



# Higher Education Review of West Cheshire College

March 2016

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## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at West Cheshire College. The review took place from 15 to 17 March 2016 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Miss Maxina Butler Holmes
- Professor John Deane
- Mr James Perkins (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by West Cheshire College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 4. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 8.

In reviewing West Cheshire College the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2015-16 are Student Employability and Digital Literacy,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)<sup>4</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code).

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Review themes: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859).

<sup>3</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review web pages: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review).

## Amended judgement - June 2017

### Introduction

In April 2016, West Cheshire College underwent a Higher Education Review, which resulted in the following judgements: the maintenance of the academic standards of awards requires improvement to meet UK expectations; the quality of student learning opportunities meets UK expectations; the quality of the information about learning opportunities meets UK expectations; and the enhancement of student learning opportunities requires improvement to meet UK expectations.

Negative judgements are subject to a formal follow-up by QAA, which involves the monitoring of an action plan produced by the College in response to the report findings.

The College published an action plan in October 2016 describing how it intended to address the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the review, and has been working over the last seven months to demonstrate how it has implemented that plan.

The follow-up process included three progress updates and culminated in the review team's scrutiny of the College's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence, along with a one-day visit on 8 May 2017 with two reviewers. During the visit the team met the Acting Principal, senior staff, teaching staff and students to discuss progress and triangulate the evidence base received over the preceding months.

The visit confirmed that the recommendations relating to the maintenance of academic standards and enhancement had been successfully addressed.

### QAA Board decision and amended judgement

The review team concluded that the College had made sufficient progress to recommend that the judgements be amended. The QAA Board accepted the team's recommendation and the judgements are now formally amended. The College's judgements are now as follows.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### Findings from the follow-up process

The team found that the College had made progress against the recommendations as follows.

#### Recommendation - Expectation A2.1

With regard to academic governance arrangements assuring the College of the maintenance of academic standards at an executive level, the College has altered its governance structures and created an Academic Board for Higher Education (ABHE) as a subcommittee of the Corporate Board. It has also initiated a Self-Assessment Report (HESAR), which is received at all levels within the College governance. The College is making sufficient progress against this recommendation.

#### Recommendation - Expectation A3.3

To ensure that strategic self-assessment review processes critically identify, evaluate and monitor action with respect to higher education, the decision to produce the HESAR now

enables the College to provide oversight of higher education and to critically identify, evaluate and monitor action. The College is therefore making sufficient progress against this recommendation.

**Recommendation - Expectation B5**

In order to formalise student membership of higher education deliberative committee structures, the College has revised its student representative training; has better informed students on the membership of committees; and has worked effectively with the Students' Union to formalise student membership of deliberative committees. The College is making sufficient progress against this recommendation.

**Recommendation - Expectation B8**

To strengthen the processes for programme monitoring and review to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness across the higher education provision, the College has reduced the number of Quality Boards, which now take place at faculty level. The terms of reference of the Boards include programme monitoring and monitoring the Quality Improvement Plan. There is a clear line of reporting from the Boards to the Higher Education Curriculum Committee, which is a forum for programme leaders. The College is making sufficient progress against this recommendation.

**Recommendation - Expectation C**

With regard to formalising the internal approval process for published information regarding the higher education provision, there is a new guidance document, Production of Printed Materials Process. The ABHE is responsible for approving information and there are clear lines of responsibility for checking information, including the College prospectus and website. The University of Chester is also involved in the process. The College is making sufficient progress against this recommendation.

**Recommendation - Enhancement**

In response to the recommendation to systematically identify, implement, record and evaluate College-level initiatives and strategies for continuous improvement, the College has rationalised its policy documents and reviewed its Higher Education Professional Studies Strategic Plan (HEPSSP). In addition, the HESAR and the Higher Education Action Plan have been incorporated into a more robust three-year HEPSSP, with key milestones agreed in four main areas for enhancement. Progress with the Action Plan is reported to senior College committees. Although there is further work to ensure an effective and embedded process for enhancement, the College is making sufficient progress against this recommendation.

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about West Cheshire College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at West Cheshire College.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body and other awarding organisation **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at West Cheshire College.

- The use of effective and systematic peer observation to promote good teaching practice specific to higher education (Expectation B3).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to West Cheshire College.

By September 2016:

- ensure that academic governance arrangements assure the College of the maintenance of academic standards at an executive level (Expectation A2.1)
- ensure that strategic self-assessment review processes critically identify, evaluate and monitor action with respect to higher education (Expectation A3.3)
- formalise student membership of higher education deliberative committee structures (Expectation B5)
- strengthens the processes for programme monitoring and review to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness across the higher education provision (Expectation B8)
- formalise the internal approval process for published information regarding the higher education provision (Expectation C)
- systematically identify, implement, record and evaluate College-level initiatives and strategies for continuous improvement (Enhancement).

### Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions that West Cheshire College is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The steps taken to implement, monitor and review the higher education Student Engagement Strategy in partnership with the student body (Expectation B5).
- The actions being taken to develop the use of the virtual learning environment to support student learning (Expectation B3).
- The introduction of subject boards to monitor student progress and achievement (Expectations B4 and B8).

## Theme: Student Employability

West Cheshire College is a specialist vocational provider with strong employer links, including the local Chamber of Commerce. Development of academic and employability skills is core to the College's provision. At present, activity at the College is localised, with national initiatives such as the Higher Education Achievement Record currently not being utilised. The College offers foundation degrees with progression to top-up bachelor's degrees.

The College is looking to develop Higher Level Apprenticeships, in partnership with local employers. The main employability activities the College is involved in are work placements, work-based learning and work experience. The Careers Team nurtures strong links with employers and support a strategic approach to employer engagement. This is complemented by the industrial knowledge of academic staff and their current vocational experience, with teaching staff organising placements for students in some instances. Employers are further engaged through the Work Experience Team. For HND Travel and Tourism students, this opportunity is often used as a talent scout exercise.

Developing student (and graduate) entrepreneurship is a smaller aspect of the College's approach. Some examples include Art and Design students undertaking live briefs, and students being encouraged to actively pursue freelance work where possible. Students also organised an exhibition in a Chester gallery to promote work, allowing engagement with employers, public and other artists. Employers are engaged to feedback on programmes to ensure they are equipping students with the skills they need for employment. Students reflect positively on the way in which they are prepared for employment, through the hard and soft skills they learn to varying extents across the College's provision, the expertise of those delivering programmes, and the use of guest lecturers and industry-standard resources and facilities.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#).

## About West Cheshire College

West Cheshire College (the College) is a medium-sized, general further education college, with some higher education provision and work place training. Higher education is delivered on two campuses in Handbridge (Chester) and Ellesmere Port. It offers Higher National Certificate/Diploma Pearson programmes in Engineering, Creative Media, Art and Design, Hospitality Management, Travel and Tourism, Performing Arts and Public Services. It is an Associate College of the University of Chester and offers foundation degrees in computer Science, Fitness and Health, Early Years and Teaching Assistance, and a Certificate in Education. The Technologies Campus in Chester provides practical facilities for higher education engineering, and the Creative and Service Industries Campus at Ellesmere Port has facilities for hospitality management, travel and tourism, computing and creative arts, and health and social care.

The College's mission is to be: 'An exceptional college that inspires success and changes lives.' The objectives of the College's Higher and Professional Study Strategy are to: 'work in partnership with our students'; 'enhance the higher education student experience'; 'develop our strategic partnerships'; 'develop teaching and learning'; and 'focus on widening participation'.

The College's main aim is to ensure its students leave with the skills and experience necessary to achieve their career or higher-level study ambitions. This is supported by the College's Strategic Framework.

The College works closely with local employers to understand their business needs in order to train and up-skill their employees to increase their productivity and profitability. In doing so the College hopes to encourage new businesses to come to the area knowing there is a ready supply of able and capable staff, as well as high quality learning opportunities available to them.

The key challenges facing the College are to ensure that the portfolio of programmes meets the needs of students and employers in an area of economic uncertainty, and to ensure that programmes recruit the required student numbers. There have been no major changes since the last review in 2011 by QAA, but at the time of the current view, the Principal was on long-term sick leave and the College is experiencing some financial problems.

The College has responded to the good practices and recommendations from the QAA Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review in 2011. The first instance of good practice concerned the College's interactions with its awarding partner in the Information and Communications Technology programme. The second instance of good practice referred to rigorous assessment arrangements. The College's assessment arrangements are still well-articulated but the involvement of employers is less obvious. The third instance of good practice concerned the clear and robust College strategies, and extensive engagement of employers, to ensure the effective integration of work-based and work-related learning into all foundation degrees. The involvement of employers in work-based and work-related learning in all foundation degrees is a continuing area of activity. The fourth instance of good practice related to the College's extensive and responsive arrangements for the support of students, which include the highly flexible Springboard support programme, which is specifically tailored to the needs of higher education students. Springboard does not exist anymore but there is still an extensive range of support arrangements, from careers and personal tutoring to study skills and small-group teaching. The fifth instance of good practice concerned the strategically planned and comprehensive arrangements for staff development. Staff development did not come through as good practice in this review, however, continuing professional development (CPD) activity is clearly still promoted through development days and CPD activities at the University of Chester are offered to all College higher education staff (not just those teaching on University-validated programmes).

There was one advisable recommendation for the College to strengthen the implementation of its procedures for checking marketing materials, to ensure that essential core information is clearly identified and more rigorously monitored. The College indicates that information is now an agenda item for quality boards, in order to ensure programme leaders that anomalies are addressed and communicated to marketing. There is a recommendation regarding information in the current review.

