employers' views were central to curriculum design and delivery and that all staff had a regular opportunity to engage with employers. The development of the FdSc ICT is an exception in that the provision is tailor-made to suit the training requirements of BT and the programme has been expanded to include further pathways and modules to suit the needs of the employer. The College recognises that there is variation in the engagement of programme teams and is seeking to address this through the draft Higher Education Improvement Plan. In furtherance of this, the team **recommends** that by June 2016, the College should take deliberate steps to engage employers more consistently in the delivery and monitoring of programmes to allow students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

2.37 There are a small number of students on placement. Students studying on programmes franchised from the degree-awarding body follow the University's procedures for placements where applicable. The College has existing procedures for work placements but these are not specific to higher education students. Students confirmed that employability skills are embedded into their programmes through programme specifications and individual modules and that arrangements related to work placements, where they exist with a small number of students, work effectively.

2.38 The review team concludes that Expectation B4 is met, since student development is placed clearly at the heart of teaching and learning support at the College. The associated level of risk is judged as moderate, given the lack of consistency of employer engagement across the higher education programme areas regarding their systematic contribution to the development of students' academic, personal and professional potential.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

2.39 The College provides a wide range of mechanisms for students to give feedback on their learning experience at programme level. The College has recently developed a specific Learner Involvement Strategy to support the implementation of its student engagement ethos. The College encourages each programme to elect two student representatives to participate in College higher education groups. New student representatives are trained and provided with a Student Representative Handbook. Students confirmed that they are aware of their student representatives. Higher education students are represented on the HE Academic Board and HE Quality Board.

2.40 The Learner Involvement Strategy outlines structures for representation and gathering feedback via a variety of mechanisms such as learner surveys and the Higher Education Student Council. This has recently been updated for 2015-16 to include higher education student engagement explicitly. The College has an ongoing development of a suite of strategies, policies and procedures which has led to an affirmation in Expectation B3. While this includes student engagement, the review team was made aware that students had not been involved in the development of the Learner Involvement Strategy, and awareness of its existence from students and staff is limited.

2.41 The College has appropriate meeting structures to ensure the student voice is heard at programme level. Student representatives attend programme committee meetings and there is a Higher Education Student Council. These arrangements would enable the College to meet the Expectation.

2.42 The review team analysed the operation and effectiveness of student engagement by examining the involvement of student representatives in College committee and programme structures, the impact of the student voice and the feedback provided by the College in response to student comments. The review team examined documentation such as the Learner Involvement Strategy, the Student Representative Handbook, and the minutes and action plans from associated committees; explored the use of the VLE; and met students, student representatives, staff and employers during the visit.

2.43 The strong relationship between staff and students means that student feedback is often dealt with informally. Students are made aware of any actions taken by the College through 'You Said, We Did' posters, regular interactions with their student representatives and staff and via the VLE. Students generally consider their views to be appreciated and acted upon by the College. The review team saw evidence of the College responding to student feedback, including extending the library opening hours and providing higher education students with different-coloured lanyards, which was very much appreciated by all higher education students.

2.44 The College encourages student feedback at programme level via programme meetings and module and unit evaluations, which are considered by programme teams and used to inform the Quality Improvement Plans. The College has acknowledged that student engagement above programme level is not consistent or effective. The review team was made aware that some key student-facing documentation, such as the Learner Involvement Strategy and the HE Deal, had not been developed in consultation with the student body. Furthermore, the review team saw no evidence that the HE Academic Board had considered

the student feedback collected via the HE Student Council. The review team therefore **recommends** that by July 2016 the College take deliberate steps to involve students as partners at strategic levels in the assurance and enhancement of their learning experience.

2.45 Overall, the College actively and effectively seeks feedback from its students at programme level and responds appropriately. The team concludes that Expectation B5 is met but, owing to the lack of student representation at strategic levels in the assurance and enhancement of their learning experience, the team considers the level of risk to be moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning**

**Findings**

2.46 As outlined under Expectation A3.2, the assessment practices for higher education programmes provided by the College are governed by the regulations and procedures of the awarding body and awarding organisation. The overall approach to assessment is set out in the document Assessment Protocols and Processes Assessments (June 2013). Assessment for awards made by the University is checked through the involvement of programme advisers, standardisation and internal moderation activities. Assessment for University programmes follows awarding body regulations and guidelines which are available to staff and students on the College and University VLEs. Assessed work is internally verified by the University to ensure appropriateness, achievement of learning outcomes and marking to agreed criteria. Assignment briefs are constructed for Pearson programmes to meet the requirements of the awarding organisation. These are approved and moderated internally before approval by the standards verifier. Details of assessment are contained in student handbooks and on the VLE and explained at the start of each module or unit. Students are issued with assignment briefs which are devised by the College to awarding body and organisation guidelines. The College has processes for accreditation of certificated and non-certificated prior learning and prior experiential learning.

