Quality Review Visit of Suffolk New College

April 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Suffolk New College

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

- further embed academic freedom and collegiality as a deliberative process with more clarity, context, planning and integration across the entire HE provision (Codes of Governance)
- develop further opportunities for students to be more formally engaged as partners in quality assurance processes (Quality Code).

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 24 to 25 April 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mrs Jane Durant
- Mr Gary Hargreaves
- Ms Karen Chetwynd (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 Suffolk New College

Suffolk New College is in a unique position in that it is a partner of the University of Suffolk Ltd together with West Suffolk College and East Coast College. Higher education provision is described as being provided at University of Suffolk Campus, Suffolk New College with programmes validated by the University of Suffolk (UoS). UoS, previously University Campus Suffolk, was granted Taught Degree Awarding Powers in 2015 and university status in 2017. The Principals of each college sit on the university board and senior staff from the university sit on the college boards. Previous to this situation, higher education programmes were validated by the University of East Anglia and University of Essex. These programmes are no longer offered and all students studying these programmes have completed their studies.

UoS and the partner colleges form a Learning Network that provides opportunities for collaborative work including continuing professional development (CPD) and standardisation. Students have access to resources at the main university campus, which is close to the College in Ipswich, and online.

Ipswich is the largest town in Suffolk, and has a lower than average wage economy. Compared to the rest of England, Ipswich has higher levels of deprivation and unemployment with an economy of lower productivity. The population is less qualified to higher levels than average, with 39 per cent compared to 53 per cent nationally qualified up to level 3, and wages at 10 per cent below national average. Ipswich has a higher black and minority ethnic population than its surrounding county. Of the town's population, 35,500 live within the most deprived fifth of areas of England. Nine areas of the town are ranked in the

top 10 per cent most deprived areas nationally. The Social Mobility Index ranked Ipswich 292 of 324 local authority districts based on data from 2014 and 2015. The College is committed to playing an active role in the area's skills transformation, which is required for a more productive and high-value economy, through the provision of further and higher education opportunities for the community and beyond. Ipswich has been declared an Opportunity Area by the Department for Education, which recognises a lack of social mobility in the area and is working in partnership to combat the existing barriers to social mobility.

Suffolk New College (SNC) currently has approximately 2.500 full and part-time students of whom 99 are studying on higher education programmes. Until recently, SNC concentrated its higher education provision in two areas, civil engineering and initial teacher training but is now looking to extend its provision to other areas and in 2017 began an FdA in Fashion Communication and Promotion.

The programmes within the scope of this review are; FdSc Civil Engineering, BSc Civil Engineering, Certificate in Education, PGCE and FdA Fashion Communication and Promotion.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1   The College effectively executes its responsibilities for ensuring that the academic standards of its programmes are appropriately aligned to the FHEQ. The College works with its higher education (HE) awarding partner, University of Suffolk, to deliver programmes on a formal partnership basis. The College's responsibilities for assessing appropriate levels and standards are shared with the University although the College also operates a robust internal process for scrutiny of new programmes and business development through the College's Learning Network Academic Committee (LNAC) led by a clearly directed HE matrix for development within a formal HE strategy.

2   The awarding body is ultimately responsible for the standards oversight, approval and monitoring of programmes, and minutes of approval events and validation documentation show appropriate consideration of the FHEQ in the oversight of the programmes and in the approval of definitive course documentation. The evidence also shows that local economic considerations and industry relevance to satisfy employer need are taken into account during course development. Subject Benchmark Statements and relevant professional body requirements are used as additional reference points as confirmed through regular accreditation activity.

3   The College has effective arrangements to ensure that the academic standards of its programmes are comparable with those of other UK HE providers through formal datasets provided by the University partner to help monitor local provision. The awarding partner is responsible for external examiner arrangements and reports, which comment on the comparability of standards to suit the needs of vocational education.

4   Annual and periodic review mechanisms including risk schedules via a Risk-based Monitoring and Enhancement Report (RiME) are used to ensure that actions arising from external examiner reports are dealt with, and the College's internal deliberative committee structure confirms that appropriate actions have taken place with oversight by the awarding body University committees. The review team was assured of awarding body oversight to support both higher education teaching and learning and facilitate robust higher education assessment practices ensuring shared practice through control measures across all College partners.