There were four desirable recommendations. Firstly, to make more effective use of the substantial monitoring data already being generated, to support a cross-College approach to managing the standards and quality of its higher education provision. Monitoring data is considered at programme and strategic levels, and good progress has been made on this recommendation. Secondly, to make more explicit and systematic use of the various elements of the academic infrastructure as reference points in the College Higher Education Strategy, and more widely in the delivery and monitoring of the provision. The Higher Education Strategy Group's terms of reference makes explicit the application of the academic infrastructure, and subsequently alignment with the Quality Code. Thirdly, to continue to work with its awarding body and organisation to provide differentiated information in external examiners' and annual programme reports for those awards that are offered across a number of college partners. Reports about the College's provision through the University of Chester now include separate information about the provision. Fourthly, to review the terms of reference, membership and agendas of its various higher education groups, to support the growth of a more deliberative higher education academic community.

This was not commented on in the self-evaluation document. The current review makes recommendations regarding this matter.



## Explanation of the findings about West Cheshire College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

# **1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations**

**Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:**

**a) ensure that the requirements of The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are met by:**

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

**b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics**

**c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework**

**d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

## **Findings**

1.1 The College offers programmes at foundation degree, Higher National Certificate and Diploma levels (HNC/D), awarded by the University of Chester (the University) and the latter by Pearson. As these programmes are externally approved and reviewed by the awarding partners, the College aims to maintain academic standards. The College aims to deliver programmes in alignment with their positioning of its programmes with respect to national higher education qualification frameworks, and in doing so ensures that students are able to meet learning outcomes commensurate with those levels and their associated subject benchmarks and credit awarded for the achievement of those outcomes. The College seeks to follow the quality processes laid out by those awarding partners. This is assessed through validation and periodic review of programmes and annual monitoring reports

1.2 These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.3 To test the Expectation, the team met the acting principal, senior team, academic staff, support staff, employers and students. The team scrutinised quality handbooks, external examiner reports, programme specifications and student handbooks, annual monitoring reports and a recent renewal report for foundation degrees.

1.4 The College uses awarding partner guidance and during meetings staff shared their awareness and use of these. Further, academic staff are able to access external developmental workshops to enhance their understanding of national frameworks. Support staff are assisted by academic staff to understand the standards required by programmes. Employers too are supported to varying degrees to understand the requirements of programmes, with some participating actively with Pearson programmes. This is supported through documentation for placement providers. Students indicated they were familiar with the national framework levels of the programme, learning outcomes and credit levels of the programme, which are detailed in handbooks and programme specifications. Annual monitoring reports consider the maintenance of standards and these are substantially supported through external examiner reports. Further, external examiners attend examination boards to ensure the requirements of the higher education frameworks, the qualification characteristics, and the learning outcomes are being achieved.

1.5 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.6 The College operates under the academic governance and frameworks of the University and Pearson, and as such internal frameworks and governance are focused on ensuring standards are maintained. These frameworks are confirmed through agreements, and information is shared through formal documentation and shared with staff through the College's virtual learning environment. External changes to these awards are communicated through developmental sessions or through internal communication.

1.7 Higher education is managed by a number of the College's senior leadership team. There is a hierarchy of boards and higher education groups for the foundation degrees and HNC/D programmes. The College's Senior Leadership Team and ultimately the Principal are responsible for deciding which programmes are offered and for the internal governance for higher education. In line with the requirements of Pearson, the College's programmes, examination and quality boards confirm the award of academic credit. The award of credit is scrutinised through external examination of assessments. For University of Chester courses the University's Progression and Awards Assessment Boards confirm the award of academic credit.

1.8 The process as outlined would allow for this Expectation to be met.

1.9 The review team considered a wide range of evidence, including an Associate College Renewal Report and the related action plan, monitoring reports, minutes of the executive and senior leadership team alongside the higher education strategy and operational groups, and annual reviews of programmes.

1.10 The review team found there is a common understanding across senior, academic and administrative or support staff of the roles and responsibilities of higher education boards and groups and with the reporting to and working with the University and Pearson. In particular, at a curriculum level the various annual monitoring and reporting processes were well understood, particularly with respect to liaising with the awarding partners and respective external examiners. This is reflected in the annual reviews completed by programmes.

1.11 In March 2015, the College was the subject of a renewal for its Associate College status with the University. This event highlighted concerns including a lack of a strategic approach to managing higher education (a significant responsibility for this resting on a small number of individuals), underdevelopment of growth or enhancement prospects for higher education provision, the effect of staff turnover on managing higher education, student retention and the accuracy of student information. This meeting also identified HND programmes as the main focus of higher education provision at the College. An action plan was devised to address some concerns and subsequently received by the University and considered by the (former) strategic operations group. The immediate steps identified for the Executive Team were not discussed. In considering minutes of senior meetings and through meetings with staff, the review team was unable to identify where these actions were being monitored and actioned.

1.12 In recent years, the College combined its overarching higher education strategic and operational groups, and subsequently divorced these as it was felt these worked more effectively when apart. Below the strategic level, the College has operated quality boards at programme-level since IQER in 2011, and through their link with the higher education operations group it provides a transparent mechanism for the delivery of programmes. Conversely, the review team found instances where external examiners raised issues, there were different levels of critical reflection on the implications for standards within annual reviews.

1.13 The operational activities were found to be somewhat removed from the strategic group, and when reviewing the records of the previously combined strategic operations group the review team considered there to have been a more joined up approach. The Principal and senior team acknowledged that the higher education management framework was new, and was intended to reduce ad-hoc reporting and oversight. An example of this is where the strategy group considers external examiners' reports, identifying strengths and areas for improvement across the College. These reports were not considered in the broader context of existing challenges the College was facing.

1.14 A partnership report from the College to the University highlights issues with student success attributed to staff turnover and a need for more robust admissions processes. While some of these issues were found to have been considered within the committee structure, such as retention, deliberative responses to other concerns are less easy to identify. A report was produced for the College Corporation Board concerning higher education. The team was unable to find any consideration of the concerns raised by the University. The College executive team considered this report to the Board, but within the recorded discussions of this group's other meetings higher education is a small area of focus, whenever it is considered.

1.15 Through meetings with the senior team at the beginning and end of the review visit, the review team heard that the University review had provided the College an opportunity to critically reflect, and as such, many of the changes which had been discussed would take some time to embed. With respect to academic standards these changes are more implicit and signalled intent rather than actioned.

1.16 The review team was not assured that the College is effectively exercising itself strategically in a comprehensive manner to secure academic standards. The review team **recommends** that the College ensure that academic governance arrangements assure the College of the maintenance of academic standards at an executive level.

1.17 While the College identified some actions to be taken in this area, until such time as a more responsive link between operational and strategic governance of higher education can be made, the review team found that there is insufficient emphasis or priority given to assuring standards, due to weakness in the operation of the College's governance structure. The review team concludes that the Expectation is not met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

## **Findings**

1.18 The College offers franchised foundation degrees from the University. The programmes are approved through the university's validation processes. Programme modifications are proposed by the university's programme leader in consultation with the College. All modifications are approved by the University through the relevant Board of Studies. The programme leader is responsible for producing and maintaining this programme information.

1.19 The College offers a number of Pearson HNCs and HNDs. The College's responsibilities are contained in the responsibilities checklist for providing definitive programme information relating to the HNs as delivered by the College. These include a programme specification. The College is responsible for ensuring that learning materials are regularly reviewed and modified as appropriate to ensure continued relevance and validity. It is also responsible for providing definitive programme information, including a tailored programme specification. There is a formal course approval process in place at the College. This process is reviewed annually and evidence of in operation was provided during the review.

1.20 The design of this process would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.21 This Expectation was tested by scrutiny of the self-evaluation document, the student submission, and at meetings with staff during the review visit. Key documents included responsibilities checklists and two programme specifications.

1.22 There is formal process for signing off the development of new programmes in the College and HESG terms of reference have curriculum development as part of its remit and this is evidenced in the minutes of meetings. An example of the internal approval process at work with the signing off the FdSc Sports Coaching degree was noted.

1.23 The College is clear on its responsibilities for the maintenance of a definitive record of each programme. The processes for the approval of modification are clear, and the process for the internal approval of programmes is formally followed. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.24 The College's awarding partners are responsible for the setting and approving of academic standards. The College is approved to deliver programmes by the University and by Pearson. Pearson maintains responsibility for the approval of Higher National awards and the College informs Pearson of the chosen units, observing the rules of combination.

1.25 The College states that it works in close partnership with the University in developing learning opportunities for the community and to ensure that programmes meet employer needs. There are meetings at the university-led HESG to share long-term planning. The Associate College status renewal panel in March 2015, however, noted 'limited progression efforts to engage in joint curriculum planning'.

1.26 Regarding Pearson, the College states that the awarding organisation monitors standards and quality through Quality Management Reviews and 'ensures academic standards are maintained through external examiners'. Two generic Pearson publications were cited as evidence: the BTEC Quality Review and Development handbook; BTEC Standards Verification handbook and one external examiner report were provided.

1.27 New course proposals are approved at a strategic level through business planning processes to ensure strategic fit. A recent development has been for the HESG to approve new programmes. The oversight provided by these external processes enables the College to ensure that academic standards are set at an appropriate level. The College, through the joint meetings structure with the University, has an appropriate framework for the approval of taught programmes.

1.28 The College's arrangements would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.29 The review team tested the effectiveness of these practices and procedures through examining the university policies, partnership agreement and approval reports. The team also met the Acting Principal, senior staff including a representative from the University, teaching staff and students.

