



# Higher Education Review of Wirral Metropolitan College

December 2014

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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 Wirral Metropolitan College. The review took place from 9 to 11 December 2014 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Glenn Barr
- Dr Elaine Crosthwaite
- Dr Peter Rae
- Dr Iain Mossman (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Wirral Metropolitan 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 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 6.

In reviewing Wirral Metropolitan 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 2014-15 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,<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=106](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106).

<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).

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about Wirral Metropolitan College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Wirral Metropolitan College.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisation **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.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **good practice** at Wirral Metropolitan College.

- The effective tracking of the virtual learning environment statistics to identify and disseminate good practice (Expectation B3 and Enhancement).
- The College-wide initiatives and support that raise student aspirations (Expectation B4).
- The excellent and wide-ranging opportunities that enable fine art and illustration with animation students to develop their professional potential (Expectations B4 and B6).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Wirral Metropolitan College.

By May 2015:

- consistently apply College policies on the return of marked work for all programmes (Expectation B6)
- ensure sufficient support is provided to employers to enable them to discharge their responsibilities in assessment of students on work placement (Expectations B6 and B10)
- articulate the criteria for deciding whether a programme enters or leaves the College's procedures for special measures (Expectation B8).

By June 2015:

- make more effective use of management information systems to inform and monitor strategic decisions regarding at-risk students (Expectations B2 and B4)
- embed systems to ensure the consistency of information about learning opportunities for prospective and current students (Expectation B2 and C)
- in partnership with students, articulate, monitor and review student engagement mechanisms within higher education (Expectation B5)
- implement a holistic approach to the review of higher education provision to inform college-level decision making (Expectation B8 and Enhancement)
- develop and implement college-level policies and procedures for the management of provision with others (Expectation B10)
- take specific action to monitor the impact of enhancement (Enhancement).

By August 2015:

- formalise the engagement of external experts, employers and students in the College's quality assurance mechanisms (Expectations A3.4, B1, B5 and B8)
- further develop the approach to teaching and learning so that it reflects the needs of higher education staff and students (Expectation B3)
- provide appropriate guidance and support to enable higher education student representatives to fulfil their role as partners in the quality assurance and enhancement of their learning experience (Expectation B5).

## Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The actions being taken to date to contextualise specifications and to standardise assignment briefs and handbooks for Pearson programmes (Expectations A2.2, B6 and C).
- The introduction of the internal process for course validation (Expectation A3.1).

## Theme: Student Employability

The College focuses on providing learning opportunities which are vocationally oriented. Student employability is an important guiding principle at the College and was commented on positively in many of the review team's meetings, from the Principal down through all levels of staff and with students. The College plays an important role in driving the aspirations of the local area, and helping students from the local area fulfil their potential. Work placement opportunities are available on a number of programmes and students believe that these opportunities, alongside their studies, contribute significantly to their employability.

A number of specific employability initiatives are run in the College, including a focus on personal development planning, curricula vitae writing workshops and interview advice. The College currently holds the 'matrix standard for excellence' in providing impartial advice and guidance to students from trained support staff. Students also have access to careers services at partner institutions.

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

## About Wirral Metropolitan College

The College is a medium size general further education college geographically located on the Wirral peninsula in the north west of England. It is the only further education college on the peninsula and serves a wide range of students. It has a high widening participation factor with many adults returning to learning. This is contrasted with a large selective school system within the borough. There are six grammar schools, a sixth form college and additional sixth form provision in a number of the schools.

The College's vision is: 'To be an outstanding College.' The College's mission is: 'We will enhance the economic prosperity of young people, adults and employers through high quality, work related education and training.'

The College operates from three main campuses; Conway Park and Twelve Quays (both located in Birkenhead), and the Oval in Bebington. There are also two outreach sites in

North Birkenhead and Wallasey, a Trade Union Education Centre in Liverpool, a Plumbing and Gas Skills Centre in Bromborough, Canning Street Plastering and Brickwork Centre, Tower House, the Learning Shop, and dedicated art studios all adjacent to the Twelve Quays Campus.

The College higher education student population for 2012-13 was 261 full-time and 132 part-time directly funded HEFCE students. In the current academic year (2013-14) the student numbers are 268 full-time and 143 part-time, all directly funded students.

Higher education courses are delivered across the two recently refurbished main campuses which reflect the specialist resources in support of the College's higher education provision. A Higher Education Secretariat, based at the Conway Park campus, provides the administrative support for higher education and is the main point of contact for higher education partner institutions.

The College offers the following programmes:

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Awarding body</b>
BSc Psychology (2+2)	University of Liverpool
BA Media Production	Liverpool Hope University (ends July 2014)
BA Cultural Studies	Liverpool Hope University (ends July 2015)
BA Fine Art	Liverpool John Moores University (ends July 2015)
FdA Early Years	Liverpool John Moores University (ends July 2014)
BA Illustration with Animation	University of Chester
BA Fine Art	University of Chester
FdSc Computer Science	University of Chester
BA Cultural Studies	University of Chester
FdSc Forensic Science	University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)
FdSc Chemistry	University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)
Certificate in Education/PGCE	University of Central Lancashire (UCLan)
HNC/D Business Studies	Pearson
HNC/D Construction	Pearson
HNC Operations Engineering	Pearson
HNC/D Applied Chemistry	Pearson
HNC/D Applied Biology	Pearson
HLA Chemical Science	Pearson
HNC/D Animal Management	Pearson
HNC/D Photography	Pearson
HND Travel and Tourism Management	Pearson
HNC Performance (Dance)	Pearson
HNC/D Advanced Practice in Work with Children and Families	Pearson

During the summer of 2012 the College's two main campuses underwent a £6 million refurbishment programme, resulting in major improvements in facilities for students. Higher education students have benefited from the improvements on both campuses, with new laboratories, therapy treatment rooms, and an extension and updating of general social space and restaurant areas. Students were consulted and were able to provide their input around the design and features of the refurbishments. In September 2014 the College opened a new Higher Education Centre at the Twelve Quays campus.

At the end of the academic year 2012-13 the College underwent a management restructure. In the new structure, the Higher Education Manager reports directly to the Vice Principal for Quality and Business Development. The key responsibilities of the Higher Education Manager are to research and support the development of the College's higher education offering, to plan with directors, College managers and partners to grow the College's higher education offering, to ensure progression routes are clearly available for College higher education provision, and to support the development of effective internal and external higher education quality, validation and review processes. The Higher Education Manager is supported by the Higher Education Secretariat who is the main point of contact for communications with University partners.

Since the introduction of the new higher fee regime in 2012-13 the College has reduced the full time fee for HND down from £5,975 to £3,975 from September 2014 to try to recruit more students, and has intensified its marketing activity. A task group was set up in 2013 to review level 3 programmes to identify any gaps in provision which may prevent students progressing to higher education.

Since the IQER in February 2010 the College has responded to the recommendations. The College has instigated a programme to ensure e-learning engagement reaches threshold levels in all programmes. The College has introduced a standardised HNC/D assessment brief and through the Higher Education Manager audits assessment documentation. The Academic Panel has been charged with ensuring that actions to address issues raised in feedback forms are communicated to students on a formal basis. The structure of the HE Forum is being considered, and acts to support good practice in the College. The website has been updated, and the hard copy prospectus is also available on the website. The College is building on the features of good practice identified at its last review.

## Explanation of the findings about Wirral Metropolitan 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's higher education provision is mapped against external benchmarks including the *Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), through the awarding bodies (five universities) and awarding organisation (Pearson). Partnership agreements indicate that the awarding bodies are responsible for ensuring that qualifications align with national expectations.

1.2 Programmes designed by the College are validated by the awarding bodies. Validation procedures typically require the College to complete an outline planning proposal, and if approved, a steering group, including University and College staff, develops the proposal. As part of this process, checks are made that the proposed programme is positioned at the appropriate level of the FHEQ and aligns with relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. The College's Higher National provision is designed by the awarding organisation, Pearson, to meet national expectations. Based on these arrangements, the College meets the Expectation in theory.

1.3 The review team checked the effectiveness of the College's approach to developing programmes and the inclusion of references to national expectations through consideration of validation reports, programme specifications and definitive documents. External examiner reports were scrutinised to check that appropriate academic standards are maintained.

Meetings were held with academic staff at all levels to confirm staff understanding of the use of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements in programme design and delivery.

1.4 The College largely relies on the procedures of its awarding bodies and organisation to provide assurance that academic standards are maintained. Validation records confirm that the College has developed programmes which address relevant national benchmarks, are at the appropriate level, and cover all learning outcomes. For recent validation activity, the University of Chester guidance for new programmes and updating of programme specifications has been implemented by staff. Programme specifications state the FHEQ level of the programme and the relevant qualification and Subject Benchmark Statements. For Pearson qualifications, where national standards are embedded in the programme documentation provided by the awarding organisation, the College has established standardised materials such as pro formas for assignment briefs to ensure that staff have a consistent approach across the curriculum.

1.5 External examiners' reports confirm that academic standards are being maintained at appropriate qualification levels. Action plans arising from external examiner reports are developed by course teams and tracked through internal quality assurance processes to ensure that actions are completed.

1.6 The review team concludes that the College meets the Expectation in Chapter A1 in both design and operation 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**

1.7 The College is required to adhere to the academic governance arrangements and regulations of its awarding bodies which are set out in partnership agreements. These indicate that it has delegated responsibilities to undertake assessment activities that contribute to the award of academic credit and qualifications. The academic frameworks and regulations within which the College operates are established as part of programme approval processes, and standards are set out in programme specifications.

