Review of College Higher Education of Colchester Institute

May 2013

Contents

About this review

This is a report of a Review of College Higher Education conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Colchester Institute. The review took place on 7-9 May 2013 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr C Vielba
- Mr B Whitehead
- Mr O Reid (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Colchester Institute and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on:
    - whether the college fulfils its responsibilities for maintaining the threshold academic standards set by its awarding bodies
    - the quality of learning opportunities
    - the quality of information
    - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the key 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 4.

In reviewing Colchester Institute, the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The theme for the present review was Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The QAA website gives more information about QAA and its mission.[1] Background information about Colchester Institute is given on page 3 of this report. A dedicated page of the website explains more about this review method and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.[2]

---

[1] www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx
[2] www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/rche/pages/default.aspx

Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about Colchester Institute (the College).

QAA's judgements about Colchester Institute

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Colchester Institute.

- The academic standards of the awards the College offers on behalf of its awarding bodies **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the College **is commended**.
- The quality of information produced by the College about its learning opportunities **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at Colchester Institute:

- the College's development and constructive use of detailed assessment and grading criteria to facilitate students' understanding of expectations about achievement at each level of study (paragraph 1.1)
- the College takes a strategic and innovative approach to embedding employability, in its broadest sense, in all aspects of the curriculum, thereby facilitating improved student understanding of the relationship between theory and practice (paragraphs 2.1 and 2.17)
- the College takes a systematic and responsive approach to students' module evaluations (paragraph 2.6)
- the College offers high-quality learning support and pastoral care for students with a disability (paragraph 2.12).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendation** to Colchester Institute:

- by the start of the calendar year 2014, strengthen monitoring procedures to ensure that all assessed work is returned to students, with appropriate feedback, within the specified timeframe (paragraph 1.3).

Affirmation of action being taken

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

- the College is completing and evaluating a revised scheme of peer teaching observation (paragraph 2.2)

- the College is working with the Students' Union to strengthen the effectiveness of student representation on committees (paragraph 2.5)
- the College is integrating a range of technological supports into learning and teaching (paragraph 2.15).

Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Colchester Institute involves its students in quality assurance and enhancement, both formally and informally, in an integrated, well planned and carefully monitored manner.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the [Handbook for Review of College Higher Education](), available on the QAA website.[3]

About Colchester Institute

Colchester Institute is a large, mixed-economy college with approximately 1,300 students on prescribed higher education programmes, all of them leading to awards of the University of Essex (the University) or (in a minority of cases) Pearson Edexcel. High-quality learning and teaching, accessible to a varied but predominantly local student population and supported by a strong vocational orientation and the increasing integration of technology into pedagogy, is central to institutional philosophy and practice. Higher education - the focus of the present report - is delivered on one campus, competently managed by a dedicated team, and highly valued by students.

The College's previous QAA review (in 2007) identified six features of good practice and made seven recommendations, all of which have been addressed satisfactorily. Since that time, the College has reorganised its higher education portfolio, strengthened its management team and enhanced the support of higher education students - most notably in a new-build higher education centre, planned and delivered in a manner designed to reflect students' preferences.

The College is a well managed and student-centred organisation, with a clear set of values and objectives, which are institutionally expressed and locally implemented. Its relationship with the University of Essex is strong, and the University has a high regard for its academic activities and student support.

---

[3] [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx]()

Explanation of the findings about Colchester Institute

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.[4]

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[5] is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the handbook for the review method, also on the QAA website.[6]

1   Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards at Colchester Institute **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1   Responsibility for assuring the academic standards of higher education programmes delivered by Colchester Institute lies with the awarding body (the University of Essex or Pearson Edexcel). Within this context, the review team noted that the College has adapted the language of relevant external reference points to provide students with all necessary information in a user-friendly way. In discussion, students evaluated this information very highly. The development and constructive use of detailed assessment and grading criteria to facilitate students' understanding of expectations about achievement at each level of study constitute **a feature of good practice**.