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's governing body, the Corporation, provides effective arrangements to maintain oversight of academic governance. The Corporation works within the principles of good governance as outlined in the Association of Colleges' Code of Good Governance for English Colleges 2015, which works alongside the Corporation's own Code of Governance. The College's HE provision is led and scrutinised by the Vice Principal through Committees and Assessment Boards, all of which report to the Corporation, who report to the University and are further represented by the College Principal as a Corporation member, and Director of the University's Board. The University's Governance structure incorporates the College formally as part of the partnership agreement through their reporting and monitoring processes and through the deliberative committees known as the Quality Sub Committees that include the Partner College Committees, reporting directly to the University Senate

and into the University Board of Directors. In maintaining effective oversight, the Director of Quality from the University sits on the College Corporation ensuring that reporting arrangements are clear and effective. Further, the College committee structure sets out the schedule and processes for reporting and is led by the University. Representatives from the University also attend relevant College committees, for example LNACs.

6   The College described, in principle, arrangements for respecting academic freedom and collegiality. While the review team heard examples of how academic freedom and collegiality was being expressed, for example joint student/staff publication of research in Civil Engineering, and the staff designed Fashion FdA, this was not strategic or planned and staff expressed limited understanding of academic freedom. The College needs to further embed academic freedom and collegiality as a deliberative process with more clarity, context, planning and integration across the entire HE provision as an **area for development**. This could be more effective if it were included more formally in the College's own Code of Governance.

7   There are clear and effective governance arrangements to support and maintain the oversight of academic risk. A risk management strategy includes a College RiME operating at College level and is produced annually, informed by course RiME reports, and by data produced by the UoS data team. RiME is a specific register for higher education, and any risks appear in the College Risk Management Plan, which is prepared and presented to the Corporation by the Principal and references the entire range of College provision, providing Governors with oversight of risk at the most strategic and senior level. Whilst the RiME operates at College level it directly reports to the University and informs the College Higher Education Strategy.

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

8   UoS maintains ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of the awards delivered by the College. As a University partner, and in accordance with the Collaboration Agreement, the College is responsible for ensuring the quality of the provision it delivers. The College works within the University's regulatory and policy frameworks that are clearly articulated in the Collaborative Agreement and the Suffolk New College Core Responsibilities document.

9   Senior leadership of College higher education is structured through the Vice Principal who line manages the Director of Quality, Support and Teacher Development and the heads of academic schools. Divided by subject, the provision is managed within three schools. Within the College, responsibility for maintaining academic standards, and assuring and enhancing the quality of the student academic experience is effective through course progress reviews, the Learning Quality Improvement Team, the LNAC, the Senior Management Team, and the Corporation. The University's annual RiME process and periodic institutional review ensure the oversight of academic standards is robust. The College is well supported by colleagues from the University.

10   The College works within the terms of the validation agreement it has with the UoS. Prior to submission to the University, proposals for new programmes are subject to detailed scrutiny at multiple levels of management within the College to ensure alignment with the College's Higher Education Strategy. The College maintains responsibility for designing, developing, gaining validation and re-approval of courses and course changes, including learning outcomes, aims, course content, and assessments. College teams are well supported by University staff in programme development, programme re-approval, and formal validation. Positive outcomes from the recent periodic institutional review undertaken by the University in May 2017 provide assurance of academic standards.

11   The College adheres to the University's policies and procedures for assessment, marking, moderation, and the recognition of prior learning. Learning outcomes are explicit in definitive course records and course design documentation. Assessment Board records confirm application of the University's requirements and appropriate assessment practices. Reports from external examiners seen by the review team confirm appropriate standards of assessment and moderation practices to assure comparability of academic standards with other UK higher education providers. Students agree that marking and assessment are fair and that feedback guides improvement.

12   In accordance with the Collaboration Agreement, External Examiner Policy, and the Core Responsibilities document, the process for appointing external examiners is well considered. The College sources suitable external examiners prior to submitting a formal proposal to gain approval from the University, which subsequently appoints approved candidates. Oversight of external examiner action plans and progress on these is maintained and monitored through the RiME reports.

