Quality Review Visit of Warrington & Vale Royal College

May 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about Warrington & Vale Royal College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at Warrington & Vale Royal 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 Warrington & Vale Royal College. The review team advises Warrington & Vale Royal College to:

- produce and distribute a single source of guidance and support for tutors delivering Pearson courses (Quality Code)
- implement structured training for higher education student representatives (Quality Code).

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 8 to 10 May 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Fiona Thompson
- Mrs Lorraine Lavery
- Ms Sophie Elliott (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 Warrington & Vale Royal College

Warrington & Vale Royal College (the College) is formed by the recent merger between Warrington Collegiate and Mid Cheshire College in August 2017. It is a further and higher education college providing education across a range of subject areas. There are currently 19 higher education programmes delivered across five curriculum faculties.

The College's higher education provision is delivered across two campuses, Warrington and Hartford, and three satellite centres at Samlesbury, Burnley and Rochdale, which are part of the Longridge Teaching Centre. The Longridge Teaching Centre has its own awarding body approval with Pearson, although students are taught by and enrolled with the College. Warrington is the main campus with the highest proportion of higher education students, while the Hartford campus is scheduled to close in the summer of 2018.

The College currently has 585 students of whom 298 are full-time and 287 are part-time and delivers provision on behalf of four awarding bodies and organisations - University of Chester, Manchester Metropolitan University, Pearson and City & Guilds. The provision includes three foundation degrees, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas and a level 5 Diploma in Education. The foundation degrees are currently in their final teach-out year and the College is migrating their current Pearson provision from the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) to the Regulated Quality Framework (RQF).

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1   The College does not have degree awarding powers and adheres to the regulatory frameworks, reporting arrangements and quality assurance procedures of its awarding bodies and organisations. The awarding bodies and organisations retain overall responsibility for the academic standards of their awards. Academic standards are set and maintained by the awarding bodies, the University of Chester and Manchester Metropolitan University and two awarding organisations, Pearson and City & Guilds, who ensure that their awards align with national standards through scrutiny, monitoring and review processes. The University programmes are closing and are on final teach-out in 2017-18.

2   The review team found that the College has programme approval and review arrangements in place and has programme specifications, assessment board, internal verification and standardisation processes in place to ensure that it meets its awarding bodies' and awarding organisations' requirements. These ensure that the academic standards of the programmes offered meet or exceed the UK threshold standard for the qualifications offered, as set out by the FHEQ.

3   The College works closely with industry through employer liaison activities to ensure that appropriate standards relating to practice are reflected in the design, delivery and assessment of its current provision and preparation for the migration to the new Pearson RQF programmes for 2018-19. External examiners are appointed by Pearson, City & Guilds and the universities and their reports confirm that programmes are comparable with those of other UK higher education providers.

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   Arrangements for maintaining oversight of academic governance are in line with the Code of Good Governance for English Colleges and the higher education CUC Code of Governance, which permeate the practice of all committees and boards at the College. Academic governance is overseen by the Standards and Curriculum Committee, who meet termly and report to the Board of Governors. The Governing Body, including a student governor, provides overall strategic leadership at the College, resulting in effective arrangements that ensure strategic oversight of academic governance is implemented.

5   The Curriculum Director (Adults & Higher Education) has overall responsibility for operational management of higher education at the College, ensuring resources are deployed effectively, and that strategic oversight is sought in the management and provision of higher education programmes. The relevant policies and procedures for the merged College have been revised and approved by the Standards and Curriculum Committee and the Board of Governors, who have oversight for ensuring that effective risk management arrangements are in place. The responsibility for the implementation of risk management at the College rests with the Standards and Curriculum Committee. The College has a comprehensive, fit-for-purpose risk register which informs and is informed by the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). The risk register is scrutinised at the Audit Committee before it is presented to the Corporation. This robust process ensures that the College monitors and maintains strategic oversight of academic risk.

