CEG UFP Ltd

FoundationCampus

Embedded College Review for Educational Oversight by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

November 2013

Annex 3: Sunderland FoundationCampus

Introduction and background

The Cooperation Agreement with the University partner, the University of Sunderland (the University), is dated 22 April 2013. The self-evaluation document (SED) indicated that Sunderland FoundationCampus (SFoC) was established during 2011.

SFoC is located on the city campus of the University. It offers the Undergraduate Foundation Programme (UFP) in four pathways (Business, Economics, Finance & Management; Computing, Engineering & Sciences; Law, Humanities & Social Sciences; Life Sciences), providing guaranteed progression to a wide range of undergraduate degrees of the University as well as to the FoC International Diploma Programme. In addition, SFoC also offers the International Diploma Programme (IDP) which provides guaranteed direct entry into the second year of selected business degrees, and the Master's Foundation Programme (MFP) which provides guaranteed progression to master's degree programmes at the University in a wide range of discipline areas. In November 2013, there were four full-time and 11 sessional staff at SFoC, and 63 UFP, seven IDP and 51 MFP students.

SFoC operates within the centrally administered framework, notably the FoundationCampus Academic Quality Assurance Manual 2013. The centre head of SFoC is a member of the FoC Academic Board, and there is also staff and student representation on the programme committees. Within SFoC, there is a staff-student liaison committee. Centre review of SFoC is a business focus rather than an academic process, though performance targets are set for student progression and attendance.

The review team were told that the University had involvement in the initial approval of schemes of work in 2011, but had had no involvement since then, and contact with the University was largely related to marketing and administrative issues. The University partner has no involvement in the committee structure of SFoC. It does not receive the FoC annual monitoring review or external examiner reports. University staff with whom the review team met were vague about the arrangements for oversight of academic standards by the University. They thought this might be part of the remit of the University's Academic Services unit but were not sure. They also thought University staff attended assessment boards, but these are held centrally by FoC and University staff are not involved. It was confirmed that brochures and other publicity material relating to SFoC were approved by the University.

The SED was written by FoC alone, and the University confirmed it had seen the document. A student written submission (SWS) had also been prepared. Students with whom the review team met said they had been involved in collating information to support the SWS, but they had not seen the final submitted version. The team were told SFoC had not so far responded formally to issues raised in the SWS, though the centre head indicated it had not contained any matters that were a surprise to her. The University had not seen the SWS.

Key findings

Academic standards

There can be **confidence** that academic standards at the embedded college are managed appropriately and in accordance with the policies and procedures of FoC.

Quality of learning opportunities

There can be **confidence** that the quality of learning opportunities at the embedded college is assured and enhanced appropriately and in accordance with the policies and procedures of FoC.

Public information

Reliance **can** be placed on the information that the embedded college produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers.

Good practice

All the features of good practice identified in the overall FoC report applied at SFoC. The review team noted the following additional good practice at SFoC:

- the joint marketing initiatives between SFoC and its University partner (paragraph 22).

Recommendations

All recommendations identified in the overall FoC report applied at SFoC. The review team also makes the following recommendations in relation to this College.

The team considers that it is **advisable** for SFoC to:

- take early action to rectify shortcomings in the availability of appropriate laboratory facilities to support student learning (paragraph 10)
- revise the ways in which it communicates information to potential students about additional progression requirements and limitations on its MPharm programme pathway (paragraph 29).

Detailed findings

How effectively do FoundationCampus and Sunderland FoundationCampus fulfil responsibilities for the management of academic standards at this college?

1   The Cooperation Agreement with the University partner is dated 22 April 2013, and the SED indicated that SFoC was established during 2011. The review team queried this and were told that, initially, the partnership had operated under a Letter of Intent until the formal legal agreement was signed in April 2013. This meant that three cohorts of students (2011, 2012-13 September and 2012-13 January) were recruited to SFoC prior to the date of the contractual agreement with the University. The review team saw a copy of the Letter of Intent and noted in particular Clause 11: 'Progression – The final agreement will include the detail of how the international students will, on satisfactory completion of their courses with FoundationCampus, progress onto courses at Sunderland'. Moreover, Clause 11 is one of those in the Letter of Intent specifically stated as not intended to be legally binding on the

parties. The clear inference here is that, for the three initial cohorts of students, there was the possible risk that the agreement might not have been signed, and consequently students would not have had a formal and contractual guarantee of progression to their chosen programme of study at the University.

