

Higher Education Review of Ashton Sixth Form College

October 2014

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Ashton Sixth Form College. The review took place from 14 to 16 October 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Paul Brunt
- Mrs Rosemary Evans
- Miss Emma Palmer (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Ashton Sixth Form 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 maintenance of threshold academic standards
 - the quality of student learning opportunities
 - the information provided about higher education provision
 - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 7.

In reviewing Ashton Sixth Form College the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland.

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2014-15 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,² 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.³ A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)⁴ and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code.

² Higher Education Review themes: www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106.

³ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus.

⁴ Higher Education Review web pages: www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review.

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Ashton Sixth Form College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Ashton Sixth Form College.

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

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at Ashton Sixth Form College.

- Academic staff are highly qualified and are actively encouraged and supported to pursue a comprehensive range of continuing professional development activities (Expectations B3, B4 and Enhancement).
- The comprehensive and high-quality support given to students from initial enquiry through to graduation (Expectations B2, B4, B10 and Enhancement).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Ashton Sixth Form College.

By April 2015:

- develop the committee responsible for higher education to include regular monitoring of the Enhancement Strategy (Enhancement).

By October 2015:

- monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the recruitment, scope and participation of HE Student Ambassadors (Expectation B5 and Enhancement).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions that Ashton Sixth Form College is already taking to make academic standards secure and improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The actions being taken to improve the accessibility of information available to students on the virtual learning environments (VLEs) (Expectations B3, B4 and C).
- The steps being taken to fully disseminate and implement the strategic approach to enhancement (Enhancement).

Theme: Student Employability

The College has an effective structure in place to support and promote employability for students, and this is backed by the requirements of its awarding body for the 'Staffordshire Graduate' attributes to be embedded within any course undergoing validation. Most students are already in employment but there is still a wide range of careers and personal development activities available in the College, with an increasing emphasis on guidance for higher education students. Students are highly regarded by their employers who value the quality and relevance of the education being delivered at the College. Similarly, students have become more confident in their work as a result of what they have learned at the College.

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

About Ashton Sixth Form College

Originally a grammar school, Ashton Sixth Form College (the College) was established in 1980. It is located on the outskirts of Ashton-Under-Lyne. Students are primarily recruited from the borough of Tameside and surrounding boroughs. Tameside is a region characterised by relatively high levels of unemployment, low rates of pay and low attainment in terms of higher-level qualifications.

The College's vision is 'to be an outstanding College and pursue excellence'. Its mission is to:

- inspire students, enrich lives and foster a love of learning
- inspire staff to lead fulfilling professional lives
- celebrate achievement and success
- promote wellbeing and nurture a collaborative, College-wide community
- make a positive contribution to the wider community
- play a key role in educational developments.

The bulk of the College's provision centres around Level 3 programmes delivered to approximately 2,000 full-time 16 to 18-year-old students. In addition, the College provides HE and Skills (18 plus) programmes from entry level to Level 3 for around 900 adult students, mainly on a part-time basis. At the time of its Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in 2009, the College had 156 higher education students, all of whom were part-time. The College now has 176 students on higher education programmes, the majority of whom are part-time.

The College offers foundation degrees in Education and Early Childhood Studies, a Foundation Year Health Studies, a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Media Production, BA (Hons) top-up programmes in Education and Childhood Studies, and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). The HND was introduced in September 2014 and is validated by the University of Salford under its license with Pearson. The remaining provision is validated by Staffordshire University.

At present, all of the higher education programmes are designed by the awarding bodies and delivered by the College. Previously, part of the teaching on the BA top-up programmes was delivered by the awarding body but this is no longer the case. The other major change since the IQER was the termination of the partnership with Leeds Metropolitan University. Other significant changes include: the introduction of a student number control (SNC) and a direct contract with HEFCE for a small number of students; a new HE Study Zone; and new higher education-specific policies, procedures and strategies. In addition, the College has carried out a restructuring of key staff roles in higher education management, and placed a growing emphasis on developing the employability of its students.

The College has identified a number of key challenges facing its higher education provision including: engaging its part-time students and offering an appropriate experience for its growing number of full-time students; attracting higher education students to a sixth form college; ensuring adequate recruitment, development and engagement of sessional teaching staff; developing and maintaining sufficient resources to meet the needs of higher education students; and engaging employers.

