



Quality Review Visit of Waltham Forest College

May 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Waltham Forest College

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

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.**
- **There is limited confidence requiring specified improvements before 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 Waltham Forest College. The review team advises Waltham Forest College to:

- streamline and consolidate systems for more effective consideration and monitoring of action plans through to completion (Quality Code)
- strengthen processes for more effective quality assurance and support of higher education student placements (Quality Code)
- strengthen the formal processes for ensuring that information is accurate and up to date (Consumer Protection)
- ensure that complaints and appeals procedures accurately reflect the role of the awarding organisation (Consumer Protection).

Specified improvements

The review team identified the following **specified improvements** that relate to matters that are already putting, or have the potential to put, quality and/or standards at risk at Waltham Forest College. The review team recommends that Waltham Forest College:

- develop and implement comprehensive terms and conditions and make them accessible to prospective students (Consumer Protection)
- develop and implement a transparent, fair and accessible policy governing course closure and changes, and make this policy available to prospective and current students (Student Protection).

About this review

The review visit took place from 24 to 25 May 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Fiona Thompson
- Ann Hill
- Matthew Kitching (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 Waltham Forest College

Waltham Forest College (the College) is a large general further and higher education college in North East London. The London Borough of Waltham Forest is very diverse ethnically and socially, with areas of comparative prosperity and other areas among the 10 per cent most deprived in the country. The proportion of people of working age with qualifications at level 1 to level 4 are below regional and national averages, as are average earnings.

The higher education programme area consists of: HNC/HND Business; HNC/HND Health and Social Care; HNC Computing, which is managed in the Business and Higher Education (Adult Learners) department; and the HNC/HND Art and Design and Fashion and Textiles pathways, which are managed within the Creative Industries curriculum area. The College works with Pearson as its awarding organisation.

There are currently 76 higher education students, a significant decrease from two years ago when there were just under 270 higher education students.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 Academic standards for the College's higher education provision are set and maintained by Pearson, the awarding organisation. Pearson ensures that its awards align with national standards, specifically the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) and FHEQ. The College is accountable to the awarding organisation for the delivery and maintenance of standards. The College has in place internal regulations, structures and processes for the management of the higher education provision, which working in conjunction with Pearson ensure that the required standards are met. Minutes and reports demonstrate that these processes operate effectively.

2 Assurance of standards on the College's provision is provided through scrutiny, monitoring and review by the awarding organisation, ensuring that standards are met. External examiners, appointed by Pearson, confirm that standards are appropriate and comparable with those found on similar programmes in other UK educational institutions. No critical issues regarding the standards of the College's provision have been raised by the awarding organisation or external verifiers in the recent past.

3 Higher education provision is based on the principles of widening participation, increasing choice in higher education routes, such as progression onto full degree-level programmes, and the development of the skills and knowledge to meet the local economic requirements of Waltham Forest. The College works productively with industry, public organisations and professional bodies to ensure that appropriate standards relating to practice are reflected in the design, delivery and assessment of its provision.

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

4 The review team found that the College's governance arrangements are implicitly aligned to the AoC Code of Good Governance for English Colleges.

5 On the basis of evidence seen, the review team concluded that there are appropriate arrangements in place for maintaining oversight of academic governance, including effective risk management and the assurance of standards in the College's higher education provision, through the reporting structures that support the work of the Corporation. The principles of academic freedom and collegiality are enshrined within the College's Instrument and Articles of Government.

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

6 The College does not design its own programmes and instead franchises existing courses from its awarding organisation. Pearson is therefore responsible for assuring that programme learning outcomes align with the qualification descriptor; this is secured through validation and monitored through external verification. The College is responsible for developing learning materials, delivering teaching and constructing assessment, which is guided by the College's Teaching and Learning Strategy.

7 A planned assessment framework for each course helps to ensure that the College is meeting Pearson requirements. Assessments designed within the College cannot be handed to students until internal verification has been conducted. There is a template for this process, which is then subject to external verification. The review team found clear evidence of positive feedback from external verifiers about the standard of assessment. There is an assessment schedule in place and this is available to students through the virtual learning environment (VLE). Students reported that they understood what was required of them in relation to assessment.

8 The arrangements for the use of data in annual monitoring are clear. The Data Services Team provides data for programme teams, which features prominently in the Higher Education Self-Assessment Document and is a feature of Quality Review Meetings held with higher education programme staff and the Principal and Assistant Principal. Data is also considered in the regular reports compiled by the Principal for Governors, which contain clear references to higher education targets and issues.

9 In addition to the externality provided through validation and the external verification process the College makes use of a wide range of external networks including Linking London, Barnet and Southgate College and Higher Education Academy Fellowship training events.

