



# Quality Review Visit of Sussex Coast College Hastings

May 2017

## Key findings

### QAA's rounded judgements about Sussex Coast College Hastings

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

- **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 Sussex Coast College Hastings. The review team advises Sussex Coast College Hastings to:

- ensure that policies are reviewed at the agreed intervals and that the review schedule for higher education policies is kept up to date (Code of Governance)
- provide formal training for student representatives in order to equip them more fully for their role (Quality Code)
- develop further opportunities for students to be more formally engaged as partners in quality assurance processes (Quality Code).

### Specified improvements

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

## About this review

The review visit took place from 17 to 18 May 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Paul Brunt
- Ms Karen Chetwynd (Student Reviewer)
- Dr Jenny Gilbert.

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 Sussex Coast College Hastings

Sussex Coast College Hastings (the College) is a further education college situated within the town of Hastings, with two main campus sites.

The College currently works in partnership with two universities and two awarding organisations: the University of Brighton (UoB), the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN), Pearson, and ATHE (Awards for Training and Higher Education).

The partnership with UoB was established in 1987 and consists of foundation degree and honours degree provision in several art and design subjects and sport and fitness; and also a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. The UCLAN partnership was established in 2010 and involves one programme in nuclear engineering. The College has had a long relationship with Pearson and offers Higher National programmes in a range of subjects.

The College's partnerships with its awarding universities are in a transitional stage. The UCLAN programme is being run out because of declining demand. The UoB programmes are currently franchised but the College is working with the University to convert these to validated status with effect from the 2017 intakes. UoB has a presence in the town of Hastings, providing local access to University resources, but will be withdrawing from this by 2019. The College is in the process of developing a new university centre, which will enable it to offer higher education programmes in a dedicated area which has been developed specifically for purpose.

The College has approximately 300 students studying on its higher education programmes.

## **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 currently works with its awarding bodies to deliver programmes on a franchised basis, although several new programmes with UoB are shortly to be approved on a validated basis, giving the College additional responsibilities for academic standards.

2 The awarding bodies are responsible for the oversight of the approval of programmes regardless of partnership typology. Minutes of approval events show appropriate consideration of the FHEQ in the design of the programmes and in the approval of definitive documentation. This evidence also shows that local economic and employer need and subject benchmarks are used as additional reference points.

3 The College has effective arrangements to ensure that the academic standards of its programmes are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers. The awarding partners are responsible for the external examiner arrangements. External examiner reports comment on the comparability of standards and the sample of reports seen by the review team confirm that standards are comparable.

4 Annual and periodic review mechanisms are used to ensure that actions arising from external examiner reports are dealt with, and the College's deliberative committee structure confirms that appropriate actions have taken place.

### **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 adheres to the Code of Good Governance for English Colleges and shows a commitment to the key principles through its published mission statement and aims. The College has well established relationships with awarding partners to maintain academic standards, illustrating clear delineation of responsibilities across programme development; teaching and learning responsibilities and student liaison. The College has a strategy to enhance higher education provision and operates within a hierarchical reporting structure for maintaining academic oversight and working towards the implementation of the strategy. Student representation is embedded into the committee structure.

6 The College's Higher Education Academic Board enables higher education provision to remain in a prominent position in reporting structures to the overarching governing committee for the College, the Corporation. The College's governance arrangements indicate separation between the corporate and academic responsibilities at SSCH and the College was able to evidence organised management structures with clear delegation. Reporting channels were evidenced through annual reports and updates via the Higher Education Manager directly to the Corporation members; and through the quarterly Principal's Performance Review meetings, where actions are measured against the annual higher education Quality Improvement Plan reports, other performance indicators and documentary analysis.

7 Staff were able to describe their involvement in programme design and assessment coordination and programme modification procedures designed to address industry relevance and employability issues in a collegiate manner. Employer engagement was evidenced through strategic level involvement with Local Enterprise Partnerships and departmental engagement with leading industry figures and guest tutors across some programmes.

8 The College demonstrated mechanisms for maintaining oversight of academic risk by providing evidence of senior committee (Corporation) meeting minutes to illustrate oversight of higher education issues and strategic planning for growth.