6   Contained within the Instrument and Articles of Government is the College's approach to governing academic freedom, which communicates that academic staff have freedom within the law to challenge ideas and present new ones without being at risk of losing their jobs or any associated privileges. The College uses the Codes of Good Governance as a reference point to ensure they fulfil their responsibilities as a higher education provider in respecting the principles of academic freedom and collegiality.

7   In meeting with staff and governors at the College, the review team tested the development of the HE Strategy, finding that it is underpinned by significant employer engagement, securing higher education provision at the College as relevant to industry and enhancing the opportunity of student progression to higher education institutions. The review team found that the Governing Body provided clear oversight and guidance to the College during the process of the merger and currently with the closure of the Hartford campus; it continues to be a strength of the Corporation in future planning.

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

8   The awarding bodies and organisations have responsibility for the approval of provision, with the College engaging in effective processes for both the development and the cessation of provision. Programme design includes student input as well as external academic and professional input, including from employers, to ensure validity and currency.

9   The University awarding bodies provide guidance to the College to support the management of their respective foundation degrees. For Pearson provision the College is following their established approval process as they migrate their current QCF provision to the RQF. While the College currently has a comprehensive set of internal policies to supplement the Pearson policies, requirements and guidelines, there is no tutor handbook to support the management of Pearson programmes. The team is confident that this does not put academic standards at risk but it is advised that the College produce and distribute a single source of guidance and support for tutors delivering Pearson courses. This is deemed to be an **area for development**.

10   The College's Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement Policy provides a framework for activities relating to quality management, assurance and enhancement, including responsibility for monitoring through the governance structures. In addition, the Curriculum and Quality Management meeting has responsibility for monitoring the College's higher education provision including the operation of its quality assurance systems.

11   Programme specifications are in place for all provision and available to students via the virtual learning environment (VLE).

12   The College follows appropriate processes for the setting and marking (including internal moderation/verification) of assessments in line with the requirements of each awarding partner and aligned to the College's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy 2017-18, the Teaching, Training, Learning and Assessment Policy 2017-18, and the Internal Quality Assurance Procedures. Marking criteria and requirements for different levels of attainment are provided to students through each programme's Student Handbook as well as through the detailed assessment briefs. For university provision, assessment boards are held at the relevant university with representatives from the College in attendance. For other provision, assessment boards are held at the College, chaired by the Curriculum Director (Adults & Higher Education).

13   External examiners provide assurance that standards have been met and assessment processes are quality assured through their reports. External examiners are appointed by the awarding body or organisation with reports reviewed centrally by the

Director of Quality and the Quality Team, as well as at programme level, with written responses overseen by the Curriculum Director (Adults & Higher Education). The Higher Education (HE) Curriculum Programme meeting has responsibility for the ongoing monitoring of higher education provision, including consideration of external examiners' reports and awarding body requirements. External examiner reports are published on the VLE.

14   All programmes are reviewed annually drawing on relevant data and reports, including external examiner reports, with a QIP produced. The programme reviews and QIPs are considered by a review panel and feed into a detailed and thorough annual higher education self-evaluation document with areas for development included in a higher education QIP. This is monitored on a regular basis through the Standards and Curriculum meeting, the HE Curriculum Programme meeting, and the HE Performance Monitoring meeting. Pearson conducts annual quality visits and provides an annual Quality Management Report, with the College engaging with Pearson through their Annual Performance Monitoring Review process. The College engages effectively with the Universities' quality assurance processes, including annual review and partnership review, as set out in relevant handbooks.

15   The College also operates a system of in year programme review where progress is shared, and quality improvement plans updated. A report on higher education is submitted monthly to the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) meeting.

16   The team tested the effectiveness of the review processes with reference to the Longridge Teaching Centre sites. External examiners, for some of the provision delivered at these sites in 2016-17, identified a number of recommendations and essential actions in their reports. These were detailed in the higher education self-evaluation document and in the relevant programme QIP with the latter regularly updated detailing action taken. Senior leaders put focused activities in place, including targeted continuing professional development, which, along with learning walks and support, ensured recommendations were addressed in a timely manner as evidenced by students and by delivery staff feedback to the team. The 2017-18 external examiner report also confirmed appropriate action had been taken in response to the previous year's recommendations.