The College has made satisfactory progress with the recommendations made in the IQER. However, some of the work is still ongoing and not all of it has yet been fully implemented and evaluated. The College has achieved the following: maintained good links with external sectors; restructured the roles of key staff working in its higher education provision; implemented a system for recording information about students and with the intention in

future of using it to feed into the College's quality assurance and enhancement processes; implemented effective staff training on the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) and evidenced engagement with the Quality Code in revising policies, processes and strategies specific to higher education; strengthened its quality framework including the introduction of the 'quality cycle'; introduced scholarly activity and various forms of continuing professional development including HE development days; and made progress on improving its VLEs.

Explanation of the findings about Ashton Sixth Form College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and other awarding organisations

Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* are met by:

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.1 The College is responsible for delivering the programmes offered through its partnerships with Staffordshire University and the University of Salford. The HND Media Production is delivered through the University of Salford's license with Pearson. In this case, the awarding body has enabled the College to deliver an amended version of one of its programmes of study. The remaining programmes are validated by Staffordshire University. The awarding bodies, through their approval and review procedures, are responsible for ensuring that key reference points are adhered to. Design, development and approval are carried out by the awarding bodies and the College contributes fully to the validation processes, including during periodic reviews. Prior to the formal validation processes of the awarding bodies, the College conducts its own internal approval process, whereby the Assistant Principal: HE, Skills and International puts forward a business case for approval to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) of the College. The awarding bodies supply the College with comprehensive information about reference points which is made available to staff and students via a number of routes including programme and module specifications, information packs, course and student handbooks, websites, VLEs, and other relevant documentation. The College's processes meet the Expectation in *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards*.

1.2 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining relevant information packs, handbooks, annual monitoring reports, external examiners' reports, partnership agreements, and validation and review reports and by talking to senior staff, employers, teaching staff and students.

1.3 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be effective in practice. External examiners' reports show that the College, in the context of the intended learning outcomes, is aware of, and adheres to, the relevant reference points in its teaching, learning and assessment practices at both module and programme level. The College continuously monitors the appropriateness of levels through marking, standardisation, second marking, and monitoring and feedback for individual modules. This information is recorded in its annual monitoring reports which feed into the Higher Education Self-Evaluation Document and Quality Improvement and Enhancement Plan. The team saw evidence of the College's engagement at validation events and the range of discussions regarding the employment of external reference points. Staff, students and employers whom the team met confirmed that the information they receive is clear.

1.4 While the awarding bodies have ultimate responsibility through their own regulatory frameworks for ensuring that the relevant external reference points are adhered to, there is significant evidence that the College effectively manages its own responsibilities for doing this within its partnership agreements. This is confirmed through a variety of mechanisms including reviews by the awarding bodies and the conclusions from external examiners' reports. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.

Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.5 The regulatory frameworks of each awarding body determine the academic standards for each programme. The College works within the established academic frameworks and regulations of its awarding bodies as outlined in the partnership agreements. The College demonstrates its awareness of, and engagement with, these frameworks and regulations through a variety of mechanisms including validation and revalidation processes, programme monitoring and review, and external examiners' reports. Internally, the College has generic and higher education-specific quality cycles comprising key documents, policies and committees responsible for securing academic standards and quality. A growing number of policies, procedures and regulations specific to higher education reflect the commitment of the College to its provision in this area. The College's processes meet the Expectation in *Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards* of the Quality Code.

1.6 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining partnership agreements, handbooks, annual programme monitoring and review reports, external examiners' reports, College policies and procedures, minutes of meetings, and validation and revalidation documents. The team also met senior staff and academic staff.

1.7 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be effective in practice. Evidence from annual monitoring and external examiners' reports, and active participation at validation events, shows the College's awareness and adherence to the frameworks and regulations of its awarding bodies. The College has good links with its awarding bodies and there are coherent and complementary quality assurance procedures in place. Staff whom the team met were clear about the respective allocations of responsibility between the College and the Universities.