2.47 The policies and procedures of the College, together with the regulations and procedures of the awarding body and awarding organisation, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.48 The review team explored the approach to assessment by reviewing relevant documentation including policy and procedure documents, programme documentation, student handbooks, reports of external examiners and standards verifiers, assignment briefs and feedback to students. During the visit, the team met senior and academic staff, and professional service staff involved in supporting assessment.

2.49 The College operates equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment. Students confirm that they are made fully aware of assessment tasks, understand what is required of them and find the assessment appropriately challenging. Students report that they are satisfied with the volume and promptness of feedback on assessed work, and that the College kept to its ambition of a four-week turnaround time.

2.50 Application for mitigating circumstances for awards of the University programmes must be made to the awarding body. The review team saw detailed policy documents relating to assessment malpractice by staff and students, plagiarism and the management of reasonable adjustment, provided by the University for its programmes, and by the College for Pearson programmes. The College does not operate a consistent system of anti-plagiarism software, with some programmes using such software and others not, as it is of the view that the small number of students on each programmes means that staff are familiar with the work of students and can be relied upon to identify any plagiarised work.

2.51 Overall, policies and procedures for the assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning are in place and effective. Students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit. The review team concludes, therefore, that Expectation B6 is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**



## **Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

#### **Findings**

2.52 External examiners are provided by Pearson and the University for their respective awards. The nomination, appointment and role of external examiners fall within the remit of the regulations and processes of the degree-awarding body and awarding organisation. External examiners are allocated by Pearson and the University, rather than being nominated by the College.

2.53 The University is responsible for making programme documentation, including programme specifications, programme handbooks, module handbooks and module descriptors, available to the external examiner. The University, in conjunction with the College, is responsible for making student work available to the external examiner. The external examiners submit reports directly to the University in accordance with the procedures set out by the University's quality assurance procedures. The University shares copies of the reports with the College.

2.54 The University provides a response to the external examiner report in consultation with the College. Subsequent to approval by the University, it then submits the formal response to the external examiner. The contents, including any recommendation and examples of good practice, are included in the AMR.

2.55 The external examiners appointed by the awarding body and the awarding organisation, and the College's recognition of the role of the external examiners, and the processes in place to ensure that external examiner reports are considered and responded to, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.56 The team considered a range of documentation, policies and procedures and met staff and students to establish the scrupulous use of external examiners in the College. In addition, the team scrutinised a number of external examiner reports and was satisfied that any issues arising are addressed appropriately through the College's committee processes. For example, the team was able to track issues from an external examiner report through to the relevant Quality Board, HE Academic Board and SMT meeting.

2.57 Academic review is undertaken in accordance with the University's quality assurance procedures. The College's Assistant Principal Quality maintains a central record of all external examiner visits.

2.58 In the case of Pearson, the examiner visits the College to sample students' assessed work after internal verification, according to sampling requirements. Examiners meet programme staff and, where possible, students to discuss matters arising from assessment and delivery which are included in the external examiner report.

2.59 The College's Quality Systems Officer extracts strengths, weaknesses, areas for development and action points from external examiner reports. These are considered by programme teams and the heads of school. Action plans are produced which are then subject to review by the Assistant Principal Quality. Monitoring is undertaken by the Quality Systems Officer who produces an exception report for the senior management team. All action plans are included in AMRs for each programme area. Summary reports are circulated monthly and reported upon as appropriate to the Quality and Performance

Committee of the Corporation. Outcomes are recorded and any identified good practice is shared through continuing professional development events.

2.60 However, in respect of the degree-awarding body, the review team found the presentation of external examiner reports cumbersome, as comments made may not be pertinent to all colleges within the University partnership.

2.61 The team heard that external examiner reports are shared with students, and that students are familiar with the names and details of their external examiners, which are provided in programme handbooks. Students are aware that the College responses to external examiner reports are provided on the VLE.