13   Considerable use is made of external expertise during programme development, approval and modifications. In addition, the College enriches its provision through engaging employers as guest lecturers and assessors, and through hosting events for the Institute of Civil Engineers.

14   Comprehensive guidance, including quality assurance processes, on placement learning within Initial Teacher Education is provided for students, mentors, and placement providers. During the review visit, the team was told that similar guidance is being prepared for students studying the FdA Fashion Communication and Promotion to be used on placements in the second year of their studies.

Rounded judgement

15   As a partner in the UoS Learning Network, SNC works closely with the University to ensure its higher education provision is aligned to the FHEQ and the Quality Code. This provision is subject to rigorous monitoring by UoS and by the College's own internal monitoring processes and is overseen by College and University management through its collaborative structure. SNC follows the guidelines and regulations of UoS with which it is a partner rather than a franchising institution. These measures, together with its engagement with the relevant codes of governance, demonstrate the College's effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards

16   The review team identified an area for development to further embed academic freedom and collegiality as a deliberative process with more clarity, context, planning and integration across the entire HE provision.

17   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)

18   The College has a variety of operational mechanisms to manage and monitor the quality of the student academic experience, and these were found to be working well in partnership with the awarding body University. Whilst it was noted that the quality of the student experience is ultimately managed by LNAC, the review team found the operational support provided to students by the Course Team directly to be both beneficial and necessary at this early stage of higher education development for the College. Each School has Course Team members who regularly support students and provide effective points of contact. Course Leaders are offered training and support including relevant CPD activity to engage with the University procedures and enhance relevant teaching and learning practices. College staff take an active role in committee operations within the University ensuring appropriate College oversight, reciprocated by University staff members contributing to College meetings. There are student course representatives who contribute to these meetings, feeding student opinion and voice into all levels of deliberation. Students reported satisfaction with their level of engagement with the College, and the College's responsiveness to issues they have raised. Student course representatives felt able to fulfil their role appropriately within the context of part-time study. During meetings, the review team noted that while the College was developing its higher education provision, the established Student Union activity maintained a largely further education focus. The elected President, however, holds a position within senior Governance structures in the College. While student engagement with committee activity was working well, student representatives are not currently involved in programme approval or periodic review activities. Senior staff had not to date sought input on these types of activities. The review team advises the College to develop further opportunities for students to be more formally engaged as partners in quality assurance processes, identifying this as an **area for development**.

19   The means by which the College uses data to improve the student academic experience is effective. The College recognises the importance of using data for quality improvement and this has been implemented effectively at programme level. Data referring to the current year of study focuses on monitoring by the awarding body University with data made available to Course Leaders, Heads of School and administrative staff for mid-term review. Heads of School have requested additional benchmarking data to further enhance the usefulness of this resource. Annual reports to Corporation make reference to the student academic experience. The awarding body requires annual reporting activity, and undertakes periodic reviews and re-approval events. There is evidence of annual monitoring and external professional, statutory and regulatory body review activity. This is overseen by senior staff.

20   The College is effective in involving students in the learning and assessment process, and this was confirmed by the students met by the review team. Students were positive about the quality of teaching on their programmes and reported that feedback on assessment was constructive and effective in supporting personal development. They also commended the relevance of the curriculum and guest speakers to support relevance to industry and the personalised approach to learning enabled through small cohort sizes and tutorials with Course Team members. Particularly positive feedback was received on the commitment and accessibility of tutors.

21   The College gathers feedback from students through a variety of survey structures, and responds to it effectively at programme level and feedback is welcomed. Arrangements

are in place for managing and monitoring the quality of the experience through College committees and University-level agenda items. Additionally, students who met review team stated that the College had quickly responded to any issues they raised, and they had not needed to pursue more formal channels.

22   Suitable learning resources and a dedicated HE study space are available to all students, and students confirmed College-level and University-level access to course facilities where required. IT provision and practical laboratory equipment was particularly noted. Students reported overall satisfaction with resources for their programmes, including library resources.