1.8 The team saw evidence that, internally, the structure of quality assurance committees and their reporting lines are clear and effective in ensuring oversight of higher education provision and in ensuring adherence to the regulatory frameworks of its awarding bodies. The HE and Skills Quality Group is the primary College committee and this feeds into the College's Quality and Standards Committee. The meetings of the HE and Skills Quality Group are supplemented by Keep in Touch (KIT) meetings attended by senior managers and academic staff, with any major matters being taken forward to the next meeting of the HE Skills and Quality Group. It is clear that staff have a good understanding of the committee structure and of how design and delivery of teaching impact on the maintenance and enhancement of standards.

1.9 The team saw numerous examples of how regulatory information is clearly set out in staff and students handbooks; for example, in the latter, regarding how assessment, marking and credit arrangements work. In addition, the College has now published a new HE Staff Handbook which deals with, among other matters, assessment. As part of their induction and continuing professional development (CPD), staff are regularly provided with information and updates about higher education standards, skills and requirements.

1.10 The awarding bodies have ultimate responsibility for academic frameworks and regulations. Annual monitoring and external examiners' reports clearly indicate that the College operates effectively to uphold the frameworks and regulations. The College's committee structure and internal quality assurance processes operate effectively in this respect. Additionally, there are well-defined lines of responsibility between the College and its awarding bodies. Therefore, within the context of the partnership agreements with its awarding bodies, the team concludes that the Expectation is met both in theory and in practice, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards

Findings

1.11 It is the responsibility of the awarding bodies to maintain definitive records, in the form of programme specifications, for each approved programme and qualification. The programme specifications include reference to relevant external reference points such as the FHEQ and appropriate Subject Benchmark Statements and information regarding credit and learning outcomes. These issues are discussed at validation events which the College attends. Assessment regulations are clearly outlined. Programme specifications are made available to students via course and module handbooks, and on Staffordshire University's VLE. These approaches allow the College's processes to meet Expectation A2.2.

1.12 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining partnership agreements, handbooks, programme specifications, and validation documents. The team also held meetings with senior staff, academic staff, and students.

1.13 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be effective in practice. Responsibilities are clearly outlined between the College and its awarding bodies. The programme specifications contain appropriate information, including reference to Subject Benchmark Statements and the FHEQ, and are included within course and module handbooks and on the Universities' VLEs. Students whom the team met were aware of programme specifications, where they could find them, and how they contributed to their programmes. When there was a temporary problem for students in accessing Staffordshire University's VLE, the programme specifications were made available on the College's VLE until the issue was resolved. Students whom the team met also confirmed their understanding of credit and grade boundaries and how they would be assessed on their programmes.

1.14 The awarding bodies have ultimate responsibility for maintaining definitive records for their approved programmes and qualifications. Within these agreements, the College fulfils its responsibilities for assisting the awarding bodies to maintain these records, in the form of programme specifications, by actively engaging with validation events and annual monitoring and review procedures. Therefore, within the context of the partnership agreements with its awarding bodies, the team concludes that Expectation is met both in theory and in practice, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.15 The College delivers taught programmes on behalf of its awarding bodies. Therefore, the ultimate responsibility for approval and ensuring that the qualifications are set at the right level and are in accordance with the appropriate academic frameworks and regulations rests with the Universities (see paragraph 1.1). These processes are clearly set out in the partnership agreements that the College has with its awarding bodies, and are referred to regularly in documentation relating to programme approval and internal and external validation events. Plans to develop new programmes are subject to an internal process that requires the development of a business case, which is then evaluated by the Senior Leadership Team and Governors. Suitable members of staff are then identified to develop the programme in partnership with an awarding body. These approaches allow the College's processes to meet Expectation A3.1.

1.16 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining partnership agreements, policies and procedures, and minutes and other documentation relating to programme approval and validation events. The team also met senior staff.

1.17 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be effective in practice. Within the context of its partnership agreements, the College takes full account of the requirements of each awarding body through its policies and procedures. Staff at the College liaise with their University counterparts on assessment matters to assure academic standards through cross-marking and moderation events following approval. Programme specifications demonstrate appropriate awareness of the FHEQ and programme outcomes that are suitably matched to the relevant qualification descriptors. Minutes of validation events also show an appropriate level of externality in panel membership.

