



Quality Review Visit of Stranmillis University College

February 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Stranmillis University College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Stranmillis University College.

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

Areas for development

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

- offer opportunities for staff to engage more fully with the FHEQ and related qualification descriptors through continuing professional development (FHEQ)
- finalise and disseminate arrangements for the review and approval of public information (Consumer Protection)
- finalise arrangements for making the procedure for dealing with student complaints explicit to students and staff (Student Protection).

Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any **specified improvements**.

About this review

The review visit took place from 20 to 22 February 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Diane Rainsbury
- Mr Anthony Turjansky
- Mr Daniel McCarthy Stott (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

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

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

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

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

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

About Stranmillis University College

Stranmillis University College (the University College) has provided a learning experience for students for over 95 years. Following a decision by the Ministry of Education (Northern Ireland) in 1922 to locate teacher training in Belfast, Stranmillis College was formed and located in the Stranmillis House estates close to the city centre. Stranmillis College had historic links with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and this relationship developed further in 1968 when the University became the validating institution for the College and its only awarding body. In 1999, Stranmillis became Stranmillis University College, a college of QUB, however the University College remains financially and organisationally independent of the University. At the time of the review visit, the University College had 1,568 students: 1,389 undergraduate students, 260 of whom are part-time, and 179 postgraduate students.

The University College works in collaboration with a consortium of six further education colleges in Northern Ireland that deliver a foundation degree in Early Childhood Studies, and with Belfast Metropolitan College to deliver a foundation degree in Health, Physical Activity and Sport. In addition, the University College provides undergraduate programmes in primary and post-primary teacher education; Early Childhood Studies; Health, Physical Activity and Sport; a range of postgraduate master's teaching programmes; and a Postgraduate Certificate in Early Years Education.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 Ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of awards delivered by the University College resides with QUB as the awarding body. The University College operates QUB's quality assurance system, which includes processes for programme approval, monitoring and review. These establish the appropriateness and comparability of standards in relation to the Quality Code, the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements, as well as professional requirements, specifically the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) competences for teacher education.

2 QUB programme specifications are developed and published for all validated awards, describing their titles and FHEQ levels, relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, and professional body accreditation. Module guides describe intended learning outcomes and GTCNI competences. The review team noted references to 'levels 1 to 3' in programme documentation, in preference to FHEQ levels 4 to 6, which accords with QUB practice. Also in line with awarding body regulations, the team noted the limited availability of intermediate exit awards at undergraduate level, which are confined to a 300-credit Ordinary Non-Honours Degree only.

3 To ensure comparability of academic standards with those of other UK higher education providers, the awarding body appoints external examiners, who comment explicitly on comparability in their reports. Module reviews, informed by external examiner reports, confirm that intended learning outcomes are consistent with relevant sector benchmarks and are being achieved by students. At programme level, annual and periodic reviews confirm that appropriate standards are being set and achieved.

4 Academic staff met by the review team demonstrated their familiarity with relevant Subject Benchmark Statements; conversely, they appeared less familiar with the FHEQ, citing QUB's Conceptual Equivalent Scales as a principal reference point for academic standards. While the FHEQ is fully acknowledged within programme specifications, and notwithstanding the full and consistent use made of QUB descriptors in setting assessment standards that are well understood by staff and students, the review team advises the University College to offer opportunities for staff to engage more fully with the FHEQ and related qualification descriptors through continuing professional development, identifying this as an **area for development**.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

5 The University College has in place and implements effective arrangements for maintaining oversight of academic governance and risk, and respecting the values of academic freedom and collegiality. Within the University College governance structure, the Teaching and Learning Committee is responsible for overseeing academic governance. This Committee provides regular reports to the awarding body's Education Committee, on which the University College is represented by the Director of Teaching and Learning.

6 The University College's Education Committee is a sub-committee of the Board of Governors and was introduced to provide an additional level of academic oversight.

The Education Committee provides a further report to the Board of Governors, along with institutional data relating to student retention, achievement, feedback from external examiners and any other issues raised or significant trends including National Student Survey data.

7 The University College recognises that providing sufficient oversight of academic standards at governing body level is a challenge and is in the process of adding additional expertise to the governing body. The review team found the current arrangements in place to be sufficient to meet baseline standards.

8 The University College's corporate risk register, which includes items relating to the maintenance of academic standards, is regularly updated and scrutinised by the Board of Governors. Further scrutiny of risks related to academic standards is undertaken by the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, where actions to mitigate risks are also discussed.

9 Expectations relating to academic freedom are underpinned by the University College's mission, vision and values, which include embracing diversity, collaboration and good governance. The Board of Governors has approved a Code of Ethics in Research, which outlines respect for academic freedom through research. In meetings with the review team, staff demonstrated their clear commitment to the expectations set out in the College's values in relation to academic freedom and collegiality.