2.62 The team heard that professional support staff are familiar with the processes relating to external examiners and that they contribute to the College responses as appropriate to their role and responsibilities.

2.63 The review team concludes that the measures in place to ensure the scrupulous use of external examiners' reports to maintain academic standards for each qualification are effective. Expectation B7 is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

**Findings**

2.64 As outlined under Expectation A3.3, the College monitors and reviews its higher education provision through procedures that meet the needs of its awarding body and awarding organisation. Annual monitoring of University programmes requires programme teams to follow a template provided by the University, and submit that together with an action plan. Annual monitoring for Pearson programmes is undertaken by the College, using a similar template. These are considered by an HE Quality Board for each subject area, chaired by the Assistant Principal (Quality). The Boards consider the reports in detail, confirming actions from last year and approving action plans. Annual monitoring is used by the College to inform Quality Improvement Plans. The College has an HE Academic Board that has oversight of the annual monitoring process as one of its terms of reference. Periodic reviews are undertaken by the University for its awards. The College engages with Pearson during Pearson's periodic review of their HNC/Ds. However, as noted previously, no review by the College of its own Pearson provision has yet taken place as the awards have not been in place long enough to warrant such a process.

2.65 The College policies and procedures, together with the regulations and procedures of the awarding body and awarding organisation, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.66 In testing the approach, the review team read relevant documents, including procedural documents, AMRs, external examiner reports, the minutes of the Higher Education Board, and quality improvement plans. It also met with relevant staff and students.

2.67 Staff met by the review team demonstrated an understanding of the processes involved, although there was some confusion with terminology, with the term 'Quality Improvement Plan' used interchangeably for different reporting and action processes, which has the potential to hamper clarity. This contrasted with the clear timeline and terminology provided to aid the review process. Staff met by the review team demonstrated a clear understanding of the volume of programme modifications that would trigger a revalidation. During the review, however, the team was informed that the University periodic review process could trigger revalidation, could confirm that no revalidation was required, or could combine review and revalidation if a new programme specification were submitted. It was not clear to the review team that these various options were well understood within the College.

2.68 The annual monitoring and review process gives due consideration to student feedback. Student evaluations are considered by programme teams and Heads of School and are used to inform Quality Improvement Plans. Annual monitoring makes appropriate use of external examiner reports for University programmes and standards verifier reports for Pearson programmes and generate action plans in response. The review team saw College Quality Improvement Plans for 2014-15 and 2015-16. Both identified actions, target dates and indicators of success. The review team understood that the later of these two plans represented a more strategic approach to improvement than the earlier one. The annual review process can lead to consideration of the viability of programmes and the triggering of the College Programme Withdrawal Procedure. Where a programme is discontinued, students on that programme would continue to complete their studies to

achievement of the award with full delivery and support provided. The review team saw evidence that the HE Strategy Group was actively managing the annual review cycle.

2.69 The College makes little use of employers in the delivery or monitoring of programmes and this has led to a recommendation in Expectation B4 to take deliberative steps to engage employers more consistently and hence allow students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

2.70 Overall, the review team confirms that the lines of responsibility, timescales and templates for completing monitoring are clear. The team considers that the College carries out its responsibility for the monitoring and review of programmes effectively and therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

#### **Findings**

2.71 The College's process for handling complaints is set out in the Customer Feedback Procedure and is applicable to both further and higher education provision at the College. The College has its own Student Appeals Procedure (Higher Education) for all College higher education programmes that are not validated or franchised by the University. Appeals against academic decisions on programmes validated by the University are considered through the University Academic Award Regulations. The complaints and appeals process for applicants is outlined in the College's Admissions Policy made available on the College website.

2.72 The policies and procedures of the College would allow the expectation to be met.

2.73 The review team tested the College's approach to student appeals and complaints through meetings with students, professional support staff, senior staff, academic staff, and representatives from the awarding body. The team also consulted documentation, including the associated policies for complaints and appeals, student programme handbooks, and the collaborative agreements with the University.

2.74 During the visit, the review team discussed appeals and complaints with staff and students. The College encourages informal discussion of complaints at a programme or school level to seek early resolution. Staff and students feel that information about complaints and appeals is easily accessible. However, neither staff nor students understood the difference between complaints and appeals. In particular, students met by the review team stated that an appeal was the next step in the complaints process if the complaint was unsuccessful. Furthermore, the examples of early complaint resolution provided to the review team were in fact examples of responding to student feedback at an informal level (see Expectation B5). One member of staff claimed that the distinction would be made upon how it was presented by the student. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that by February 2016 the College ensure that staff, students and other relevant stakeholders are fully and accurately informed about the differences between a complaint and an appeal.