1.18 Within the context of the partnership agreements with its awarding bodies, the evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively fulfilling its responsibilities for programme approval to ensure that each of its qualifications is allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ. To do this, the College works closely with its awarding bodies and contributes effectively to the approval process. Therefore, the team concludes that Expectation A3.1 is met both in design and operation, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.19 Well established frameworks and regulations to govern how credit is awarded are outlined in the College's partnership agreements with awarding bodies and information about this is made explicit to students in programme specifications. Awarding bodies are responsible for the approval and monitoring of programmes on an annual and periodic basis, and for overseeing the examination boards. Initially, students' work is marked and moderated by College tutors. Following this, there is a shared moderation with the awarding body prior to samples of work being sent to the award administrator and subsequently to the external examiner. At set intervals during the academic year, the University convenes an assessment board, which is usually attended by the external examiner. Grades are confirmed at this point by the partners and any resubmissions agreed. Course handbooks outline the requirements to students of how to achieve module and programme credit, and are available on the College's VLE. The VLE also provides links to the awarding bodies' academic regulations to ensure there is a clear understanding of the credit requirements. These approaches allow the College's processes to meet Expectation A3.2.

1.20 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining partnership agreements, programme specifications, assessment policies and practices, external examiners' reports, course and module handbooks, and the College VLE. The team also met senior and academic staff, and students.

1.21 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be effective in practice. External examiners' reports confirm their satisfaction with the board procedures and with the satisfactory achievement of learning outcomes. Students whom the team met confirmed that they were aware of the requirements to achieve credit.

1.22 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for the award of credit and qualifications. Assessment is used to give students the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the relevant learning outcomes and decisions to award credit or qualifications are based on robust evidence that the programme or module learning outcomes have been achieved. These are confirmed by evidence from University-led meetings, external examiners' reports, and from meeting with students. Therefore, the team concludes that Expectation A3.2 is met both in design and operation, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.23 The College's approach to managing and overseeing its higher education provision is informed by its Higher Education Strategy 2013-2016. The Strategy defines areas for future development with respect to higher education. As well as having its own internal annual monitoring processes, the College is also required to contribute to the annual and periodic review procedures required by the awarding bodies. Pivotal to the College's oversight of its higher education provision is the operation of the Quality and Standards Sub-Committee, KIT meetings, and the HE and Skills Quality Group which is chaired by the Assistant Principal HE, Skills and International. This provides a locus for consideration of new programme proposals, approvals, and regular programme monitoring and reviews. Each awarding body requires the College's annual reviews to analyse module-level and programme-level information, student performance data, and external examiners' reports. Awarding bodies require annual reviews and five-yearly periodic reviews, where programmes are revalidated. In addition, the College operates an internal process for course- and area-level monitoring. These approaches allow the College's processes to meet Expectation A3.3.

1.24 The effectiveness of these practices and procedures was assessed by examining the Higher Education Strategy, minutes of the HE and Skills Quality Group, module and award monitoring forms, Higher Education Self-Assessment Report and Quality Improvement Plan, Self-Evaluation Document, Quality Improvement and Enhancement Plan, partnership agreements, and validation documents. The review team also talked to the Principal, senior staff, and academic staff.

1.25 The review team found that these processes work effectively in practice. For those awards validated by Staffordshire University, the annual review process works well with Module and Award Leaders using data on student feedback and performance to complete module and award monitoring forms, respectively. The University then scrutinises these forms to produce a report with recommendations for action and this feeds back into the College's own processes. The University requires an overarching annual summary of the College's provision to be developed within a Higher Education Self-Assessment Report and Quality Improvement Plan. This is presented to an internal panel of senior staff and Governors in the College for approval and sign-off. A Self-Evaluation Document and Quality Improvement and Enhancement Plan is subsequently developed. The review team was informed that, from 2014, the annual review system would incorporate the University of Salford programme on an equivalent basis.

1.26 The awarding bodies also require programmes to be reviewed and revalidated every five years. During this process, the team saw evidence that the currency of programmes and the continued alignment with threshold academic standards are considered.