1.30 The processes for programme approval work effectively to comply with the academic frameworks and regulations of the awarding partners. For the University, the programme validation processes follow those described in the Quality and Standards Manual. The University's Course Approval Procedure progresses from Outline Planning Proposal stage to Development Advisory Group and then Steering Group stage. The team saw and heard evidence of this process in action for the foundation degree Fitness and Health, which also included a site authorisation visit. A new Sports Coaching programme was under development in preparation for 2016 entrants. Teaching staff confirmed their understanding of Subject Benchmark Statements and use as reference points in the development of programmes in Computing and Sport. The minutes of the joint Operations Group noted that there were no immediate plans for new University validated provision; this was confirmed during meetings held at the visit.

1.31 The Higher Education and Professional Study Strategy (HEPSS), which had only been approved in December 2015, refers to a 'commercial approach' towards programme development with an emphasis on professional programmes. Although the review team met staff from the Commercial Services Team, there were no examples of new provision under development. The revised remit of the HESG will be to update the business plan annually, to approve new courses for inclusion in the departmental plans, review entry and progression requirements and ensure all programmes have approval and meet awarding body requirements.

1.32 The Panel for the Associate College Status Renewal explored the processes for curriculum development. Previously HESG held responsibility for the oversight of programme development and it was noted that there was no current process at that time (March 2015) to provide assurance at strategic level. HESG now oversees academic planning and development. The College's Course Approval Procedure requires the completion of documentation covering the business case aspects and resourcing along with an understanding of the quality assurance arrangements. The Pearson unit specifications translate into a coherent programme with agreed learning outcomes. The Panel is chaired by the Deputy Principal Planning and Performance. There was no evidence of students being actively involved in programme design and approval processes.

1.33 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**



**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.34 The College states that the existence of assessment boards and the appointment of external examiners ensure that student achievement is measured by the achievement of learning outcomes at the appropriate level. The College relies on the academic frameworks of its awarding partners to ensure the validity of assessment. External examiners attend boards and their feedback informs the annual monitoring process and the Academic Partnership Monitoring Report. There is an overarching Higher Education Teaching Learning and Assessment Strategy (HETLAS). This was produced during the summer of 2015; one of the four strategic themes is assessment for learning.

1.35 For the Pearson provision, the College uses the BTEC Centre Guide for Assessment and Standards Verification and the BTEC Centre Guide to Internal Verification as its reference points. With effect from 2015-16, the Higher National provision became part of the Pearson Quality Management Review process. A visit by the Centre Reviewer is scheduled later in the year. Standardisation takes place as required by Pearson. The College Assessment and Internal Verification Moderation Policy covers all levels of study, including further education. The HE Strategic Operational Group, maintains oversight of assessment processes to ensure that academic standards are being managed through internal verification and standardisation meetings.

1.36 The University's Quality and Standards Handbook provides the reference point for the foundation degree programmes. The programme specifications for these awards set out the assessment strategies to enable students to achieve module and programme level intended learning outcomes. The partnership agreement defines the mutual responsibilities in relation to assessment. Subject-level staff are involved in assessment processes through their engagement with first and second marking and moderation processes which are arranged by the University. Overall student achievement is monitored through the quality boards and reported to the Higher Education Strategy Group and the University's Operational Group in relation to the foundation degree programmes.

1.37 These frameworks and approaches assure that the design and monitoring of assessment ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded appropriately and would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.38 The team tested the effectiveness of assessment arrangements through the reading of programme handbooks, external examiner reports, minutes of meetings at course and management levels. The team also held meetings with teaching staff, senior staff including a University Link Tutor, and students.

1.39 The evidence reviewed showed the policies and procedures to work effectively in practice. College staff attend the University Module Assessment Boards which monitor student achievement to meet threshold academic standards. Assessment briefs for the

foundation degree programmes are produced by the College module tutors and approved by the University Link Tutor. External examiners confirm that threshold standards are met. The collaborative annual monitoring report for the Foundation Degree Computer Science, written by the University Link Tutor, shows active moderation across the three college partners. Staff welcome the opportunities for engagement with external peers and that the workshops delivered by University staff had increased their understanding of levelness and the linking of assessment instruments to learning outcomes.

1.40 The process for agreeing assessment with Pearson's external examiners is to provide samples of assignment briefs at the start of the year followed by external examiners reviewing a sample of assessments and grades awarded during their visits to the College. The College Assessment and Internal Verification Moderation Policy covers provision at all levels of study with no separate policy and procedure for higher education. The roles and responsibilities of teachers, assessors and internal verifiers are described. The responsibility for the internal confirmation of standards of assessment lies with the internal verifiers. Appropriate levels of assessment in relation to threshold standards are confirmed through external examiner reports. In the case of Performing Arts, for example, the internal verification process is described as being 'robust and well planned' and that assessment briefs are 'well designed'. Conversely, the external examiner for Hospitality Travel and Tourism noted that the internal verification process required strengthening. The quality boards play a central role in ensuring that external examiner feedback is addressed.

1.41 The programme handbooks and programme specifications present a clear view of assessment expectations and grading descriptors. Assessment briefs, which indicate relevant learning outcomes are accessible to students; the team was provided with a helpful demonstration by the lead student representatives. Students are aware of the different levels of assessments.

1.42 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.43 The responsibility for overall monitoring and review, including periodic review, for the University awards lies with this awarding body. The College states that it 'seeks to support and enhance but not duplicate' the University's procedures. There are regular meetings held between the two institutions at both strategic and operational levels. An annual partnership report is produced by the Deputy Principal. A link tutor is allocated to support each University programme. The College states that curriculum development and standards are overseen by the HESG which has the remit 'to plan and monitor the strategic development of the College's HE offer...ensuring quality and enhancement of the total HE offer'. Regarding Pearson, the awarding organisation monitors processes and procedures through Quality Management Reviews and 'ensures academic standards are maintained through external examiners.' The Deputy Principal Planning Performance and Support holds senior level responsibility for higher education. The review team was informed that the Executive Leadership Team discusses the curriculum plans. The Director of Quality Improvement and Student Engagement (Director QISE) post was created for the start of the 2015-16 academic year; this post-holder reports to the Vice Principal Teaching and Learning.

1.44 The HESG, chaired by the Deputy Principal, was introduced for September 2015 and oversees curriculum development and academic standards. There are terms of reference for and membership of this group which, in theory, provide the oversight of the higher education portfolio. Standard agenda items include receipt of feedback from the quality boards, University programme committees and examination boards and consideration of external examiner reports for Pearson programmes. The team noted that there was no academic staff membership of HESG and were informed during the visit that faculty directors would become members. The core membership identified in the terms of reference was the Deputy Principal, Director QISE and two Associate Directors, one for Services to students and one from Marketing. There are no student members.

1.45 There is a Higher Education Operations Group (HEOG) chaired by the Director of Quality Improvement and Student Engagement, who holds responsibility for both further and higher education programmes. Programme Leaders form the core membership. These groups were established in their current form with effect from September 2015.

1.46 The College's approach would not allow the Expectation to be met.

1.47 The review team tested the effectiveness of the College's arrangements for the monitoring and review of its higher education provision through the reading of key documents including the minutes of HESG, HEOG, College Executive Team meetings, the UC Associate College report, annual programme reports. The team also met the Acting Principal, a Link Tutor from the University, students, senior and teaching staff.

1.48 The review team explored the effectiveness of the processes for monitoring and review. During 2014-15 the College held HESO meetings. This was a time of further restructuring. The HESG was reinstated for 2015-16. Scrutiny of the minutes show, however,

that there are often only three members of staff in attendance and that there is no academic representation at faculty level. At the time of the review, the Vice Principal Teaching, Learning and Improvement, who had been in post since the start of the academic year, was not a member of the HESG. The link between the two groups comes through the Director of QISE. Although the Director of QISE is responsible for the operational overview of higher education, the Faculty Directors with responsibility for both higher and further education curricula report to the Assistant Principal: Teaching and Learning. Both the Director QISE and the APTLS are line managed by the Vice Principal: Learning, Teaching and Improvement, however, the Director of QISE reports to the Deputy Principal regarding higher education quality assurance and enhancement from an operational viewpoint. The situation which had been summarised by the University in March 2015 whereby 'the existing approach appears to rest on a small number of individuals who bear a great deal of responsibility', therefore, still applies. The terms of reference for both the HESG and HEOG groups are very similar and the team questioned the potential for duplication of business and whether either provide effective oversight of annual monitoring and review as there was little evidence of critical evaluation in the minutes of meetings. The review team was informed at the final meeting that the terms of reference for the HESG would be changed to include faculty directors.

1.49 The College did not demonstrate how it engages with the academic frameworks and regulations with regard to annual monitoring and review. It, therefore, did not present an adequate understanding of the devolved responsibilities allocated by each awarding partner for helping to maintain the academic standards of their awards.

1.50 The University conducted a periodic review activity in March 2015 to renew the Associate College status. The panel made a strong recommendation that the College should exercise a more secure strategic approach towards its higher education portfolio. The panel concluded that there was a requirement for a 'more structured and systematic approach to the management of Enhancement at the College, with greater responsibility and engagement at institutional level.' The October 2015 minutes of the joint University/College Operational meeting noted that the College had yet to circulate the Associate College action plan with appropriate timelines. The College did not demonstrate how a formal response had been agreed through strategic reporting structures. The College produced a single-sheet action plan which indicated that actions were completed by September 2015. There was no evidence of ongoing review, progress and evaluation of actions over the several months following the review nor of a formal response at a strategic level.