2   The FoC annual academic review methodology is based on a report completed by the Chief Academic Officer. While this contains statistical information about the performance of students in each embedded college, there is no detailed consideration of SFoC within it, though the review team were told that staff views articulated through the subject groups and the subject leader may inform the annual monitoring reports (AMRs). The AMRs are discussed at staff meetings within SFoC and are emailed to all staff. There is no formal process of academic review of SFoC. Rather, review of the embedded college is essentially a business review with targets set for centre managers related to business performance criteria. FoC does have a system of external examiners who moderate academic standards across the FoC network and provide external examiner reports. None of the reports seen by the review team contained specific references to SFoC. The University does not receive either the programme AMRs or external examiner reports, and it is not involved in any of the academic committees of FoC. As recommended in the main report, it would be **desirable** for SFoC to encourage its University partner to have greater involvement in monitoring the academic standards of its programmes.

How effective is the management of student assessment?

3   Students at SFoC undertake the standard set of assessments which apply to all FoC embedded colleges. In the case of academic subjects, assessments are a mix of examinations and coursework and there are mid-term formative assessment tests, grades from which do not affect the students' final grades. In the case of English, students do not take the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test, but rather undertake the University's own English test, and they have done so since SFoC commenced operation. Students are expected to improve their English language competence by the equivalent of 0.5 of a grade in IELTS each term. This is based on research which advises 300 hours' learning to advance 0.5 of an IELTS grade. With the combination of formal language teaching, plus delivery of academic subjects in English and expected levels of private study, staff said this rate of progress in English language competence was achievable. Students confirmed there was an 'English only' policy though it was not strictly enforced, and there was a schedule of what students were expected to do outside class to improve their level of English. Students were streamed from the outset for English language classes. Students felt there was an opportunity to improve their English competence.

4   Students indicated that assessment requirements were generally clearly communicated, and they understood what was required, though there had been some initial confusion over mid-term tests. Feedback on assessed work was timely and generally it was clear what was required to achieve higher grades. Staff review examination performance with individual students though some had to be prompted to do so. Mid-term tests served to give students an idea of how well they were progressing, and students said they were generally aware of how well they were doing. Students had access to their results through their personal page on Magellan, the student intranet, which enabled them to track their progress. Personal tutors also assisted in relation to student understanding of assessment requirements and their progress. SFoC uses plagiarism-detection software.

Where appropriate, how effectively are UK external reference points used in the management of academic standards?

5   The centre head confirmed she was aware of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) but felt it was so new that it had not yet impacted at the level of individual FoC centres. She anticipated more of an impact next year. Staff with whom the review team met were aware of the Quality Code and of the central FoC working party which was mapping the Quality Code against its own policies and procedures. They believed the Quality Code was embedded in the FoC quality assurance procedures. The centre head was also aware of the outcomes from the 2012 Review of Educational Oversight on London FoundationCampus. However, she believed the outcomes were of more relevance at a strategic level and, since she did not believe they were of operational interest, had not shared them with other staff in SFoC. Staff with whom the team met were aware of the FoundationCampus Academic Quality Assurance Manual which was available through FOCUS, the staff intranet. It would be beneficial if greater use were made of external reference points in managing academic standards at SFoC.

How effectively are external examining, moderation or verification used to assure academic standards?

6   FoC currently has a team of four external examiners and these cover all the individual FoC centres including SFoC. The review team were told external examiner reports go to Academic Board, and if there are issues relating specifically to SFoC, they are notified directly and a response is given. The centre head, subject and programme leaders are all members of the assessment boards held centrally, and have access to verbal comments made by the external examiners at these boards. Staff indicated they would access external examiner reports via the AMRs, and they could quote an example of an external examiner making comments which had led to a modification in marking criteria. External examiner reports are also discussed at staff meetings, and external examiners had made occasional visits to SFoC; for example, the external examiner for the MFP had given a presentation to staff. Students do not have access to external examiner reports except indirectly through their representation on programme committees that receive the AMRs, which include external examiner reports and a response from the Chief Academic Officer for FoC.

7   Staff explained to the team the process of moderation and standardisation of marking employed at SFoC. As well as sample cross-moderation within SFoC, subject leaders undertook second marking of samples of assessed work, reviewing a sample of 10 per cent of scripts together with any fails to standardise marking standards across the different FoC centres. Where staff undertaking cross-moderation could not agree the marking standard, the issue would be escalated to the subject leader.

How effectively is statistical information used to monitor and assure academic standards?

8   The SED included statistical information on progression and achievement at SFoC, and the same information was incorporated into the AMRs for each FoC programme. The review team were told that application statistics were regularly made available during the recruitment phase, thus enabling resource requirements to be planned. Some analysis takes place of why students drop out in the period between application, paying a deposit (when they are entered onto the student database) and actual admission. Comparative progression rates are also available, enabling SFoC to benchmark its performance against that of the other FoC centres.