9 At the time of the review, some specific higher education related policies were out of date, and in some cases there was an inconsistency with documents available via the website and referenced to students via course handbooks and applications procedures. A cross-College schedule for the review of policies provided to the team indicated that some policies had not been reviewed by the due date and that some information had not been accurately recorded. The review team advises the College to ensure that policies are reviewed at the agreed intervals and that the review schedule for higher education policies is kept up to date, identifying this as an **area for development**.

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

10 The College delivers programmes designed and approved by its awarding partners. It manages the standards of its academic provision through implementing the procedures of the awarding partners. The UCLAN programme was subject to periodic review and re-approval in 2015. Uncertainties in demand, and an associated drop in recruitment, led to closure of this programme and the final cohort of students will complete in summer 2017. There was a recent UoB periodic review of franchised programmes in 2016 and a number of new programmes have been designed, and are shortly to be approved, under a validated agreement with the University. In the light of the closure of the UoB campus in Hastings, and the opening of the University Centre at the College, there is a clear rationale for the development of these new programmes. They are being offered mainly as top-up or replacement programmes in disciplines where there is a strong staff base.

11 There is a College calendar for the Quality Assurance Cycle and a Quality Policy and Implementation Strategy. Quality assurance procedures are outlined in the Higher Education Staff Guide. Many academic staff are involved in programme design and development and a number will be attending approval events in the near future. Academic staff confirm that programme development is informed by student feedback, by the views of local industry and small business employers and through their own professional links. Programme monitoring is undertaken via a College mid-year report that is produced for all programmes. Annual monitoring is required by all awarding partners and in some cases this replaces the internal College document. The recently introduced Pearson Annual Health Reporting Process requires the College to submit programme and institutional level reports. All reports use data including student results, retention and progression statistics, student feedback and external examiner comment. All reports are considered by the Higher Education Board. The awarding partners maintain a definitive record for each programme and qualification.

12 Credit and qualifications are awarded where relevant learning outcomes are achieved and students can gain recognition for previous academic credit. The responsibilities for managing assessment are clearly delineated between the awarding partners and the College. There is a College assessment policy and a process captured in a simple flowchart. In addition the College Teaching and Learning Policy includes guidelines

for assessment. There is a specified period for return and feedback on assessment for each programme. Students report that learning outcomes and assessment criteria are shared with them and explained, and that feedback is timely and constructive. Academic staff inform students of how to avoid plagiarism and action is taken when it is suspected; these processes are fully documented in programme handbooks.

13 Awarding partners are responsible for appointing external examiners, and their appointment and training aligns with the Quality Code. The College informs students about the role of the external examiner and a number of students had met the external examiner for their programme. Reports are shared with students and Subject Leaders take necessary actions and respond to external examiner comments in the Annual Health Report for the programme.

14 Guidance on work-placements is included in programme handbooks or the appropriate module guide; this includes reference to any assessment related to the work placement. In addition, all students are issued with a Health and Safety Guidance Policy for Higher Education Student Work-placements. It is the student's responsibility to ensure that the health and safety risk assessment, contained in this policy document, is signed off by the employer, the College tutor and the student.

15 In 2015 some issues were identified with the standards and the quality of the student learning experience on a distance learning HNC Business (Management). The College generated and implemented an action plan and also decided to cease recruitment to the programme. There remain 26 students studying at different stages of the programme. The remaining students use online materials and are now supported entirely by College academic and technical staff. Written feedback is collected for each module from all students and this feedback indicates that the students feel well supported. The College is effectively tutoring students on the distance learning programme during the period of its closure.

## **Rounded judgement**

16 The College's governance arrangements, its internal policies and procedures, and its adherence to the awarding partners' requirements ensure that academic standards are set at a level that is consistent with UK threshold expectations and that the College meets the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards.

17 There are no specified areas for improvement in this judgement area. There is one area for development concerning the processes for review of policies and maintenance of associated records. The area for development relates to an identified minor omission or oversight, and the need to tighten up procedures was acknowledged by the College during the visit.

18 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)

19 The College has a variety of mechanisms to manage and monitor the quality of the student academic experience, and these were found to be working well. All programmes have a subject leader who regularly meets students and provides an effective point of contact. Subject leaders are trained in their role, and are central to the monitoring mechanisms, which include meetings of Course Boards and the Higher Education Board. There are student course representatives who contribute to these boards, and there is a student governor on the Corporation. Students reported satisfaction with their level of engagement with the College, and the College's responsiveness to issues they have raised. While course representatives felt able to discharge their duties, it was apparent that they had not received training for their role. The review team advises the College to provide formal training for student representatives in order to equip them more fully for their role, identifying this as an **area for development**.