1.51 The University Partnership institutional monitoring report produced by the Deputy Principal was a two page document and there was no evidence in the minutes of meetings of this being critically evaluated or approved. Furthermore, scrutiny of the minutes of the two HEOG meetings held in November 2015 showed no evidence of discussion of matters arising from the quality boards. Annual Monitoring Reports were received by the Director of QISE and the Quality Improvement Plans monitored through the quality boards.

1.52 There is a programme leader for each programme with a quality board to monitor and enhance the quality of each programme. Quality boards are chaired by the Director of QISE. There is a separate board for each programme. Scrutiny of the minutes of these meetings showed that attendance is usually confined to the Director plus one, sometimes two, members of staff. The College stated that departmental quality boards and HNC/D examination boards report to the HESG. As noted above, however, these boards take place at programme level and there is no evidence currently of how discussions translate into an annual summary or into a higher education-wide quality improvement or development plan for the next academic cycle.

1.53 The College stated that reporting mechanisms to Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and Governors required further development following the IQER and that higher education now featured on SLT meetings agenda and a 'report is being prepared for Governors'. The College response to an early evidence request acknowledged that HESG reporting to SLT (now Executive Leadership Team) had 'not been fully embedded and remains an area for development'. Scrutiny of several SLT meeting minutes during 2014-15 showed no evidence of the University's Associate College review being discussed with actions being agreed.

1.54 The team heard from the Acting Principal that reporting processes were 'too ad hoc' and that reports from HESG to the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) 'will' provide the overview and assurance that threshold standards are being maintained and that agenda items would be added for Corporation meetings.

1.55 A report was produced by the Director of QISE and presented in March 2016, the week before the review visit. The team saw this report as representing a move forward as it represents the first overall summary of higher education to the Board. The team was informed that there would be termly reports rather than a single annual process but was also informed that it was intended to produce a Self-assessment Annual Review (SAR) for higher education to be more 'systematic and explicit'. The review team concludes through further scrutiny of SLT minutes that there is insufficient oversight of the monitoring and review of higher education. For example, the October 2015 minutes noted a concern over enrolment being below target and lack of progression from Level 3 programmes but that the quality boards would be discussing these aspects. There was no evident discussion of overall academic standards for the previous year. Minutes of these meetings in most cases comprise brief notes with vaguely stated actions and lacking sufficient detail. Minutes were of a perfunctory nature at all levels. The review team also scrutinised the minutes of ELT and Corporation. The team specifically explored the formal recording of preparation for and follow-up discussion, action planning and monitoring in relation to the University's Associate College status report. With the exception of a couple of brief references to the event, there was no evidence an institutional level commitment to the process; indeed, the report had not been discussed at, nor forwarded to, the Corporation Board.

1.56 While the team acknowledges the impact that the Director of QISE role-holder has made over a period of a few months in relation to strengthening the operational management of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities, and the well-intentioned statements for the future plan, there remains uncertainty regarding the process for monitoring and review of programmes. The deliberative structures are not yet embedded and there remains limited evidence of strategic level critical evaluation of the higher education provision.

1.57 Given that these deliberative meetings play a key role in the monitoring and review of programmes, the lack of evaluative analysis at senior level leads the team to conclude that the University's recommendation for a 'more structured and systematic approach to the management of higher education at the College with greater responsibility and engagement at institutional level' remained apposite. The review team **recommends** that the College ensure that strategic self-assessment review processes critically identify, evaluate and monitor actions with respect to higher education provision.

1.58 The review team concludes that the Expectation is not met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:**

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

## **Findings**

1.59 The College engages with employers and external examiners to provide externality for its higher education provision. For foundation degrees, external examiners are appointed by the University. Pearson appoints external verifiers in line with its own processes and procedures. External examiner reports are considered at the College's Higher Education Strategy Group to consider the delivery and achievement of academic standards across provision. Employers are engaged through a range of formal local fora and informal relationships between academic staff, and the College intends that provision is targeted to the local economy, as well as to address locally identified skills gaps.

1.60 The processes in place would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.61 The review team met the acting principal, senior staff, and teaching staff, and teleconferenced with employers who are formally involved with the College. Minutes of the Strategy Group, external examiner reports and responses were considered alongside programme monitoring reports and examination board records.

1.62 The College receives external examiner reports for foundation degree programmes from the University. The reports demonstrate the College is able to assure itself that UK standards are being met. For HNC/D programmes, the College receives reports and these are considered as part of the annual programme monitoring process. Examination boards' outcomes are also verified through use of external examining, which for HNC/D provision is supplemented through internal verification.

1.63 Programme teams make use of examiner reports. Examiner reports are considered in annual programme reviews. In their reports, examiners find the College's programmes to be meeting the required academic standards.

1.64 The College engages with the local Chamber of Commerce, and at programme level, staff shared their discussions with employers in order to ensure the currency of programmes in relation to industry standards. Employers shared various extents to which they were involved in providing externality, ranging from site visits to informing curriculum design, discussing changes in industry more broadly, and developing new programme offers. This was also found in HESG minutes.

1.65 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations: Summary of findings.

1.66 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.67 Of the seven Expectations in this area, five are met with low risk. Of the two that are not met, Expectations A2.1 and A3.3, the level of associated risk is judged to be moderate in each instance, with two recommendations arising.

1.68 The two recommendations deriving from the 'not met' in this area relate to weaknesses in the College's governance structure. The College needs to implement academic frameworks and regulations to ensure the College's oversight of the maintenance of academic standards, and to ensure that strategic self-assessment review processes critically identify, evaluate and monitor action with respect to higher education.

1.69 The review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of the degree-awarding body and other awarding organisation at the College **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval**

#### **Findings**

2.1 Awarding partners hold responsibility for programme approval. The College has an overarching Higher and Professional Study Strategy (HPSS) which includes the strategic direction of the higher education provision. It states that the College is an 'active member' of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) indicating that programmes have been designed in partnership with employers. The Strategy aspires to develop curricula to meet the skills needs of the region through 'developing a commercial approach to professional studies at Level 4 and above'. The University's Quality and Standards Manual provides the reference point for the design, development and approval of the foundation degrees, as described in paragraph 1.30 in A3.1. The programme validation processes follow those of the University from the Outline Planning Proposal stage to Development Advisory Group and then Steering Group stage. New programme proposals are approved at a strategic level through a business planning process to ensure strategic fit. A recent development has been for the Higher Education Strategic Group (HESG) to approve new programmes.

2.2 The adherence of the College to the awarding partners' formal procedures, and its own internal processes, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.3 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining validation reports and background documents for programme approval and the minutes and terms of reference of key meetings. The review team also met the Acting Principal, senior staff, teaching staff and students. Three individual telephone calls were made to employers.

2.4 The Course Approval Procedure requires the completion of documentation covering the business case aspects and resourcing along with an understanding of the quality assurance arrangements. The academic case for a coherent programme commences with programme teams and is progressed through faculty meetings. This applies to both University programmes and the contextualisation of the Pearson unit specifications into a coherent programme with agreed learning outcomes. The Panel is chaired by the Deputy Principal.

2.5 Overall, the team found that the processes for design and approval of programmes work effectively in practice. The University's Associate College report of March 2015 noted limited expansion of new programmes. There is a new foundation degree under development in sports coaching. Teaching staff have been involved in some foundation degree curriculum development prior to the University's review in Fitness and Health, Computer Science and Early Years.

2.6 The team saw and heard some, albeit limited, evidence of employer input into programme design. In Engineering, employers have identified module choices. Members of the teaching teams were able to participate in the revalidation of Early Years and Computing



programmes with university peers, both of which drew upon some feedback from employers and students.

2.7 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education**

**Findings**

2.8 The College's responsibilities for admissions are set out in the University and Pearson partnership agreements. The College has an admissions policy which reflects the priority in the College Strategic Framework of 'right student right course'. All students are admitted through the UCAS system. The College has service standards for dealing with applications and all applications are screened by a programme leader. Students are invited for interview and data is stored securely. The admissions policy is benchmarked against the Quality Code, *Chapter B2* and influenced by Supporting Professional in Admissions (SPA) guidance. The Deputy Director Student Support has attended a SPA training session.

2.9 The admissions process was clearly explained in meetings with staff during the review. There is a range of guidance published including the Admissions Policy, Student Charter; Student Services Service Standards, programme specifications, HE Admissions Flowchart and entry criteria are clearly indicated on the College website and in the Prospectus (2016). The College provides an open evening for prospective students and interviews all students with programme leaders closely involved in recruitment decisions. Students confirmed that these processes were in place and working well.

2.10 These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.11 This Expectation was tested through examination of submitted evidence, the student submission, admissions policies and meetings with staff and students.

2.12 The students confirmed that the admissions process worked effectively for them. The Student Support Office is helpful in this process and entrance criteria are clear and there are service standards for responding to admissions enquiries. The College has a higher education admissions flowchart that clearly explains the admissions process step by step and enables staff to track admissions.

2.13 Recruitment and retention is a standard item on quality board agendas. The low retention rates on the HND programmes is 65.6 per cent and the College is adopting strategies to improve these. There is some discussion of recruitment under the heading of marketing at the Higher Education Operational Group (HEOG) meetings. Through an internal review process the College adopted processes to respond more quickly to admissions enquiries and through the issuing of conditional offers.