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

10 The University College works within the academic regulations and quality assurance processes of QUB. There was robust evidence of consistent application of the operation of these processes in practice, and staff demonstrated detailed familiarity with these requirements.

11 Programme specifications constitute the definitive source of information and follow the required template of QUB. Learning outcomes are clearly defined within programme specifications and module descriptors, with QUB regulations and quality assurance processes being the definitive source of reference for initial programme development, delivery and assessment.

12 In relation to colleges within the consortium, while QUB is ultimately accountable for the academic standards of the award, the University College exercises operational oversight for the quality assurance of its partner colleges. This is implemented fully in practice with each programme having a senior member of staff acting as a Quality Coordinator. The Teaching and Learning Committee and relevant programme boards provide effective management and oversight, which is supported operationally by effective day-to-day liaison and participation.

13 All programmes operate in accordance with QUB's Code of Practice on Examinations and Assessment. All assignments are marked using the QUB Equivalents Marking Scale and second-marked prior to submission to the external examiner. Internal moderation is carried out by partner colleges prior to cross-moderation by the University College. All assignments are second-marked, to assure consistency of assessment and grades awarded, and subject to moderation by the external examiner.

14 External examiner reports demonstrate that student work is of an appropriate academic standard for the level of award. The University College meticulously follows the requirements of QUB with regard to responding to external examiners' reports. There was evidence of the University College responding to thematic issues spanning different

programmes and undertaking an assessment review in response to a specific issue identified by the external examiner on one programme.

15 In accordance with QUB requirements and the general expectations of the Quality Code, all students have access to external examiner reports. However, the review team found a range of different approaches in how external examiner reports were disseminated, and students met by the team were generally unaware of where reports were located. The University College recognises the advantages of developing a more consistent approach to the publication of external examiner reports to promote greater awareness across the student community.

16 The Annual Programme Review (APR) report provides an effective mechanism at programme level for monitoring academic standards. These reports follow QUB's template and are applied consistently. APRs are considered by the University College's Teaching and Learning Committee prior to formal consideration by QUB, and incorporate consideration of data relating to progression, achievement and employment destinations. The findings of APRs are used to develop an annual plan, with the Teaching and Learning Committee directly contributing to and scrutinising them as part of its deliberative process.

17 University College periodic review procedures are determined by QUB and incorporate external peer review, with students represented on the panel. Module evaluation and review is undertaken effectively and includes responses from students at partner colleges, with the Programme Committee having oversight of the outcomes of such feedback, which it reviews on an annual basis.

Rounded judgement

18 The academic standards of higher education courses are set by the awarding body and managed through appropriate mechanisms. The University College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards through its governance structures; internal processes and procedures; and adherence to the regulations of the awarding body. There are no specified improvements in this area.

19 The review team identified one area for development in this area. This relates to offering opportunities for staff to engage more fully with the FHEQ and related qualification level descriptors through continuing professional development.

20 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

21 The University College's Teaching and Learning Strategy, overseen by its Teaching and Learning Committee, places emphasis on widening participation and developing graduate skills. A complementary Research Strategy, overseen by the Research and Scholarship Committee, reflects a commitment to embedding research in teaching and learning across all programmes.

22 Academic staff appointments are managed in accordance with QUB regulations, which require evidence of significant discipline experience and a current doctoral qualification or intention to acquire one. A Staff Development Policy covers all categories of staff and a separate Doctoral Support Policy makes specific provision for the support of doctoral study. New teachers are inducted and mentored, and staff may access training from QUB's Centre for Educational Development. Academic staff appraisal focuses specifically on teaching, scholarship and research, and while there is no formal teaching observation (in line with awarding body practice), informal peer observation and team teaching support the exchange of staff practice. Academic staff are supported to seek and obtain external examiner positions at other higher education institutions. Students who contributed to the review indicated their strong appreciation of tutors' academic qualifications and research profiles.

23 The University College and its awarding body have joint responsibility for the provision of learning resources. The University College has invested more than £10 million over ten years in refurbishing its library and IT provision. Students also access QUB facilities and resources, including the Queen's Online virtual learning environment, which provides access to module information, learning resources and electronic coursework submission. Students who contributed to the review indicated broad satisfaction with the quality and accessibility of learning resources.

24 The University College provides a full range of academic and personal support services to its students. These services are signposted during induction week and beyond, and in programme handbooks. A Student Support and Wellbeing Strategy, overseen by the Student Support and Engagement Committee, brings together support for academic study, personal development, careers and student wellbeing. Each student is assigned an Adviser of Studies, who offers academic advice and support, and a Personal Tutor, who provides general guidance and makes referrals to central support services.

