



Quality Review Visit of West Suffolk College

May/June 2017

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about West Suffolk College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at West Suffolk College

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.**
- **There can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.**

Areas for development

The review team identified the following **areas for development** that have the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at West Suffolk College. The review team advises West Suffolk College to:

- further develop structures that enable effective contributions of the student voice to decision-making processes at Corporation and its subcommittees (Code of Governance)
- ensure there are defined learning outcomes for generic interim exit awards and these are made available to students (Quality Code)
- ensure procedures for the approval of placement/internship providers are implemented consistently (Quality Code)
- ensure the terms and conditions used for Higher National provision accurately reflect the role of the awarding organisation (Consumer Protection)
- ensure the academic appeals process used for Higher National provision accurately reflect the role of the awarding organisation (Consumer Protection).

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 31 May to 1 June 2017 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Demelza Curnow
- Ms Sally Dixon
- Mr Matthew Kitching (Student Reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

- provide the relevant funding body with an expert judgement about the readiness of a provider to enter, or continue to operate within, the higher education sector.

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

- ensure that the student interest is protected
- provide expert advice to ensure that the reputation of the UK higher education system is protected, including the protection of degree standards
- identify development areas that will help a provider to progress through a developmental period and be considered 'established'.

Each review visit considers a provider's arrangements against relevant aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements, and in particular:

- the reliability of degree standards and their reasonable comparability with standards set and achieved by other providers
- the quality of the student academic experience, including student outcomes where the provider has a track record of delivery of higher education.

About West Suffolk College

West Suffolk College (the College) is a general further and higher education college located in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk. Higher education courses are delivered at a dedicated higher education building on the main Bury St Edmunds campus. It also has five College centres in nearby Haverhill, Mildenhall, Stowmarket, Sudbury and Ipswich and is a significant provider of learning in south Norfolk, recently opening a sixth College Centre in Thetford. The College has invested capital in its premises including work on Suffolk House at the Bury St Edmunds campus, which is now the centre for the University at West Suffolk College offering dedicated facilities for Higher Education students.

The College's higher education provision is delivered in partnership with one awarding body and one awarding organisation: the University of Suffolk (the University) and Pearson. The College is the largest partner in the University of Suffolk Learning Network. The College recognises that the University provides many opportunities for collaborative working and values this relationship working towards continued growth for further mutual benefit.

The vision for higher education at the College is to provide highly-skilled graduates for employment locally, across the region and nationally. At the time of the review visit the College had approximately 640 students, all were UK or European Union students with approximately 61 percent of students full-time and 39 per cent part-time. The academic portfolio consisted of 33 validated programmes to include level 4 Higher National Certificates, foundation degrees with top-up opportunities to full honours undergraduate degrees as well as a Certificate in Education and a Professional Graduate Certificate in

Education. Programmes are offered across the subject areas of: Teaching, Children and Young People, Sports Coaching, Music, Humanities Social Science, Counselling, Hospitality and Events, Engineering, Construction, Computing, Business, and Art and Design.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The University has responsibility for the validation and periodic review of programmes. These processes are governed by the University's Framework and Regulations for undergraduate awards, Higher National awards and Initial Teacher Education awards. Panels include internal and external academics, employers and students. These panels test that programme proposals and the student learning experience are of an appropriate standard and in line with external reference points. The University also plays a role in assisting the College to meet Pearson expectations and standards more broadly by helping the College to monitor new requirements of the awarding organisation.

2 Notwithstanding the fact that there is a need to define learning outcomes for generic interim exit awards, as noted elsewhere in this report, the review team found that staff responsible for constructing assessment make use of qualification descriptors to ensure that programmes are in line with the FHEQ.

3 Assessment is approved by the University at validation and is also subject to internal and external verification before tasks are presented to students. The College operates a robust marking and moderation process which meets the requirements of the University's Assessment Moderation Policy. Where programmes are delivered at multiple campuses the College engages in cross-site moderation to ensure comparability of standards.

4 External examiners are in place for all programmes and contribute to Assessment Boards through the submission of an annual report. Reports demonstrate that external examiners have confidence in assessment and marking processes at the College and confirm that standards are being met.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

5 The review team found that the College has in place effective governance arrangements to maintain oversight of the College's higher education provision. The College has a defined structure for its governance, that includes the Standards and Excellence Committee which reviews aspects of the College's higher education provision. This Committee, which includes representatives from the higher education team, reviews data, student feedback and performance.