9   SFoC has anecdotal information on the performance of its alumni as they progress through their chosen University programme. It recognises the value of access to formal and

systematic statistical information on the progression of alumni as a contribution to the enhancement of its teaching and learning. This had been requested, and the University had said it was not possible to provide it. However, University staff stated to the review team that they believed it would be possible to do so. As recommended in the main report, it would be **desirable** for SFoC to work with its partner University to secure access to statistical information on the progression of its alumni.

How effectively are responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities fulfilled?

10   The agreement between FoC and the University commits the former to articulating the infrastructure resources required for teaching and learning and the arrangements for supporting students, and the latter to providing these resources. Within the current range of student recruitment, resources are available, though if there was a significant increase in a particular area of recruitment, the centre head would need to negotiate additional resources from the University. Most teaching is undertaken in space over which SFoC has sole control, but specialist teaching facilities such as laboratories are made available as needed through negotiation with the University, though constraints on the capacity of laboratories were said to be a problem. In their SWS, students indicated that issues had been raised concerning the amount of practical work undertaken in classrooms in the sciences, and they would like to see more laboratory time to prepare them adequately for both the exams and university. Current students met by the team echoed these views, and said improvement to laboratory arrangements was a key area where they would wish to see change. The team were told that laboratory space was managed by the individual faculties of the University. Staff stated that they were unaware of any particular difficulties, though there could be an issue relating to late notification of additional space requirements to the relevant faculty. It is **advisable** that SFoC takes early action to rectify shortcomings in the availability of appropriate laboratory facilities to support student learning.

11   Students have a University registration card which gives them full access to all University learning resources and support facilities. They are also associate members of the University's Students' Union. In addition, SFoC has laptops which are made available for students to use. Generally, outside the concerns about restrictions on available laboratory space, students felt they were well supported and were satisfied with the level and quality of learning and support resources available to them.

12   Staff were aware that there is a central project considering the acquisition of a virtual learning environment (VLE) to be deployed across FoC. They said that there had been some consultation about users' needs, and some staff had experience of working with a VLE in other institutions. Currently, staff are supported by an intranet, FOCUS, and students by their own intranet, Magellan, which includes a personal student information page for each student.

How effectively are external reference points used in the management and enhancement of learning opportunities?

13   The review team saw limited evidence of the use of external reference points in relation to the management and enhancement of learning opportunities at SFoC.

How effectively do FoundationCampus and SFoC assure themselves that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced?

14   The primary mechanism for assuring the quality of teaching and learning is lesson observation undertaken by the centre head, which is the principal means of academic staff appraisal.

How effectively is student feedback used to assure and enhance the quality of learning opportunities?

15   SFoC makes use of the cross-organisation, standard online questionnaires administered at the end of induction, at the end of each term during which each module was taught, and on completion of the programme. On occasion, these are administered in hard copy rather than online. The approach was said to be too inflexible to be wholly useful and response rates were limited. The results are available at SFoC level, and are incorporated into the AMRs for each programme and discussed at the Academic Board and relevant programme committee. The personal tutor system was seen to be a more effective mechanism for eliciting student feedback, with students having weekly contact with their personal tutor, while informal feedback gathered through in-class activities was also valued. Students confirmed the value of tutorials as a means of giving feedback, and said they often became aware of SFoC's response to their feedback through the student representation system (see paragraph 16). Other means through which students heard SFoC's response to their feedback was through emails and noticeboards using a 'you said, we did' format.

16   SFoC operates a student representation system, with student representatives drawn from different classes. Students who volunteer to be representatives are briefed on their role. Students said they were given an opportunity during scheduled classes to gather feedback from the students they represented, and also to inform students of the responses of SFoC to their feedback. Student representatives sit on the SFoC staff-student liaison committee. Examination of the minutes from this committee showed students could raise issues relating to their learning experience, though the amount of discussion was quite variable between meetings. The review team also noted that minutes showed the day and month on which meetings were held but not the year. Current students with whom the review team met said they had no knowledge of the staff-student liaison committee. There are also student representatives from SFoC on the central programme committees where the first item of business on the agenda is always student feedback. Students contribute to these programme committees via LINK, a telecommunications link, and students confirmed they had been involved in online meetings involving students from across the FoC network. Overall, students were generally positive about the responsiveness of SFoC to issues they raise.