1.8 The College's role in securing academic standards varies by partner and programme. For validated or franchised programmes, the College adheres to the Universities' policies, while for Pearson awards, College policies apply. The College has academic governance arrangements and policies to enable it to meet the requirements of its partners. There is a formal committee structure comprising the Higher Education Quality and Achievement Committee (HEQAC) which reports to the Board of Governors, the Academic Panel and the HE Forum. The College has policies and procedures to cover the setting, marking and internal moderation of assessments. The College's arrangements are subject to regular scrutiny by the awarding bodies and organisation through the operation of assessment boards and the work of external examiners. The College's processes meet Expectation A2.1 in theory.

1.9 The review team considered the partnership agreements and the College committee terms of reference and minutes to check the operation of academic governance arrangements. Programme specifications and assessment regulations were reviewed to confirm the appropriate use of assessment frameworks. External examiners' reports and the College's implementation of actions arising out of these reports were scrutinised. The team met staff to confirm their understanding of the academic framework and assessment regulations.

1.10 The College has appropriate academic governance arrangements in place through its committee structure. The HEQAC which comprises all academic directors provides regular and effective oversight of academic matters. A coherent understanding of the different awarding body regulatory regimes is maintained by the HE Manager and Secretariat, which provide a central point for the receipt and dissemination of information. Staff development activities provided by the university partners enable staff to remain competent in working within the academic frameworks and regulations of awarding bodies.

1.11 Programme specifications include reference to national credit frameworks, qualification characteristics and the volume of assessment. Recent updating of programme specifications has been completed in line with University of Chester guidance.

1.12 External examiners' reports confirm that the College meets the requirements of its awarding bodies for the conduct of assessment and action in response to the recommendations of external examiners. The academic framework that the College has established for Pearson programmes is working effectively, and includes a Lead Verifier who provides a watching brief to ensure consistency of Pearson awards.

1.13 The review team concludes that the College's clear governance and management procedures are effective. The College's role in implementing the academic frameworks and regulations of its awarding bodies and awarding organisation enables the Expectation in Chapter A2.1 to be met in both design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

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

**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**

1.14 The College delivers a portfolio of franchised and validated programmes. The awarding bodies retain responsibility for maintaining a definitive record of each award. The College maintains and makes available information which describes the aims and intended learning outcomes for each programme that it delivers, in programme specifications, course handbooks, and unit handbooks, which link to the relevant FHEQ qualification and Subject Benchmark Statements. Based on these arrangements, the College meets the Expectation in theory.

1.15 The review team considered the self-evaluation document and associated evidence, including programme specifications, course handbooks, minutes of meetings, and quality manuals. The team also met the Principal, senior, teaching, and support staff, and an awarding body representative.

1.16 The College is responsible for ensuring that any programme changes are managed in accordance with the awarding body's standard procedures. The College is responsible for the annual updating of programme specifications, and for completing annual monitoring reports which are submitted to the awarding bodies. Annual monitoring reports for all programmes are considered internally by the Academic Panel and the Higher Education Quality and Achievement Committee.

1.17 The College clearly understands the delineations of responsibility in awarding body or organisation relationships. Evidence presented by the College in the form of definitive programme documents indicates that the College is meeting its duties in the preparation of clear and accurate programme specifications. Programme specifications for Pearson awards are in the process of being contextualised, though some still use the generic specifications, rather than indicating specifically how the programme is being implemented within the College. This commentary reinforces the affirmation in Part C that affirms the actions being taken to date to contextualise specifications and to standardise assignment briefs and handbooks for Pearson programmes.

1.18 Overall, the review team concludes that the College meets Expectation in Chapter A2.2 in both design and operation through the careful preparation and maintenance of clear and accurate programme specifications, 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**

1.19 Every new taught programme introduced by the College is subject to the respective awarding body's approval processes. The awarding body is therefore responsible for confirming that programmes are designed to meet the qualification descriptors and threshold standards specified in the FHEQ and in Subject Benchmark Statements.

1.20 The College is responsible for preparing the definitive documents for approval and the subsequent validation of programmes. This includes designing and producing the programme specification when the College seeks approval for a new programme. Where a Pearson programme is proposed, associated units are selected by the programme team, and submitted to Pearson, who approves or declines the submission. These procedures enable the expectation to be met in theory.

1.21 The team reviewed the self-evaluation document and associated evidence. It examined outline planning proposals, considered minutes of meetings, reviewed committee terms of reference, and scrutinised programme specifications. The team also met the Principal, senior, teaching, and support staff, and an awarding body representative.

1.22 Recent procedural changes mean that new provision is now identified and shaped within the College by means of a validation panel, which submits an outline planning proposal to the Higher Education Quality and Achievement Committee. The programme must conform to the College's Higher Education Curriculum Strategy and business plan. If the proposal is approved, the College presents the proposal to the awarding body, and then a joint steering group develops it, ensuring courses are mapped appropriately against the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements. Therefore, the review team **affirms** the introduction of an internal process for course validation.

1.23 Based on a clear awareness within the College of the procedures for programme design and approval, the review team conclude that the College is embedding effective processes for designing programmes which meet threshold standards. Therefore, the Expectation in Chapter A3.1 is met in both design and operation 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**

1.24 The College operates programmes subject to franchise, consortium and validation agreements and responsibility for assessments varies according to the agreement with each awarding body or organisation. The College's principles of assessment contained in the Higher Education Quality Handbook and the teaching and learning policy guide staff in the operation of assessment processes. Awarding bodies ensure that student achievement of learning outcomes receives academic credit through moderation, external examination the operation of boards of examiners.

1.25 The internal and external quality assurance procedures in place in theory enable the College to ensure that credit and qualifications are only awarded where the achievement of relevant learning outcomes has been demonstrated through assessment and that both UK threshold standards and the awarding body or organisation's own academic standards have been satisfied.

1.26 The review team examined awarding organisation regulations and college quality documentation and procedures and met staff responsible for assessment and moderation. External examiner reports, minutes of boards of examiners and records of moderation provided evidence of the effective operation of the processes.

1.27 The team confirmed assessment design, marking and moderation processes ensure that the College and awarding bodies and organisation award qualifications only as a result of the achievement of relevant learning outcomes. Assignment briefs examined by the team clearly identified learning outcomes to be achieved. Examples of assessor feedback on marked work showed credit given for the achievement of learning outcomes. Records of internal verification and moderation of assessment activities demonstrate effective checking procedures. These procedures ensure that students have the opportunity to achieve outcomes detailed in programme specifications at the appropriate levels. Assessors, internal verifiers and external examiners for Pearson programmes consider merit and distinction levels as defined in the Pearson award framework as well as threshold level achievement. Electronic tracking processes record student achievement to provide accurate records for boards of examiners to make appropriate decisions. External examiners confirm the maintenance of academic standards national and awarding body standards. In accordance with the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* the College assesses work-based learning. On the FdSc Computer Science programme, employers complete a work placement matrix leading to the award of module marks, although it is not clearly articulated how this process operates in practice. The awarding body and external examiner confirm the academic standards of the award.

1.28 Overall, the College applies the assessment regulations and procedures of its different awarding bodies and awarding organisation effectively. The review team concludes that, with the exception of a small part of the provision, the College meets the Expectation in Chapter A3.2 in both design and theory and that 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**

1.29 The College follows the processes for monitoring and review established by its awarding bodies. The College is responsible for producing annual monitoring reports, prepared by Course Leaders, reviewed by the Director, and signed off by the Higher Education Manager before submission to the relevant awarding body. External examiner reports indicate that programmes meet required academic standards. For Pearson programmes, internal moderation processes and verification by the Pearson appointed external examiner confirm the maintenance of academic standards.

1.30 Through its internal processes of monitoring and review and external monitoring by its awarding bodies and organisation, the College assures itself in theory that it consistently maintains academic standards.

1.31 The review team examined internal and external monitoring documentation to check conformity with the processes set out in the Higher Education Quality Handbook and awarding body and Pearson procedures. Meetings with senior staff and teaching staff provided further evidence of the application of these procedures.

1.32 The team found that awarding body and organisation monitoring processes check and confirm that the College meets national standards. The College conforms to the quality processes of the awarding bodies, submitting annual reports for scrutiny. Where programmes are withdrawn, effective processes protect student achievement and academic standards. The College participates in the periodic review processes of its provision by its awarding bodies but does not conduct a reflective analysis to assure itself that its provision remains appropriate, current and meets required standards.

1.33 The College's own processes provide a further level of monitoring and review, applying to Pearson programmes and also those of the awarding bodies. Programme teams report to the College's Academic Panel and the Higher Education Quality and Achievement Committee (HEQAC). Review processes include analysis of recruitment, retention and achievement data. External examiner reports and student views are also considered. Action plans and regular monitoring ensure the maintenance of standards.

1.34 The review team found that the College's higher education review process does not explicitly address the achievement of academic standards and the College does not produce an overall review of its higher education programmes. Although governors receive an annual Higher Education Strategy report, the College does not produce or discuss an overarching annual report to confirm academic standards.

1.35 However, the College effectively applies its own and its awarding body and organisation's monitoring and review procedures to safeguard academic standards. Therefore, the College meets the Expectation in Chapter A3.3 in both design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

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

**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**

1.36 The College recognises the value of external expertise in programme design and quality assurance processes and the responsibility for engaging external and independent expertise primarily lies with awarding bodies. The awarding bodies engage external members to contribute to validation processes and appoint external examiners to oversee the maintenance of their academic standards. The College has internal processes for working with external examiners and utilising their reports in annual review and monitoring the actions arising from external examiner reports.