6 Governors articulated the importance of academic freedom and the governing body has members with significant higher education experience alongside business and community representatives.

7 The College has a detailed risk register which includes risks associated with teaching and learning and the student experience and is monitored by the Audit and Risk Management Committee. The Assistant Principal for Higher Education provides updates on

student programme data and associated risk factors to the senior management team and the Corporation.

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

8 As a degree-awarding body, the University has ultimate responsibility for academic standards. As a Learning Network Partner of the University, the College is responsible for ensuring the quality of provision, as outlined in the University's Quality Manual, relevant University regulations, policies and procedures, and the partnership Collaboration Agreement. The Collaboration Agreement includes the West Suffolk College Core Responsibilities table which is reviewed annually and provides detailed information and guidance.

9 The College is supported by the University's Partnerships Team and institutional oversight is reflected through the annual Risk-based Monitoring and Enhancement process (RiME) and the quinquennial institutional review. The College has a Higher Education Management team which has been in place from 2016-17. The Learning Network Academic Committee (formerly the Centre Academic Committee) has responsibility for maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of the student experience.

10 The College describes its role in course approval as overseeing the design, development, validation and re-approval of courses, including all course content, aims and learning outcomes. Responsibilities for local oversight of this role are set out in the Learning Network Academic Committee's Terms of Reference. The College confirmed to the review team that all its provision with the University of Suffolk is validated. Based on this assurance, the team determined that the College was responsible for ensuring the availability of defined aims and learning outcomes for interim exit awards such as Certificate of Higher Education and Diploma of Higher Education. Where named interim exit awards were available, the aims and learning outcomes for these were confirmed in the validation process and published to students in the programme handbooks (although did not appear in the published definitive course record). However, where a generic or non-subject specific interim exit award was available, the College relied solely on the University's Framework and Regulations for Undergraduate Awards and a credit accumulation approach to Certificate of Higher Education and Diploma of Higher Education. The review team recommends that, to meet its responsibilities as outlined to the review team, the College should ensure there are defined learning outcomes for generic interim exit awards and these are made available to students, identifying this as an **area for development**.

11 The College follows the University's procedure for approval of changes to existing courses and has processes internal to the College for managing this.

12 The College is subject to periodic institutional review by the University. This successfully took place in March 2017 and, at the time of the review, the College was in the process of responding to the findings in the timeframe required.

13 The College follows the University's Assessment and Feedback Framework, Assessment Moderation Policy and Code of Practice on Reasonable Adjustments, which informs the work of the Special Educational Needs Adviser in supporting students. Respective responsibilities around assessment are set out in the Collaboration Agreement Appendix 1 and the Core Responsibilities. Moderation practices in place include internal moderation and cross-college moderation. External examiner reports and Assessment Board minutes confirm appropriate assessment practices are in operation to assure academic standards and the comparability of programmes with those of other UK higher education providers.

14 The College also shares assessment board data with the Senior Management Team and the Standards and Excellence Committee to provide a view of mid-year progress.

15 The University has an External Examiners Policy and the expectations of the College in relation to this policy are set out in the Collaboration Agreement and the Core Responsibilities document. External examiner reports for both the University and Pearson awards make provision for the external examiner to identify areas on which a response is required; action plans, which are monitored by the course committee, include actions identified through external examiner reports. The College maintains oversight of the course-level action plans and the external examiner reports through the RiME process in which any themes are identified. External examiners also provide comments at the assessment board and, when an examiner cannot attend, comments are submitted in writing in his/her absence.

16 In addition to the external examiner system, externality is supported in the programme approval, modifications and review processes. The University and its Learning Network also provide additional opportunities for exchange of practice beyond the College.

Rounded judgement

17 The awarding body and organisation set the standards of the College's programmes through the application of their own academic frameworks and regulations, to which the College adheres. The College, through its adherence to its awarding body's regulations, its engagement with the FHEQ, the relevant code of governance and Part A of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards.

18 The review team identified an area for development, which advised the development of defined learning outcomes for generic interim exit awards and that these are made available to students.

19 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable.

Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

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

20 The College follows the awarding body's admissions policy. Offers based on the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) are made by the central University Admissions team. The College academics conduct interviews with non-standard applicants utilising a score card which is reviewed by the Administration Team before being returned to the University.

21 The College follows the awarding body's regulations and policies in respect of teaching, learning and assessment. A Higher Education Forum supports the development of teaching and learning and disseminates good practice. The College also engages with the awarding body's research and scholarly activity framework. Academic staff value the peer observation scheme, which is used both within and across subject areas. Staff are supported to engage with professional bodies and higher level qualifications.