Rounded judgement

17   The review team concludes that the College is meeting the baseline regulatory requirements in this judgement area through its arrangements for maintaining oversight of its academic governance. The College's quality assurance arrangements are effective in enabling it to fulfil its responsibilities and adherence to the requirements of its awarding bodies and organisations.

18   The academic standards of the awards delivered by the College are set in accordance with the institutional agreements between its awarding bodies and organisations. However, the review team identified one **area for development** to further strengthen academic standards in respect of its provision with its awarding organisation and advises the College to produce and distribute a single source of guidance and support for tutors delivering Pearson courses (Quality Code). This does not require or result in major operational or procedural change.

19   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)

20   Although there have been many recent changes for the College, the student academic experience is under-pinned by high levels of academic and pastoral support from academic and professional staff, engagement with employers in programme design, delivery and assessment and mapping of progression opportunities for students with local universities. The College has additionally retained both its 'Investors in People' accreditation and 'matrix Standard' for its information, advice and/or guidance services in 2017-18.

21   The College's Admissions Policy sets out the procedures for recruitment, selection and admission including an admissions interview process. These are transparent, consistent and fair and make reference to appeals and complaints regarding admissions decisions. Students have access to a range of services through central support teams such as finance, careers and library facilities with the merger enhancing the range of library resources. Students are encouraged to declare any additional support needs prior to entry and throughout their course. Students are informed about services and support at the admissions interview, on the website and through induction and course handbooks and highly value the level of support they receive through central services and through pastoral and academic personal tutoring before and when on programme.

22   The student voice process is supported through Learner Involvement Procedures facilitating students to feed back informally and formally on their experience. This includes College-level surveys and module evaluations to support improvements to existing provision. Students cited examples of improvements as a result of raising matters with the College, including changes to assessment schedules and assessment design and the opportunity to shape programme design of the new RQF programmes. Class representative meetings are led by the HE Coordinator resulting in enhanced Wi-Fi, new resources and dedicated space for higher education students in the library. Regular contact with tutors generally ensures that staff become aware of issues as they arise to resolve them at programme level rather than through the formal complaints process. Student representatives are supported and guided at a local, informal level and the College has acknowledged a more structured process of training is required to ensure student engagement is effective and fully equips students to pursue their role as part of the College's governance structure. Therefore, the review team advises that the College looks to implement structured training for higher education student representatives as an **area for development**.

23   Analysis of the autumn 2017 survey indicated higher than anticipated student levels of dissatisfaction. The College responded through undertaking focus groups to determine student concerns and areas for improvement with 'You Said We Did' posters developed to demonstrate progress made at College and programme level. The March 2018 survey results have demonstrated an improvement in student satisfaction levels.

24   The College's Teaching, Training, Learning and Assessment Strategy sets out the College's vision for teaching and learning with regular reviews of teaching performance and effectiveness through management and peer observations and learning walks. Staff have the opportunity to attend College-wide training on teaching and learning on Friday afternoons. Relevant training has been provided on strategies relating to teaching, learning and assessment for higher education and admissions including sessions for Longridge teams. Staff participate in regional conferences and national projects and some staff are funded to undertake master's programmes. Extensive engagement with employers and in

professional activities outside College offer teaching staff opportunities to undertake vocationally specific upskilling to ensure currency and relevance of curriculum content and assessment materials. Ninety-one per cent of students agree that teaching and learning is good.