1.37 External and independent expertise is obtained through the awarding bodies' processes for the validation and revalidation of programmes. External scrutiny of the award of credit and the academic standards of awards is provided through the external examiner system and the College's processes for monitoring of actions arising from external examiners' reports. On the basis of these arrangements, the College meets the Expectation in theory.

1.38 The review team evaluated the College's use of external expertise in the assurance of academic standards through scrutiny of the validation and approval records of the awarding bodies, external examiners' reports, and the College's annual monitoring reports and committee minutes showing the actions taken in response to external examiners' reports. The team also discussed the involvement of independent external expertise with College staff and employers.

1.39 The team found the College and its awarding bodies make effective use of the external examiner system to demonstrate independent external scrutiny of the achievement and maintenance of academic standards. External examiners' reports confirm that academic standards are being met at appropriate qualification levels. The College responds to external examiner comments through the annual monitoring reports to awarding bodies and directly to its awarding organisation. The external examiners' reports are being used systematically in annual review and monitoring processes, with action plans created by course teams considered and monitored by the HEQAC. The external examiners' reports for the FdSc in Computer Science and the College action plan show how a problem area was identified and addressed.

1.40 The College has strong relationships with the local community, and with local employers and industries. Senior staff attend the North West Regional Forum and meetings with Local Enterprise Partnerships. Although a strategic aim is to improve employer engagement, there is no systematic representation from employer organisations on any College committees. The College has acknowledged a need for employer engagement in the development process for new programmes but the review team was unable to identify employers who had contributed to programme design or review.

1.41 External advisers appointed by the awarding bodies participate in course validation and review events by providing reports to inform the approval process or as validation panel members. The College does not have a separate process for consultation with external expertise

in the development of the curriculum, although the Curator of the Williamson Art Gallery was initially involved in the development of the BA Fine Art programme. College staff access external expertise through a range of forums. These include meetings with university link staff, boards of studies, and tutor liaison events; consortium meetings held by the University of Chester and UCLan; and guest speakers. However, the College largely relies on its university partners and has no formal procedures or forums for obtaining independent external expertise to inform internal quality processes. This commentary reinforces the recommendation found under Expectation B8 that the College formalise the engagement of external experts in its quality assurance processes by August 2015.

1.42 Overall, the review team concludes that independent and external expertise is used in the maintenance of academic standards. Therefore, the College meets the Expectation in Chapter A3.4 in both design and operation 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

1.43 In reaching its judgement about threshold academic standards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.44 All seven expectations have been met and the associated level of risk for all is low. There is one supporting recommendation in this area that the College formalise the engagement of external experts, employers and students in the College's quality assurance mechanisms. This recommendation requires a minor update to systems that will not result in major operational or procedural change. The need for action has been acknowledged by the College. Previous responses to external review activities provide confidence that the College will address this recommendation within a reasonable timescale.

1.45 There are two supporting affirmations in this area. The College is currently taking actions to contextualise specifications and to standardise assignment briefs and handbooks for Pearson programmes. The College has also introduced an internal process for course validation. There are no features of good practice in this area.

1.46 There is evidence that the College is fully aware of its responsibilities for maintaining academic standards of awards. The review team concludes therefore that the maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisation **meets** 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 and approval of programmes.**

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

#### **Findings**

2.1 The College's awarding bodies are responsible for the design, approval and evaluation of their respective programmes delivered at the College. However, the Pearson-accredited programme design, approval and evaluation is the responsibility of the College in line with the requirements of the awarding organisation. The College's higher education quality manual outlines the role of the College's committee structures in designing new provision. As part of the Higher Education Review process, the College has revised the internal structure for new programmes and has developed a formal process for design, development, and approval which it is beginning to embed.

2.2 The College manages the design and approval of programmes in accordance with partnership agreements with its awarding bodies and with Pearson. The College's quality processes effectively encompass the requirements of the different awarding bodies and awarding organisation and the College has developed standard higher education meeting agenda items designed to focus on relevant issues at different points in the academic year. This, in theory, allows the Expectation to be met.

2.3 The team tested the Expectation by reviewing the self-evaluation document and associated evidence, including outline planning proposals, minutes of meetings, and programme specifications. The team also met the Principal, senior, teaching, and support staff and an awarding body representative. The team found that those involved understood their responsibilities in programme development.

2.4 The team found that the College understands a key part of achieving its vision for new programmes involves listening to and meeting the needs of local students and employers. However, external voices in programme development are primarily those of academic specialists drawn into the process by awarding bodies: there is currently little involvement of employers or of students in the process, although the recently developed outline proposal document for new higher education programmes does encourage such engagement. This finding therefore supports the recommendation found in section B8 that the College formalise the engagement of external experts, employers and students in the College's quality assurance mechanisms.

2.5 Overall, the College maintains effective oversight of the programme design and approval process. There are clear internal processes that enable the different requirements of the awarding bodies and organisation to be met. Therefore, the review team concludes that the Expectation in Chapter B1 is met in both design and operation 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***

**Findings**

2.6 The College has responsibility for designing its admissions policy and procedure, and for the operation of admissions, although admission to the BSc Psychology (2+2) is operated by the University of Liverpool. The College shares joint responsibility for determining and agreeing the standards for entry with its awarding bodies, while the College's awarding organisation specifies entry criteria for HNC/D programmes. The College has a comprehensive and transparent policy for the admission of higher education students, and is firmly committed to the principles of fair admission with a strong interest on widening access and participation in higher education. The policy is openly available on the College website, and sets out an appropriate set of expectations that students can have of the College in going through its admissions process. The policy is reviewed annually by HEQAC, who are responsible for strategic oversight of the policy. Higher education courses report information about enrolment, progression and achievement at both the Academic Panel and HEQAC.

2.7 Promotion of and recruitment to higher education courses is focused around open days and information events, students meeting with the College information, advice and guidance service (IAG), and online information. Course information and entry criteria are set out in a higher education specific prospectus and in online course descriptions. Students apply to full-time courses through UCAS, whereas students to part-time courses apply directly to the College via a bespoke form. All applicants are invited to an interview with teaching staff from each course who are responsible for admissions decisions. At the interview the course structure and content is discussed, and the applicant's suitability for the course assessed. Detailed joining instructions are issued to students offered a place, and a wide range of staff are available at enrolment to relay information and expectations to students. The College has a compliments and complaints form for students who wish to submit an appeal against an admissions decision. The review team considers that this approach in theory allows the Expectation to be met.

2.8 The review team considered the operation of this policy and process through considering documentation including: the Admissions Policy; accreditation of prior experiential learning information; the Higher Education Prospectus; the College website; minutes of HEQAC; the Academic Panel and admissions meetings; admissions and progression statistics; agreements with awarding bodies; guidance issued for interviews; and by meeting students, senior and academic staff and professional support staff.

2.9 College staff confirmed that all applicants are invited to interview. Interviews both assist staff in making application decisions and provide guidance so that students can make informed decisions. Unsuccessful applicants are written to and given the opportunity to join an appropriate course that could lead to a higher education programme in the future. A small number of the students the team met stated that they had not been interviewed. Documentation around admissions for 2014-15 entry was incomplete, due to a change in student information management system in February 2014. However, the data supplied to the review team was consistent with the students' view that some applicants were offered places and enrolled in the college without an interview. As a significant cohort of students progress within the College from level 3 there are other mechanisms in place for staff to

determine student suitability for admissions. While few students are admitted to the College with advanced standing by recognition of credit-bearing prior learning, staff were knowledgeable about the process to follow and appropriate documentation was available about awarding body stipulations.

2.10 The College has a number of mechanisms which monitor admissions information. The College operates a 'Recruitment, Admissions and Enrolment Group' which considers higher education admissions as well as admissions to the rest of the College. Applications, admissions and retention statistics are considered and monitored at an appropriate level. Enrolments are reported at HEQAC and programme planning is based on projections of future admissions. Management information statistics highlight the College's commitment to supporting learners from diverse, non-traditional and deprived backgrounds. However, a summary of course performance to HEQAC indicated that some programmes had low overall success rates, and the College accepted that while it often knew individual students well, it did not track the overall profile of admissions qualifications to the College, or have systems in place to monitor data around at-risk students through the student lifecycle. This commentary reinforces the recommendation in section B4 that the College make more effective use of management information systems to inform and monitor strategic decisions regarding at-risk students.

2.11 The team found the College's communication with applicants is clear and timely, and consistently channelled through the IAG service, which has a fundamental role in supporting students in the transition from prospective student to current student. Support staff and student advisers have a sound understanding of their responsibilities and of their role in admissions processes, and in channelling complaints and appeals through the appropriate process. However the team noted some minor inconsistencies in the College's published information about admissions, whereby the prospectus, online information and UCAS displayed slightly different information about entry requirements to the College's programmes. Students the team met noted differing ways in which students are admitted to their programmes. These factors contribute to the recommendation in Part C that the College embed systems to ensure the consistency of information about learning opportunities for prospective students.

2.12 Overall, the admissions policy and processes in place are appropriate and the review team concludes that the Expectation in Chapter B2 is met in both design and operation 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**

2.13 The College has a Teaching and Learning Policy which articulates its approach to learning support including personal tutorials, and teaching and learning delivered by qualified staff. All staff are required to have appropriate subject qualifications and to hold or be working towards a teaching qualification. Arrangements to maintain the quality of provision include a lesson observation scheme, appraisal process, a Learning and Teaching Champion, and a staff development programme.