Use of external examiners

1.2   External examiners are appointed by and accountable to the awarding bodies. The College engages actively, efficiently and responsively with such examiners at all necessary points, discharging the responsibilities delegated to it competently and professionally.

Assessment and standards

1.3   Assessment is conducted within the awarding bodies' frameworks. University of Essex representatives informed the review team that the College discharges its responsibilities efficiently and conscientiously; students stated that marking is consistent and reflective of published policies and criteria, with assignments becoming progressively demanding as programmes proceed. Nevertheless, while the quality of feedback is high (see paragraph 1.1), students stated - and the College acknowledged - that it has not always been timely, with the four-week turnaround time not being met in a minority of cases. The review team **recommends** that by the commencement of the calendar year 2014 the College strengthen its monitoring procedures to ensure that all assessed work is returned to students, with appropriate feedback, within the specified timeframe.

---

[4] The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However, it is available on request for inspection: please contact QAA Reviews Group.
[5] www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx
[6] See note 3.

1.4   The College has given careful consideration to its approach to suspected academic misconduct, operating a primarily developmental and preventive policy. The review team anticipates that it will continue to monitor this approach, to ensure that it remains sufficiently alert and sophisticated to ensure the integrity of academic standards by detecting all forms and instances of academic misconduct in a rapidly changing environment.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.5   The review team found that the College discharges all programme approval, monitoring and review responsibilities delegated to it by the University in a reliable and professional manner. It participates conscientiously in programme approval (in respect of which it has certain delegated powers), and annual monitoring and periodic review (both of which are completed on University templates). It prepares for the latter by an internal review procedure involving panels with student and employer representation and independent internal members. In addition, the College is itself subject to periodic partnership review by the University. This was most recently undertaken successfully in 2011.

Subject benchmarks

1.6   The review team found that information about subject benchmarks is used systematically and transparently.

Conclusion

1.7   The review team found the procedures for assuring the academic standards of the programmes delivered by the College robust. This finding is consistent with oral advice received from representatives of the University and from students.

2   Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at Colchester Institute **is commended**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1   The review team found the College's commitment to providing an education tailored to local needs manifested in good part by its close engagement with employers, and by the current or recent industrial or professional experience of many staff members. The College is developing a research and (in particular) scholarly activity profile which reflects this priority; core staff are required to complete a performance and development review to assess their performance and their development needs in the context of this and other strategic objectives; and the College takes systematic and creative institutional-level steps to integrate a vocational orientation into student learning. The College's strategic and innovative approach to embedding employability, in its broadest sense, in all aspects of the curriculum, thereby facilitating improved student understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, is identified as a **feature of good practice**.

2.2   Almost all core staff members hold a teaching qualification; staff development is strategically developed, targeted, implemented and monitored; the College's mentoring approach involves experienced staff advising and supporting newer colleagues; and its peer observation scheme, which has been carefully introduced and now enjoys widespread support, constitutes a systematic attempt to ensure and enhance the quality of teaching.

As this scheme is in its first year of operation and will be evaluated in early 2014, the review team **affirms** the College's progress towards completing and evaluating a revised scheme of peer teaching observation.

Learning resources

2.3 The review team found the College's learning resources fit for purpose. The resources have been developed in the light of a strategic assessment reflecting the requirements of its validating bodies and the views of staff and students. The College has paid close attention to library provision, which has in the past received equivocal student comment, and to advising students of the nature and extent of their rights at the University library. All students are provided with a tablet computer, and with appropriate training and support in its use: this reflects a strategic commitment to making student learning exceptional and exciting as well as vocational. In addition, the College has taken, and confirms that it will continue to take, all reasonable steps to ensure that students are aware of the nature of their access to University facilities. It accepts that these steps, extensive and systematic as they are, have thus far been only partially effective.