23   Both University and Course staff provide an induction for students designed to ensure students are aware of the learning resources available across College and through the University. Students particularly valued the ongoing support provided by the Course Team members, Personal Tutors and Mentors. The review team was made aware of activity in operation to ensure appropriate development of this resource to support the expansion of higher education programmes.

24   The College operates a comprehensive and appropriate staff development offer, which includes access to awarding body events, CPD and Higher Education Academy support through the PASSPORT scheme. Staff were able to describe involvement with student-led research collaboration activity and noted the value of their professional experience and currency to support academic and professional rigour in their teaching and assessment practices. The awarding body provides access to its development programme for staff, providing specific HE training activities on an annual basis. Individual staff are supported to undertake higher degrees and receive additional support by the in-house ITT team to support learning and teaching activity. All staff have an annual appraisal of their performance and development needs, this includes occasional staff observations and all staff take part in relevant standardisation activity and training.

25   The College makes effective use of external examiners and external input to improve the quality of the student academic experience, engaging with local organisations, businesses, sector-specific organisations and employers to contribute to programme development and work placement opportunities. Some stakeholders contribute directly to the delivery of learning as guest speakers.

26   The College effectively executes its responsibility over public information and understands its shared responsibilities with the awarding body. The College provides higher education course handbooks and module briefs which are contextualised to reflect individual programme detail, programme aims and learning outcomes. Students confirmed that Handbooks are available electronically, and in hard copy.

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

27   The College's governing body, the Corporation, provides a clear and effective structure that encourages student involvement in academic governance, and this is expressed in the College's Corporation Code of Governance. The review team heard that higher education student representation at programme level is in place, and effective, and representation by higher education students in the College's deliberative committees and governance structures is encouraged although both students and staff noted that take up was often limited due to the fact that the majority of student are part-time. The Student Governor is the Student Union president who also sits on most of the College's deliberative committees and is currently a sabbatical further education student, although this did not

impede or restrict HE student representation. Student representation is set out in the University Student Representation Code of Practice, which indicates how the student representation processes are expected to operate and outlines representation including those of its partners; this includes guidance on training and support. In practice the College supports their student representatives at a local and programme level and this was affirmed by both staff and students, with guidance found in MySuffolk, the College virtual learning environment. The SNC Corporation Code of Governance outlines student governor membership, representation, recruitment and selection. Student views are sought regularly, monitored and reported as part of the risk management process.

28   There is an effective Complaints Procedure that operates in accordance with the UK Quality Code Chapter B9 and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) Good Practice Framework. Formal complaints are dealt with through the University Complaints Procedure, which are presented to the Corporation annually where they can review the nature of complaints and actions taken to address these. The report informs on trends and any areas of particular concern, RAG (red, amber, green) rating the complaints by severity and risk. In addition, the Admissions Policy articulates the University's overarching Admissions Principles including those concerning course changes and complaints. There are various other sources of information including MySuffolk, the student portal, and student handbooks. All complaints are logged by the College and University, monitored by both the University and the College Corporation. The complaints process begins at the point of admission and is outlined in the Admissions Policy. There is a three-stage process for complaints: informal, at Course Team; formal, by a Senior Manager; and then escalated to University if not resolved by the second formal process. The University Office for Student Appeals Complaints and Conduct (OSACC) is engaged from the formal stage and oversees the process to ensure fairness and transparency in the implementation of the process. Academic appeals and misconduct are outlined in University policies and are widely accessible to students through a variety of mechanisms including student handbooks and online through the student portal. The OSACC team reports annually, summarising appeals, conduct and complaints, and trends. During 2016-17 there were three cases of academic appeal with only one upheld permitting a module retake.

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

29   Arrangements to ensure consumer protection obligations align with Competition and Markets Authority guidance and are appropriate and transparent. The University of Suffolk's rigorous policies and procedures for admissions are clearly articulated and are available to applicants via links from the College's to the University's website. Applications and admissions are managed by the University. Open days, taster days and portfolio days are held for applicants to visit the College, some applicants may be interviewed by College staff to assess their suitability for a programme and to provide additional information. A central record of applicants and enrolment numbers is maintained by the University. In the student submission and during the visit, the review team heard examples of problems a minority of students had experienced with the application process. The team saw evidence that College staff are working proactively with University colleagues to ensure previous issues caused by miscommunication are avoided in the future.