2.14 The staff appraisal scheme entails an annual review of performance and the preparation of a continuing professional development (CPD) plan aligned with College Self Assessment and Business Planning priorities. The CPD plan provides for seven days of job-related activity in addition to three College development days. The staff development programme is driven by the staff development policy, and includes core compulsory development sessions, focused on improving quality and teaching, and learning and assessment, alongside bespoke development workshops. The College supports academic staff to gain higher education and professional qualifications and also to undertake research linked to their subject specialism.

2.15 Review of the provision of learning and teaching is undertaken termly and also annually in the annual monitoring reports prepared for its university partners. The College processes for monitoring and review show that it is responsive to student feedback and also uses external examiner reports to obtain information on strengths and areas for improvement. The HE Forum enables staff to discuss and share good practice and enhance the provision of learning and teaching; this includes reviewing the findings from student surveys.

2.16 The College provides a high level of pastoral care as classroom numbers are small, and students are able to have regular one-to-one tutorials with their course tutor. The student submission indicated that the majority of students are very satisfied with College provision, citing the high standards of teaching, personal and welcoming approach, high level of individual support from tutors, and responsiveness to students' issues and requests for enhancements. The College has invested significant capital in the development of the physical environment, to ensure the facilities meet the needs of students. This includes particular consideration for the needs of part-time students. The College's policies, procedures and arrangements allow the Expectation to be met in theory.

2.17 The review team examined the effectiveness of the College's approach through discussions with senior, academic and support staff, students and employers, in addition to a demonstration of the VLE. A range of documents were examined including the College's Teaching and Learning Policy, evidence of staff development, and the observation of teaching, and minutes of meetings of the HE Forum, Academic Panel and HEQAC.

2.18 The team found that the College provides effective support for student learning and achievement. Academic staff actively use external examiners' reports and student feedback to identify areas for improvement. The review process did not operate effectively and in a

timely fashion for the FdSc Computer Science but arrangements are now in place to rectify the shortcomings. With this exception, students confirmed that they were very satisfied with the teaching and learning opportunities and the high level of support from tutors.

2.19 The HE Forum enables academic and support staff to share experience and identify good practice, which members disseminate to their course team. A significant area of the HE Forum's work is to support tutors in the development of the virtual learning environment (VLE) including a review of VLE usage data. Data tracking student usage of the VLE provides a measure of the successful use of learning materials and enables peer to peer sharing of good practice. The effective tracking of the VLE statistics to identify and disseminate good practice is **good practice**. This finding is reinforced by the commentary in Enhancement.

2.20 The College employs appropriately qualified higher education staff and has sound arrangements for their CPD. The awarding institutions undertake the approval of staff appointed to teach on their programmes, and staff benefit from staff development provision by university partners. The College has an active programme of staff development providing staff with funding to study for higher qualifications, to attend conferences and seminars for updating, and more recently, to undertake research projects. Support staff also indicated that they receive appropriate higher education staff development. Staff development is monitored annually through review of CPD logs during the appraisal process. The College has appointed a Learning and Teaching Champion to support higher education staff, although the focus is working with managers on planning and organising, rather than directly with individual tutors. This post, together with learning fairs, facilitates the sharing of good practice across the College. The review team noted that there is at present limited engagement with the Higher Education Academy.

2.21 The lesson observation scheme in current use is based on the Common Inspection Framework. A higher education focused scheme is being piloted which reflects the demands of teaching and learning at higher education level, and staff involved in the pilot indicated that it is helpful in improving their teaching. For the present, however, the review team noted that the lesson observation scheme is not sufficiently assuring teaching and learning at higher education level and informing staff development. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the College should further develop the approach to teaching and learning so that it reflects the needs of higher education staff and students by August 2015.

2.22 Overall, the College has appropriate systems and processes to support the development of staff and students at a level appropriate for higher education. The review team concludes that the Expectation in Chapter B3 is met in both design and operation 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**

2.23 The College's Higher Education Strategy prioritises a vocational mission along with a commitment to providing progression to, and positive destinations from higher education, to meet local needs particularly for adults returning to learning. The Teaching and Learning Policy outlines the support given to students, who come from diverse backgrounds. Student progress and development is monitored by course tutors with the aid of small class sizes that involve and engage students, and one-to-one tutorials provide individual support.

2.24 The Academic Panel and the HEQAC monitor and review student support and resources throughout the academic year. The process of termly reports from course leaders to the Academic Panel, and termly reviews of each course by HEQAC with the use of action trackers, enables issues regarding resources and student support to be addressed promptly.

2.25 A wide range of resources is made available to students to support their learning. This includes one-to-one tutorials; the VLE; the Higher Education Student Handbook and programme level student handbooks; two learning resource centres, one on each main campus; IT facilities; and a higher education quiet room. Students are informed of these resources in the Higher Education Student Handbook which is issued at induction and also available through the VLE. In addition, the College has a Student Services Team with student advisers who provide advice and guidance on progression and career choices. The College promotes employability skills and some courses include placements, 'real world' projects, professional development or work-related modules, and talks on how to start up a business.

2.26 The student submission indicated that student input is highly valued by the College and various improvements to learning resources have been made in response to student feedback. The College's provision of student support and its arrangements and procedures to monitor and evaluate resources allow the Expectation to be met in theory.

2.27 The review team tested the effectiveness of the arrangements and resources to support students through discussions with academic and support staff, students, and local employers. A range of documentary sources was also considered including the student submission, policy documents, annual monitoring reports and committee minutes.

2.28 The College has procedures in place to ensure that sufficient resources are provided to meet its Higher Education Strategy. A more proactive approach to identifying and addressing resource and equipment needs has been established which entails a devolved budget and an ongoing bidding process for capital funds. In line with the strategy, higher education funding is prioritised. This has enabled the College to be more responsive to growth, for example of the BSc Psychology student numbers, and has resulted in investment in discrete accommodation for higher education teaching and learning as well as learning resources. The Academic Panel and HEQAC take an overview of resource provision and are responsive to requests from staff and students within certain budget constraints. The process of termly reports and reviews is effective in addressing issues regarding resources and student support.

2.29 The VLE provides useful resources and is appreciated by students. Each course has a section on the VLE with a minimum core of resources including programme level

student handbooks, module guides and assignment briefs, as well as links to awarding institution resources. Students confirmed that resources are sufficient to enable them to meet their learning outcomes, although there were mixed views from FdSc in Computer Science students. The College is aware of these problems which are in part due to software compatibility issues across the consortium, and is taking steps to provide support to students. Some students commented on a need for more book stock and up-to-date sources. However, reading lists are provided by the awarding institutions and the College holds the recommended library stock. All reading lists are posted on the VLE and linked to the library catalogue. There is good access to awarding institution electronic resources. The new accommodation and discrete higher education facilities at Conway Park Campus and Twelve Quays from September 2014, has resolved several issues regarding room constraints and higher education student study areas.

2.30 Students on all courses benefit from personal tutorials and the take-up is high. There is a range of experience of tutorials between courses, with some tutors providing one-to-one tutorials, some group tutorials, and in other cases, tutorials are provided when assessed work is returned. Students reported that the quality of feedback on assessment is good and timely, although FdSc in Computer Science students said that written feedback had been received late. Students valued highly the support received from their tutors.

2.31 Students on the BA in Fine Art and BA Illustration with Animation have particularly strong resources and opportunities to develop their professional expertise. The College provides an art studio for the dedicated use of arts students. The curriculum has been developed with advice from the Curator of the Williamson Art Gallery and students work with curatorial staff at the gallery to ensure that their work is at an appropriate level. The course culminates with an exhibition of student work at the gallery. Tutors for the BA Fine Art and BA Illustration with Animation are active in developing external relationships, and in many cases, the students work on joint projects, such as a collaborative project with Brigham Young University in 2012. The excellent and wide-ranging opportunities that enable fine art and illustration with animation students to develop their professional potential is **good practice**. This is reinforced by the commentary in section B6.

2.32 The College evinces a strategic focus on aspiration and achievement which entails encouraging non-traditional students to aspire to, and progress in higher education. The ethos of the College is to encourage aspiration in a community with high levels of poverty, by providing role models through a 'Choose to Be' campaign, demonstrating the opportunities that higher education brings, creating a higher education identity through the provision of bespoke facilities, and celebrating achievement in formal ceremonies. An alumni group has recently been established to enable graduates to stay connected, share experience and expertise and inspire future students. The aspirational ethos clearly underpins the work of the Principal and is articulated by teaching staff. The College-wide initiatives and support that raise student aspirations is considered **good practice**.

2.33 The College offers a range of support services to provide for students' personal and professional development, and information on these is provided in the HE Student Handbook. Non-traditional students receive study skills support. In the STEM area, where maths is important, the College has arranged drop-in workshops, and additional maths classes are arranged for construction students. The Student Services Team provide advice and guidance on progression and career choices, and has specialists in dyslexia and additional learning support. Student Advisers and teaching teams are in regular contact to exchange information on any at-risk students who require counselling, and students can also access professional support through a drop-in centre.

