



Quality Review Visit of Strode College

May 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Strode College

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

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

Areas for development

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

- revise committee terms of reference to clarify arrangements for oversight of higher education academic governance (Code of Governance)
- reinstate the formal annual compliments and complaints report to Governors (Code of Governance).

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 10 to 11 May 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Hastings McKenzie
- Mr Gary Hargreaves
- Mrs Sarah D'Ambrumenil (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 Strode College

Strode College (the College) is a general further education college located in Street, Somerset. Somerset does not have a university so all higher education in the county is delivered through further education colleges. Strode College has been delivering higher education courses since 2006 in partnership with the University of Plymouth and from 2012 with Pearson. The College currently has 107 students on higher education courses.

The College has one awarding body: the University of Plymouth (the University). In addition, the College delivers Higher Nationals validated by its awarding organisation Pearson. The College has largely used the University's academic regulations to manage the quality and consequent evaluation of its provision.

Strode College offers foundation degrees, top-up degrees and Higher National qualifications in the following subject areas: History, Heritage and Archaeology, Management, Computing, Engineering and Psychology.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The review team confirms that the College has in place the documentation and arrangements to meet its awarding body and organisation requirements, and to ensure that the academic standards of the programmes the College provides meet the baseline regulatory requirements and the UK threshold requirements for the FHEQ. Other reference points include Subject Benchmark Statements and Pearson centre defined programme specifications.

2 The awarding body, Plymouth University, and the awarding organisation, Pearson, have confirmed through their course approval processes that the validation requirements have been met and adhered to. The College provided detailed examples and clear descriptions of its internal validation processes, and of the robust and rigorous documentation necessary to complete the formal validation requirements of its awarding body and organisation. Validation processes included both University and Pearson centre defined programme specifications that reflected the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements and other external reference points. Prospective students and local employers were consulted when the College was considering new provision. For potential University programmes there is well-informed support provided through the Universities Relationship Development Manager Meetings, providing support for planning and development of any new provision.

3 The College has a range of networks and other indicators it can use for comparisons with other higher education programmes, nationally, regionally and locally. There is also a range of data used including Teaching Excellence Framework metric data that is examined and used to plan, improve and inform academic standards.

4 The College continually undertakes considerable and well-documented research to confirm that the academic standards of the College's programmes are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers. This is demonstrable through networking with the University and other local colleges, and also evident through external examiner reports, and both attending and presenting at conferences.

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

5 The College has adopted the AoC's Code of Good Governance for English Colleges and the review team found that the academic governance arrangements enabled academic freedom and collegiality. The Academic Standards and Quality Committee (ASQC) is responsible to the Board of Governors for assuring that the quality and standards of teaching and learning are maintained. Through its membership and consideration of formal reports it is effective in maintaining oversight of academic risk.

6 Relationships and reporting lines between College committees were unclear. While common membership enabled the cross communication and consideration of issues, individual committee responsibilities for the oversight of higher education were not always defined. The review team advises the College to revise committee terms of reference to clarify arrangements for oversight of higher education academic governance as an **area for development**.

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

7 The review team were assured that the College's arrangements in discharging its responsibilities for helping to maintain the academic standards of its awards were effective. The College works in partnership with the University and Pearson to deliver higher education programmes. The College is compliant with University and Pearson requirements and has its own internal procedures to assure the quality of its higher education provision. Processes include the use of student feedback and external reference points in both the creation and maintenance of programmes.

8 The College has suitable arrangements to test that students have achieved the academic standards set; assessments are written against learning outcomes and appropriate criteria are set by College staff. The team found that appropriate data is used at both programme-level, including partner representatives, and College-level to monitor academic standards.

Rounded judgement

9 Through its governance structures, internal processes and procedures and its adherence to University and Pearson regulations, the College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards. There is one area for development in this area where activity is already underway or where there are minor omissions or inconsistencies. There are no specified areas for improvement in this area.

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

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

11 The review team can confirm that the College meets the baseline requirements and expectations of the Quality Code. The College delivers each programme over two consecutive days of the week. This approach is popular among the students as it offers a flexible balance between College and home life. Students are well represented and engaged at programme level, and are kept informed of higher education developments at both programme and College level. This includes involvement in programme monitoring and approval, and students have effective resources and support in place to support their learning experience.