Rounded judgement

10 Through its governance structures, internal processes and procedures and its adherence to awarding organisation regulations, the College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards. There are no areas for development or specified improvements in this area.

11 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)

12 The review team considered that the quality of the student academic experience was assured and enhanced, in the majority of areas, through activities ranging from student representation to monitoring processes and resource planning. The student voice is effectively captured through a formal representation system, through feedback questionnaires at unit and course level, and through informal opportunities facilitated by the accessible culture of the College.

13 Admissions processes are clearly articulated and followed, with students satisfied with the process. Students are provided with appropriate course materials and assessment information, and have support, from tutors, at both class and individual level, to support their learning and pastoral needs. The review team considered that learning resources were appropriate and there was an effective planning process in place.

14 Staff are provided with support in their development and in the maintenance of their subject currency through an appraisal process and the provision of a range of staff development opportunities. The College has recently introduced a Learning Area Review process, which will replace teaching observation. This process operates in two forms - a review of a discipline area, which is the initial phase, and a review of the individual, which is planned for introduction as phase 2.

15 Processes for review and action plan development are varied and many. While the review team was confident that annual review is effective, drawing on a range of data to identify enhancements, the development of action plans, with clear target dates and monitoring points, was less clear. The team noted that action plans were developed from: the College SAR, the Higher Education Self-Evaluation Document; consideration of external verification reports; consideration of awarding organisation quality management reports; Learning Area Reviews; and the Higher Education Action Plan (referred to as the APR Action Plan, as this is an action plan derived from the College's reflection on learning from its engagement with the QRV process). In addition, it was not evident to the team how the actions relating to higher education provision fed into the College's Quality Improvement Plans. The range of action plans could potentially lead to a lack of clarity with regard to oversight and monitoring of progress. The review team advises that the College streamline and consolidate systems for more effective consideration and monitoring of action plans through to completion, identifying this as an **area for development**.

16 Students on the Health and Social Care HNC/HND provision are required to undertake 200 hours of work placement as part of their Personal and Professional Development unit. The review team heard that, for most of the students, this was arranged with their current employer. For students who were not employed within a sector allied to their studies, a suitable placement was provided for them by the College. While the placement arrangements are agreed with the student prior to the placement, the appropriateness of the placement is assured retrospectively on completion of the placement and the assessment. The review team considered that the College could usefully introduce an enhanced pre-placement process in order to ensure clarity of expectations for the College, the student and the placement provider, and therefore advises that the College strengthen processes for more effective quality assurance and support of higher education student placements, 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 Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

17 Given the scale of higher education provision at the College there are significant opportunities for students to be involved in academic governance and the College has a demonstrable commitment to gathering and acting on student feedback. There are two students on the governing body, one of whom is a higher education student. The report submitted to the Corporation by the Principal contains explicit reference to higher education and a Vice-President in the Students' Union is also on a higher education programme.

18 Each course has a class representative and they are invited to course team meetings. Students are interviewed as part of the Learning Area Review process. Students are also invited to complete a range of surveys and unit feedback forms. The College has provided examples of acting on student feedback, for instance in relation to developing programmes to afford students better progression routes and improving communication where students reported they didn't feel listened to. Students also confirmed that they are consulted on new programme proposals and that they are satisfied with how the class representative system is operating.

19 The College compiles a detailed Complaints Report, which is submitted to the Corporation. While it doesn't make a clear distinction between further and higher education complaints, the review team was informed that there were two higher education complaints in the most recent reporting period, both of which were resolved satisfactorily. The Principal's office maintains a log of all complaints and any investigation is delegated to the Learning Manager or Assistant Principal.

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

20 Marketing information for programmes is located on the College's website. Introductory overview information about the College campus, facilities, staff and students is presented, and a search function enables prospective students to access publically available documentation, with links to online enquiry services.

21 Processes are in place for the collation, checking and publication of information for prospective and current students in order to ensure the accuracy, accessibility and relevance. Information on the website and College prospectus is checked for accuracy by the higher education team and the Data Services Team before it is published, whether in hard copy or electronically. The review team heard that the College's VLE is subject to annual audit.

22 Despite these arrangements, the review team noted some factually inaccurate and out of date information on the College website, including details relating to College facilities and a 2014-15 College Charter. Senior staff reported that they plan to streamline their approach to website development but the review team advises that the College strengthen the formal processes for ensuring that information is accurate and up to date, identifying this as an **area for development**.

23 The review team heard that all applicants are interviewed and students spoke very highly of the College's supportive approach to the admissions process, and particularly of the individualised support and information they receive, which enables them to appreciate the demands of higher education. Additionally, students commented favourably upon the range of careers advice and guidance they are provided with in order to progress further.