25   Assessment operates according to awarding body and organisation regulations; students confirm that arrangements are clearly communicated at induction, through the VLE, and through programme specifications and course handbooks, with clear assessment and grading criteria provided. Students and external examiners confirm that there are assessment schedules and guidelines in place and that assessment feedback is timely and developmental, clearly linked to grading criteria and that they understand the need for academic integrity. There is a detailed HE Induction programme in place and includes how to use reference sources, the use of anti-plagiarism software and how to use online journals. The E-Learning platform also signposts students to relevant resources.

26   Students and delivery teams commented on the academic freedom to tailor assessment evidence to student employment circumstances. Effective links with employers and sector organisations facilitate and maintain the currency and employment relevance of educational provision through active participation of employers including ex-students as guest speakers and through the provision of live briefs and employment opportunities. There are currently no placements offered as part of any programme.

27   There is an academic appeals process in place referenced at induction, managed by the Director of Quality and which references awarding bodies and organisations as the next step once internal College processes are exhausted.

28   Physical and learning resources to support programmes are good. There is earmarked funding for higher education library resources and access to a higher education capital fund for purchase of programme-level equipment and to enhance furniture and IT facilities, including a dedicated amount allocated specifically for Longridge programmes. Teams are currently reviewing resource needs ahead of the migration to the new RQF programmes for 2018-19 as part of the planning and approval process.

29   Teams engage in annual programme self-evaluation including in-year reviews to monitor student progress and the quality of programmes including resources and staff development, with oversight by the ELT, awarding bodies and organisations and the committees responsible for monitoring provision. These reviews underpin the development of the College QIP. This constitutes an effective process for annual monitoring in line with the expectations of the Quality Code.

30   Information for students is accessible and comprehensive including a detailed process for verifying the accuracy of information. Information is available via the College's website, programme factsheets and course handbooks based on a standardised template.

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

31   The College encourages student participation within its governance structures and arrangements, providing the opportunity for a student member with full voting rights to sit on the Board of Governors. The student governor is also invited to sit on the Standards and Curriculum Committee to further engage with academic governance at a senior level. However, the College has identified that more action could be taken to facilitate the attendance of student representation at senior meetings to increase student input into

governance processes and is working to achieve that through the review of the requirements of the role of student governor in consultation with the Clerk of the Corporation.

32   The student voice is fed upward through student representatives at the termly meeting of the College Student Forum, the outcomes of which are reported at HE Curriculum Programme meetings and then to the ELT. This process ensures that the student voice is integrated into the College's governance arrangements; 93 per cent of students agree that they have a fair opportunity to provide feedback to the College, and that their opinions are listened to and acted upon. Student representatives are supported and guided at a local, informal level. See paragraph 22 for further detail.

33   The College has full responsibility of monitoring and capturing student complaints, as set out in their comprehensive Complaints and Compliments Policy, which adheres to the guidance of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. Complaints are reported monthly to the ELT, the actions and outcomes of which are monitored termly by the Standards and Curriculum Committee and ultimately fed into the annual QIP and drawn to the attention of the Governing Body. The review team found that due to the supportive, inclusive nature of the College, there were few formal historic complaints for the team to test the effectiveness of the official policies and procedures in place. In meeting with staff and students, the College demonstrated through example that issues are resolved at an informal level before they develop into a formal complaint, assuring the review team that concerns are dealt with in a timely and effective manner.

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

34   The College website has a range of information available for current and prospective students including links to current year Terms & Conditions. While materials are developed by a range of College staff, final approval of marketing and programme-related information lies with the Director of Marketing and Admissions and approval is also sought from relevant awarding partners. This process ensures that information is accurate and current.

35   The College sets out its approach to admissions in its Admissions Procedures document which is available on the main College website. This document articulates the commitment to providing a comprehensive range of current information about provision, including course costs. See paragraph 21 above for further information.

36   Information about the course is available via the web and as a downloadable factsheet using a standard template. This includes information about entry requirements, including for applicants with extensive work experience and/or professional qualifications, as well as information about additional costs.