20 During review meetings it was noted that, as the College was developing its higher education provision on a validated basis, concurrent planning was underway to expand student involvement and to develop a Students' Union. While student engagement at committees was working well, student representatives were not currently involved in programme approval or periodic review activities. Senior management representatives stated that they valued the input of students, but had not to date sought input on these type 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**.

21 The means by which the College improves the student academic experience, and uses data to inform this, 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 are presented through programme reviews. Mid-year and annual health reports and the institutional report to Corporation make reference to the student academic experience. Awarding partners require annual reporting, and undertake periodic reviews.

22 The College is effective in involving students in the learning and assessment process, and this was confirmed by the students whom the reviewers met. 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 employability relevance of the curriculum and the personalised approach to learning enabled through small cohort sizes and tutorials. Particularly positive feedback was received on the commitment and accessibility of teaching teams and the ongoing professional and vocational activity of most tutors.

23 The College gathers feedback from students through a variety of formal means, and responds to it effectively. Student feedback informs the mid and annual review mechanisms, and is also gathered at the module and programme levels. Students who met reviewers stated that the College had quickly responded to any issues they raised, and they had not needed to pursue more formal channels.

24 Adequate learning resources are available to all students, and are readily accessible. The awarding partner approval processes require the College to show that it will

provide appropriate resources for learning and the quality of resources are reviewed through the annual health reporting process. The Higher Education Board, attended by student representatives, monitors resources and seeks ways to make improvements. Students reported satisfaction with resources for their programmes, including library resources. The library staff provide an induction for students designed to develop research skills and to ensure that students are aware of the learning resources available across College and through the UoB for franchised programmes. Students who met reviewers particularly valued the additional support that is provided by the Higher Education Mentor. Detailed planning to ensure appropriate resource provision to support the expansion of the forthcoming validated higher education programmes was underway at the time of review.

25 The College has a comprehensive and appropriate staff development strategy, which enables staff to undertake research and scholarship to support higher education. The awarding bodies require the College to provide relevant staff development, and the UoB provides access to its development programme. College-wide higher education training activities are provided on an annual basis. Individual staff are supported to undertake higher degrees, and receive remission for scholarly activity. Some staff maintain their own industrial practice. Art students particularly noted that many of their tutors have first-hand experience working in the industry, and this currency in practice enhanced their overall academic experience. All staff have an annual appraisal of their performance and development needs, and have their teaching observed formally and with a peer.

26 The College makes effective use of external stakeholders and external input to improve the quality of the student academic experience. The College engages with local organisations, businesses, work based learning providers and employers to contribute to programme development. Some stakeholders contribute directly to the delivery of learning as guest speakers or provide case studies for student projects. The input and value of external stakeholders inform the annual programme health reporting process.

27 The College has effective arrangements to ensure that information related to the student academic experience is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The College's responsibilities for publishing information about its higher education programmes approved by the UoB and UCLAN are clearly detailed in the cooperation agreements. The College publishes higher education course handbooks which are contextualised to reflect individual programme detail, programme aims and learning outcomes. Handbooks are available electronically, and in hard copy. Students confirmed that their handbooks are useful and informative.

### **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' Code of Good Governance for English Colleges (AoC)**

28 The College operates a committee structure, which includes student representation particularly at the Higher Education Board. College staff and management explained the implications of the Students' Union development to support this engagement. Students were also able to refer to consultation opportunities from such meetings, additionally some students were able to confirm their involvement in programme proposals and the process of providing feedback to enhance student resources or facilities through direct discussion with tutors.

29 The College provides access to complaints guidance materials for students, appropriate for their programme of study and relevant awarding partner. The College provided examples showing the effectiveness of its own arrangements in ensuring that student complaints are addressed and that the welfare of students is secured to a satisfactory standard, to meet the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's requirements.