How effectively do FoundationCampus and SFoC assure themselves that students are supported effectively?

17   Students receive a Student Handbook, Programme Handbook and schemes of work. The Student Handbook is specific to SFoC. Students confirmed they found the written documentation provided to them to be clear, accurate and helpful.

18   Students are provided with a pack of pre-arrival information covering a range of important matters including accommodation, finance, what to bring, and getting to the campus. Students said they had found this helpful. SFoC operates an induction programme for new students, and this covers not only programme requirements but also an introduction to the University, orientation to the campus and the wider city of Sunderland, immigration matters and health care. Students said that although initially there was some confusion, they saw this as a good induction process, with activities built into it including induction to the University and its facilities. The Sunderland University Students' Union President had given a helpful introduction as part of the induction. Availability of University student accommodation was seen as a strength of the provision by both staff and students. Students with special needs are identified as part of the admissions process, and SFoC determines whether a student can be supported. In doing so, the centre head draws on the expertise available within the University.

19   SFoC operates a personal tutor system, with full-time and sessional staff who have significant hours working for SFoC. There is a FoC personal tutor handbook which staff said makes the expectations relating to the role very clear. Students have weekly structured group tutorials and staff also operate an open-door policy, allowing students needing help or advice to drop in. Administrative staff are also involved in providing support and guidance to students. Students confirmed that all these arrangements are in place, and they were very positive about the support they received. The personal tutoring system was seen as very helpful, and students identified it as the main route through which they would seek support and guidance on such matters as their academic progress, complaints or academic appeals. As noted in the main report, overall the review team formed the view that the academic and personal support arrangements available to students at SFoC constituted **good practice**.

20   Students also benefit from occasional social activities organised by SFoC. Students confirmed that they were also eligible to join clubs and societies run by the University Students' Union and that they did so. However, more SFoC social opportunities remained an area in which current students wished to see improvement.

How effectively does Sunderland FoundationCampus manage the recruitment and admission of students?

21   Student enquiries are directed to the central team in Cambridge, except in the case of China where they are handled by the Beijing office. All offers are made by the central team in Cambridge. There are clear criteria for admissions in terms of local and overseas qualifications in a range of countries. These are specified in the embedded college promotional literature. Students who do not meet the standard entry requirements or have any special circumstances (such as extra welfare requirements) are referred to the embedded college for approval before being accepted. The embedded college may discuss the candidate with staff in the partner University before indicating to the central team whether an offer should be made. Most students the review team met indicated they had been recruited via agents working for FoC, and generally they were satisfied with this process, but see paragraphs 28 and 29 regarding students recruited to the Pharmacy programme.

22   In relation to recruitment, strategic marketing meetings are held with the University two or three times each year, and the University receives ongoing reports on recruitment activity during the year. The review team were also informed of joint marketing activities at international recruitment fairs, and sharing of information concerning agent networks. Overall, the review team judged the joint marketing initiatives between SFoC and its University partner to represent **good practice**.

What are the arrangements for staff development to maintain and enhance the quality of learning opportunities?

23   SFoC employs a combination of full-time and sessional staff to deliver its programmes. They are predominantly recruited through advertisements, including internal advertisements and advertisements placed in the University. New posts are created on the decision of the centre head against projected student numbers. Recruitment is through an interview process, and staff are cleared by the Disclosure and Barring Service. Induction of new staff is undertaken against a checklist of areas to be covered, largely of an administrative character. There is no formal staff mentoring procedure in place, but the deputy centre head provides informal mentoring for new staff. New staff without prior teaching experience are subject to an early lesson observation by the centre head or deputy head. Subject leaders also play an important role in the induction of new teaching staff. The relevant subject leader, who may well be in a different centre of FoC, makes contact

with a new member of the subject teaching team and provides a starter pack through the intranet including teaching materials and resources and diagnostic tests.

24   Teaching staff are appraised via annual lesson observations conducted by the centre head. Staff receive both verbal feedback and a written report, and an action plan is agreed. In addition, the review team were told lesson plans may be posted on the staff intranet as part of staff development, and there is a procedure for staff to request colleagues to observe and give feedback on their teaching.