25 A Communication Skills Centre provides academic skills support, including academic writing and referencing, delivered by specially recruited and trained student peer advisers, which staff and students described as particularly valuable. In relation to employability, activities provided under the banner of 'degree enhancement' include access to additional qualifications and awards and alternative placement experiences, which the University College links with its exceptionally high rate of graduate employment. Overall, the review team was satisfied that students access appropriate and comprehensive support from a range of academic and administrative staff.

26 Processes for student engagement, including the collection of student feedback and representation on committees, are managed in conjunction with the Students' Union. Staff-Student Consultative Committees (SSCCs) are attended by elected student

representatives, who receive training from the Union. A Student Representative Council, hosted and chaired by the Union, provides an additional platform for students' views.

27 Elected Students' Union officers, who include a sabbatical President, comprise the Student Executive and variously attend SSCCs, programme boards and senior committees. The President, who is a University College Governor, and other members of the Executive, receive external training for their roles.

28 Students complete module evaluations and annual surveys and participate in periodic programme reviews, both as contributors and panel members. Programme handbooks contain information on student representation, the Students' Union and Student Charter.

29 Students who contributed to the review valued their communications with staff, both formal and informal, which were based on excellent personal relationships and a student-centred, 'community' ethos. The most recent National Student Survey yielded overall satisfaction of 90 per cent and high satisfaction across all questions, including Student Voice.

30 The setting, marking and moderation of assessments are conducted in accordance with QUB regulations and procedures. Assessment strategies demonstrate a range of formative and summative assessments to suit particular subjects and levels of study. Coursework briefs are internally moderated prior to distribution. First and second-marking are conducted with reference to QUB's Conceptual Equivalents Scales and module-specific criteria. Processes for reasonable adjustments and consideration of extenuating circumstances are signposted in handbooks and managed by the Student Support Service and Exceptional Circumstances Committee respectively, in line with QUB regulations.

31 Students who contributed to the review demonstrated a good understanding of academic level, learning outcomes and assessment criteria, and described assessments that were varied and challenging, and feedback that was timely, developmental and of consistently high quality. Boards of examiners comprising internal and external examiners are chaired by senior University College staff, and confirm students' marks, progression and awards in accordance with QUB regulations.

32 Module reviews, overseen by programme boards of studies, utilise quantitative data and feedback from students and external examiners to confirm that curriculum, teaching and assessment remain appropriate and that students are achieving the required standards. APRs and periodic programme reviews conducted by QUB confirmed the standards and quality of all programmes, and recommended their continued approval.

33 The University College works with employers, principally schools, to source and deliver student work placements. A dedicated placements team supports the allocation and administration of placements. Placement handbooks contain advance information for students and placement providers, supplemented by pre-placement modules, briefing sessions and/or orientation days. The handbook for teacher training placements defines clearly the roles and responsibilities of education providers, schools and trainees. Staff visit placement settings and use feedback from students and tutors to inform future placement allocations. Placement providers who contributed to the review described excellent working relationships with the University College and their involvement in programme development, monitoring and review, both individually and collectively.

34 The University College leads a consortium of further education colleges in the delivery of foundation degree programmes. Heads of the relevant college departments serve as Quality Coordinators, chair programme boards of studies and ensure that programme assessment (including cross-college moderation), monitoring and review are conducted in

accordance with QUB requirements. Foundation degree students who contributed to the review described the support they received for progression to honours degree study at the University College.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

35 The University College has in place effective arrangements to ensure student engagement in academic governance. The University College has an independent Students' Union and the Student President is a full member of the University College's Board of Governors and the Teaching and Learning Committee. The review team noted the effective use of external training for the student governor, along with significant support to undertake their role.

36 The University College has a formal Senior Leadership and Student Executive Committee where the Students' Union executive regularly meet with senior leadership. In addition, each programme has a SSCC at which students can provide feedback on their programmes. The review team met students and student representatives, who described these committees as beneficial and effective in providing and receiving feedback. At present, students are not represented on committees at which detailed discussions of any programme changes take place, including boards of studies.

37 The Board of Governors has approved a Dignity at Work and Study Policy, along with a Student Support and Wellbeing Strategy, and receives and reviews an annual report on student complaints and appeals. The Director of Student Support and Learning Services provides regular updates at the Education Committee and reviews student retention, progress and success as a measure of the Strategy's effectiveness.