30   The University's terms and conditions are well publicised, clear and fair. Prior to accepting an offer, applicants are provided with clear and fair terms and conditions via the University's website. Detailed information includes statements relating to course suspension or withdrawal and fees, including any additional costs students might incur. In addition, the University explains actions it will take to reduce any negative impacts that making changes to courses may have on students. Suitable emphasis is made of the need for applicants to read the terms and conditions prior to accepting an offer for study.

31   Course information available to applicants is accessible through the University's website. The University maintains responsibility for the accuracy of this. The reliability of College-produced information such as the College website, definitive course records, and student handbooks is assured through university audits.

32   College students use the University's complaints and appeals policies and procedures. The team considers these are clear, fair and accessible. Students access these documents through the College website. Documents include guidance on the role of the OIA. Although directed to the University to lodge a complaint, College staff aim for the informal resolution of issues prior to escalation to a formal stage. College managers may be involved in investigating a formal complaint. Students who met the team confirmed they know how to access and use the complaints and appeals processes.

33   The University manages the complaints and appeals processes. Appropriate consideration of detailed records of complaints and appeals is given throughout monitoring and review, and by College committee.

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

34   There are clear and effective processes that set out how the College and its awarding partner manage course closure. These are clearly set out in the General Regulations for Students; the overview of the process and rights includes a 14-day notice period to withdraw their place or request a transfer to alternative provision. The Admissions Policy provides further detailed explanation of the process including the reasons that a course might be suspended and provides a minimum 28-day notice period for applicants. The College indicated that the procedure has not been used. If a course closure was required the College would work with the University and its partner colleges to provide a suitable alternative. For example, the University of Suffolk at West Suffolk College offers both teacher training programmes and construction and civil engineering provision.

35   As part of the processes of course review, student comments are incorporated into the self-evaluation document produced for the Re-approval/Validation Panel, with the student voice actively sought and acted upon in programme developments and reported in the final Validation Report. There are a number of measures to include the College and its staff in information about changes and updates through College internal committees including the LNAC, HE Team CPD events facilitated internally and by key University staff, and the annual Policy and Procedure update session provided by University colleagues.

36   There is a clear policy and intention to inform students of major changes. Definitive course records are updated annually when this instigates a Course Modification Procedure and requires student consultation. Staff and students who met with the review team cited examples of how the College involves students in material changes to courses and how this is communicated to them. For example, assessment was modified for the ITT, although this followed a request by students. The development of review of new programmes also involves students in engagement and is outlined in the UoS Procedure for the Approval of Changes to Existing Courses and aligned with the UK Quality Code and consumer protection legislation including the Competitions Market Authority.

37   Formal complaints and academic appeals processes are managed by the UoS OSAAC. These procedures are aligned to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's Good Practice Framework (2014), which is aligned with Chapter 9 of the Quality Code

(Academic Appeals and Student Complaints). The OIA provides an independent and confidential service to students. The OSAAC annual reports are monitored by the Quality Committee and the Equality & Diversity Committee for trends, frequency and timeliness in processing complaints, and interventions are used as mechanisms to support improvements, with representatives from students and partner colleges on both committees. The College, staff and students indicated that there have been no reported significant trends or frequency of complaints at Suffolk New College to call for change or interventions.

Rounded judgement

38   The College demonstrates effective operation processes to enhance and monitor the student experience which work effectively and symbiotically with the partner University. The Quality Code is embedded in the College's policies and procedures, with each Expectation being considered and used to inform these. The College adheres to the relevant code of governance and has effective student representation. The College processes align to CMA guidelines with monitoring of all information and clear procedures for complaints and appeals. Student opinion is regularly gathered and considered at programme and senior level and incorporated into monitoring reports to the University.

39   The review team identified one area for development: to develop further opportunities for students to be more formally engaged as partners in quality assurance processes.

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