1.27 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for monitoring and reviewing the programmes delivered on behalf of its awarding bodies. Programme teams review existing provision

drawing on data from module-level feedback, student performance, and feedback from external examiners, and present this through the annual programme review process. The College ensures oversight of its programmes, and proposals for the development of new ones, through its deliberative structures. This ensures that academic standards are achieved and that the requirements of the awarding bodies are being maintained. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards

Findings

1.28 The awarding bodies design the programmes delivered by the College and therefore have ultimate responsibility for making use of external and independent expertise to set and maintain academic standards. External examiners' reports comment on whether academic standards have successfully been achieved and maintained by the College. External examiners are appointed and trained by Staffordshire University but the College hopes to be more involved with the appointment of external examiners in the partnership with the University of Salford. The College has good links with local employers and employer-related organisations. Externality is further enhanced by the experience of academic staff, all of whom have current or recent experience in the sectors in which they teach. These approaches allow the College's processes to meet Expectation A3.4.

1.29 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining relevant strategies, staff development events and external examiners' reports, and through meetings with students, employers and academic staff.

1.30 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. External examiners' reports suggest satisfaction with the maintenance of academic standards, although the reports do not specifically refer to the College by name but instead describe findings at a number of local providers. The College has recognised this as a problem and is currently in discussions with the awarding bodies to ensure that more specific information relating to individual providers is provided in the reports.

1.31 The team found evidence that the College maintains strong links with local employers and employer-related agencies. Links with relevant employers and agencies such as the Tameside Economic and Learning Partnership and the Local Authority Workforce Development Team ensure that local needs are actively considered when developing new programmes, as well as providing input into the Education and Early Childhood Studies programmes. In addition, the Chief Executive of Tameside Council is a member of the College's governing body and the designated link to Higher Education and Skills. Active use of the Governor Engagement Strategy ensures that each member of the governing body is linked to a designated part of the College's curriculum.

1.32 The team saw and heard evidence that academic staff are well qualified and have a significant amount of experience and expertise in the relevant sectors. The majority of academic staff work at the College on a part-time hourly-paid basis while continuing to work in the sectors relevant to the courses on which they teach. Students whom the team met confirmed that they valued this current industry expertise.

1.33 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for maintaining academic standards through the use of external expertise. This is confirmed by external examiners' reports and the team saw evidence of good relationships with local employers and related agencies, and the

industry-relevant experience of academic staff. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation, and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies: Summary of findings

1.34 In reaching its positive judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All of the Expectations for this judgement area were met and the associated levels of risk were low. In all sections under academic standards, the College is also required to adhere to the procedures of its awarding bodies. The team identified no recommendations or affirmations for this judgement area. The review team therefore concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of the degree-awarding bodies **meets** UK expectations.

2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes

Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval

Findings

2.1 Up until now, the awarding bodies have designed, developed and approved those programmes delivered by the College. Within this context, the College has a strategic approach to its higher education provision as referenced within its Higher Education Strategy 2013-16. The awarding bodies lead the approval process, in accordance with the partnership agreements. The College's selection of programmes for development follows an internal process that requires the development of a business case, which is discussed in the HE and Skills Quality Group before being scrutinised by the Senior Leadership Team and agreed by Governors. The measured approach taken by the College in respect of the development of any new programmes, and the close relationship it has with its awarding bodies, allows the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval*.

2.2 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining the Higher Education Strategy 2013-16, partnership agreements, the terms of reference and minutes of meetings of the HE and Skills Quality Group, and minutes from approval and validation events, and through meetings with senior and academic staff.

2.3 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. The College clearly sets out its strategic goals in the Higher Education Strategy 2013-2016 and through the Senior Leadership Team exercises oversight of its progress in considering new programme developments. There is clear evidence of the College's involvement in the validation of programmes as defined in the relevant awarding body's regulations and processes as well as assisting with the production of parts of the validation documentation. In addition, minutes of approval and validation events (and the resulting programme specifications) clearly demonstrate appropriate engagement with key reference points including Subject Benchmark Statements, the FHEQ and, where appropriate, the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*. The team also saw evidence of assessment methods and tools, including volume and load, being considered at these approval and validation events including in relation to intended learning outcomes. Views of external experts, including from appropriate employer networks, are taken into consideration within the approval process.

2.4 More recently, the HND delivered on behalf of the University of Salford was developed as an amended version of an existing programme run by the awarding body. In this case, the College successfully assigned relevant staff with suitable industrial expertise to work with the University to further develop the programme.

2.5 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College is effectively discharging its responsibilities for the design, development and approval of its higher education programmes. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.

Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission*

Findings

2.6 The College has an HE and Skills Admissions Policy and an HE Admissions Appeals Policy which clearly set out the process by which prospective students progress to becoming current students, and the complaints and appeals procedures should a student not gain a place on their chosen programme. In addition, the HE and Skills Marketing and Communication Cycle covers key periods of recruitment throughout the academic year. The College receives direct applications for all but one of its higher education programmes, the exception being the Foundation Year Health Studies where applications are made to Staffordshire University via the UCAS process. These policies and procedures allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission*.

2.7 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these policies and procedures by examining the HE and Skills Admissions Policy, the HE Admissions Appeals Policy, the HE and Skills Marketing and Communication Cycle, programme information packs, and through meetings with employers, support staff, academic staff and students.

2.8 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. In addition to the Admissions Policy, useful additional information to help students with the application process and choosing the right course is provided in information packs for individual courses. The team saw three examples of these packs which are accessible and contain helpful and accurate information to assist students, in addition to other processes put in place by the College and its awarding bodies.

2.9 Staff involved in admissions confirmed that they help prospective students on the Foundation Year course with their UCAS application even though this is done through the University. Students whom the team met welcomed this assistance and the students as a whole stated that they felt well supported throughout the application and admissions process. Students have an opportunity to feed back on their experience in a survey carried out in October following enrolment. The College has good initial checks to ensure students are on the right programme and that they are appropriately supported by academic and support staff. Staff involved in initial interviews are given guidance to aid consistency and to ensure that students are on the right programme, including appropriate use of Staffordshire University's APEL Policy.

2.10 The team heard from employers and alumni students who all confirmed the positive effects of the comprehensive information given out at recruitment, interview and admission stages. Some of the employers are themselves former students and they have recommended courses to employees. The team found that all of this practice and its positive effect on student retention was part of the comprehensive and high-quality support given to students, from initial enquiry through to graduation, and considers it to be **good practice** (see also Expectations B4, B10 and Enhancement).

2.11 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College has recruitment, selection and admissions policies and procedures which adhere to the principles of fair admission. The College supports students by offering a good experience at initial application and admissions stages and by putting processes in place to increase the

likelihood that students are enrolled on the most appropriate programme. Good external links also helps the College to recruit students who are well informed about the provision on offer. Information to prospective students is clear and comprehensive. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.

Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*

Findings

2.12 The strategic direction for higher education provision at the College, including learning and teaching, is detailed in the Higher Education Strategy 2013-2016. Stemming from this overarching strategy are a number of related policies, procedures and strategies, including the HE Student Engagement Strategy, a new draft Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy, a Continuing Professional Development Strategy, HE Review of Learning Policy, an induction policy for students, an Academic Skills Policy, equality and diversity strategies and policies, and various methods of feedback and monitoring used by the College and its awarding bodies. In all cases, policies and procedures are on the College VLE, with relevant links to the websites of the awarding bodies. Course material is placed on the VLEs with separate platforms for College and Staffordshire University materials. All policies are reviewed at least once a year and more frequently if required. The College has a wide range of CPD initiatives including scholarly activity and staff development days focused specifically on higher education. These policies, procedures and strategies allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching*.

2.13 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these policies, procedures and strategies by examining the documents outlined in the previous paragraph, and through meetings with senior staff, employers, support staff, academic staff and students.

2.14 The review team found these processes work effectively in practice. Results of the National Student Survey (NSS) and the College's HE and Skills Survey generally show students to be highly satisfied with the learning and teaching environment, with relatively few areas for improvement such as tutors' different teaching styles and insufficient texts in the library. In light of its Review of Learning Policy, the College has developed its Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy for higher education. The team welcomed this initiative because once this Policy is approved and implemented in autumn 2014, it should help the College to further improve the way in which it delivers teaching and learning across its higher education programmes.

2.15 The team found that information about teaching and learning is clearly set out in course and module handbooks. Tutors consistently place course material on the College and University VLEs for students to access. Students whom the team met confirmed the findings from a recent focus group regarding difficulties in accessing the VLEs from home and with certain functional aspects to do with Staffordshire University's VLE. The team were made aware that the issues had been discussed at a meeting between senior and technical staff and that the University had been alerted to the problems regarding access to the VLE. The team therefore **affirms** the actions being taken to improve the accessibility of information available to students on the VLEs (see also Expectations B4 and C).