25   There are several strands to staff development at SFoC. To date, a number of continuing professional development days have been offered each year to staff, with input from centre heads from other parts of the FoC network. One problem with this approach is that it has not been possible to obtain the full involvement of sessional staff because of their limited times of enagement, though such staff are informed of the training days and can be paid for attendance. From December 2013, the FoC-wide reading week has been introduced to create an opportunity for staff to undertake staff development free of teaching duties, and staff stated they were aware of this development. Some staff had also attended the training events organised for programme and subject leaders covering the transition to Pearson as the awarding body for the IDP and MFP. In addition, staff at SFoC benefited from their membership of subject groups operating across the FoC network. These provide a forum for subject-based staff development. Staff told the team they were aware that staff development opportunities are provided by the University, but nothing was in place at SFoC to enable them to participate in these. As recommended in the overall report, it would be **desirable** for SFoC to liaise with its University partner to identify and promote to SFoC staff appropriate university-based staff development opportunities.

How effectively do FoundationCampus and Sunderland FoundationCampus ensure that learning resources are accessible to students and sufficient to enable them to achieve the learning outcomes?

26   See paragraph 10.

How effectively does Sunderland FoundationCampus's public information communicate to students and other stakeholders about the higher education it provides at this college?

27   Students stated that they received information about FoC in general and SFoC in particular through agents, including an in-country agent-promoted conference, and through the website and prospectus. Generally, they had found the information provided by the agents to be helpful and accurate. The website had been used to gain additional information about SFoC, and students said they had found it clear and easy to navigate. However, while students said they understood from the the website they would be able to choose their modules, on arrival at SFoC they found this decision had already been made and there was no choice available to them.

28   Information on progression arrangements to the University was generally clear, and students were aware in most cases that, for some progression routes, higher grades may be required or there may be a requirement to undergo an interview. There was, however, one very important exception to this. Students on the UFP pathway preparing for progression to the MPharm Pharmacy degree programme are required to gain significantly higher than pass grades in their UFP, and the University also places a cap on the number of students who can go forward on this progression route, currently limiting it to 10 students. The review team were told that in 2012-13, students wishing to pursue Pharmacy who had the requisite grades were nearly twice as many as the cap. In the event, the University department agreed to take all the students who wanted to progress even though this significantly

exceeded the cap. The team were told by University staff that while there was no guarantee of progression where student numbers exceeded the cap, direct discussion with the University department might lead to additional students being able to progress to Pharmacy in 2012-13.

29   Nonetheless, the review team were concerned about how effectively this limitation was communicated to students ahead of their admission to SFoC. The SFoC prospectus does include a footnote which informs students they will need to gain higher grades (though it does not specify how much higher), and that 'the number of places available to study this degree (MPharm), and the Undergraduate Foundation Programme leading to this degree, are limited'. The wording of this would not necessarily alert potential students to the fact that significantly more students are recruited to the UFP pathway than the guaranteed numbers able to progress subject to gaining the requisite grades. The team asked what other information was provided to students prior to entry, to ensure they were aware of this potential barrier to their progression to the MPharm Pharmacy programme. They were shown a communication dated 7 August 2012 which had been sent out to applicants. It drew potential students' attention to changes in the Home Office (previously UKBA) arrangements which would mean non-EU graduates from the MPharm programme would not be able to remain in the UK after completing their four-year programme. This means they would be unable to undertake pre-registration training and gain professional registration with the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. The communication also drew potential students' attention to the higher grades required in the Pharmacy progression route, and provided specific and detailed information about these. However, there was no indication of the cap the University places on the number of students guaranteed to progress to the MPharm Pharmacy programme. The team also saw an example of the offer letter sent to students seeking a place to study Pharmacy through SFoC. While students are admitted to the general SFoC Life Sciences pathway, the letter also states that the student will be eligible for entry to the MPharm Pharmacy programme at the University 'on successful completion of the above course' (the Life Sciences pathway), and there is no mention of the limitation on student numbers. Although students do have a fallback route, the BSc (Hons) BioPharmaceutical Science, there remained the potential for students to be recruited to the Pharmacy pathway, to have gained the requisite grades for progression, but to be unable to progress because of the cap on the number of guaranteed progression places available. The team regard it as **advisable** that publicity and other material used by SFoC to inform potential students about the progression route to MPharm at the University should more effectively and unambiguously communicate the restriction on guaranteed places at the University.

30   The SFoC Student Handbook is prepared using FoC style guidelines, but contains locally derived information. However, the review team noted that guidance given to students on how much paid work they could undertake without breaching the terms of their student visa varied from that provided in another FoC centre, and was potentially misleading.

How effective are Sunderland FoundationCampus's arrangements for assuring the accuracy and completeness of information it has responsibility for publishing at this college?

31   The agreement between the University and SFoC states that the former is responsible for signing off all public information produced by or on behalf of SFoC, including prospectuses and website content. University staff confirmed that published material was signed off by the University. Generally, information is complete and accurate, with the important exception of progression in Pharmacy (see paragraph 29).