2.14 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

#### **Findings**

2.15 There is a Higher Education Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (HELTAS), focusing on students developing as independent learners and researchers, supported in their success through 'excellence in learning and teaching'. Teaching staff are appointed on the basis of suitable qualifications and/or appropriate vocational experience and related industry experience. Those appointed to foundation degrees are approved by the University, with an internal process used for those on Pearson programmes. The effectiveness of learning and teaching is measured in various ways, including student progression and success, student surveys and focus groups, and peer observation of teaching. Learning and teaching is reviewed through College internal review processes. The Student Charter provides the expectations for student engagement in learning. This is further supplemented through student-facing information.

2.16 The learning environment is supported through graded and ungraded peer observation, which is aligned to the UK Professional Standards Framework for teaching and supporting learning in higher education. It aims to identify outstanding or good practice, or identify improvements to continually enhance the teaching of higher education. Further developmental activity, both internally, from the University and Pearson is available to staff. Learning resources are available through the University's student portal, and College virtual learning environment (VLE). The latter is overseen by a Technology Enhanced Learning Leader, with minimum expectations for the resources and presentation communicated to staff responsible for programme delivery. Audits of the VLE are conducted centrally, with areas for improvement shared with programme leaders.

2.17 In support of student learning, the College is committed to providing outstanding student support. 'Live briefs' are used to help provide currency in the delivery of programmes, either relating to or based on industry. Through personal tutoring, students are supported to reflect on their performance and identify improvements to help ensure they achieve or exceed their potential. Students are encouraged to reflect on their progress through peer review, peer marking and personal development planning.

2.18 The processes outlined above would allow for the Expectation to be met.

2.19 The team examined the HETLA Strategy, Observation Policy, tutors form, AMR, quality board minutes, SLT, Corporate Board minutes, course team meetings, guidance and forms on peer observation, minutes of senior boards and meetings with the Acting Principal, senior, teaching, students, support, employers.

2.20 The College seeks to differentiate its higher education delivery. Many also teach on further education programmes. The Teaching and Learning Strategy promotes an aspirational ethos for good teaching, as well as a need to engage students in the learning experience. This was understood and reflected as occurring by staff from their own and students' perspectives'. The 'approved tutors form' allows the College to demonstrate the recruitment of suitably qualified staff. As part of their development, staff are able to take five developmental days per year for either higher education or industrial updating.

2.21 Learning and teaching is discussed in programme annual reviews, including using metrics from teaching observations. Quality boards consider the effectiveness of learning and teaching through observations during the academic year. Students told the team that they consider staff to be appropriately qualified and share their professional and practical knowledge, valuing the role of practitioners within the classroom. Quality Improvement Plans provide 'smart' objectives for programmes to improve teaching and learning for students. The use of student focus groups allows for issues to be identified.

2.22 Students spoke very positively about the VLE, from its ease of use and interface to the quality and utility of resources shared. Those responsible for delivering programmes were aware of the minimum requirements for VLE, which had been the focus of a staff development day. The VLE Developmental Review identifies the core requirements, and identifies issues with online provision. The member of staff centrally leading on myCourse informed the review team that training is supported for both staff and students, including the provision of an online training site for staff. Students are also supported to use the site through training during induction. The review team **affirms** the actions being taken to develop the use of the virtual learning environment to support student learning.

2.23 Teaching is delivered on a small-group model, intended to facilitate individual support by using student profiles for small-classes to identify individual support needs. The College attributes student satisfaction with teaching to the small-class model provided. In recent years, the College has improved its National Student Survey scores. In particular, students value the small group teaching, which they felt helped them engage in their learning, as well as the use of a range of teaching methods and 'real world' scenarios. Live briefs and the development of professional and transferrable skills are key principles in learning and teaching. Employers shared their experiences of contributing to students' learning through site visits, and workplace experience to varying degrees.

2.24 Though student survey data, an improvement in the area of academic support can be seen as contributing to student engagement in learning. The College is also in the process of considering the impact of equality and diversity on teaching and learning.

2.25 Students attribute the vocational practical experience they are able to receive through placements and staff expertise as helping put theory into practice. Peer review forms allow students to support each other's engagement and progress through offering top-level consideration of fellow students' work. In discussion with students, the review team was assured that across the College students are satisfied with their learning and teaching experience, complemented by their experiences in the work place as discussed later concerning Expectation B10.

2.26 Peer observation of teaching through individual teacher reviews allows for best practice to be identified. Staff are provided with further support to improve teaching. A description of the session is provided, with identification of strengths and areas for improvement. The forms and policy supporting this were identified as being thorough, with the observation forms linking strongly to key aspects of the Quality Code, such as curriculum design and delivery, as well as the establishment of an effective learning environment. Staff are provided with suitable guidance on the conduct and reporting of observations. The senior team highlighted that the cycle of graded and ungraded peer observations was a strong aspect of achieving the ambitions of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. Teaching staff stated that the process of peer observation, both conducting and receiving, was significantly beneficial, providing an opportunity to learn from other colleagues, formally and informally exchange ideas through senior oversight of the process to share practices College-wide. Peer observation is an item of discussion in senior committees, course team and quality board meetings. The use of effective and systematic

peer observation to promote good teaching practice specific to higher education is **good practice**.

2.27 In addition to peer observation, staff development is acknowledged as a core expectation. The Principal, senior team, teaching and support staff all highlighted its importance and value, ranging from support to complete further study to seeking HEA Fellowships and also higher education development days open to all staff, provided by the University.

2.28 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.29 A strategic framework underpins the College's approach to student support, focused on inclusion, a supportive, safe and stimulating culture, to deliver appropriate, personalised and high quality support. The College uses its management information system to identify 'at risk' students. Individual student services also have their own service agreements, which are evaluated.

2.30 During application interviews, students are informed about the requirements of study at a higher education level. They are encouraged to identify any potential barriers to their learning and support needs. Upon arrival at the College, diagnostic approaches are used to identify support requirements. Student services are promoted to students throughout their studies and staff are present in person during induction events. Following completion of their studies, students are able to discuss their prospects with members of academic staff, many of whom are active in industry with active links and insight, as well as the Careers Team. Links are established between central support services and curriculum areas. Development of academic and employability skills is core to the College's provision.

2.31 Student progress is carefully monitored. Retention and progression are considered by senior strategic and operation groups, and at programme-level by quality and examination boards. It is further monitored during tutorials. Deferrals and referrals are managed through examination boards for Pearson provision, and through relevant boards for University foundation degrees. Destinations data for graduates is collected, analysed at programme-level and reported annually. Destinations data is also further in annual programme reviews.

2.32 Students are supported in-programme to use industry-standard equipment. The College is committed to enabling access to learning technologies for all students to aid engagement in their learning, which in recent years has focused on the development of their VLE. Physical resources include a study centre, library access to books, journals and newspapers, other electronic resources and e-books, in addition to in-house computers. Foundation degree students are also able to access resources provided by the University.

2.33 The structures and approaches in place would allow for the Expectation to be met.

2.34 The review team considered evidence including the College Strategic Framework, student survey outcomes, the student submission, pre-arrival information for students, minutes of programme and senior staff meetings, student focus group records, the Student Charter, induction timetables and destinations data. Student support was discussed in meetings with the acting principal, senior team, students, support and academic staff.

2.35 The College Strategic Framework includes performance indicators. The National Student Survey shows students are satisfied with knowing who to discuss matters with and the broader academic support. The Framework is supported by HELTAS and the IT strategies and Student Charter. The Charter is focused on providing a range of support services, tutorial support, general guidance in addition to that focused on careers and employability, mental health and other pastoral support. Students expressed their contentment at this level of support, while acknowledging that academic support to transition into level 4 could be enhanced through further explanation of the academic expectations of

level 4. Student services standards statements articulate the levels users can expect, including to whom they apply. The services also uses self-assessment to identify where improvements are needed. The College provides support for day-release students, through, for example, providing special information online.

2.36 The HESG considers the role quality boards play in supporting students and identifying issues. One such issue identified was a need to improve recruitment activity to address student achievement concerns. The review team found evidence that the strategy progresses issues for consideration and this is discussed with the University for foundation degrees. The review team **affirms** the introduction of subject boards to monitor student progress and achievement. The College now operates an extensive induction process. Induction is reviewed through surveying students, and this is discussed with students. Such changes in the past have included centralising induction with a common timetable across programmes. The College conducts a significant amount of activity to help students transition from level 3 to level 4. Destinations data indicates high levels of student progression into further study or employment, and survey data highlights that students feel they are developing the skills they need to get a job after their programmes.

2.37 During meetings with teaching staff, the importance of developing students employability skills was highlighted, which reflects the College's commitment to meeting the needs of the local economy. The links between support and careers services are also effective. Support staff play an active role in College senior and programme meetings, including identifying additional support needs for students. Communication channels are responsive both ways.

2.38 Students' usage of the VLE is monitored to ensure students are engaging with the resources available to them. Students were positive about the online resources, but also about the special resources. Higher education spaces for students have been allocated which students appreciate. The College provides out-of-term academic support in areas such as referencing, essay writing, research methods, examination techniques. This support in and out of term-time is provided by a specific member of staff, who informed the team that a one-to-one approach enables students to receive full support.

2.39 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

2.40 The College has a Higher Education Student Engagement Strategy that outlines the main methods of engaging with students. Students are invited to attend quality boards but are not formal members. There is student representation at the College Corporation meetings, Health and Safety Committee, Equal Opportunities Committee. Students are represented on University's Student Council. Each programme has student representatives who are offered online training. Students complete module reviews. For the foundation degrees, the College operates Staff Student Liaison Committees to capture the student voice.