22 The awarding body's tutorial policy is followed by the College. There is a Special Educational Needs Adviser in post and the College follows the awarding body's policies on reasonable adjustments, attendance, and extenuating circumstances. Students talk passionately about the support provided by the College including the personal tutor system.

23 Specialist resources are provided where appropriate. The College has undertaken a student consultation on the higher education library area presenting suggestions for improving the higher education area of the library. Students confirmed that they were assigned a designated library support member of staff.

24 Survey data is used to gain feedback from students. The College has a student representation code of practice and also uses Student Voice Forums and course committees to capture the student voice. Students confirm that student representatives received training for their representative role. They also informed the review team that the new role of Campus Officer had had a positive impact on the information available for students. The College has adopted the awarding body's student charter. A course action plan is discussed at the Course committee where students are represented.

25 The College follows the awarding body's annual Risk Based Monitoring and Evaluation process which includes analysis of external examiner reports, data and key themes. There is a moderation process which includes student representatives, staff, management and governors.

26 Data at programme level is used to review individual student performance and identify areas of risk. There is a defined process for monitoring data that feeds into the annual monitoring process. In addition, the College uses data to inform the strategic and operational decisions.

27 The College provides placements or internships for students on some of its provision. This provision is supported by defined documentation that is used across the placements and/or internships. However, the documentation completed for placements and/or internships does not fully comply with the requirements set out in the programme handbooks to ensure that placements/internships are appropriate and safe. The review team advises the College to ensure procedures for the approval of placement/internship providers are implemented consistently (UKQC), identifying this as an **area for development**.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

28 The University has a Student Representation Code of Practice, which the College follows. The role of Students' Union Campus Officer is new for 2016-17 and is a voluntary role of the University of Suffolk Students' Union. Training is currently carried out by the University Students' Union and the role is supported locally by the College's Higher Education Management Team. The College is cognisant of the need to keep the role under review in these early stages and the review team would encourage this, particularly in terms of clarifying the scope of the role and the level of responsibility expected from the Students' Union Campus Officer.

29 Student representation is in place on a number of committees and bodies, including Course Committees, focus groups, the Learning Network Academic Committee which has provision for one student per level of study, and the Student Voice Forum which includes student representatives, the President of the UoS Students' Union, and is chaired by the College's Students' Union Campus Officer. While student representation has become more effective following recent efforts to develop further the College's structures for higher education provision, the College has recently recognised the need to strengthen engagement of its higher education students at the level of Corporation and its subcommittees. The review team advises the College to further develop structures that enable effective contributions of the student voice to decision-making processes at Corporation and its subcommittees, identifying this as an **area for development**.

30 Other opportunities for student feedback outside of the formal student representation system are in place and feedback gathered in these ways is used to inform College reflection, review and action. Students learn of responses to their feedback through a range of media.

31 The College follows the awarding body's procedures for academic appeals, complaints and misconduct procedures and students know where to access these. If complaints cannot be resolved locally, students are directed to the awarding body's Office for Student Appeals Complaints and Conduct (OSACC), which provides an annual report for the University Quality Committee and Senate. The College is kept informed of all complaints and appeals by OSACC. Oversight is both local, including the course committee action plan mechanism, and at College-level through institutional-level reporting. While these procedures are relevant to students enrolled on University awards, the review team observed that the needs of those on Higher National awards were not clear and identified an area for development associated with this (see paragraph 36).

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

32 Students are positive about the information they receive and believe this enabled them to make an informed decision when selecting a course of study at the College. Students felt that information on the website was clear and effectively supplemented by advice and guidance provided by College staff. Students received a copy of the terms and condition in hard and soft copy and considered that the interview process was transparent and informative.

33 A recent University internal review identified that there was a need for the College to continue to develop and implement processes to manage public information to ensure compliance with Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) requirements. The College have sought to address this through its refreshed higher education quality cycle. In order to

ensure information remains accurate all course directors will check and update course information, including the website and student handbooks. Course webpages will also be checked for accuracy throughout the academic year, a process that will be overseen by the Higher Education Quality Coordinator as part of the annual quality cycle. A representative from the University quality team is also due to deliver a session on CMA requirements to College staff so that they understand the requirements and can adapt their practice accordingly.