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

30 There is a comprehensive Higher Education Admissions Policy, which ensures fairness and transparency, and is available to applicants on the college website. Discussions with staff and students indicate that there is compliance with the policy. The review team received an updated version of the policy for the new University Centre. Entry requirements and summaries of each programme are published on the website and are easily accessible. Students apply through UCAS for degree and HND programmes, and direct to the College for HNC and PGCE programmes.

31 All students are invited for interview and the findings are recorded on a standard template. Normally two members of programme staff interview each student. Borderline applicants may be asked to complete an assessment to judge their prior knowledge. During the interview process both internal and external applicants have an opportunity to discuss the nature of the programme with existing students. Students report that the interview process is relaxed and friendly and helps them to gain confidence. The interview process serves to select students, to determine where an alternative programme might be more suitable and to provide applicants with information about the programme. The College also runs a number of recruitment events during which students act as ambassadors.

32 The College produces promotional material and information for all of its higher education programmes; additionally the awarding bodies market the programmes through their own channels. The recently updated marketing policy addresses recruitment, information and advice; it is reviewed annually as part of the quality cycle. There is an online prospectus that includes information about modules to be studied. Students are familiar with their awarding bodies and state that the online and hard copy information, together with the more detailed oral information provided at interview, enabled them to make an informed decision about the offer of a place on a programme. During the interview process applicants are informed about finance, accommodation, curriculum and College expectations.

33 On enrolment students sign an enrolment form, and a learning agreement which indicates what the College will provide and outlines the responsibilities of the student. Students registered on UoB awards are, in addition, provided with the University's terms and conditions. A summary can be found in the Course Handbook and a fuller version, which includes reference to additional regulations that may apply at partner colleges, is available on the University's website. The College is currently drafting its own terms and conditions that mirror those of the UoB. They will come into force in August 2018, to be sent out with offer letters during the next application cycle. The terms and conditions for UCLAN are available on its website. The Pearson Guide to Quality and Assessment makes reference to the CMA and indicates the requirement for providers to provide the necessary information to their students.

34 The College Admissions document indicates that students who wish to appeal against any decision made during the admissions and enrolment process should contact the Head of Student Support Services. The Vice-Principal Curriculum will make a decision within 10 working days. There is also a Compliments, Concerns and Complaints Policy and a Procedure for Students and Stakeholders that can be found on the College website; this document indicates that a complaint from any stakeholder, including applicants, that is not resolved informally should be referred to the Quality Office. The complaint is referred to an Investigating Officer and there is a response within 15 working days. Staff are aware of the processes for appeals and complaints and are able to advise applicants accordingly.

## **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**

35 The College operates various transparent channels of communication for programme closures and changes that are accessible to both existing and prospective students, coordinated in a timely manner to keep all parties fully informed. In accordance with relevant student protection measures decisions to cancel programmes would be made before clearing, with marketing figures and application statistics being provided for senior leadership team (SLT) to make decisions. The College is aware of its role in supporting students to find alternative programmes (with higher education partner involvement). There is evidence in policy documentation that the College endeavours to ensure continuity of provision for students when a programme is closed, and to provide individual student support with experienced tutors through the tutorial system.

36 The higher education course change policy states a clear responsibility for communications with students in such cases, referencing the CMA guidance for the different types of change. The review team was provided with evidence of commitment to teaching out, which was confirmed by staff who were able to provide individual examples from their own involvement in this aspect of student support.

37 Complaints guidance materials (including those from the relevant awarding partner) are made available in course handbooks and on the College website, illustrating the stages of complaint and detailing processes for informal resolution. Students are aware of the processes for appeals and complaints relevant to their programmes and were able to confirm access to these materials and further guidance. The responses to complaints and appeals are in line with Competition and Markets Authority guidance to ensure that the outcomes of all complaints and appeals processes are proportional and fair.

38 The Complaints Policy and Procedure is overseen by the SLT and Curriculum and Quality Subcommittee and complaints information is provided to the Governors by the Quality Office in order to monitor complaints and improve performance. Currently there are no complaints to review for this period.

### **Rounded judgement**

39 The review team concludes that the College is meeting the baseline regulatory requirements in this judgement area through its governance arrangements, internal policies and procedures, and adherence to its awarding partners' frameworks and regulations.

40 The review team identified two areas for development in this judgement area. These related to a need to update procedures that will not require or result in major operational or procedural change. No specified improvements were identified.

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

**QAA1990 - R9440 - Nov 17**

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