2.41 The College uses informal student focus groups to obtain student views. The College has a Student Charter which set out expectations of students. Other mechanism for capturing the student voice include end-of-course questionnaires, the National Student Survey, module questionnaires and campus meetings. The Students' Union has appointed a Higher Education Officer.

2.42 The design of the process would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.43 The University's review of the Associate College status made a recommendation for 'a more structured and systematic approach to the management of higher education at the College, with greater responsibility and engagement at institutional level'. There is limited evidence of discussion of higher education student views at an institutional level.

2.44 Students are not members of the HEOG or the HESG. Students are invited to higher education quality boards but are not in regular attendance and are not routinely invited. Students are not in regular attendance at ELT meetings. Students are aware of the online training but this is not mandatory. The review team **recommends** that the College formalises student membership of higher education deliberative committee structures.

2.45 The process for students completing module evaluations is a formal opportunity laid down in the College's Student Engagement Strategy. The review team **affirms** the steps taken to implement, monitor and review the higher education Student Engagement Strategy in partnership with the student body.

2.46 The College has made some efforts to engage students, and makes use of student evaluations. It is responsive to student feedback, however, students are not formally part of deliberative structures, such as the quality boards, the HEOG, the HESG and the Executive Leadership Team. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**



**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning**

**Findings**

2.47 The College processes for assessment operate in accordance with the academic frameworks and regulations of the awarding partners. The approaches towards complying with these requirements result in the fulfilment of the College's responsibilities for ensuring that students are enabled to achieve relevant learning outcomes.

2.48 The College's Procedure for the Recognition of Prior Learning Experience covers applicants to the Pearson provision; the Higher National programme handbooks refer to the generic Pearson policy and signpost applicants to the awarding organisations' website. Applicants for foundation degree programmes are considered under the University's Accreditation of Prior Learning Policy, which is described in the Quality and Standards Manual. Decisions are conveyed to the relevant examination board. Student performance through assessment is discussed at the Quality Boards and the HESG.

2.49 These arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.50 The review team examined the effectiveness of the approaches and procedures through scrutinising assessment documentation, programme handbooks, minutes of team meetings, annual monitoring reports and external examiners' reports. The team also met senior staff, teaching staff and students.

2.51 Overall, the procedures are effective in practice. The Assessment and Internal Verification and Moderation Policy describes assessment methods and the principles for effective feedback. The timescale for receipt of feedback on assessed work is 20 days, with written feedback being supplemented by verbal feedback. Feedback also identifies areas for improvement. Formative feedback is provided on ungraded tasks to encourage higher levels of performance. External examiners confirm that feedback is developmental, for example, in Performing Arts and Computer Science. Actions had been taken to address an instance of a recommendation to improve feedback from previous years. The team noted the enthusiasm for, and effectiveness of, voice recorded feedback which was being progressed in the HND Public Services. Staff attended the University-led session on assessment marking and feedback and found this to be helpful in guiding assessment practice.

2.52 Students understand the grading criteria and welcome the vocational relevance of their assessment experience and the close engagement of their tutors with employers. Examples of vocational relevance and live assessment briefs were particularly identified in Hospitality, Performing Arts and Computing where employer feedback had informed assessment criteria. Students are able to provide peer assessment to help develop assessment literacy and awareness of academic practice.

2.53 For Pearson qualifications, cases of academic malpractice are investigated under the Higher Education Conduct and Disciplinary Procedure, which references recourse to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator as a last resort, but the document does not explicitly describe academic offences and their associated penalties. The Malpractice Policy provides illustrative examples and refers to the investigatory procedures but then does not cover a

range of penalties. Students are made aware of the implications of academic malpractice, including plagiarism, during induction sessions and through their programme handbooks. The University operates its own academic malpractice policy which does include the range of penalties imposed.

2.54 The College has its own regulations for extensions, reasonable adjustments and resubmissions for the Pearson provision. There is a policy for the notification of extenuating circumstances and the information is provided to students in their programme handbooks.

2.55 Assessment boards are conducted by the University, including Module Assessment Boards and Awards Boards. College staff regularly participate in these meetings. Summary comments are included in the annual monitoring reports. External examiners confirm the level of assessment and marking standards.

2.56 For the Pearson provision examination boards are conducted under the guidelines provided by the BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment for Levels 4-7. The procedure was revised, with a new Examination Board Procedure, for the 2015-16 cycle to ensure alignment with changes made by Pearson. The review team confirmed that examination boards operated effectively in previous academic years. A briefing paper was produced for students to communicate the revised approach and the new arrangements were discussed in the HEOG November meeting. The College has introduced subject boards to be held three times during an academic year to receive module grades, approve resubmission opportunities and make recommendations to the final examination board. The team makes an affirmation at Expectation B4 of the use of subject boards in managing student progress and achievement. The boards will culminate in an end-of-year Award Board which will consider each individual student and formally receive and consider applications for mitigating circumstances and confirm penalties relating to dishonest means.

2.57 Student performance is discussed at the quality boards and the HESG. Minutes of the boards confirm assessment practices, including those for marking, feedback and internal verification. The review team notes that a series of workshops were delivered by University peers during the summer of 2015 focused on design and good practice in assessment feedback. Staff had found these sessions helpful. There is no indication, as yet, as to how this leads to the enhancement of assessment processes. As noted elsewhere, the College had been, and still is, experiencing a period of instability; the review team heard many well-intentioned statements which were too recent to establish as being embedded.

2.58 The College operates equitable, valid and reliable processes that provide students with appropriate opportunities to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## **Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

#### **Findings**

2.59 External examiners are appointed by the University and Pearson. There is a shared expectation that appointees are suitably qualified and experienced in the subject area or specialism. The role of external examiners is defined as advising on the academic standards of modules, programmes and awards, and where possible to share good practice. Examiners are asked to comment on the currency of curricula, the rigour and fairness of assessment opportunities, and attend assessment boards. Further, they are asked to comment on the comparability of standards and student achievement. External examiners review examination scripts and student assignments, and meet staff and students.

2.60 External examiners are appointed to specific programme areas by the University and Pearson. Examiner reports are given to the awarding partners, and in the case of foundation degrees the College is asked to report on issues raised in the reports. These reports are made available to students online. The College scrutinises examiner reports at quality boards and the HESG, and these are also addressed and actioned (where necessary) through annual monitoring reports. Students are informed of the name and position of external examiners through their personal tutors, and given access to the previous year's reports and action plans online.

2.61 The design as described would allow for the Expectation to be met.

2.62 The team considered external examiner reports and responses, annual monitoring reports, minutes of quality boards and the strategy group. External examining was discussed during meetings with senior staff, teaching staff, and students.

2.63 External examiners are clearly informed about the programme areas for which they are responsible. They are able to comment on the clarity and definition of learning outcomes and their vocational relevance, the quality of learning and teaching, and are invited to identify areas of good practice.

2.64 Examiners also identify weaknesses in provision, for example, consistency in student feedback. External examiner reports are considered as part of annual programme review. However, specific issues identified sometimes are not specifically addressed within formal College-level reporting and review processes. It is clear where issues are responded to in formal correspondence with external examiners at programme level. External examining is considered as part of ongoing relations with link tutors for foundation degrees. There is now some differentiation between colleges and programmes in external examiner reports, which facilitates the College's ability to identify issues for its own programmes.

2.65 Minutes of the HESG meetings show consideration of examiner report outcomes. Staff were confident in the role of examiners in supporting programmes to meet UK threshold standards, and in confirming the achievement of students. In the case of HNC/HND provision, the College takes more responsibility through internal verification and examination boards for the achievement of their students, but the externals verify these outcomes also. Programme tutors engage with external examiners in person at examination boards and through regular email correspondence. External examiner reports and any required actions are considered through meetings of programme quality boards. Some students were unsure about how they could access examiner reports.

However, reports are available online to students and the Students' Union highlights this for students.

2.66 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

**Findings**

2.67 The College states that the responsibilities for formal review and period monitoring sit with University of Chester and Pearson. It does, however, acknowledge the requirement to implement review and monitoring processes. The HESG has oversight for the monitoring and review processes.

2.68 The College is responsible under the University partnership agreement for operating the annual monitoring processes and for providing the relevant information for the periodic review. There is an annual Institutional Academic Partnership Monitoring Report which was completed by the Deputy Principal although, as noted in Expectation A3.3, there was no clear evidence of this report being discussed nor approved through the meetings.

2.69 Annual monitoring reports are produced for each programme, which incorporate consideration of student performance, feedback, external examiner comments and action plans for enhancing provision. The process for Pearson programmes was strengthened for September 2015. There is a separate quality board for each programme which monitors the quality improvement plans with 'significant issues' being referred to the HESG.

2.70 These processes would allow the College to meet the Expectation.

2.71 The effectiveness of these practices was tested by examining annual monitoring reports, minutes of quality boards, the HEOG and HESG and course team meetings. The review team also held meetings with support, teaching and senior staff, a Link Tutor, and students.

2.72 The team explored the effectiveness of the arrangements for quality boards, both in terms of the time efficiencies and also in providing for the holistic consideration of portfolio-wide development. The higher education strategy states that quality boards monitor and enhance provision. Scrutiny of the minutes of meetings show that in addition to the Director of QISE as Chair, there is usually only two other staff in attendance for each board. There were very few instances of student participation. Since September 2015, student representatives have been invited to attend quality boards, but this does not signify membership. In meetings with students, with the exception of one, they were unaware of the term quality board. Because there are several separate boards, each attended by the Director and one or two staff, these can be time-consuming and there are limited opportunities to share practices and engage with common themes.