2.16 A number of academic staff have master's-level qualifications and those without a postgraduate qualification are working towards one and/or have extensive subject and professional expertise that enables them to teach at this level. Two are currently working towards PhDs and there is continuing professional development (CPD) funding available for staff to undertake relevant postgraduate degrees. Staff are also engaged in a range of

scholarly and professional activities which is in the course of being logged to provide a more structured approach to capturing and strategically guiding these activities. The team heard that staff practices and progress are monitored and reviewed using a variety of mechanisms including performance management reviews (PMRs), CPD, peer observation of teaching, and sharing of best practice at development days. Other ways in which staff can share good practice and evaluate their own practices are through the recent introduction of a new biannual research magazine entitled 'Higher Education Ashton Review' (HEar) and an online collaborative space. The team therefore concludes that academic staff are highly qualified and are actively encouraged and supported to pursue a comprehensive range of CPD activities. This is **good practice** (see also Expectations B4 and Enhancement).

2.17 Concerns raised by students are listened to and acted upon and feedback is given to students in relation to the actions that have or will be taken, for example via the 'You Said, Our Response' mechanism. Other ways in which students are able to feed back about their experiences of teaching and learning are via end-of-module surveys, student surveys, and focus groups. Staff also stated that they respond to every student issue raised as part of programme and module monitoring processes. Students whom the team met confirmed that staff are responsive and supportive. The team heard examples of changes made to physical resources as a consequence of student feedback including the provision of an HE Study Zone and improvements to the learning resource centre (LRC), most notably more books and journals available online and longer opening hours for part-time students. The team also heard that the College is putting more training in place for students to ensure they are able to make full use of these resources.

2.18 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College has effective learning and teaching practices. Overall, students are happy about the teaching and learning available at the College. The highly qualified staff and the range of CPD available was found to be good practice, while the team affirmed the College's actions in improving accessibility of the VLEs. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.

Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement

Findings

2.19 The strategic direction for higher education provision at the College, including arrangements and resources to enable student development and achievement, is detailed in the Higher Education Strategy 2013-2016. Stemming from this overarching strategy are a number of related policies, procedures and strategies (see paragraph 2.12). Staff practices and progress are monitored using a variety of mechanisms including performance management reviews (PMRs), CPD, peer observation of teaching, and a range of evaluations and surveys. The College's processes for annual monitoring and review are outlined in paragraph 1.23. These policies, procedures and strategies allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*.

2.20 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these policies, procedures and strategies by examining the Higher Education Strategy, external examiners' reports, the relevant documents outlined in paragraph 2.12, and through meetings with senior staff, support staff, academic staff and students.

2.21 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. New and returning students are thoroughly inducted onto their programmes of study and in September 2014 the College introduced an induction which is more focused around higher education. The College has a proactive and supportive Additional Learning Support (ALS) department. The team heard that the College undertakes 'free-writing' assessments of all new students to identify those with dyslexia or associated disabilities. The College makes use of specialist software to identify students at risk, as defined by poor performance or attendance, and this triggers additional follow-up and support.

2.22 Paragraphs 2.10 and 2.16 highlight numerous examples of high-quality support provided by both academic and support staff. The team therefore concludes that the comprehensive and high-quality support given to students from initial enquiry through to graduation is **good practice** (see also Expectations B3, B10 and Enhancement). In addition, the team recognises that academic staff are highly qualified and are actively encouraged and supported to pursue a comprehensive range of continuing professional development activities and this is also considered **good practice** (see also Expectations B3 and Enhancement).

2.23 The team saw evidence of a range of new initiatives designed to encourage a greater focus on higher education at the College. One example is an 'Evening of Academia' event which focuses on the theme of transition from further to higher education, and onto higher degrees and careers. The idea for the event was informed in part by a student focus group.

2.24 The College has in place a range of effective monitoring and review processes that lead to actions being implemented both within the committee structure and through line management procedures. For example, there are appropriate monitoring and review mechanisms in place for ensuring that higher education students receive an appropriate share of the learning resources including physical resources, dedicated course materials and study space. There is a separate budget for higher education resources at the College. Higher education provision is now considered as a separate entity to further education at meetings where resource allocation is discussed.