37   There are clear guidelines for the recognition of prior learning, with the Director of Quality responsible for management and implementation. Students who met the team spoke very highly of the College's supportive approach to the admissions process, with accurate information available that was reflected in their experience once enrolled. The team considered, on the basis of the evidence provided, that robust and effective procedures are in place to ensure the consistency and fairness of the College's approach to admissions as well as the provision of appropriate information to enable applicants to make an informed decision.

38   Offers are made by email which includes information relating to modules, cost, additional costs, fee increase, refunds policy, fee liability policy, the Customer Complaints & Compliments Policy and other relevant policies as an attachment, and a weblink to the Terms & Conditions. Although students are not sent a hard copy of the Terms & Conditions,

the information sent is a student-facing document and reflects aspects of the Terms & Conditions. The team was advised that if Terms & Conditions are changed in year, a revised version would be sent to current students. The team was assured that Terms & Conditions are clear, readily accessible and drawn to the applicant's attention through the admissions process, and that an archive of Terms & Conditions is maintained by the Admissions Coordinator.

39   Each programme has a comprehensive Student Handbook that provides a range of information about the course and assessment, including information about the external examiner and where their reports are available on the VLE. These handbooks also reference a number of policies and procedures with web links.

40   The HE QIP for 2017-18, which is monitored by the HE Performance Monitoring meeting and the Standards and Curriculum Committee, includes actions aimed at improving and enhancing information through standardising documentation wherever possible. This plan indicates good progress and provides an evidence trail of actions including the effective communication with applicants and students affected by the recent merger.

41   The College has a Customer Complaints and Compliments Procedure that details the process and is readily available on the College website, in student handbooks and in the Terms & Conditions. Reference to the process is also signposted through documents such as the Equality & Diversity Policy 17-18 and the Learner Involvement Procedures. Complaints are monitored on a monthly basis by the ELT and termly at the Standards and Curriculum meeting. The team considered, on the basis of a range of evidence, that the arrangements in place ensure that information about complaints is clear and accessible and the processes fair.

42   The College has a separate appeals process for admissions which is set out in the Admissions Policy. Complaints relating to admissions processes are managed through the College Complaints and Compliments Policy.

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

43   The review team found that the College has effective practices in place for the closure of courses, which was tested extensively during the recent merger, and ultimately, with the closure of the Hartford Campus. Working with a consultant, the College has developed and put in place a change management plan, forming a joint Board of Governors before the merger took place to guarantee that robust student protection measures were carried out.

44   The College uses its Internal Approval of New Courses and Decommissioning of Courses Procedures to evaluate the justification, requirements and impact of proposed closures. The College has demonstrated that they ensure the continuity of provision for students who are at risk of experiencing course closure. Programmes scheduled to close are taught out so that the level of study can be completed. The College has robust monitoring processes in place to track the development of students on closing courses to ensure that their progression and achievement is being met. The College ensures that in the case of a course closure, provision can be continued by the existing teaching team, or that the continuation of provision can be delivered by the relevant awarding body. The process of

the recent merger evidences that the College also has effective arrangements in place for supporting the wider higher education sector in the event of a programme or provider closure elsewhere.

45   The College presents the opportunity for consultation between staff and students if any changes to current courses are due to take place, ensuring that the best outcome will be achieved for all stakeholders. Material changes, such as changes to timetables or assessment dates, are communicated clearly in a timely manner in order to ensure that students are informed about their experience.

46   Sufficient arrangements are in place to secure a confidential and appropriately independent approach is taken towards handling complaints and appeals. The review team found that the majority of complaints at the College are resolved at an informal level in a fair and timely manner. The outcomes of any complaints or appeals engaging in formal processes at the College are fed upward through the relevant committees and used in the annual QIP to improve the student experience.

Rounded judgement

47   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 its responsibilities delegated by its awarding bodies and organisations in supporting the student academic experience.

48   The review team however identified an **area for development** that would allow the College to further improve the student academic experience. The team advises that the College implement structured training for higher education student representatives (Quality Code). This does not require or result in major operational or procedural change.

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