2.34 Student progress is monitored by course tutors, and course data on retention and achievement is tracked and reported to the HEQAC. The College checks that its policies and

arrangements on equality and diversity are effective in supporting students through equality and diversity impact measures. These consider gender, disability, widening participation, and achievement for the whole College and by curriculum area. The data is reviewed by the equality and diversity steering group chaired by the Principal and shows that the College has effective student support. The College does not collect data specifically related to non-traditional entry students. Individual records are kept regarding one-to-one tutorials and any meetings with student advisers. The review team noted that the College has a high number of mature and non-traditional students who are potentially at greater risk of dropping out and identified an opportunity to track the achievement and retention of such students. The review team **recommends** that the College make more effective use of management information systems to inform and monitor strategic decisions regarding at-risk students. This finding is reinforced by the commentary in section B2.

2.35 The review team concludes that, on balance, the College meets the Expectation in Chapter B4. However, the limited strategic oversight of student support and monitoring of at-risk students, as well as the delay in addressing the support needs of FdSc in Computer Science students, poses a potential risk to student learning opportunities. Therefore, the review team concludes that the associated level of risk is moderate.

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

**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**

2.36 The College's approach to involving students in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience is set out in the student engagement policy which is applicable to further and higher education students. The Higher Education Student Handbook is the primary mechanism through which information about the student representation system is issued to students, and it details the opportunities for students to get involved as a course representative and as representatives to HEQAC and the Academic Panel. Student representatives are supported by a Student Engagement Manager who conducts a training day for all representatives. The Student Representative Council (SRC) is the senior body of student representatives, chaired by the Student Engagement Manager, which brings together all student representatives (further education and higher education) and senior College management to discuss cross-College issues. Actions stemming from discussions in the SRC are tracked in a live document and monitored by the SRC. During 2013-14 the Higher Education Manager gained additional student feedback through walk through events and at the Higher Education Christmas Cracker event. The College also takes part in the National Student Survey and Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE) Survey. At the course level, students participate in module or course questionnaires and the information is collated by course leaders who present the information to the Academic Panel as part of its quality assurance cycle. Courses also hold student/staff liaison meetings, although this is not part of the formal student engagement policy.

2.37 In theory this approach could meet the expectation set out in *Chapter B5: Student Engagement*, although the structures are primarily consultative rather than allowing for active engagement with students as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experiences.

2.38 The review team tested the effectiveness of student engagement by meeting senior staff, academic staff, professional support staff, students and student representatives. The team examined documentation including the student engagement policy, the Higher Education Student Handbook, the Student Representative Council action tracker, minutes of student/staff panels, minutes of the Academic Panel, details about course representative training, annual monitoring reports, data from the DLHE survey, details of the higher education walkthrough, and the Student Voice report to the Board of Governors.

2.39 The team found that there are no distinctive structures set out for higher education students in the student engagement policy and the College recognises this is an area for development. There is limited mention of higher education specific student engagement in the Student Voice report to the Board of Governors. The strategy and documentation publicising student engagement does not sufficiently promote staff involvement in student engagement mechanisms. For example, students arrange elections for course representatives, students arrange course representative meetings with staff and students self-nominate to attend HEQAC meetings and Academic Panel. While in 2013-14 there was a higher education student representative on the Board of Governors, this is not set out as mandatory. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the College, in partnership with students, articulate, monitor and review student engagement mechanisms within higher education.

2.40 There is inconsistent student representation on HEQAC and the Academic Panel. While students have been offered opportunities to attend, the team noted that student representation is not mentioned in the terms of reference of these committees. The minutes of the Academic Panel highlight that student views are discussed in detail, but the lack of student representation means that feedback loops may not be closed and the accountability of student views may be affected. This commentary reinforces the recommendation in Chapter B8 that the College formalise the engagement of external experts, employers and students in the College's quality assurance mechanisms.

2.41 The SRC is one of the primary routes for the student voice to feed up to senior management and for the feedback loop to be closed with actions reported back to students. However this body does not consider academic matters. The SRC action tracker records college-wide issues, particularly in relation to the physical environment. Students cited examples of effecting significant changes to the College's physical estate through this body, and are satisfied that the action tracker is effective in informing student representatives of changes made in response to action by the SRC.

2.42 The review team found that the materials provided to student representatives for their training day present the overall College management structures, but for higher education student representatives these do not sufficiently cover the higher education management structures. The student representatives whom the team met demonstrated limited knowledge of management structures at the College and a mixed understanding of their roles and responsibilities as a student representative. Student representatives also showed limited awareness of the arrangements for annual monitoring. At course level, student representatives have opportunities to feed back to their course tutors and both students and staff were able to articulate examples of changes that had been made to course delivery. However, FdSc Computer Science students expressed dissatisfaction with the responses to the issues with their course. In light of the above, the review team **recommends** that the College provide appropriate guidance and support to enable higher education student representatives to fulfil their role as partners in the quality assurance and enhancement of their learning experience.

2.43 The recommendations in this section relate to student engagement with quality assurance mechanisms, which while it is broadly sufficient, is under developed and does have shortcomings. There is a gap in engaging students on higher level deliberative structures. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation in Chapter B5 is not met. While student representation does operate broadly effectively at course level, there are weaknesses in the wider operation of the student representative system and therefore the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not 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**

2.44 The College is responsible for applying awarding body regulations and assessment procedures to secure valid and reliable assessment outcomes. Programme specifications provide a definitive course record of the programme structure and outcomes assessed. Responsibility for setting, marking and moderation of assessments varies according to the agreement with the awarding body or organisation. Assessment methods vary according to the nature of the programme, with guidance from the College's Teaching and Learning Policy and the principles of assessment contained in the Higher Education Quality Handbook. For validated and Pearson programmes the College sets the assessments. For franchised programmes in teacher education UCLan sets the assessments. For the BSc Psychology the University of Liverpool sets and marks the assessments for two modules; otherwise the College is responsible for designing assessments. For the programme in FdSc Computer Science the University of Chester takes overall responsibility for assessment design in agreement with consortium colleges. College staff mark assessments which are subject to internal moderation.

2.45 The principles of assessment contained in the Higher Education Quality Handbook provide clear and detailed guidance for assessment practice, rather than the College's Teaching and Learning Policy which applies across all levels and focuses on support and entitlement. All programme specifications clearly identify the intended learning outcomes for the programmes, although not all Pearson programmes have bespoke specifications with contextualisation to show how they apply to the programme delivered at the College.

2.46 Programme validation procedures ensure that affective assessment design allows students to meet the learning outcomes of their programme of study. Comprehensive processes support the assessment of student performance establishing a clear framework for robust, valid and reliable assessments confirmed by external examiners. The College has its own procedures for late submission claims and penalties, and procedures to investigate academic misconduct which apply primarily to Pearson programmes. Therefore, the expectation is met in theory.

2.47 To test the College assessment processes the review team examined documentation relating to the principles and practice of assessment including validation documentation, programme specifications, the Teaching and Learning Policy and the Higher Education Quality Handbook. The team also examined documentation relating to the operation of assessments including programme handbooks, assignment briefs and moderation and external examiner records. Minutes of various committee meetings provided a further record of the consideration and operation of assessment processes. The team also met staff and students to discuss the nature of assessments and the operation of assessment processes.

2.48 Assessment design allows students to apply knowledge to practical problems in work-related contexts. Case studies, live briefs, work experience and placements supplement the practical nature of the assessment activities. This is particularly strong for fine arts and illustration and supports the feature of good practice in section B4 that identifies

the excellent and wide-ranging opportunities that enable fine art and illustration students to develop their professional potential.

2.49 External examiners confirm the appropriateness of assessment activities and that they meet intended learning outcomes at the appropriate level. Students confirm that they receive sufficient information about their assessments and that they receive support for study and research skills. External examiners confirm that contextualised grading criteria and supportive feedback allow students to identify how to achieve higher grades.

2.50 Electronic submission of assessments for all programmes allows effective tracking and use of plagiarism detection and originality software. The College encourages students to use electronic checking software as a diagnostic tool to improve their academic writing skills. The use of the software in this way safeguards academic standards and minimises cases of unfair means requiring investigation. However, the team found inconsistent guidance in student handbooks on the degree of originality required in written work. The College is in the process of consolidating the use of standard documentation and formats for handbooks and assignment briefs and the College has taken significant steps to provide consistently detailed assessment briefs. This commentary reinforces the affirmation in section C that affirms the actions taken to date to contextualise specifications and to standardise assignment briefs and handbooks for Pearson programmes

2.51 Internal verification and moderation procedures vary by awarding body and are generally effective. There are arrangements for the resolution of marking differences between assessors, and assessment boards consider and confirm final results. Sampling procedures for Pearson and university programmes are thorough. External examiners are satisfied that systems of moderation enable standardisation of marking and assessment. Moderation of marked work takes place by awarding bodies and in the case of the consortium programmes also with the awarding body and teaching staff from partner colleges, to enable consistency. Issues arising at final moderation by the awarding body and consortium in 2013 resulted in appeals by two FdSc Computer Science students. The decision to uphold the appeal benefited all students on the module concerned. The University instigated a concerns review, which included taking control of moderation, and the College placed the programme in special measures. Internal College processes had not identified the problems up to that point. The College has now removed the programme from special measures after positive reports from the external examiner and awarding body. However, the team identified some continuing student dissatisfaction with the programme.

2.52 The application of electronic tracking processes to check that students receive feedback by agreed deadlines lacks consistency. FdSc Computer Science students failed to receive written feedback on their first year work until the start of year two. Students on this programme had little time to identify how they could improve before submitting their next piece of work. College guidance requires the timely return of marked work and the commitment to return work within four weeks. With the exception of the FdSc Computer Science programme, students who met the team confirm that feedback on written work is within the College guidelines. The review team **recommends** that the College consistently apply College policies on the return of marked work for all programmes.