2.75 The College's process for appeals for Pearson programmes is outlined in the Student Appeals Procedure (Higher Education) and is explicit that the University programmes are not in scope.

2.76 During the visit, the review team found that there was confusion among College staff and the representative from the University about the route available for students to make an academic appeal. The review team was presented with conflicting information on whether appeals were considered by the College or University in the first instance. This is further compounded by the fact that students met by the review team were confident that they could seek clarification from the staff at the College or their programme documentation, which was also not explicit in the process to be followed. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that by February 2016 the College ensure that staff and students are fully and accurately informed about the procedures on how to appeal in respect of courses validated or franchised from the University.

2.77 The review team was unable to test how the College used the information collected via the complaints and appeals processes as there had been no formal complaints or appeals from higher education students within the last three years. The review team was provided with information on the processes followed for reporting complaints to the Corporation Board, HE Academic Board and SMT.

2.78 There is confusion among staff and students about the difference between complaints and appeals and also regarding the policies and procedures relating to appeals concerning the University. This confusion amounts to significant gaps in structures and procedures and ineffective operation of this part of the College's governance structure. The review team thus concludes that Expectation B9 is not met and that the level of risk is serious.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Serious**

**Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others**

**Findings**

2.79 The College takes responsibility for managing its relationship with employers in respect of student work placements provided on foundation degrees. The College articulates its commitment to developing the employability and work-readiness of its students through its revised Higher Education Strategy.

2.80 In developing programmes designed to reflect local need, the College adopts a strategic approach to delivering learning opportunities with employers. Currently, the College is evaluating its higher education portfolio.

2.81 The policies and procedures of the College, together with the regulations and procedures of the University, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.82 The review team tested the evidence by reading handbooks and the College's self-evaluation document submitted for this review, and holding meetings with senior, teaching, professional and support staff, employers, and students to discuss the management and organisation of work-based learning.

2.83 The College does not delegate any responsibility for the delivery of higher education programmes or assessment to other organisations. Students studying on programmes such as the FdSc Information and Communication Technology and HNC Applied Computing are in related employment and sponsored by their employers. They may undertake some independent study in the workplace but no formal assessment takes place.

2.84 Students studying on the FdA Early Childhood Studies undertake work placements in their workplace which are supervised by their employers. The University provides guidelines for work placements and documentation which is completed by students and their placement providers.

2.85 Workplace mentors, usually a line manager or placement supervisor, provide formative assessment on assignment drafts. Students are encouraged to identify real-life projects and briefs which form the basis of the work-related assessment, such as reflective logs. Employers confirmed that students are allocated workplace mentors.

2.86 The employer handbook for the FdA Education Teaching Assistants was useful as it clarified the responsibilities of both student and employers. However, it is out of date, as the front cover states 2012-13 and some details such as staffing have since changed. In addition, the team was provided with a Higher National workplace agreement but there was no indication of how this works in practice or how it is monitored.

2.87 Students working towards foundation degrees confirmed that they undertake work-based activities and that they value their work experience. They confirmed that the College and staff at all levels were committed to supporting them in the workplace.

2.88 The review team met with three employers who spoke positively of the support and regular contact they were offered by the College, even though one programme has recently

terminated. The team heard that the employer representative from BT was able to contribute through a service-level agreement to the validation of the FdSc Information and Communication Technology.

2.89 As described in the introduction to this report, in some subjects the College offers Higher National Certificates and Diplomas leading to awards made under licence by the University, whereas in engineering the College offers Higher National Certificates and Diplomas leading to awards made directly by Pearson. There are currently a little under 30 students on such awards.

2.90 Students on courses leading to Pearson awards are registered with the University to make them eligible to receive student loans - the College not being registered with Student Finance England in its own right. During the visit, the review team heard that the formal agreement governing this arrangement had lapsed in summer 2014 and continued to operate informally. Furthermore, the team was told that the University had informed the College of its intention to discontinue the arrangement completely with effect from the end of the current academic year; that is, before some of the students on the courses affected were due to complete their studies. An informal note of a meeting between the College and the University specified that in the event of the College not being able to offer students the facility to complete their awards, the University would allow the students '...to complete on campus or would identify suitable alternative routes to enable existing students to complete their studies'. Yet because the subjects being studied by these students are not within the University's academic portfolio, it was not clear that completing on the University's campus was possible. Nor was it clear from the evidence what the 'suitable alternative route' was or how it would operate.