24 Programme handbooks, course handbooks and programme specifications are available in hard copy and are also held on the College's VLE. Students confirmed that the handbooks contain a wide range of definitive information and that they find them useful.

25 The College is responsible for ensuring that prospective students are informed about arrangements with the awarding organisation. This includes information about the management of academic standards, complaints and appeals procedures, and their rights and responsibilities as students. Pearson confirm that registration and certification processes are in place, with adequate controls.

26 The review team heard that students were provided with fees information per academic year, rather than total cost and they were unfamiliar with Pearson regulations, beyond grade boundaries. Also, although they were aware of the College's complaints process, they were unaware of their rights of external appeal to the awarding organisation or to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

27 Senior staff recognise that the College needs to do more to ensure that students are provided with enough information relating to terms and conditions. The review team found that signposting to the cost of courses was complicated, thus hindering accessibility to the relevant financial information; the team could not locate any discernible logo or presence on the website that relates to the awarding organisation, and which is aligned to course details. The College intends to develop appropriate policies and procedures through its Higher Education Action Plan. Through scrutiny of the College's website and documentary evidence, the team found that terms and conditions related to consumer protection and legal guidance are currently not easily located, or presented in an accessible form that would ensure that important terms and conditions are drawn to prospective students' attention before they accept an offer. The review team advises that the College develop and implement comprehensive terms and conditions and make them accessible to prospective students, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

28 The College is responsible for the provision of information to students on their right to appeal and the process for internal appeal and subsequent external appeal to Pearson. Current students understand the complaints handling process within the College and confirmed that access to the complaints procedure is easily accessible both in hard copy and on the VLE. The complaint handling system is discussed with students at induction sessions and is subject to annual review by the College's Corporation and Risk Management Board.

29 The review team noted that the College's complaints procedure does not make any reference to higher education procedures, which includes the right of appeal to Pearson, following the completion of the College's internal complaints procedure (see paragraph 28).] The team heard that the College is aware of this oversight and plans to address it through its Higher Education Action Plan. The review team advises that the College ensure that complaints and appeals procedures accurately reflect the role of the awarding organisation, identifying this as an **area for development**.

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

30 Responsibility for course closure rests with the awarding organisation. The College has a procedure for course closure where the choice for discontinuation lies with the College. Currently, course closure is dealt with through the self-assessment and curriculum planning quality cycle process. Students with whom the review team met were unclear about

their rights and responsibilities regarding course closure, although they had recently received verbal information.

31 Material changes to courses are typically made between cohorts to lesson impact, with students able to cite changes to course structures, such as with the HNC/D Business and HNC/D Health and Social Care programmes. Students confirmed that the College entered into dialogue with them about these arrangements to identify options and minimise the impact on cohorts affected by changes.

32 The College recognises that it lacks formal policies with regards to course closures and substantial changes to courses and is taking action to address this through the production of a Higher Education Action Plan. Prospective and current students do not receive any formal documentation prior to enrolment or during their study, which helps clarify reasonable expectations relating to terms and conditions with respect to course closure or changes, hence course closure and changes falls short of being an effective process. The team advises that the College develop and implement a transparent, fair and accessible policy governing course closure and changes, and make this policy available to prospective and current students, identifying this as a **specified improvement**.

33 Complaints are tracked by the Quality Administrator and responded to by the investigating officer (usually the Assistant Principal of the area within which the allegation is made) within 14 days. Any appeal is dealt with by an independent member of the College's executive team. The Assistant Principal compiles and presents an annual report to Corporation. There have been no appeals made by higher education students to the OIA over the last two years. The team heard that complaints are taken seriously and the content is used positively for quality improvement measures to improve the student learning experience: for example, to identify additional support mechanisms for students. Students commented that minor issues are typically resolved informally. The procedures and timelines align with OIA guidelines.

Rounded judgement

34 The review team found that the College was partially meeting the baseline regulatory requirements in this judgement area through its internal governance arrangements, policies and procedures and adherence to its awarding organisation's academic frameworks and regulations.

35 However, the review team identified four areas for development and two specified improvements. The areas for development relate to strengthening processes for more effective quality assurance and support of higher education student placements; streamlining and consolidating processes for the effective consideration and monitoring of action plans through to completion; strengthening the formal processes for ensuring that information is accurate and up to date; and ensuring that complaints and appeals procedures accurately reflect the role of the awarding organisation. The specified improvements relate to developing and implementing comprehensive terms and conditions, and making them accessible to prospective students; and developing and implementing a transparent, fair and accessible policy governing course closure and changes and making this policy available to prospective and current students.

36 The review team concludes that there is limited confidence requiring specified improvements before there can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.

QAA1987 - R9445 - Nov 17

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2017
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557050
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk