

Higher Education Review of Central Sussex College

February 2014

Contents

About this review	1
Amended judgement October 2015	2
Key findings.....	3
QAA's judgements about Central Sussex College.....	3
Good practice	3
Recommendations	3
Theme: Student Employability.....	4
About Central Sussex College	5
Explanation of the findings about Central Sussex College.....	6
1 Judgement: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards.....	7
2 Judgement: Quality of student learning opportunities.....	14
3 Judgement: Quality of the information produced about its provision.....	26
4 Judgement: Enhancement of student learning opportunities	28
5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability.....	30
Glossary.....	31

About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Central Sussex College. The review took place from 10 to 11 February 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr G Barr
- Ms S Blake
- Mr K Harris (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Central Sussex 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)¹ 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 maintainance of threshold academic standards²
 - the quality of learning opportunities
 - the information provided about learning opportunities
 - the enhancement of 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 Central Sussex 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 2013-14 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,³ 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.⁴ A dedicated page of the website explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#) of higher education providers in England and Northern Ireland⁵ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode.

² For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

³ Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/higher-education-review-themes.aspx.

⁴ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus.

⁵ Higher Education Review web pages: www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/higher-education-review.

Amended judgement October 2015

Introduction

In February 2014 Central Sussex College underwent a Higher Education Review which resulted in judgements that its maintenance of threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisations met UK expectations; that the quality of student learning opportunities met UK expectations; and that the quality of information produced about its provision met UK expectations; but that enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College required improvement to meet UK expectations.

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

The College published an action plan in July 2014 describing how it intended to address the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the review, and worked over the next 12 months to demonstrate how it has implemented that plan.

The follow-up process included four progress updates and culminated in a desk-based analysis by members of the review team of the College's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence.

The analysis confirmed that the recommendations relating to the enhancement of learning opportunities had been successfully addressed. Actions in respect of the recommendations and good practice relating to the areas which received positive judgements had also been completed on schedule.

QAA Board decision and amended judgement

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

- The maintenance of threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisations **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information produced about its provision **meets** UK expectations.
The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

The review can be considered as complete.

Findings from the follow-up process

The team found that the College had made progress against the recommendations associated with the enhancement of learning opportunities as follows.

- The College now ensures that all faculties discharge their student-facing responsibilities in a timely, user-friendly and consistent manner, and that good practice is identified and disseminated across the institution.
- The College has systematised the current positive features of higher education quality management into an institution-wide approach to quality enhancement for higher education.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Central Sussex College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Central Sussex College.

- The maintenance of threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies and awarding organisations **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information produced about its provision **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at Central Sussex College.

- The College's approach to the provision of distinctive and tailored career advancement opportunities for part-time students is both positive and committed (Expectation B4).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following recommendations to Central Sussex College.

Within one year of the publication of this report:

- ensure that the Higher Education Academic Board functions effectively as the senior body overseeing the maintenance and enhancement of academic quality (Expectations A1, A4, B1)
- take steps to systematise the current positive features of higher education quality management into an institution-wide approach to quality enhancement for higher education (Enhancement).

By the commencement of the academic year 2014-15:

- undertake a formal review of all relevant policies and procedures to ensure that, notwithstanding its validated agreements, it can take an increasingly proactive and consistent approach to higher education policy (Expectations A6, B6, B9)
- take action to ensure that the current enrolment procedure meets the needs and expectations of higher education students (Expectation B2)
- take steps to develop its higher education student representative system to enable representatives to engage fully with it, ensuring also that they are suitably prepared for their roles (Expectation B5)
- ensure that all faculties discharge their student-facing responsibilities in a timely, user-friendly and consistent manner, and that good practice is identified and disseminated across the institution (Expectation B6, Enhancement)
- ensure that all external examiner reports are made available to students or their representatives (Expectation B7).

Theme: Student Employability

The College engages actively with local employers, both through local networking at industry-faculty level and through the advice and industrial involvement of its own part-time staff.

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

About Central Sussex College

Central Sussex College (the College) is a four-campus further education institution: its main campus and locus of higher education teaching is in Crawley. The College's catchment area is characterised both by high levels of youth unemployment and a low progression rate to higher education, and by its proximity to London Gatwick Airport. This creates both skilled employment opportunities and a development initiative, the Gatwick Diamond, which the College supports. These demographics influence the College mission, driving a focus on the aims of increasing participation in higher education and upskilling the local workforce.

While higher education currently accounts for fewer than 300 of the College's student roll of 11,000, significant expansion plans exist: thus far these have led most notably to institutional investment in a University Centre, in partnership with the University of Brighton and University of Chichester. The College's current awarding partners, in addition to these institutions, are Pearson and the University of Sussex, though the partnership with the University of Sussex is drawing to a natural close. The programmes in scope are: Higher National Certificates and Diplomas in Creative Media Production and Engineering; a Foundation Degree in Early Childhood; level 5 and 6 awards in Education; and a level 7 award in Human Resource Management.

The College was subject to a QAA Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review in 2009. This had a positive outcome, with six features of good practice and five recommendations. The institutional response to the report was signed off as satisfactory by QAA, but changes to the College's management and focus in the intervening five years mean that the report's contents have been largely superseded by organisational changes. In addition, at the time of the present review the College was emerging from a difficult financial period, with a fairly new Principal and a revised management structure in place.

Explanation of the findings about Central Sussex 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: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards

Expectation (A1): Each qualification (including those awarded through arrangements with other delivery organisations or support providers) is allocated to the appropriate level in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)*.

Quality Code, Chapter A1: The national level

Findings

1.1 Ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of programmes offered by Central Sussex College lies with the awarding bodies. The review team found ample evidence of programmes and student achievement being located at the correct levels. Within the College, operational responsibility for managing academic standards rests with faculty directors. The Higher Education Academic Board has advisory and communication responsibilities only: neither the Board's terms of reference nor the minutes of its meetings show it to have a significant role in managing academic standards.

1.2 The review team found that while this level of devolution enables individual faculties to engage actively with the varying requirements of their awarding bodies (and in all cases engagement with external expectations, including the FHEQ, is sound), it restricts the capacity of the College as a whole to engage, proactively or holistically, with its own higher education activities. The review team **recommends** that the College ensure that the Higher Education Academic Board functions effectively as the senior body overseeing the maintenance and enhancement of academic quality. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2): All higher education programmes of study take account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements.

Quality Code, Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level

Findings

1.3 Responsibility for ensuring that account is taken of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements also rests with the awarding bodies. The review team found that staff had received appropriate training (for example, in the use of external occupational benchmarks and the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*), notwithstanding the fact that staff development records do not systematically record this training. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3): Higher education providers make available definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements for a programme of study.

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: The programme level*

Findings

1.4 Programme specifications for university-validated programmes are completed on the appropriate templates: in all cases these include reference to subject and qualification benchmarks. In programmes for non-higher education validating bodies the College ensures that programme specifications meet all relevant external expectations and are publicly available on its website. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A4): Higher education providers have in place effective processes to approve and periodically review the validity and relevance of programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter A4: Approval and review

Findings

1.5 The College's Programme Validation Process involves the sequential scrutiny of programme proposals, culminating in presentation to the Executive Leadership Team, which makes final decisions on combined business and academic grounds. The process, which may but does not necessarily involve advice from senior academics external to the institution or employers, is robust in that the College gives adequate attention to the appropriateness of possible new programmes and conscientiously follows awarding body procedures.

1.6 Monitoring and review are aligned to the requirements of each awarding body. Annual monitoring involves programme leaders submitting a report for consideration by the Higher Education Academic Board. Although the format of these reports varies, both they and the action plans deriving from them are appropriate in content, adequately monitored and fit for purpose. Periodic review documentation is similarly robust. The College discharges its responsibilities responsibly.

1.7 At institutional level, the College complements these responsibilities largely through the Executive Leadership Team, the Higher Education Academic Board being, in spite of a recent strengthening of its terms of reference, a reporting channel rather than a decision-maker in higher education development. While the College's self-evaluation document locates responsibility for approving both new programmes and substantial changes to existing ones with the Higher Education Academic Board, the nature and extent of the Board's authority to exercise this responsibility were unclear to the review team. Accordingly the team again **recommends** (see paragraph 1.2) that the Higher Education Academic Board functions effectively as the senior body overseeing the maintenance and enhancement of academic quality. Overall, however, the Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A5): Higher education providers ensure independent and external participation in the management of threshold academic standards.

Quality Code, Chapter A5: Externality

Findings

1.8 Quality assurance requirements, including the nature and level of externality, are specified by each awarding body. The College's higher education provision, being largely part-time and employment-related, also requires a high level of employer engagement for currency and relevance to be assured, and the review team found instances of local employers helping identify potential new programmes for development. The College stresses that its part-time teaching staff, many of whom remain active in industry, bring a high level of externality to programme design, teaching and assessment. The team found several examples of curriculum and assessment being explicitly related to employment needs, and confirms that students rate the employment relevance of their programmes highly. Accordingly, while employers' participation in programme design is not captured in any formal institution-wide structure, the College ensures a reasonable level of externality in programme development, design and assessment. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A6): Higher education providers ensure the assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and that the award of qualifications and credit are based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

Quality Code, Chapter A6: Assessment of achievement of learning outcomes

Findings

1.9 The fact that learning outcomes and assessment formats are subject to awarding body approval and review requires the College to meet different expectations and present such materials as programme specifications and assessment information in variable ways. Accordingly, the review team noted variations in assessment practice in mitigation, late submission, double marking and assessment feedback. The College discharges all responsibilities competently, and external examiner reports generally confirm the appropriateness of academic standards.

1.10 The College's internal higher education policies include taking a robust approach to aspects of assessment which include moderation, achieving consistency across programmes and modules, providing for minimum standards, and ensuring that assignments are fit for purpose. The College has a policy document on mitigating circumstances, though this largely describes the range of awarding body regulations. The documents are, however, general in scope, and the review team was told that most assessment queries are referred to the awarding body concerned.

1.11 While students raised few concerns about assessment itself (some were very positive about it), students of one faculty in particular were critical of its administration, citing variability in the distribution and return of assessed work, and inconsistent practice in penalising late submissions. This instance of the broader problem of limitations in the central oversight of faculties stems from a weakness in setting and regularly monitoring higher education assessment practice at institutional level. The review team accordingly **recommends** that the College undertake a formal review of all relevant policies and practice to ensure that it can take an increasingly proactive and consistent approach to higher education policy development. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.12 In reaching its judgement about academic standards the review team noted that ultimate responsibility rests with the degree-awarding bodies (the College does not award degrees) and that in all cases the College discharges its responsibilities in respect of the maintenance of threshold academic standards competently and professionally. This being so, the academic standards of the awards on programmes offered by the College are secure, and the College **meets** UK expectations.

1.13 Nevertheless, the fact that this section contains two recommendations signifies that scope exists for the College to strengthen its oversight of its higher education provision while continuing to meet the requirements of the awarding bodies. In particular, the manner in which the College's Executive Leadership Team currently oversees this provision means that responsibility for individual programmes is in practice devolved to faculties, with consequential but uncoordinated divergent practices.

2 Judgement: Quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers have effective processes for the design and approval of programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter B1: Programme design and approval*

Findings

2.1 Procedures for programme design and approval are described in paragraph 1.5. Learning opportunities and associated support mechanisms are given due consideration, both internally (where a combined academic and business decision is taken by the College Executive Leadership Team) and by validating bodies. The review team confirms that all recent college-level programme approvals have been conducted in a professional manner, though attention is again drawn to the limited involvement of the Higher Education Academic Board and the resultant limited nature of the engagement of academic staff other than the proposers. The review team again **recommends** that the College ensure that the Higher Education Academic Board functions effectively as the senior body overseeing the maintenance and enhancement of academic quality. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B2): Policies and procedures used to admit students are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied.

Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Admissions*

Findings

2.2 The College's Admissions Policy specifies both the Policy's underlying principles, including an institutional commitment to equality, diversity and widening participation, and its practical operation. The arrangements are aligned with all relevant external reference points. The Admissions Policy was last formally reviewed in 2009. The College Prospectus is comprehensive, offering clear information on entry requirements and funding, and, in most cases, programme fees; students confirmed their satisfaction with admissions, but some were critical of the enrolment day, which fell below expectations and did not adequately address the time constraints of the part-time students in employment who make up the bulk of the College's higher education population. The review team **recommends** that the College take action to ensure that the current enrolment procedure meets the needs and expectations of higher education students. Notwithstanding this, admission arrangements are fit for purpose; the Expectation is met and the risk 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

2.3 The College gives high priority to the quality of learning it provides to its diverse student population; it takes pride in the potentially transformational effect of its higher education; it has invested heavily in the University Centre, which students greatly value; it offers individual learning plans to students to support and monitor their progress; and it provides professional development for staff to ensure that the quality of teaching meets internal and external expectations. The College does not have a higher education learning and teaching strategy, stating that this area of activity, including the aims and values underpinning it, is embedded in its current Strategic Plan. The review team investigated this claim, and, while finding current arrangements broadly satisfactory, considers this a matter to which future consideration could beneficially be given.

2.4 The College makes use of a commercial virtual learning environment (VLE). While the review team found instances of its creative and imaginative use by some programme teams, students reported that usage is variable and that on some programmes it is used largely to provide basic materials, with little opportunity for constructive interaction. Instances were also cited of part-time students arriving for classes without having been told of cancellations, and of timetabling difficulties about which advance information had not been provided. The College was surprised by the strength of student feeling expressed in this meeting, which focused largely on one faculty where senior staff stated, and the team accepted, that the problem was understood and rectification in progress. The team expects the College to continue to monitor this situation closely. Overall, the Expectation is met and the risk 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

2.5 Student support, both academic and pastoral, is central to the College's ethos. The GetREAL programme, designed to embed student support in institutional culture with the aim of enabling students to fulfil their potential, has attracted widespread commitment from both staff and students (see also paragraph 4.2). The College's approach to student support is integrated closely with its commitment to respecting and celebrating diversity. The Student Support Department takes a proactive approach to supporting individual students, not least those with dyslexia, and identifying and responding to broader local and national trends. Learning support is available in the library on a 'drop-in' basis, and the review team found evidence of the library in particular responding positively to student feedback on the availability of resources.

2.6 While one-to-one careers advice is available and well publicised, this advice is largely tailored to the needs of a student population already in work, and where the main motivation is to achieve advancement through upskilling. For full-time students, information about transfer to university is available, and the review team found evidence of former students considering the College's support an essential stepping-stone in their academic and professional progression. In many cases the vocational nature of programmes, combined with the continuing employment of part-time academic staff, means that local networking opportunities are readily available, and students who met the team were overwhelmingly positive about the likely impact of their learning on their future careers. The College's positive and committed approach to the provision of distinctive and tailored career advancement opportunities for part-time students is **good practice**. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B5: Student engagement*

Findings

2.7 The College gives high priority to eliciting and responding to student opinion, using the results to inform, monitor and improve its educational provision. The review team found evidence of this approach being used, and of the extent to which students appreciate the maturity and appropriateness of their interactions with staff. The representation system, however, remains a challenge, with the College currently of the view that part-time students cannot easily meet the time commitment being a representative would entail. The team takes the view that the College has yet to give sufficient priority to exploring all possible, including non-traditional, modes of representation which would potentially open the door to effective and constructive engagement. The team **recommends** that the College take steps to develop its higher education student representative system to enable representatives to engage fully with it, ensuring also that they are suitably prepared for their roles. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers ensure that students have appropriate opportunities to show they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the award of a qualification or credit.

Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of students and accreditation of prior learning

Findings

2.8 The College does not have its own assessment regulations, these being determined by the awarding bodies. The review team noted, however, that the College is taking steps, albeit primarily at faculty level (see paragraph 1.11), to strengthen practice. These include assessment-related issues being discussed at programme boards; appropriate adjustments to the amount and types of assessment required; the creative use of paperless assignments and assessment; and the imaginative involvement of students in action research. Programme teams also produce schemes of work to help students understand different assessment expectations: some assignments, for example, require reflective practice, while others expect evidence of personal and professional development.

2.9 At institutional level, while internal moderation procedures provide generally for transparency of marking, moderation and internal verification, their primary purpose is not to achieve internal coherence but to record different programme requirements in one place. Thus, practices in areas such as double marking remain dependent on awarding body expectations, sometimes, but not necessarily, modulated by faculty-level negotiations. While the team appreciates the necessity of all validation requirements being met, there remains scope for an institutional-level review of their operationalisation to ensure that where ambiguity or generality exists, or where day-to-day problems arise, the College as a whole takes responsibility for ensuring consistency and appropriateness. The team again **recommends** that the College undertake a formal review of all relevant policies and procedures to ensure that, notwithstanding its validated agreements, it can take an increasingly proactive and consistent approach to higher education policy.

2.10 Students spoke warmly of staff support in respect of assessment requirements and were broadly content with the fairness of the process. As noted in paragraphs 1.11 and 2.4, however, in a context of overall satisfaction some students from one faculty in particular reported negatively on inconsistencies in the collection of assignments (claiming that informal extensions were granted by staff) and the timeliness of their return, to the extent that in at least one case opportunities for improved performance in later work were jeopardised. Other than in the cases of electronic submission, there appears to be no institution-wide system to ensure that the process operates reliably and equitably. The team **recommends** that the College ensure that all faculties discharge their student-facing responsibilities in a timely, user-friendly and consistent manner, and that good practice is identified and disseminated across the institution. The Expectation is not met and the risk moderate.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

Quality Code, Chapter B7: External examining

Findings

2.11 The College normally submits nominations for external examinerships to awarding bodies, following consideration by the Higher Education Academic Board. Because external examiners work to awarding body requirements, some differences in their responsibilities exist, but in all cases relevant external expectations are met. The review team found evidence of constructive engagement with external examiners in both the reports themselves and in the College's responses to them.

2.12 External examiner reports are overseen by the Higher Education Academic Board, though minutes do not suggest detailed engagement. Distributing, chasing and collecting reports are Quality and Development Department responsibilities; formal responses are prepared by programme leads; and annual monitoring is the locus for the discussion of issues arising. Reports are predominantly positive in tone and content, and evidence was found of action being taken in response to recommendations. However, while the review team confirms that the College makes scrupulous use of external examiners and their reports, the reports themselves are not routinely made available to students. The team **recommends** that the College ensure that all external examiner reports are made available to students or their representatives. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers have effective procedures in place to routinely monitor and periodically review programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review

Findings

2.13 Procedures for annual monitoring and periodic review are outlined in paragraph 1.6. Annual monitoring, which involves the consideration of all relevant data and the production of an action plan, is robust. Nevertheless, subsequent arrangements for information sharing and oversight would benefit from reconsideration: annual monitoring reports, though considered by the Higher Education Academic Board, appear to receive only limited discussion there - an omission that restricts the opportunities for cross-programme discussion and for identifying and sharing good practice that might otherwise exist; and oversight largely involves a presentation to the Executive Leadership Team in a process documented only by amendment to the annual review report.

2.14 Periodic review arrangements follow the requirements of awarding bodies and are competently administered. Arrangements to ensure appropriate learning opportunities and safeguard students' interests where an awarding body has withdrawn from validation appear appropriate. Overall, effective procedures are in place for routinely monitoring and periodically reviewing programmes. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have fair, effective and timely procedures for handling students' complaints and academic appeals.

Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic complaints and student appeals

Findings

2.15 A clear and accessible procedure exists for handling complaints, operational responsibility for which lies with the Quality and Development Department reporting to the Corporation and Executive Leadership Team. The same process exists for further and higher education students, with a leaflet and complaints form available in paper and electronic formats. Complaints relating to higher education programmes are few; in consequence, the College does not monitor or review them separately.

2.16 The review team has less confidence in the fairness of the academic appeals procedure. While acknowledging that in the case of universities (but not Pearson) the awarding body ultimately handles appeals, the team found inconsistencies in the College's discharge of its responsibilities arising from attempts to achieve resolution at programme level. The College Assessment Policy (2007) specifies procedures for students who are dissatisfied with the outcomes of assessments, explaining that procedures exist for student support and representation should they wish to pursue an appeal. However, one programme handbook describes an internal verifier's decision as final, whereas College procedures permit a further appeal within five days; one programme permits an internal appeal prior to submitting a formal appeal to the awarding body, another does not; and mitigation appeals are variably conceived and implemented. It is again **recommended** that the College undertake a formal review of all relevant policies and procedures to ensure that, notwithstanding its validated agreements, it can take an increasingly proactive and consistent approach to higher education policy.

2.17 The review team, in exploring whether students understand both the procedures themselves and the distinction between complaints and appeals, found that while their knowledge of the procedures is limited, they believe that if they needed information they would know where to find it. The Expectation is not met and the risk moderate.

Expectation: Not met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.18 The College has no provision delivered with third parties other than in terms of a small number of sector-endorsed work placements, which are managed satisfactorily at programme or faculty level. The role of the Higher Education Academic Board in overseeing these arrangements on behalf of the institution as a whole is limited (see recommendation in paragraph 1.2). The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research degrees*

Findings

2.19 The College offers no postgraduate provision, therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

Quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.20 In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team noted that the College's higher education students receive a level of support and encouragement that enables them to make a successful transition to higher education, and that the College is skilled in meeting the needs of a predominantly part-time and diverse student population. While the team also noted that some students were very critical of aspects of their provision, the College responded that senior staff were aware of the problems in one faculty, and that satisfactory steps were being taken to ameliorate the situation. The team accepts that the experiences of these students, though unacceptable, may have been exceptional and are being addressed.

2.21 Of the 10 relevant Expectations in this section of the report, eight are met. The two exceptions relate to aspects of assessment, where a weakness in institutional management of a difficult situation was identified, and to academic appeals, where the review team found the information provided on procedures was inconsistent.

2.22 The review team makes four new recommendations in this section, also repeating two from the previous section. The new recommendations relate to arrangements for the enrolment of new students; the involvement of existing students as committee representatives; and making external examiner reports available to student representatives. In concluding that the College **meets** UK expectations in relation to the quality of learning opportunities, the team is of the view that the Expectations not met do not, individually or collectively, present any serious risks to the management of this area.

3 Judgement: Quality of the information produced about its provision

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's Prospectus, available both electronically and as hard copy, contains extensive information about programmes, entry requirements, application and admission procedures, campuses and relationships with awarding bodies. Like the website, it provides only implicit information about mission, vision and values (which are currently under review): while some of these can be inferred from policy statements on equality, diversity and discrimination, the College may find it helpful to reflect on whether it is currently doing justice to the principles underpinning its educational mission. It may also find it helpful to decide whether information on all programme fees is sufficiently accessible to potential students. For current students, who spoke positively to the review team about the information provided, information about programmes and related activities is widely available through the VLE, student handbooks and the student intranet. Such information does, however, need to be supplemented by the provision of external examiner reports (see paragraph 2.12).

3.2 The reliability of public information is overseen by the Student Support and Sales and Marketing Departments, aided by relevant senior, administrative and academic staff. Clear lines of responsibility exist to ensure both that prospective information is signed off by faculties and awarding bodies where necessary, and that the College meets its obligation to publish its Key Information Set. The review team confirms that these arrangements appear sound in conception and execution. The Expectation is met and the risk low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Quality of the information produced about its provision: Summary of findings

3.3 In reaching its judgement about the information the College provides about its higher education provision, the review team discussed the matter with both providers and students, checked the College website and prospectus, and sampled a range of documents provided for students. The team concludes that the College **meets** UK expectations for the quality of information it provides about its higher education provision.

4 Judgement: 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 has a range of procedures designed to support and strengthen student learning, but while its commitment to doing so is beyond question, these procedures do not emanate from an overarching institutional-level approach to enhancement. The self-evaluation document refers only implicitly to enhancement, no policy documents directly address it, and discussions in the course of the review failed to identify measures taken to demonstrate that the College is taking deliberate steps at institutional level to enhance the quality of students' learning opportunities. The devolution of extensive programme management responsibilities to faculties leads to variable practices, not a consistent, systematic, institution-wide approach. Given the acknowledgement, at senior level, that a more strategic approach to enhancement is required, a current strategic review is likely to include the development of such an approach. The team again (see paragraph 2.10) **recommends** that the College ensure that all faculties discharge their student-facing responsibilities in a timely, user-friendly and consistent manner, and that good practice is identified and disseminated across the institution.

4.2 The College's ethos encourages the strengthening of student learning opportunities, and the GetREAL initiative, which applies to all students and has attracted widespread support, aims to secure and maintain just such a commitment from all staff, whether academic, support or manual. The review team saw evidence that GetREAL helps further education students progress to higher education, but less concrete evidence that it makes a similarly positive contribution to the experience of higher education students themselves, or to their programmes.

4.3 The College has several means of identifying good practice. First, teaching observation, formal and informal, provides opportunities for staff to improve performance; but while the process has clear and helpful guidelines, the review team did not find evidence that outcomes are recorded and evaluated to drive developments across the higher education portfolio. Second, self-assessment reports on all higher education programmes, which are fundamental to quality management, are informed by information including achievement data, external examiner reports and student opinion surveys, and they generate quality improvement action plans for the Higher Education Academic Board's consideration. However, while Board minutes demonstrate a commitment to improving the quality of learning opportunities, the review team found little evidence of such analysis leading to systematic enhancement. The review team **recommends** that the College take steps to systematise the current positive features of higher education quality management into an institution-wide approach to quality enhancement for higher education. The Expectation is not met and the risk moderate.

Expectation: Not met

Level of risk: Moderate

Enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.4 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team noted that the definition of enhancement against which the College is judged necessitates basing it on deliberate steps at institutional level. The College, while its ethos supports students and while it is committed to improving the quality of their learning opportunities, was unable to provide convincing evidence of such an approach. This is in part because of the emphasis it places on faculty-level developments and the different arrangements operating in different parts of the institution. For this reason the Expectation is not met and presents a moderate risk. Accordingly, the team concludes that the College requires improvement to meet UK expectations for the enhancement of student learning.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

Findings

5.1 The review team investigated approaches taken to support student employability at the College. The team found that the College engages actively with local employers, both through local networking, mainly at industry-faculty level, and through the advice and industrial involvement of its own part-time staff.

5.2 The College both supports and contributes to the Gatwick Diamond initiative, which involves business leaders, business membership organisations, colleges and universities, local authorities, and government agencies in an attempt to transform the area into 'a world-class place to live, work and do business'. The College has a longstanding commitment to improving student employability, and close faculty-level links between staff and local employers, combined with the fact that the College is located in areas where the socioeconomic context is shaped and influenced by its proximity to London Gatwick Airport, help define the nature and focus of its employment-related provision.

5.3 The majority of the College's higher education provision is taken part-time by students in employment who are seeking career advancement. To support this market, College staff interact with local employers on a regular (though not always systematic) basis, while the fact that the College itself has a policy of appointing part-time staff who continue to pursue industrial or professional activities contributes to ensuring the continuing relevance and currency of their programmes (see paragraph 1.8). Students spoke highly of this arrangement, appreciating the employability skills they were acquiring, and the fact that their teachers, as well as being academics, serve as professional role models and networking facilitators. Employment opportunities for the minority of full-time higher education students also exist, but would benefit from further attention and support.

5.4 The review team found that the College makes regular and effective use of employers and industry professionals in determining the likely market for new programmes, and also elicits helpful advice from part-time staff. The College does not have a formal procedure for the institution-level involvement of employers, and it is possible that employers' contribution to institutional development would be consolidated were such a body to be established and promoted.

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 to 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/assuringstandardsandquality.

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.

Academic standards

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

Award

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

Blended learning

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

Credit(s)

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

Degree-awarding body

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

Distance learning

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

Dual award or double award

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

e-learning

See **technology enhanced or enabled learning**

Enhancement

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

Expectations

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

Flexible and distributed learning

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

See also **distance learning**.

Framework

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

Framework for higher education qualifications

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

Good practice

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

Learning opportunities

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

Learning outcomes

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

Multiple awards

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

Operational definition

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

Programme (of study)

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

Programme specifications

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

Public information

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

Quality Code

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

Reference points

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

Subject benchmark statement

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

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)

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

Threshold academic standard

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

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

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

Widening participation

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

QAA774 - R3713 - Jun 14

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2014
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Email enquiries@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786