2.91 The team was extremely concerned about the lack of a formal agreement covering this arrangement and about the potential impact of the arrangement being withdrawn entirely in summer 2016. The team was also concerned that the College staff involved in discussions with the University had not communicated the University's intentions to the College HE Academic Board, with the result that the Board had not had the opportunity to consider the College's responsibilities and risks. In summary, the situation demonstrated that the College does not have in place arrangements for these students that are implemented securely and managed effectively, and that this demonstrated a serious risk to the quality of their learning opportunities. The review team therefore **recommends** that by February 2016 the College formalises the arrangements with Staffordshire University to ensure that those students who are studying for Pearson awards are able to complete their programmes.

2.92 The College has students on Pearson programmes who it cannot guarantee will be able to complete their programme of study due to the lack of a formal agreement with the University. This represents a serious risk to these students' learning opportunities. In the light of this concern, the review team concludes that the Expectation is not met. The level of risk for these students' learning opportunities caused by this significant gap in policy and procedures is serious.

**Expectation: Not met**  
**Level of risk: Serious**



**Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees***

## **Findings**

2.93 The College does not offer research degrees and therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.94 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.95 Of the 10 applicable Expectations for this judgement area (the College has no engagement with Expectation B11), six are met with low risk. Two are met but with a moderate risk (Expectations B4 and B5). The moderate risk in Expectation B4 centres around the involvement of employers in the delivery and monitoring of programmes whereas the moderate risk in Expectation B5 concerns the involvement of students at strategic levels of the organisation.

2.96 However, in addition, two Expectations are not met and are judged to have serious risks (Expectations B9 and B10). The serious risk in Expectation B9 is around the confusion among staff and students regarding the difference between a complaint and an appeal and the lack of understanding of staff and students as to how the appeals process for the University awards operates. These twin confusions mean that students have no understanding of how to appeal to whom. This lack of clarity puts student learning opportunities and fairness at serious risk. The serious risk in Expectation B10 concerns students on Pearson awards. Because the College has no agreement with Student Finance England, the students are enrolled through Staffordshire University and access student finance through this mechanism. However, the College has no formal agreement in place to continue this practice until the end of the students' programme of study and students could thus be left with no mechanism to continue their studies.

2.97 The review team identifies two areas of good practice in this judgement area. The first is located in Expectation B3 and concerns the current arrangements for all the College higher education students (including those on Pearson programmes) to have full access to Staffordshire University resources. The second is located in Expectation B4 and concerns the College-wide commitment to providing individualised student support.

2.98 There are five recommendations associated with this judgement area, located in Expectations B4, B5, B9 and B10. These concern taking deliberate steps to involve employers more in the delivery and monitoring of programmes (Expectation B4); taking deliberate steps to involve students as partners at strategic levels (Expectation B5); ensuring that everyone is fully and accurately informed about the difference between a complaint and an appeal (Expectation B9); ensuring that staff and students understand how to appeal in respect of University programmes (Expectation B9); and formalising the arrangement with the University concerning the students on Pearson programmes (Expectation B10).

2.99 There is one affirmation in this judgement area located in Expectation B3 which concerns the ongoing development of a suite of strategies, policies and procedures for the College higher education provision.

2.100 The review team notes that while six Expectations in this judgement area are met with low risk, two are met with moderate risk and crucially two are not met, with serious risk (Expectations B9 and B10). The review team therefore concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the College **does not meet** UK expectations.

### **3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities**

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy**

#### **Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision**

##### **Findings**

3.1 The College makes a wide range of information available to its stakeholders including current and prospective students, staff, employers and the public. Its website contains a dedicated section for its higher education provision that includes details of programmes on offer, how to apply and relevant policies and procedures. The College also provides an annual printed prospectus. Arrangements for monitoring information are detailed within the External Communications Policy and the process is clearly understood by staff. The College's Director of Marketing and Admissions is ultimately responsible for the oversight of information and liaises with College programme teams and Heads of Department who have responsibility for constructing the information. The HE Coordinator undertakes an audit check of the information provided by higher education programmes. The Corporation has ultimate responsibility for approval of policies and procedures.