2.73 The annual monitoring reviews for the University are commenced by the Link Tutor who meets the College teaching team. These include consideration of student recruitment, progression, feedback, team and external examiner comments and have identified action points with progress updates. The reports are presented to the relevant University faculty board of studies and the AQSS. Within the College, reports are discussed within the faculty and at the HEOG. The University also provides updates through Partner and Associate College days, with information available online.

2.74 For the Pearson provision a 'more robust' annual review was introduced in September 2015 for each programme which is monitored through the relevant Quality Board.

These reports have sections covering outcomes, academic standards, leadership and management, student voice and quality enhancement, each with self-assessment gradings. Some early sources of evidence showed some resulting QIPs where the actions had not been updated. The review team heard that the Director of QISE had recently met teaching staff on a one-to-one basis, before the annual review was submitted to Pearson. The team was informed that in future these annual reviews would inform the HESAR. The review team **recommends** that the College strengthens the processes for programme monitoring and review to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness across the higher education provision.

2.75 The annual reviews are discussed in programme team meetings as part of the rolling action plan approach. This process was introduced to strengthen the previous approach and is in the early days of adoption. The examples seen by the review team tended to be descriptive with brief comments. However, staff endorsed the usefulness of the process and acknowledged the role of the Director of QISE in leading this. Essential action required by the external examiner for Engineering to formally record team meetings had been addressed. Student representatives attend course team meetings. Students note that they are able to input into programme monitoring and review through feedback on their student experience in end-of-module questionnaires, internal and national surveys.

2.76 Evidence from documentation and meetings demonstrates that the College is managing its responsibilities for monitoring and reviewing at the programmes level, albeit with some weaknesses in the operation of the academic monitoring process. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

**Findings**

2.77 The College's responsibilities for complaints and appeals are set out in the University's and Pearson responsibilities checklists. For Pearson, the College provision follows its own complaints and appeals processes and once these are exhausted a student has the right to use those of Pearson. For the University, the College provision follows its own complaints procedure and once these have been exhausted the student has a right to use University's procedures. All academic appeals for the University provision are dealt with by the University's appeals procedures. The College has its own policies for complaints and its own academic appeals procedure for Pearson provision. The Complaints Policy is published on the student intranet and in programme specifications and student handbooks.

2.78 The arrangements for academic appeals and student complaints would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.79 This Expectation was tested through scrutiny of the self-evaluation document, submitted as part of this review, the student submission and meetings with staff and students. In addition, key documentation included responsibilities checklists and College Complaints and Appeals policies.

2.80 Staff are aware of the process of how students complain and appeal and that summary information is published in the student handbooks/programme specifications. Details of the policies are published to students on the intranet. Not all students were aware of the process of making a complaint or appeals but students are satisfied that all of their issues were dealt with informally by tutors.

2.81 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others**

**Findings**

2.82 At a strategic level, the College Strategic Framework highlights the importance of developing the local workforce and producing employable graduates, while the HEPSS indicates programmes developed in response to local and national market needs. Organisation and delivery of opportunities is made operational through a number of methods, either through direct liaison between programme leaders and placements, or students identifying their own opportunities, and within these options the role of the placement providers differs based on need. Work experience is at the discretion of curriculum areas, and the programme team are responsible for determining the requirements for work placement and work with students to source placements, in addition to central College support as required. Students complete a condensed work experience application form which is forwarded to the central work experience team who undertake the health and safety checks and approve the placement. Employers are not directly involved with the assessment of students, but do input into academic decisions in some instances through providing statements. The follow-up, including student evaluation and employer feedback, is the responsibility of the Programme Team.

2.83 The design of managing higher education with others would allow for the Expectation to be met.

2.84 The review team discussed this area with the Acting Principal, senior, academic and support staff, employers, and students. Evidence such as agreements with awarding partners, employer-facing informational documentation and internal documentation for completion by students.

2.85 The College Strategic Framework outlines the importance of developing the local workforce and producing employable graduates, and the College is keen at a strategic level to develop the number and quality of relationships with local employers. A Higher and Professional Studies Strategy is consistent with this aim, placing provision in the context of responding to local and national market needs. The College has also recently established a work experience steering group, which has identified that quality boards and the Higher Education Operation Group could play a more active role in overseeing work-based experience.

2.86 The Health and Safety forms employers are required to complete are in line with legislative requirements, and further emphasise the responsibility on employers for their care of students, such as providing induction, providing supervision, ensuring there are agreed contact hours and providing a safe working environment. Workplace partnership agreements further solidify this. Students are expected to complete a self-assessment to ensure their safety. For foundation degrees, information and documentation for employers is developed in conjunction with the link tutor at the University of Chester.

2.87 Employers are encouraged to provide feedback on students. These testimonies are positive about the students' performance. In teleconferences with employers the team was informed about the contributions of students to the work setting. Where employers do provide formal feedback on student achievement, this is in the context of providing additional



evidence in support of academic decisions concerning overall student achievement. Employer handbooks provide information about the nature of the programmes students are on, as well as expectations for work-based modules.

2.88 Students, where they had undertaken work experience, were positive about the way it enriched their academic experience, providing a 'real life' context and application of their studies. Less formal provision of higher education with others was also discussed, such as the provision of live briefs and in some instances live case studies through field trips. Students on day-release programmes shared similar views about their academic experiences, and the employer the review team spoke to explained that active discussions take place between it College to ensure that satisfactory progress is being made. Student documentation requires a developmental approach to reflecting on placements, in some cases identifying desired actions, but for the most part retrospectively logging completed activities.

2.89 The College demonstrated a keen awareness of the need to ensure students' learning opportunities while learning in work-based environments or experiences, and have suitable processes in place to manage these opportunities. This activity was found to be intrinsically linked to the educational mission and strategy of the College. In addition, the College's work to review the opportunities available to students demonstrated efforts to not only manage provision with others effectively, but also enhance its operation and role within student learning.

2.90 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees***

**Findings**

2.91 The College does not offer research degrees, therefore this Expectation does not apply.

## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.92 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.93 Of the 10 applicable Expectations in this area all are met: eight with low risk and two with moderate risk. There is one instance of good practice relating to peer observation, and two recommendations concerning formalising student membership of committees, and strengthening monitoring and annual reporting processes. There are three affirmations relating to: student engagement, the development and use of the VLE, and the introduction of subject boards.

2.94 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

### 3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.**

#### Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

##### Findings

3.1 The College does not have a formal policy for the approval of public information. It publishes a range of information on its website including: the College Strategic Framework, information on the Corporation Board, and state that 'all information is checked for accuracy before publication'. Accuracy of information for the University provision is ensured by sending drafts of the prospectus information to the University's Marketing Team. The website is the main repository for information for students, with a higher education section of the website including: application process, prospectus, student support, careers advice, and life as a student at the College.

3.2 The College publishes a Student Charter. There is an array of information for current students, including on programme specifications and handbooks published on the website. Information is now a standard agenda item at the quality boards.

3.3 The processes would allow the Expectation to be met.

3.4 This Expectation was tested through analysis of the College's self-evaluation document, submitted as part of this review, the student submission, meetings with staff and students during the review visit and analysis of other evidence. The College presented a demonstration of the website and intranet.

3.5 The Principal is ultimately responsible for the accuracy of published information. The lead for the review of public information is the Assistant Director Marketing who operates an annual review of prospectus and web information with programme leaders and students. Student Services has in place service standards that ensures it annually updates the accuracy of published information for students on the website and in hard copy.

3.6 There are minimum standards for the production of information on the College VLE. The University's Associate College report noted that the accuracy of published information is ensured by sending a draft of the College prospectus to the University's Marketing Team.

3.7 Students were aware of the Student Charter and the student intranet contains the Student Charter, Complaints Process, Teaching and Learning Strategy, careers information. The VLE contains detailed programme information including handbooks and assessment information.

3.8 In their submission students highlighted that the provision of sufficient pre-course information is still problematic, although students who met the reviewers expressed positive views of the information. The Students' Union is increasingly involved in the redesign of the website. The process for ensuring that published information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy is largely informal. The review team **recommends** that the College formalises the internal approval process for published information regarding the higher education provision.

3.9 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.10 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook

3.11 The Expectation in this area is met with low risk. Information produced by the College about its learning opportunities is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

3.12 The College operates an informal procedure for published information. There is one recommendation in this area to formalise the internal approval process for published information regarding the higher education provision.

3.13 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 The College states that it views enhancement as 'the deliberate and systematic process of institutional self-reflection and change that leads to improvement of student learning opportunities'. There is a Higher and Professional Study Strategy 2015-18 (HEPSS) which was approved in December 2015. The HEPSS was developed following the conclusion of the University's Associate College Status Renewal Panel in March 2015 that 'the clarity of the HE strategy and environment still requires a great deal of work...there is no evidence of a strategy at an institutional level.'

4.2 A new management structure was introduced for the 2015-16 academic year. This was, in part, a response to a strong recommendation from the University review panel for a 'more structured and systematic approach to the management of higher education at the College' and to assure a move from a situation of 'a small number of individuals who bear a great deal of responsibility'. The previous Higher Education Co-ordinator role had been subsumed into the Deputy Principal Planning and Performance portfolio who leads the strategic overview with the newly created post holder of Director of QISE having operational responsibility for managing enhancement.

4.3 The College stated that two policies had been reviewed to specifically reflect higher education: the Higher Education Student Engagement and Higher Education Teaching Learning and Assessment strategies. The latter document refers to 'developing a culture which engages students, both individually and collectively as partners to enhance their learning.'

4.4 The College's arrangements would not allow the Expectation to be met.

4.5 The team reviewed minutes of the Strategy Group and Operations meetings; higher education quality boards; the Quality and Standards Manual; the Academic Partnership Monitoring Report; and the HEPSS. The team also met the Acting Principal; senior, teaching and support staff; and students.

4.6 The evidence seen by the review team was underdeveloped and sometimes contradictory in nature. There was no development plan for the year to demonstrate enhancement-led institutional initiatives. The final meeting with senior staff presented further ambiguity as the review team was informed that accountability for leading the strategic direction was vested in the remit of many interest groups, including programme leaders and the various support services. The team was also informed that the Vice Principal Learning Teaching and Improvement (VPLTI) has line management responsibility for the Director of QISE and the APTLS, the latter of whom has line management responsibility for the Faculty Directors. Because the Director of QISE reports to the Deputy Principal regarding higher education, there was no reference to the Vice Principal in the College's self-evaluation document and the team had not met the VPLTI until the final meeting (upon the review team's request). An interim management structure was presented.

4.7 The review team found that the two policies presented as key sources of evidence under the College's response to meeting the Enhancement Expectation require improvement. Although well-intentioned, they are not yet evidenced. For example, the HETLA contains four strategic themes: a partnership culture; a student life cycle approach;

inspiring curricula and assessment, including the 'assessment for learning' vision, and a professional development culture. The minutes of the joint College and University Operational Group in October 2015 noted the College's wish to develop a 'community of HE teachers to create an HE environment'. Although the review team notes that the University had led on several CPD sessions during the summer of 2015, including: creating an effective higher education environment, developing a higher education culture, assessment design and assessment marking and feedback, there was no evidence presented of how these had informed the evolution of the HETLA plan.

4.8 The review team has made a recommendation in Expectation B8, with a moderate level of risk, for the College to strengthen the processes for monitoring and review to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness across the higher education provision. The College's self-evaluation document, submitted as part of this review, which addressed Enhancement, was often descriptive of quality assurance processes, for example, briefly describing the monitoring of teaching and learning, module evaluations, gathering of student feedback, the end-of-year annual monitoring reports or peer observations.

4.9 The review team did not see or hear how these core quality assurance processes, which take place at programme level, inform an institutional level evidence-based strategic approach towards enhancing the student experience. Meetings which the review team held with staff indicated narrow understanding of or limited opportunities to engage in enhancement initiatives. Examples were presented to demonstrate the use of quality assurance procedures to identify Enhancement including the review of the nature or scheduling of assessments, the introduction of introductory units for mathematics or the move to centralised induction arrangements. The College provided other examples of perceived deliberate enhancement steps through the revised observation of teaching and admissions requirements and through differentiated lanyards. The extant arrangements for quality boards operating at programme level do not encourage a wider academic gathering for the sharing of academic practices. The review team was informed, during the final meeting, that the proposed higher education SAR and the HESG would address Enhancement.

4.10 The review team notes in Expectation B8 the revised annual monitoring reporting documentation for the Pearson programmes and the work undertaken by the Director of QISE to improve the consistency of qualitative content and the indication that themes would be discussed at the HEOG and HESG. As noted in Chapter A3.3, there is an intention to develop an annual HESAR which would provide the mechanism for a strategic level self-assessment review process; this would present the opportunity to agree enhancement-led initiatives. The review team **recommends** that the College systematically identify, implement, record and evaluate College-level initiatives and strategies for continuous improvement.

4.11 The review team makes a recommendation, with a moderate risk, in Expectation B5 that the Student Engagement Strategy should be implemented, monitored and reviewed. While student voice mechanisms are in place, student representatives had only just been invited to attend quality boards; this does not include formal membership of those boards with key quality assurance remits. Students see the use of module evaluations, focus groups and surveys as reflecting student involvement with quality enhancement. There is no student membership in the other higher education representational structures including the HEOG or HESG; the reference to 'students as partners', therefore, in the HETLA policy has yet to be embedded. It was acknowledged in the final meeting that this strategy had not, as yet, been fully implemented.

4.12 In summary, the review team concludes that there is a lack of a clear trajectory to realise the stated ambitions in the College Framework, HEP Strategy, TLA, and Student



Engagement strategies. While acknowledging these as being apposite pillars upon which to construct a strategic approach to the enhancement of learning opportunities, there is little evidence of a coherent approach at the institutional level. The recommendation arising from the University's Associate College Renewal panel remains relevant as the College has not yet demonstrated engagement at institutional level for enhancement. The College does not use all available information as part of its strategic level quality assurance procedures and does not sufficiently identify good practice.

4.13 The review team found that there is insufficient evidence to support a strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities: there are weaknesses in the operation of the College's academic structures, and its strategic level quality assurance procedures are in the early stages of development. The review team concludes that the Expectation is not met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.14 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook

4.15 There is one recommendation in this area relating to systematically identifying, implementing, recording and evaluating College-level enhancement initiatives.

4.16 While there is a Higher and Professional Study Strategy in place at the College, it did not provide evidence of where the 2015-16 strategic priorities were being progressed or translated into action, or how it uses information and shares good practice. The review team also identified weaknesses in the College's academic governance structure.

4.17 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 College is a specialist vocational provider with strong employer links. Development of academic and employability skills is core to the College's provision. The student submission highlights employability as permeating throughout the College's higher education programmes. At present, activity at the College is localised, with national initiatives such as the Higher Education Achievement Record not being used.

5.2 The College is committed to developing effective external partnerships, in order to ensure students are suitably equipped to enter the workforce and for students to achieve their aims. This is at the forefront when it comes to employer engagement, but also extends to the relationships with the University and Pearson. The College identified its HNC/D provision as its main focus, a deliberate move in response to the changing focus of employers who identify the closer alignment of this provision with Skills Sector Council.

5.3 The College engages with the local Chamber of Commerce, in addition to the Local Enterprise Partnership to ensure programmes are targeting the local economy, in particular where there are labour gaps. The College works closely with the University to develop progression routes into 'traditional' higher education, with many foundation degrees offering progression into bachelor top-up programmes.

5.4 The College is also looking to expand through development of higher level apprenticeships, in partnership with local employers. Further, the College work with employers and understand business needs in order to train and up-skill employees. These links with industry, both through individuals as well as sectors more broadly, is identified as a strength within the College.

5.5 The main employability activities the College is involved in the area of placements, work-based learning and work experience. The Careers Team nurture strong links with employers and support a strategic approach to employer engagement. This is complemented by the industrial knowledge of academic staff and their current vocational experience, in some cases with teaching staff organising placements with employers for students. In addition to existing personal connections of academic staff, at a programme level, relations with employers are developed through existing further education connections, and are further engaged through the Work Experience Team. Other links exist, such as businesses running mock interviews. For HND Travel and Tourism students, this opportunity is often used as a talent scout exercise. Where work placements or work experience isn't compulsory, students are able to source this themselves and undertake it with the agreement of curriculum areas.

5.6 Developing student (and graduate) entrepreneurship is a smaller aspect of the College's approach. Some examples include Art and Design students undertaking live briefs, and, where possible, students are encouraged to actively pursue freelance work. An example of this was when students organised an exhibition in a Chester gallery to promote their work, allowing engagement with employers, public, and other artists. The use of work-based problems are identified as enabling assessment for learning.

5.7 Employers are engaged to feed back on programmes to ensure they are equipping students with the skills they need for employment. For instance, the Foundation Degree Computer Science course, employers' feed back about the content they would desire to see in the programme, identify additional skills currently lacking in the programme, and also opt in to speaking to groups of students. Employer involvement in HND/C module selection

(from the unit menu offered by Pearson) is a key activity. Employers are also able to feed back during work experience discussions and employer days organised by the College.

5.8 Students reflect positively on the way in which they are prepared for employment, through the hard and soft skills they learn to varying extents across the College's provision, the expertise of those delivering programmes, and the use of guest lecturers and use of industry-standard resources and facilities. This ranges from specialist equipment, to using internal external spaces such as theatres and hospitality venues. In supporting students' development, their employers are provided with handbooks and assessment criteria to help contextualise the work students are undertaking. Some placements also require employers to feed back on student performance, which informs assessment.

5.9 Equipment has been donated by local businesses also. This tangible experience, coupled with the use of live briefs, is highly regarded. Guest lecturers conduct masterclasses, discuss career prospects and also provide site visits for students. In some cases, students are released to complete Pearson programmes at the College, and so their studies are complementing their outside development. The College also seeks, where appropriate, to equip students with professional qualifications related to their desired careers and current studies, such as on the Foundation Degree Fitness and Health Programme.

5.10 In a recent national survey, 93 per cent of students felt they were developing skills they need to gain employment, while 96 per cent agree that they are developing safe working practices. Further, destinations data for graduates shows that a high proportion (96 per cent for 2013-14) of students were either employed or in further study

5.11 In summary, the College operates a strong focus on developing student employability, but to a greater extent its ambition is to continue to enable students to progress into the active workforce. Through evidence and meetings with a variety of stakeholders, it is successful in this regard.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 30 to 33 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx).

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

### Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

### Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

### Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

### Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

### Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'.

See also **blended learning**.

### Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

### **Enhancement**

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations.

See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

### **Learning outcomes**

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

### **Programme specifications**

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

### **Public information**

Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

### **Quality Code**

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** that all providers are required to meet.

### **Reference points**

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

### **Subject Benchmark Statement**

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

### **Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

### **Threshold academic standard**

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

### **Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

### **Widening participation**

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557 050  
Website: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)