Student voice

2.4 A strong commitment to engaging students in their own teaching and learning is fundamental to institutional philosophy and practice. The close links between senior managers and sabbatical officers are regarded by both parties as integral to the formulation, delivery and evaluation of relevant policies.

2.5 The College engages actively with the Students' Union to strengthen the effectiveness of student representation on committees. Nevertheless, while current procedures are comprehensive and broadly fit for purpose, the nature and external responsibilities of many students - combined with such other factors as placement obligations - invite an active approach to optimising students' contribution to committee debate. The College is addressing this issue by new methods of recruitment, training, monitoring and support. The team **affirms** the work being undertaken, in partnership with the Students' Union, to strengthen the effectiveness of student representation on committees.

2.6 The manner in which the College promotes and responds to student evaluations of their experience is analytic, transparent and timely. Evaluation forms are clear and user-friendly, and response rates normally high. The fact that the student portal gives access to a six-year run of module evaluations, including full quantitative and qualitative data and analyses, facilitates trend analysis through the tracking of issues previously raised and the responses made to them, and strengthens annual monitoring. Students commented - orally and in writing - on the timeliness, thoughtfulness and sensitivity of institutional responses. The College's systematic and responsive approach to students' module evaluations constitutes a **feature of good practice**.

2.7 The fact that the College's higher education student population is predominantly local, and includes a large minority of mature (and a smaller minority of part-time) students, and a higher than average proportion from low-participation postcodes is addressed systematically in both promotional and developmental activities. The College's consumer orientation drives an individualised, structurally supported and culturally embedded approach to teaching and support.

Management information

2.8 The College's approach to data collection, analysis and utilisation is reliable and effective. The Higher Education Operations Systems and Statistics Officer ensures that the

College discharges its responsibilities for statistical returns. In addition, effective integration is achieved between, on the one hand, institutional strategy and policy and, on the other, the management information necessary for that strategy and policy to be monitored, evaluated and enhanced. For example, the Equality and Diversity Policy, which involves all these activities, is examined closely at and pursuant to annual and periodic review. In this context, this and other activities such as complaints and disability support (see paragraphs 2.10 and 2.12), can reasonably be termed information-led.

Admission to the College

2.9   The review team found all aspects of recruitment and selection to be effective, targeted, undertaken by trained staff members, and supported by extensive and user-friendly information for successful candidates. Where a negative decision is reached, the reasons are logged and made available on request.

Complaints and appeals

2.10   The review team found the complaints procedure clear in content and widely available to students, who were confident they would be able to find all necessary information and support. The same quality of information is available in respect of appeals to the validating body. The number, nature and outcomes of complaints received are logged, monitored and reviewed at institutional level.

Career advice and guidance

2.11   The College gives high priority to the quality and effectiveness of its Careers Education and Guidance Service. The College holds the Matrix Quality Standard and the Recognition of Quality Award for Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance. In addition, as noted elsewhere (see, for example, paragraphs 2.15-2.16), careers support and guidance are embedded in the curriculum in both classroom learning and placements.

Supporting disabled students

2.12   The College's extensive facilities for disabled students include three dedicated advisers, a study skills tutor, and specialised facilities and equipment, which it supports with appropriate and imaginative staff development activities. It takes an active approach to identifying and supporting students who are late declaring a disability. Students with a range of disabilities confirmed orally that the College's approach is transparent, responsive and effective. The nature and quality of the learning support and pastoral care provided for students with a disability constitutes **a feature of good practice**.

Supporting international students

2.13   The College provides appropriate information, orientation and support for its five international higher education students, including ensuring that they are aware of the opportunities available to them at the University.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.14   The College delivers no programmes solely by distributed learning. It is, however, developing an approach to flexible and e-learning which will increasingly integrate technology into its normal pedagogy. All first-year higher education entrants are now issued with a proprietary brand tablet (see paragraph 2.3), and all students have a personal learning space, about which those who met the review team spoke highly.