3.2 The review team found that the College's approach to managing information and the extent to which it was fit for purpose, trustworthy and accessible was robust and would allow the Expectation to be met.

3.3 The review team tested this Expectation by reading a wide range of documentation including the College prospectus, programme handbooks, and policies and procedures. The team also viewed the College website and received a demonstration of the VLE as well as meeting students, staff and employers.

3.4 Threshold standards are in place for staff engagement with the VLE, as well as minimum standards for the availability of documentation, adherence to which is considered through an audit by the Educational Technologists who also make regular reports on progress across the College. The team found that the use of the VLE was consistent, with many course areas having already achieved the highest internal award (Gold rosettes). The students met by the review team were content with the information provided on the VLE.

3.5 During the visit, the review team was informed that staff are able to access information about the College's numerous quality assurance systems and procedures through a staff intranet known as the 'HE Community'. Staff are also provided with a Higher Education Staff Handbook. Staff were aware of the information contained on the staff intranet, and of the need to take account of the differing awarding bodies and the different policies and procedures that related exclusively to higher education. The ongoing development of a suite of strategies, policies and procedures has led to an affirmation in Expectation B3. However, staff were unable to distinguish between complaints and appeals and provide a clear process for the consideration of academic appeals on University programmes, and this has led to two recommendations in Expectation B9.

3.6 The College publishes a range of information for current students, including a programme handbook and a HE Deal which outlines the respective expectations of students and staff. Programme handbooks, which include programme specifications and module handbooks, are provided by the University and updated by the College to contextualise to

Stoke on Trent College students. The College produces handbooks for the Pearson awards. Students confirmed that these were helpful to them and fit for purpose.

3.7 The review team met a small sample of employers with different relationships with the College. The employers felt that the information provided to them was good, although they were not routinely provided with an employers' handbook.

3.8 External examiner reports are published on the College VLE and names of external examiners in programme handbooks.

3.9 Overall, the review team concludes that information about learning opportunities at the College is on the whole comprehensive, accurate and well received by students. There are some issues to be addressed in respect of clarifying appeals and complaints procedures as detailed in Expectation B9. However, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met in both design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.10 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.11 Expectation C is met and the associated level of risk is low. There are no recommendations, affirmations or features of good practice primarily located in this area, though the recommendations located in Expectation B9 concerning ensuring all students, staff and stakeholders are informed of the difference between a complaint and an appeal and ensuring staff and students understand the appeals process for University programmes are relevant to this judgement area. In addition, the affirmation in Expectation B3 concerning the ongoing development of a suite of strategies, policies and procedures for the College higher education provision is also relevant to this judgement area.

3.12 Given that the Expectation is met, the level of risk is low and there are no recommendations, the review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 The College states that it is committed to enhancing the learning opportunities and experience of its higher education students. It seeks to do this in two ways. First, student feedback from module and unit evaluations, from the HE Student Council and through programme meetings provides a formal source of information. Second, relatively small group sizes and regular communication between staff and students ensure that issues which might enhance the student experience and quality of learning opportunities can be discussed informally. The College sees both sources of information as providing a basis for taking deliberate steps to enhance the quality of the student learning experience. It seeks to evaluate such activity through the programme evaluation process and at programme team meetings, and intends that actions that enhance learning opportunities on one programme can be discussed and shared through the HE Programme Leaders and Teachers Group, with staff development sessions identifying the expectations of enhancement and sharing of good practice.

4.2 The policies and procedures of the College would allow the Expectation to be met.

4.3 The review team considered the effectiveness of this approach to enhancement by reviewing a number of documents including reviews, reports, strategies, quality improvement plans and action plans. The team also discussed enhancement in meetings with the Principal, senior and academic staff, employers, students and student representatives.

4.4 During the review, the team saw and heard some evidence that the quality of the student learning experience is being enhanced through these mechanisms. Initiatives include the development of a buddies system, where existing students are linked to new students as a means of offering mentoring and assessment support. This initiative is supported by data which indicates that those in the buddies system perform better in assessment than those on the same programme not in the buddies system, and that the increased performance is experienced both by those being mentored and those mentoring. As a result, the decision has been taken to spread the arrangement across the College provision.