2.53 Review procedures allow course teams to reflect upon the processes of internal verification and moderation although not explicitly to consider the appropriateness and effectiveness of assessment strategies. The College surveys student views on assessments and modules, however students are not formally involved in reviewing assessments.

2.54 Employers contribute to the assessment process through supporting live briefs and work placements with some employers being involved in the final presentation of student work. Employers are not formally involved in the review of assessments. The team found

that on the FdSc Computer Science students received 10 per cent of one of their module marks when an employer completes a grid at the end of a placement. The criteria for determining the mark is not clearly articulated in the student handbooks, in the assessment brief or in information supplied to the employer. The review team **recommends** that the College ensures sufficient support is provided to employers to enable them to discharge their responsibilities in assessment of students on work placement. This is supported by the commentary in section B10.

2.55 Recognition of prior learning is in accordance with awarding body and organisation regulations. Teaching staff provided the team with examples of the application of the accreditation processes for different awarding partners. College admissions procedures allow for recognition of prior experience.

2.56 Overall, the College's management of assessment, in collaboration with its awarding partners, allows students to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes for their programme of study. The team concludes that the Expectation in Chapter B6 is met in both design and operation. However, there are shortcomings in the information provided to students on assessment practice, the support given to employers and in the application of assessment procedures which are confined to a small part of the provision. Therefore the associated level of risk is moderate.

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

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

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

#### **Findings**

2.57 The awarding institutions appoint external examiners and provide training for their role and responsibilities. They have policies which prescribe how the College engages with external examiners. The College is responsible for communicating with external examiners regarding the samples of assessed work to be provided, making the arrangements for their visits, and for considering external examiner reports. The College responds directly to Pearson external examiner reports, and provides a response to the University of Chester as part of annual monitoring.

2.58 External examiners reports are submitted to the awarding institutions and then forwarded to the College. The universities send reports electronically to the Higher Education Secretariat, which forwards them to course leaders for review and response. The Pearson reports are stored on a portal for course leaders to download. Course teams consider the external examiner reports and prepare an action plan in response to any recommendations. Completion of action plans is monitored by the HEQAC. These arrangements enable the College to meet the Expectation in theory.

2.59 The review team tested the College's procedures by scrutiny of external examiners' reports and responses to these reports, annual monitoring reports, and minutes of meetings. The team met staff to explore the process by which external examiners' reports are considered, and discussed the sharing of reports with students.

2.60 External examiners' reports confirm that academic standards are at an appropriate level, and that processes of assessment, marking and moderation are operating effectively. These reports and College action plans form a key element of annual monitoring reports prepared for awarding bodies. For Pearson courses, monitoring is undertaken through the internal process of reporting to the HEQAC. External examiners' reports and course team plans are considered by the HEQAC in term one, and then reviewed by the HEQAC in term three, to ensure any required adjustments have been completed. Although there is no overview report of issues arising from external examiners' reports, there is effective tracking by the HEQAC.

2.61 The College process for responding to external examiners' reports has ensured that issues arising are appropriately addressed with the exception of the reports on the FdSc in Computer Science. These reports related to a Consortium and did not specify individual colleges, so that the issues relating to the College were not identified for monitoring. The awarding body has now rectified this and the composition of the HEQAC now includes all curriculum directors so that monitoring processes can be conducted more rigorously.

2.62 Students are able to access external examiners' reports through their course section on the VLE, which holds awarding body and Pearson general reports. Tutors use a range of approaches to share the reports with students, with in some cases, reports being discussed in class or at the programme board of studies meeting. Most students confirmed that they had seen the external examiners' reports.

2.63 Overall, the College has appropriate arrangements in place to make use of external examiners' reports and to respond to feedback from external examiners. There is clear monitoring at College level. Therefore, the review team concludes that the College meets the Expectation in Chapter B7 in both design and operation 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**

2.64 The College has its own quality cycle of committees, forums and reporting according to an established calendar of review. Awarding body requirements for annual monitoring reports supplement College processes of review. Link tutors provide liaison, support and guidance at programme level on university quality processes and procedures. Pearson programmes rely on the standard College processes. The Academic Panel and HEQAC provide appropriate opportunities for the process of programme monitoring. Academic panel considers and takes action on operational issues whereas HEQAC adopts a strategic approach, reporting to the Board of Governors. Additionally the HE Forum provides an opportunity for less formal review and sharing of good practice. The detailed Quality Manual contains the terms of reference for these committees and procedures involved in monitoring. Data, student feedback and external examiners' reports inform the process of review and action planning.

2.65 The College's processes for quality assurance of programme monitoring and review are thorough, allowing the College to assure itself that programmes are effective in securing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The monitoring and review processes are clear, regular and systematic. Therefore, in theory, this expectation is met.

2.66 In testing the College's processes, the review team met senior staff, academic and support staff, students and employers. The team reviewed minutes of the HEQAC, Academic Panel, HE Forum and programme team meetings. Annual monitoring reports and the report to governors on the Higher Education Strategy provided additional evidence.

2.67 The team found that the College has a detailed process of monitoring and reporting. Programme teams produce comprehensive annual monitoring reports for awarding body programmes, taking into account student, staff and external examiner's views and a range of performance data. All teams produce reports for consideration in the cycle of Academic Panel and HEQAC meetings. Standard templates ensure a consistent approach to matters reported and considered. Reports to the Academic Panel consider operational issues whereas reports presented to the HEQAC address external matters and programme trends. Minutes of recent meetings show adherence to the terms of reference. For example, HEQAC considered external examiner reports and partnership liaison issues whereas the Academic Panel discussed the monitoring reports from each programme. HEQAC considers the minutes from the Academic Panel to inform its discussions. Both meetings result in action plans for checking progress and setting targets. Teaching staff have a clear understanding of the roles of the committees and the processes of reporting and review. The team saw evidence that in most cases, monitoring processes are effective and result in actions to secure improvement. Examples include improved facilities and extended opening hours for higher education students, improvements to the VLE and increased support for staff scholarship.

2.68 However, the team found limitations in the extent to which the College formally involves students and employers in processes of review. Neither HEQAC nor the Academic Panel have student members present or shown in the membership or the terms of reference. One function of the Academic Panel is to review student opinion but it does not have a current student member. The College asks for nominees in the Student Handbook, although

the terms of reference for the panel remain unchanged without a student representative. Programme reports to Academic Panel articulate student views but students are not explicitly involved in formal review of their programmes. Students who met the team confirmed that they complete module reviews but are not formally engaged in annual monitoring. Employers who met the team stated that although they sometimes provided informal feedback on aspects of college programmes they did not engage in formal review. Therefore, the team **recommends** that the College formalise the engagement of external experts, employers and students in the College's quality assurance mechanisms. This is supported by the commentary in sections A3.4, B1 and B5.

2.69 In order to strengthen the monitoring of its higher education programmes, the College recently adopted a red, amber, green rating and the possibility of putting programmes marked red into special measures. The College applied the process as a result of identifying problems with the FdSc Computer Science programme and then applied the rating to all programmes at the December 2014 HEQAC. However, it is unclear how this Committee makes these judgements. There are no explicit criteria for entry or exit from special measures to ensure consistency across programmes. The team **recommends** the College articulate the criteria for deciding whether a programme enters or leaves the College's procedures for special measures.

2.70 The College evaluates its processes for monitoring and review and takes action to improve when necessary. For example, staff teams evaluated the monitoring and review processes through the HE Forum, the Academic Panel and HEQAC which resulted in adjustments to the content of the reporting templates.

2.71 The College's management of periodic review of programmes by awarding bodies is effective with appropriate responses by the College to commendations and suggested actions. The college reflects upon the validity and relevance of its programmes as part of the annual review process and analysis of three year data sets. Changes to validation arrangements with some awarding bodies led the College to consider the appropriateness of the affected programmes and to evaluate alternatives. However, the College does not subject its programmes to a broader periodic review and revalidation to a planned timetable.

2.72 Governors receive annual updates on the Higher Education Strategy, and HEQAC reports to governors through its chair. However, no overall summary report identifies trends across all programmes from external examiner reports, programme monitoring reports or the deliberations of higher education committees and forums to provide reflective, holistic oversight. The commentary reinforces the recommendation found in the Enhancement section that the College implement a holistic approach to the review of higher education provision to inform college-level decision making.

2.73 Overall, the College's monitoring and review processes are effective and result in actions to secure improvement. Therefore, the Expectation in Chapter B8 is met in both design and operation. However due to some identified shortcomings and problems confined to a small area of provision 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**

2.74 Student complaints and appeals against admissions decisions are subject to the College's internal complaints procedure set out in its 'Compliments, comments and complaints' form. The complaints process involves four proportionate stages. All complaints are recorded and monitored via the College Quality Unit, and an annual report on complaints is presented to the Board of Governors; there has been only one complaint relating to a higher education programme in the last three years.

2.75 The College has a procedure for Academic Appeals covering Pearson programmes, with other programmes covered by the regulations and procedures of degree-awarding bodies. Details of the processes are easily accessible in the Higher Education Handbook, programme handbooks, and on the VLE. The College monitors appeals with two cases on university programmes in the last three years. The College's Assessment Appeals Procedure involves four proportionate stages which are equitable and appropriate. Students are encouraged to discuss assessment decisions with their course tutor. There have been no appeals on Pearson programmes in the last three years.

2.76 The College has clear, fair and timely procedures for managing complaints and appeals allowing the expectation to be met in theory.