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

38 The University College works within the regulatory requirements of the awarding body, for which QUB has detailed policy and procedures to ensure compliance with Competition and Markets Authority requirements. Responsibility for admissions and recruitment, including the production of all promotional and programme material, is fully delegated to the University College subject to the use of specified wording in accordance with the terms of the Memorandum of Agreement. The information is presented consistently and accurately and conforms to the required wording provided by QUB.

39 The University College provides comprehensive and wide-ranging information to ensure that all applicants are fully informed about the nature of their programme and any important terms and conditions that might influence their choice and location of study. The same level of information is also available on the website. Students were complimentary about the range of information they received as applicants and attested to its comprehensiveness and accuracy.

40 Applicants also receive a comprehensive 'interview pack' when invited for interview and are made aware of all terms and conditions. Prior to confirming the offer, all applicants receive a folder of information incorporating academic, financial and pastoral information, with QUB terms and conditions included in the official offer letter.

41 Students receive accurate and comprehensive information on their programmes and module guides that are aligned with QUB requirements.

42 Applicants have access to the University College's admissions, complaints and appeals procedure, which is clearly referenced in the information provided to students. The University College's Selection Committee receives an anonymised summary of all admissions appeals and complaints, monitors application rates, and maintains an overview of admissions decisions throughout the admissions cycle. It also reviews policy and practice in response to specific issues brought to its attention, as well as in response to sector developments and recognised good practice. There is a clear process for considering applications for recognised prior or experiential learning, and this is included in induction materials.

43 Across the University College, there is a shared understanding on the operational process and locus of authority for the review and approval of promotional materials, including the prospectus, programme specifications, and all programme and student-facing documentation. The review team was satisfied with the accuracy and accessibility of the information provided to prospective applicants and students. Staff at all levels of the University College demonstrated a clear understanding of the operational practice for approving different types of information. The University College was already in the process of developing a documentary process that reflects its existing operational practice and which is scheduled for formal consideration by the Board of Governors following consultation with both students and staff. The review team advises the University College to finalise and disseminate arrangements for the review and approval of public information, identifying this is an **area for development**.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's (NIPSO) Principles of Good Administration

44 The Department for Education (Northern Ireland) sets the University College's Initial Teacher Education (ITE) maximum student number cap on an annual basis. In recent years, the University College's intake has remained largely stable, although the review team did hear evidence that any significant changes to the ITE numbers could have an impact on the student experience. The University College has put in place strategies to mitigate this risk, including the expansion of part-time and international students.

45 Given the relative stability of student numbers, and that demand for core places on the University College's programmes is high, the University College does not envisage course closures as a significant risk. The review team heard evidence that in the event of a course closure the University College would follow the processes of the awarding body in relation to teach-out. On the one occasion where, as a result of student feedback, a programme name change was instigated, the University College followed the processes for teach-out in full. Only those students who started their course after the change had been made were able to graduate with the new programme title and those currently enrolled when the change occurred retained the original title, in line with the awarding body's teach-out procedures.

46 The review team found effective processes in relation to consulting and informing current students of any changes to their course, often following direct student feedback. Given the stable nature of the University College's provision, the review team heard no examples of programmes being changed prior to a student accepting an offer.

47 The review team discussed processes related to student complaints, appeals and academic appeals with students and staff. The review team found that no formal complaints at the University College had been submitted in the last three years and there was one academic appeal that was dismissed. The team heard that concerns are mostly managed informally at a local level. Students reported positively that when any issues had been raised the University College was quick to respond, which prevented issues progressing further.

48 The University College has a Dignity at Work and Study Policy, which contains a procedure for raising issues or making a complaint in relation to dignity at work or while studying. Students are informed of the processes to raise issues at induction and through speaking with members of staff. As a result of reviewing its own policies and procedures, the University College has recognised the need for a separate distinctive student complaints procedure to provide further clarity to staff and students. This separate procedure is currently in draft form and due to be approved shortly. The University College has also identified that current documentation does not contain references to the Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman, although this is included in the new draft policies. The review team therefore advises that the University College finalise arrangements for making the procedure for dealing with student complaints explicit to students and staff, identifying this is an **area for development**.

49 The University College's awarding body manages and processes all academic appeals. Students would be signposted to QUB to raise any concerns and the awarding body would subsequently contact the University College to request any relevant information. University College staff are supported to understand the awarding body's appeals process by sitting on appeals boards, which do not involve University College students.

Rounded judgement

50 The University College has demonstrated through its governance structures, internal policies and procedures that it effectively meets all the baseline regulatory requirements in this area. There are two areas for development in this judgement area in which activity is already underway. These relate to finalising and disseminating the arrangements for the review and approval of public information and finalising arrangements for making explicit to students and staff the procedure for dealing with student complaints. There are no specified improvements in this area.

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

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