2.15   With the support of teaching staff and the Technology-Enhanced Learning Team, the College is increasingly utilising technological supports both in and in support of classroom teaching. Staff and students make extensive but focused, and sometimes creative and innovative, use of the virtual learning environment, and helpful staff and student development is available in an attempt to achieve optimal benefit from the array of supports available. The review team **affirms** the progress the College is making towards integrating a range of technological supports into learning and teaching.

Work-based and placement learning

2.16   The review team found that the College takes a strategic and innovative approach to embedding employability in the curriculum, and that the quality of learning opportunities delivered through work-based and placement learning is continually being developed. Placements, and the learning and benefits deriving from them, are central to the student experience: they are well planned and meet all relevant external expectations.

2.17   More broadly, employer involvement in programme planning and review is being extended; an extensive programme of guest speakers from industry is provided; the College was the first further education college to be accredited by the Chartered Institute of Builders; an imaginative mentoring scheme for Design students is in place; and the College has established an agency to coordinate and extend external performance opportunities for Music students. The College's strategic and innovative approach to embedding employability, in its broadest sense, in all aspects of the curriculum, thereby facilitating improved student understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, constitutes **a feature of good practice**.

Student charter

2.18   The review team found the College's Student Charter both fit for purpose and widely known and understood by students.

Conclusion

2.19   The review team found the College's quality assurance procedures in all cases satisfactory and in some outstanding.

3   Public information

Outcome

Colchester Institute makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available on its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when applying to the College and in preparing for what to expect if they join. The quality of information produced for applicants and students at the College **meets UK expectations**.

Findings

3.1   The College has a range of mechanisms for ensuring that information - for the general public as well as for prospective, current and graduating students - is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. It is compliant with all statutory obligations, including the Key Information Set, and specifies unambiguously where responsibilities for signing off documentation lie. In this context, the review team found several examples of errors in

module documentation being identified and corrected: the College will doubtless want to ensure that its procedures continue to eliminate such errors.

3.2   The College makes external examiner's reports available to students, whose representatives have the opportunity of discussing them in committees; it aims to provide maximum feasible transparency, offering extensive information on dedicated staff and student portals.

4   Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at Colchester Institute **meets UK expectations**.

Findings

4.1   The review team heard different views expressed as to whether the enhancement of learning opportunities is strategically driven or predominantly a series of good practices. Nevertheless, its analysis of strategy, policy and procedure confirmed that these differences reflected more a misapprehension about the meaning of enhancement than reality. An institutional-level commitment to enhancement is expressed in policy, the terms of reference of significant committees, and electronic information on the staff and student portals. At all institutional levels, a culture promoting the strengthening of students' overall experience is evident.

5   Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Each academic year, a theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's Review of College Higher Education teams. In 2012-13, the themes are the **First Year Student Experience** or **Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement**.

The theme selected for this review is student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement. The review team investigated the theme at Colchester Institute, and found that the College involves its students in quality assurance and enhancement, both formally and informally, in an integrated, well planned and carefully monitored manner.

5.1   The College's student-centred approach to higher education is reflected in a high level of student participation in policy development. This is facilitated by structures defining students' relationship with the College, and a culture of informality and openness. The College, aware that that the representative system - which extends from student governor to programme level - requires continual regeneration, is working in partnership with the Students' Union to ensure that such regeneration takes place (see paragraph 2.5).

5.2   The level of student engagement extended to a discussion of the appropriate fee band, the outcome of which was that students requested more facilities in return for a higher fee: one product of this decision was the Higher Education Centre, a building constituting a considerable investment for an institution which, its Principal acknowledges, is not cash-rich.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions; for example, pages 17-20 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of threshold academic standards, learning opportunities and enhancement.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms, please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:
www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx.

academic standards: The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

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.

enhancement: Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice: A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution or college manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

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*.

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

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

operational definition: A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study): An approved course of study which 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.

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.

threshold academic standard: The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications **frameworks**. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standards**.

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