2.77 The review team tested the effectiveness of the College's approach through consulting the complaints and appeals policies and procedures, scrutinising records and reports of recent complaints, examining student handbooks, and by meeting students, senior, academic, and professional support staff.

2.78 The College's 'Compliments, comments and complaints' form used to submit a complaint also includes the full policy and procedure, which is a useful mechanism to ensure that students submitting a complaint are well informed about the process. The professional support staff that met the review team had a clear understanding of the complaints process, and indicated that complaints are often discussed and resolved informally at first with student advisers or tutors. Annual reporting on complaints to the Board of Governors highlighted that the College gave detailed and fair consideration to all complaints. While the report was not higher education specific, the team felt it was appropriate given the very small numbers of higher education complaints, and the format was useful as a means of drawing effective conclusions about any potential trends or necessary enhancements.

2.79 The information presented about academic appeals in course handbooks was somewhat inconsistent, with some handbooks going into detail about the processes and detailing appropriate grounds, while others only had a simple link to the websites of degree-awarding bodies marked 'academic appeals'. However, students that the review team met are well informed about appeals and complaints and understand where they can find appropriate information if they are considering an appeal. While the College noted that no higher education appeals had ever been submitted through the Assessment Appeals process, given the appropriate way in which the College had addressed the small number of higher education complaints the team are confident that any appeals would be addressed in a fair and timely manner.

2.80 The policies and procedures surrounding complaints and appeals are fair and effective. The supporting evidence highlights timely and equitable resolution of cases and an appropriate approach to reporting. Therefore, given the small number of complaints and appeals, and the strong understanding of procedures by all stakeholders, the team concludes that the Expectation in Chapter B9 is met in both design and operation 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**

2.81 The College offers a number of courses that incorporate elements delivered in partnership with external organisations. The Foundation Degree in Computer Science has a requirement for the learner to undertake 270 hours of compulsory project-based learning within a work-based organisation as a part of two Continuing Professional Development units; the BA in Fine Art has a requirement for a gallery practice component; the BA in Cultural Studies requires a level 6 work experience unit; (147q, M10) the HNC/D in Advanced Practice with Work with Children and Families requires students to complete 400-800 hours of work-placement; the BSc in Psychology (2+2) involves two weeks' work experience at the end of the first year; and the PGCE involves teaching practice placements in school settings.

2.82 The management and implementation of work-based learning takes place at programme level and such processes are not centrally coordinated or overseen at provider level. In some programmes, programme staff carry out on-site visits in the set-up, implementation, and assessment stages of students' off-site learning; for the FdSc Computer Science, the student carries the responsibility for identifying and establishing such arrangements, and the programme staff gather information based on student reports, and contacting off-site hosts or employers by telephone or email.

2.83 Although individual programme teams give evidence of effective processes, the absence of robust college-level procedures and processes to secure the quality of student learning opportunities with third parties indicates that this expectation is not met in theory.

2.84 The review team examined the College's self-evaluation document and associated evidence, including course handbooks, learning experience agreements, and placement documentation. The team met employers, staff members and students to explore the implementation and management of work-based learning activities.

2.85 The team examined the way in which assessment takes place for work-based learning. In some programmes, College staff undertake assessment at the off-site location, in discussion with the employer. For the FdSc Computer Science employers independently undertake an element of student assessment that is not clearly explained in the student handbook, or in a placement handbook supplied to the employer, and so it is not evident that robust processes are in place for ensuring standards are maintained. This reinforces the recommendation in section B6 for the College to ensure sufficient support is provided to employers to enable them to discharge their responsibilities in assessment of students on work placement.

2.86 There is limited coordination at management level of the learning that takes place with others. The College does not have a college-level strategy for the management and support of students who undertake part of their studies with work-based partners. Not all students are systematically supported in the workplace by their College tutors. There are no college-level policies or coordination to safeguard academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the College develop

and implement college-level policies and procedures for the management of provision with others.

2.87 Overall, there are not sufficiently robust systems and safeguards in place to ensure arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with others are implemented securely and managed effectively. Based on this lack of formal oversight, the review team concludes that Expectation in Chapter B10 is not met. The recommendations in this section relate to insufficient emphasis given to assuring the quality of learning opportunities with others and, therefore, the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

2.88 The College does not deliver research degrees.

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

2.89 In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.90 Of the 10 applicable Expectations in this area, eight are met and two are not met. Five Expectations have a low associated level of risk and five Expectations have a moderate level of associated risk. There are 12 recommendations, one affirmation and two features of good practice in this area.

2.91 Three recommendations relate to student engagement, which is an Expectation that has not been met. The mechanisms for student engagement are primarily consultative rather than actively engaging students in quality assurance mechanisms. The review team recommends that the College, in partnership with students, articulate, monitor and review student engagement mechanisms within higher education. At the time of the review, the student representation training and support system provided limited higher education specific focus. The review team recommends the College provide appropriate guidance and support to enable higher education student representatives to fulfil their role as partners in the quality assurance and enhancement of their learning experience. In order to address the shortcomings of the current student engagement mechanisms, the review team recommends that the College formalise the engagement of higher education students in the College's own quality assurance mechanisms.

2.92 The Expectation in *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others* refers to the courses that incorporate elements delivered in partnership with external organisations. This Expectation is not met, the associated level of risk is moderate and there are two recommendations. At the time of the review, at provider level the College lacked oversight of the management of its work-based learning activities. The team recommends that the College develop and implement provider level policies and procedures for the management of provision with others. The review team found inconsistent practices in how employers are supported and the team recommends that the College ensure sufficient support is provided to employers to enable them to discharge their responsibilities in assessment of students on work placement.

2.93 The Expectations not met do not collectively present any serious risks to the management of the quality of learning opportunities. Recommendations reflect a need to amend or update current policies and procedures and will not require or result in major structural, operational or procedural change. The need for action has been acknowledged by the College. In light of responses to previous external review activities, the review team is confident that the areas of weakness will be addressed promptly and professionally.

2.94 The affirmation recognises the actions being taken by the College to contextualise specifications and to standardise assignment briefs and handbooks for the Pearson programmes. The features of good practice are found in learning and teaching and student support. The College effectively tracks its virtual learning environment statistics to identify and disseminate good practice. The College-wide initiatives and support that raise student aspirations and the excellent and wide-ranging opportunities that enable fine art students to develop their professional potential are also recognised as features of good practice.

2.95 The review team therefore concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities **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 publishes information about itself and its activities, including describing its mission, values and overall strategy, through its website, its prospectus, and other promotional materials. The College has established processes for ensuring the internal approval of published promotional material and has clear systems in place for promotional material to be signed off by awarding bodies. Information is available to prospective students on the College website, in the hard copy prospectus and through College open evenings, to help them select their programme, understand the academic environment in which they will be studying, and gauge the support that will be available to them. Student support personnel offer impartial advice regarding admission and careers.

3.2 Once enrolled, students receive a range of programme-specific information, including a programme handbook (a hard copy and on the VLE), which include programme specifications, guides to College policies and links to policies of validating bodies and organisations. Student handbooks vary, depending on the policy of the awarding body or organisation, but each includes key information on core and optional modules, reading lists, and procedures for submission and return of work. The generic Higher Education Student Handbook, updated annually by the Higher Education Manager, offers general information about College structures and services, and includes information regarding plagiarism policy and processes for complaints and appeals. It offers details about what the College expects from the student, and what the student can expect from the College.

3.3 In testing Expectation C, the review team explored the information provided by the College in hard copy and electronic formats and the processes for managing this. This revealed that the College has documented policies to ensure that information provided to their intended audiences is accurate, accessible, and reliable, and has processes in place for monitoring the quality of such information. The College provided information to indicate that draft copies of all new publicity materials are sent to all curriculum managers and directors, the Higher Education Manager, the Vice Principal Quality and Business Development, the Student Finance Manager and the IAG Manager for approval before being sent to external design and print agencies. Therefore, in theory this Expectation is met.

3.4 The review team examined promotional materials generated by the College, including the prospectus and the web site. The team also examined programme information provided to enrolled students (including programme and module handbooks, the HE Student Handbook, and the range of information on the VLE), and the processes for managing this. Meetings were also held with staff, employers, and students to explore the quality of information available to stakeholders.

3.5 The team found that the College makes effective use of its VLE, and course pages are audited annually to ensure they provide at least the threshold information required by the VLE checklist. Central monitoring of VLE usage data allows the College to identify and to share areas of good practice. The College has processes in place for web based programme

information to be generated using the definitive data held in the College's management information system.

3.6 Students whom the review team met reported some inconsistencies with admissions and induction information, with some programme descriptions more comprehensive and informative than others. As in B2, the team also noted some minor inconsistencies in the College's published information about admissions, whereby the prospectus, online information and UCAS displayed slightly different information about entry requirements to the College's programmes. The team observed that in some cases there is limited student awareness regarding information about student engagement opportunities, particularly at higher levels, and that information about this was not clearly signposted. The College produces academic handbooks for each course of study and these are being standardised to remove inconsistencies of information. In light of the inconsistencies in several places, the review team **recommends** that the College embed systems to ensure the consistency of information about learning opportunities for prospective and current students. This is supported by the commentary in section B2.

3.7 The College has worked hard to contextualise programme specifications for Pearson awards, to reflect the local delivery options, and is making efforts to standardise assignment briefs for Pearson programmes across the institution. The review team **affirms** the actions being taken to date to contextualise specifications and to standardise assignment briefs and handbooks for Pearson programmes.

3.8 Overall, the College produces information about its learning opportunities that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. There are some minor inconsistencies in admissions information, academic handbooks and assignment briefs and the College is in the process of implementing processes to address these. Therefore, the Expectation is met in both design and operation 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

3.9 In reaching its judgement about the quality of the College's information about learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.10 The expectation in this area is met and the associated level of risk is low. There is one recommendation and one affirmation in this area. The review team found minor inconsistencies in information for prospective and current students. The review team recommends that the College embed systems to ensure the consistency of information about learning opportunities for prospective and current students. The College was recognised for the actions being taken to date to contextualise specifications and to standardise assignment briefs and handbooks for Pearson programmes

3.11 The recommendation relates to minor oversights. The need for action has been acknowledged by the provider. There is evidence that the provider is aware of its responsibilities for the information it produces about learning opportunities. Previous responses to external review activities provide confidence that any areas of weakness will be addressed promptly and professionally.

3.12 The review team concludes therefore that the quality of the College's information about learning opportunities **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's mission is to enhance the economic prosperity of young people, adults and employers through high quality, work related education and training. The Higher Education Strategy contributes to the mission setting out clear aims and priorities. The Principal and senior staff lead the achievement of the College mission in relation to higher education through quality assurance policies and processes. The HEQAC, Academic Panel and HE Forum combine to provide a coherent structure to manage the improvement of student learning opportunities.

4.2 Strategic leadership and quality assurance processes establish the framework for identifying opportunities for enhancement. There is evidence of sharing good practice and of current enhancement initiatives. An ethos promoting the improvement of student learning opportunities is clear at all levels of the College. Deliberate steps to enhance student learning opportunities are evident. Therefore, in theory, the expectation is met.

4.3 In testing the College's strategic and operational approach to improving the quality of students' learning, the review team met the Principal on two occasions. The team identified a clear strategy, commitment and priorities to improve the quality of student learning opportunities. Meetings with senior staff, teaching and support staff and students confirmed the drive and commitment to improve. Minutes of committee and forum meetings provided evidence of where the College discuss and implement improvement opportunities. Additional documentation provides examples of how the College turned decisions at provider level into action and where information on the need for improvement originated.

4.4 The team found that the College Principal's vision and the College mission are clear drivers for improvement of learning opportunities. College priorities, articulated by staff and students and in documentation, support the College-wide aspirational ethos. The team confirmed that enhancement stems from a high level awareness of the need for improvement.

4.5 The College has strong strategic leadership and an ethos to encourage improvements leading to the enhancement of student learning opportunities. Operational level identification and sharing of good practice also lead to improvements in student learning opportunities. However, the use of quality assurance procedures to identify opportunities for enhancement leading to the integration of enhancement initiatives in a systematic and planned manner are insufficiently explicit. Although processes exist for identifying enhancement opportunities across the College through forums and committees, they are not sufficiently developed. Awarding body annual monitoring processes and partner handbooks make explicit reference to identifying enhancement opportunities but these do not systematically inform college enhancement themes. Templates and minutes of Academic Panel and HEQAC do not clearly identify opportunities for enhancement, developed into themes for subsequent dissemination and monitoring. The Higher Education Strategy report to governors does not identify themes or provide a reflective review of higher education provision and trends. The team **recommends** the College implement a holistic approach to the review of higher education provision to inform college-level decision making. This is supported by the commentary in section B8.

4.6 The College recognises this need for a more systematic, integrated and explicit approach to enhancement but that there is already in place a strong commitment to pursue enhancement themes and to learn from partners. In meetings with the team, staff were able to identify key improvements and priorities or themes, which together confirm the embedding of awareness for the need for improvement throughout the College. Three main themes for enhancement emerged from meetings: differentiating the student higher education experience and College quality processes; increasing support for the research skills and qualifications of teaching staff; and the strong employability agenda. The College has taken steps to improve resources such as higher education specific study facilities. However, students whom the team met noted the limited scale of improvements relative to student numbers. Students on fine art and photography programmes praised improvements to studio facilities and opening hours to provide a more autonomous higher education experience.

4.7 The College has made good progress in differentiating higher education quality procedures and documentation to provide a framework for enhancement. Increasing opportunities for staff scholarship are in the early stages of development as is the operation of a higher education specific process for observing teaching and learning to inform staff development priorities. The strong employability agenda is clear as shown in consideration of the Theme. The College mission and Higher Education Strategy inform the employability agenda from the vocational relevance of the curriculum, to meeting the needs of local employers and to providing symbols of achievement as a spur for student achievement and progression. The College monitors student opinion to assess the impact of improvements but has yet to systematically monitor the impact of the enhancement initiatives identified to ensure their effectiveness. The team **recommends** that the College takes specific action to monitor the impact of enhancement.

4.8 Processes for identifying and sharing good practice between teams are well established. The HE Forum provides a useful mechanism for teaching staff to discuss issues in common and to learn from colleagues' practice. Members believe the forum to be useful and provided examples of sharing practice. An example of particularly effective use of quality procedures to inform and enhance student learning relates to the VLE. Teaching staff receive student usage statistics which encourage friendly rivalry between teams and the sharing of successful approaches. This commentary reinforces the feature of good practice identified in section B3 that recognises the effective tracking of the virtual learning environment statistics to identify and disseminate good practice.

4.9 The College has a clear mission and strong strategic leadership combined with an ethos to encourage improvements to the quality of learning opportunities. The College identifies and shares good practice and has discernible enhancement themes. However, the team identified shortcomings in the systematic management of enhancement as expressed in the recommendations. Overall, the review team concludes that the Expectation for Enhancement is met in both design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

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

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

4.10 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.11 The expectation in this area is met and the associated level of risk is low. There is one feature of good practice, no affirmations and two recommendations in this area. The review team recognises the effective tracking of the VLE statistics to identify and disseminate good practice as a feature of good practice.

4.12 While the College has a number of enhancement priorities and has an ethos of improving the quality of learning opportunities, there is limited oversight at provider level. The review team recommends the College implement a holistic approach to the review of higher education provision to inform college-level decision making. In conjunction with this, the review team recommends the College takes specific action to monitor the impact of enhancement.

4.13 The recommendations in this area relate to the need to amend the current enhancement approach and consider ways to review and monitor the impact of enhancement. This will not require or result in major structural, operational or procedural change. There is evidence the College is aware of its responsibilities for the enhancement of student learning opportunities. Previous responses to external review activity provide confidence that the College will take address areas of weakness promptly and professionally.

4.14 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK standards.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The College focuses on providing learning opportunities which are vocationally oriented, defined in the mission statement as a duty to 'enhance the economic prosperity of young people, adults and employers through high quality, work-related education and training'. Thus student employability is an important guiding principle at the College, and was commented on positively in many of the review team's meetings, from the Principal down through all levels of staff and with students.

5.2 The aspirational ethos is a particularly important element of the College's approach to student employability. In particular, the team noted the role of the 'Choose to Be' poster campaign which promotes the employment successes of higher education students as a means of inspiring other learners to choose higher education. (See section B4.) There was a particularly keen sense that the College plays an important role in driving the aspirations of the local area, and helping students from the local area fulfil their potential. The College is proud of providing college higher education, and suggests that implanting college higher education contexts helps inspire students from non-traditional backgrounds to achieve and further their employment ambitions.

5.3 Work placement opportunities are available on a number of programmes. It was clear from discussions with students that the opportunities for work placements alongside their studies contribute significantly to their employability.

5.4 A number of specific employability initiatives are run in the College, including a focus on personal development planning, CV writing workshops and interview advice. Students reflected that there is a particular focus on employability during level 6. The College currently holds the 'matrix standard for excellence' in providing impartial advice and guidance to students from trained support staff. Students also have access to careers services at partner institutions.

### Innovations in promoting the employability of students

5.5 The College is working with the local enterprise partnership to embed the College as the primary skills provider in the Wirral Waters Enterprise Zone. This is a long term vision for regenerating the local area in partnership with local employers, and the College sees itself as being the central engine for offering students the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge which will lead to rewarding work opportunities within the local area. This work has led to a number of changes to the curriculum and portfolio of courses at the College.

5.6 Students from the Arts School were particularly positive about the work oriented learning opportunities on their programmes of study. In particular, they gave examples of a number of live brief assessments which had introduced them to novel materials while also allowing them to develop a network of external contacts. Staff from this subject area also gave examples of strong and lasting links that have been made with local galleries where students curate exhibitions.

### How employers are involved in the delivery and development of the curriculum

5.7 The College listens closely to the needs of local employers through informal contact, and through long-running partnerships, such as in the Wirral Enterprise Zone mentioned above, and the College has made significant efforts to orient their portfolio of courses towards the needs of employers. In addition, external members with vocational

expertise have been consulted during the development of new programmes to ensure the currency of the curriculum with the needs of employers.

5.8 The College have worked with COGENT (the Sector Skills Council for the science industry), and with employers to develop Higher Level Apprenticeships at level 4 in Chemistry which meet the needs of Unilever, who are a large local employer. The College has featured as a case study in partnership working between colleges and local businesses promoted by the Government. The College has redesigned some of its HNC/D provision to deliver relevant units for the needs of Unilever, with Unilever recognising this in its graduate recruitment programme, and students gaining entry to a top-up BSc at Liverpool John Moores University. Similarly, the College has developed a module with Pearson for the HNC in Operations Engineering which has engaged links with URENCO, a local nuclear technology employer.

## 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 27-29 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* (FHEQIS).

### **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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