4.5 Other initiatives include the strategic initiative to enhance the VLE, the use of the science centre at Staffordshire University to enable students to have access, among other resources, to MMR spectrometers and the Forensic Science House, the One-Stop Shop in the Hub, and the Accelerate programme.

4.6 The review team recognised that the bottom-up approach being taken makes a contribution to the enhancement of the student learning experience. It is not able to conclude, however, that on its own it provides an effective enhancement strategy. The review team recognises that the annual monitoring and review system is beginning to make an appropriate contribution to the enhancement of the student experience and recognised the contribution of the HE Quality Boards and the role that the HE Strategy Group is playing in managing the annual review cycle and the enhancement that came about as the result of it. The review team notes the greater strategic focus that the Quality Improvement Plan for 2015-16 is providing, and recognises that this will create a focus for an embedded enhancement strategy. In the light of these considerations, the review team **affirms** the

ongoing revision and implementation of the policies and procedures for higher education to ensure deliberate steps to enhance the quality of student learning opportunities.

4.7 Overall, therefore, the College undertakes work to enable deliberate steps to be taken to improve the quality of the student learning opportunities and the review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.8 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.9 The Expectation is met and the associated risk is low.

4.10 There are no features of good practice or recommendations in this judgement area. There is one affirmation relating to the ongoing revision and implementation of policies and procedures for higher education which support the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

4.11 Given that the Expectation is met, the review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.



## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The College is a member of the University Quarter which comprises a partnership between Stoke City Council, Staffordshire University, Stoke on Trent College and City of Stoke on Trent Sixth Form College. The UNIQ partnership aims to create a suitable infrastructure for learning and aims to ensure that residents of Stoke on Trent have access to high-quality information, advice and guidance, and seamless progression opportunities from further to higher education within the city.

5.2 The College outlines its commitment to developing the employability and work-readiness of students through its Mission Statement, Business Plan and revised Higher Education Strategy which focus on employer engagement activities, particularly at curriculum level and supporting students to obtain employment opportunities.

5.3 The College is in the process of reviewing its higher education portfolio and intends to address local and regional employment needs by using more targeted labour market intelligence, widening participation, increasing choice of higher education routes, and meeting the skills needs of the region. The College seeks to ensure that its priorities support local priorities and national objectives, structured in such a way that enables students to access financial support for their programmes, while enabling and encouraging articulation and progression. To meet this need and address labour market requirements, the College is developing a suite of Higher Apprenticeship programmes. In this way, the College provides a higher-level vocational progression choice for its existing full-time students, as well as enabling higher education opportunities for adults.

5.4 The College is focused on developing the employability skills of students, but recognises that more can be done to engage with employers. An employer survey is undertaken but senior staff are aware that the survey criteria do not sufficiently evaluate higher education. At the present time, there are no employer advisory boards, though employers, such as BT, have been involved in designing programmes with the College.

5.5 The FdSc Information and Communication Technology attracts students from all over the UK and the team found that there is a very productive relationship with BT regarding collaboration in respect of curriculum development, which has led to the introduction of new modules.

5.6 The higher education qualifications offered by the College are all employability related. Employability skills are built into all programmes and students speak highly of the way in which the College provides support for the embedding of transferable skills (this is discussed in more depth in Expectations B3 and B4).

5.7 The team heard that students are encouraged to develop presentation skills, team working and working to deadlines. There are some good examples of case studies provided by the College which demonstrate students' success in developing a career, starting a business, for example in complementary therapies, and achieving individual aspirations to progress to further study at university or to management positions in the workplace.

5.8 Careers advice and guidance is provided by the College's Student Services Unit and teaching staff and professional support staff, including the Learning Resource Centre staff, work effectively with students to develop their curriculum vitae skills, prepare them for interviews, undertake research into local industries and provide academic progression and potential career choices.

5.9 Students, staff and employers are committed to reinforcing opportunities to further embed the depth and range of student employability opportunities within the College.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 30 to 33 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality)

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

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

### Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

### Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

### Credit(s)

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

### Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

### Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'.

See also **blended learning**.

### Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

### **Enhancement**

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations.

See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

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

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

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

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

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

### **Learning outcomes**

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

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

### **Programme specifications**

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

### **Public information**

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

### **Quality Code**

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

### **Reference points**

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

### **Subject Benchmark Statement**

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

### **Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

### **Threshold academic standard**

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

### **Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

### **Widening participation**

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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