12 The College has a close relationship with its awarding body, Plymouth University, and took care to ensure when approving its Pearson programmes that a compatible framework of programme regulation and management was introduced. The Quality Action Group and ASQC play key roles in monitoring and reviewing the student experience through data analysis, programme monitoring and the consideration of action plans. The College is responsive to student feedback; Programme Committees and the Student Forum are effective in receiving feedback from students and reporting back on developments. The Board of Governors also includes a higher education student representative.

13 The College actively responds to student views on assessment. For example, student feedback on the assessment processes of the College led to scheduling changes in an attempt to offset bunching of assignments. Such considerations are ongoing and in general students considered assessment feedback to be timely and useful. The College is also making increasing use of electronic feedback via the virtual learning environment, which has also been recently augmented with a new system of plagiarism-detection software to support assignment submission.

14 Students highly value the quality of teaching and student support and the College is responsive to staff development needs, for example in supporting staff to undertake master's and research degrees. This commitment has led to staff research publications and the sharing of good practice at a recent staff College Development Day focused on excellence in higher education. The review team concluded that this considered approach to staff development and the College's consultative approach to programme development and delivery has helped create a stable portfolio of higher education programmes that are well regarded by students.

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

15 The College has a governance structure in place that includes representation from two student Governors, one of which is a higher education student, on both the Board of Governors and ASQC. Governors are encouraged to informally meet with students and the student representation system offers frequent opportunities to meet with senior staff within the College and discuss academic governance.

16 The College's governance arrangements address student welfare. The College previously had arrangements in place that required an annual compliments and complaints report to be made to the Governors. These arrangements have lapsed, although concerns

relating to student complaints can be raised within the governance structure on an ad hoc basis. The review team noted that the College recognised that an annual reporting was valuable and provided assurance to the Governors. As a result, the review team advises the College to reinstate the formal annual compliments and complaints report to Governors as an **area for development**.

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

17 The College has a comprehensive higher education admissions policy that details the process that applicants will follow. Information for potential students is easily accessible through a variety of ways and formats, including the College website prospectus. Publically available information is subject to rigorous internal vetting, and version control, from course leaders and the Head of Marketing. The Senior Management Team provides final sign-off to ensure accuracy and completeness.

18 The College differentiates between the University and Pearson in the staged admissions processes, and for both this is clearly aligned to HEFCE Regulated Programmes expectations and the Quality Code, and also signposted to take account of any potential complaints, for example to the OIA. The admissions processes are clear and easily accessible through the College website, and include details on Consumer Contracts Regulation. The College is fully aware of its consumer protection responsibilities, having taken guidance from the Competition and Markets Authority and AoC.

19 The College provides prospective students with information on courses, course structure, course fees and assessment methods, through a range of materials, including programme specifications, with additional support provided on finance, accommodation bursaries and special educational needs. Students receive an individualised offer letter which details course requirements including terms and conditions plus a conditional offer, and each student is provided with an acceptance postcard.

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

20 The College has a clear higher education complaints procedure and process; the College deals with complaints in a timely manner through a three-stage process. It notifies students of the ability to proceed from stage 1 to stage 2; and to progress stage 3 to the University, and thereafter to the OIA and the CMA. Stage 2 of the complaints process directs students to a senior member of College staff (Principal, Deputy Principal or Head of Quality) by letter, telephone, email or in person, and stresses the importance of confidentiality in handling student complaints. The College makes the process clear to students in the College's terms and conditions, in the student contracts, and student charter. The process also fully aligns with Pearson requirements. The College has fully engaged with the OIA and CMA, and their available resources including case studies.

21 There is comprehensive information and guidance provided to staff and students on academic appeals. The College follows the formal Academic Appeals Policy as defined by the University. For the awarding organisation the College has developed its own effective internal processes. Appeals process are communicated to students via the virtual learning environment and referenced in the higher education student handbooks, which include further guidance for both staff and students.

22 The College provides clear details and policy on Course Cancellation and Closure, which is outlined in the College admissions policy. There are clear procedures designed to reduce the burden of course closures on students, and where practicable, to inform students of potential course alternative providers. The College confirmed that in case of teach-out they are committed to providing support for such students even when numbers are low.

Rounded judgement

23 The College has demonstrated through its internal governance structures and its internal policies and procedures that it effectively meets all the baseline regulatory requirements for the quality of student academic experience. There is one area for development in this area where activity is already underway or where there are minor omissions or inconsistencies. There are no specified improvements in this area.

24 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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