34 Terms and Conditions are detailed and available from the University website. This information represents detailed pre-contract terms and conditions which very clearly articulate the fact that courses may be suspended or withdrawn in certain circumstances and directs students to the University Admissions Policy for more information. The Admissions Policy contains reasons as to why programmes may be suspended or withdrawn which include insufficient number or quality of student applications received, accreditation or support being withdrawn from a professional or regulatory body or the course not being financially viable. The University's Admissions Policy also states what they will do to minimise the negative impact for the student concerned.

35 The College use the University's terms and conditions for students studying programmes which are validated by Pearson. The College have taken the approach that students on Pearson programmes are enrolled with the University as the College is not directly funded by the Higher Education Funding Council in England and this allows students to access financial support. Despite this the team found that these arrangements need to be revisited on the basis that Pearson and not the University were responsible for the awards, experience and contractual arrangements for students studying on Higher National programmes. The team therefore concludes that the College should ensure the terms and conditions used for its Higher National provision to accurately reflect the role of the awarding organisation, identifying this as an **area for development**.

36 The team found that complaints processes for students, in particular those on University programmes were accessible, clear and fair. The College does not have its own Complaints Policy for Higher Education students, instead students submitting a complaint are directed to the University's Student Complaints Procedure, where informal resolution within the College has failed. The Procedure outlines the support available for students and formal process through to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA). Students informed the team that they were aware of where to find information about the complaints process should they encounter a problem. However, no separate complaints process exists for students on Pearson programmes who instead use the University procedure before any complaint is referred on to the OIA by the University after its processes have been exhausted.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) Good Practice Framework, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's (PHSO) Principles of Good Administration, and HEFCE's Statement of Good Practice on Higher Education Course Changes and Closures

37 The College rely on accessible University policies and processes for the transparent and fair closure of courses. These are explicitly referenced in the University's terms and conditions and outlined in more detailed in their Admissions Policy. Requests to suspend or close a University programme are submitted to the Learning Network Academic Committee and then to the relevant University committee. As referenced elsewhere in the report, the College does not operate a separate procedure for the closure or suspension of Pearson programmes, which instead follow the awarding organisation's process.

38 The College provided an example of how they managed students affected by the decision not to run the top-up year for the BA (Hons) Counselling. The necessary templates were completed prior to the decision being undertaken and students were provided with advice and specialist support to ensure the effect on their student experience was minimised. Students also informed the review team that they are consulted on any changes to their programmes, which is carried out in line with the Course Modification Procedure. The College demonstrated they are involved in the periodic review process as panel members.

39 Appeals processes for students on University programmes are proportional, fair, timely and independent. The arrangements for students on the College's Pearson programmes, however, were not as clear. The College does not operate its own academic appeals procedures and therefore students on Pearson programmes are required to submit any academic appeals to the University for them to adjudicate despite the fact that they are not the awarding body for this provision and do not have a direct relationship with Pearson in relation to these programmes. The University Appeals Procedure does not reference any particular arrangements for considering appeals where the student is on a Pearson programme or detail the fact that students have a right to submit an appeal to Pearson. The team therefore concludes that the College should ensure the academic appeals process used for its Higher National provision accurately reflect the role of the awarding organisation, identifying this as an **area for development**.

40 The University's Office for Student Appeals and Complaints and Conduct (OSACC) produces an annual report which examines complaints and appeals. This is considered by the University Quality Committee and Senate, both of which include representation from the College. Complaints data is also fed into College processes and is going to be reviewed by the Standards and Excellence Committee as part of the revised Quality Cycle.

Rounded judgement

41 The review team acknowledges the work undertaken by the College in developing effective student voice mechanisms and the introduction of the Students' Union Campus Officer role which has significantly strengthened the position of student engagement at course and college level. However, the team has identified as an area for development the need for the College to further develop structures that enable effective contributions of the student voice to decision-making processes at Corporation and its subcommittees.

42 A further area for development was identified advising the College to ensure procedures for the approval of placement/internship providers are implemented consistently.

43 The College has demonstrated through its various governance structures and internal policies and procedures that generally it meets the baseline regulatory requirements in this area. However, the review team concludes that while the College has aligned their structures and processes for the management of the student academic experience to that of their awarding body, they have not made explicit provision for the inclusion of their awarding organisation within these specific policies and procedures. For this reason the team have identified two areas for development in this area. One relates to the terms and conditions used and the second to the academic appeals process recommending that the College ensure these accurately reflect the role of the awarding organisation, for its students studying Higher National programmes.

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

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