2.25 The team heard evidence that the College is clearly focused on, and responsive to, the needs of its higher education students. Examples are provided in paragraphs 2.15 and 2.17 of how the College has responded positively to students' concerns about the VLE, the LRC and study space for higher education students. The team again **affirms** the actions being taken to improve the accessibility of information available to students on the VLEs (see also Expectations B3 and C).

2.26 As part of an Employability and Careers Package for higher education students, the College has recently employed an Employability and Careers Offer. As part of this package, students are offered mock interviews and assistance with completing job and UCAS applications. The team heard from students and support staff that this package, combined with input from well-qualified teaching staff with industry experience, ensures that students feel equipped to work in and progress within their chosen field. Students whom the team met also value the support from peers and the opportunities to share their experiences from the work environment.

2.27 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the College has effective processes in place to enable student development and achievement. Teaching and support staff have extensive expertise and are supported to undertake CPD. Students spoke highly of the support they received from teaching and support staff, providing the team with numerous examples. The highly qualified staff and the range of CPD available was found to be good practice, while the team affirmed the College's actions in improving accessibility of the VLEs. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is 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

2.28 The College has an HE Student Engagement Strategy with key indicators. The College has various methods to collaborate student feedback and engage with the student community including student surveys, focus groups, and programme and module evaluations. The name for student representatives has recently been changed to HE Ambassadors. HE Ambassadors can feed back about the course and resources. A Student Governor has now been recruited and approved by the Governors. These procedures and strategies allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B5: Student Engagement*.

2.29 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these procedures and strategies by examining the HE Student Engagement Strategy, relevant surveys and evaluations, and through meetings with senior staff, support staff, academic staff, students, and at the final meeting.

2.30 Overall, the review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. On an informal basis, the team found strong evidence of good working relationships between staff and students. Students feel listened to and feedback, both formal and informal, is implemented quickly and effectively as evidenced through 'You Said, Our Response' and the HEar magazine which keeps students up to date with what is happening at the College including CPD and the development and role of HE Ambassadors. The team also heard several examples of how informal feedback had quickly led to changes and how this was fed back to students.

2.31 The College has been less effective in the formal engagement of student representatives. In recognition of this, the College has 'rebranded' the role as HE Ambassadors. Due to the vast majority of students being part-time, it has had difficulty recruiting students to representative roles and getting them to attend relevant committee meetings. Some of the students whom the team met did not believe that they had an HE Ambassador for their course, largely because of the time pressures on students. The team did hear that minutes of the HE and Skills Quality Group are sent to HE Ambassadors for discussion. Staff at the final meeting did indicate that they would be trying different ways to recruit students to the role of HE Ambassador and would be developing the staff/student committee used on the HND course as a way of gathering feedback from part-time students. The team heard that training will shortly be introduced for HE Ambassadors. As these are very new developments, the team **recommends** that, by October 2015, the College monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of the recruitment, scope and participation of HE Student Ambassadors (see also Enhancement).

2.32 The review team concludes that the College effectively listens to students and responds quickly and efficiently. While recognising the part-time nature of student attendance, there are weaknesses in the student representative system. However, the College has recognised that improvements need to be made and is in the process of ensuring that the student representative system works more effectively. It is too early in the process to know whether the changes have been successful and for this reason, the team concludes that the Expectation is met but the associated level of risk is moderate.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning

Findings

2.33 The awarding bodies have significant responsibility for the management of assessment and for recognition of prior learning. For all Staffordshire University awards, the University designs and sets the assessments and provides the grading criteria. College staff mark the students' work and then engage with University staff to standardise and moderate marks. For the University of Salford award, the College develops assessment briefs, which are then approved by the University. There are no Professional Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) considerations, nor are research degrees offered. The regulations for the accreditation of prior learning are run in accordance with the awarding bodies. College staff are made aware of policies related to assessment via the College VLE, and assessment matters have informed relevant staff development activities. The College's approach to assessment in terms of working largely with assessments and processes designed by the awarding bodies allows the College to in theory meet the Expectation in *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*.

2.34 The review team considered a range of documentary evidence in programme specifications, course and module handbooks, external examiners' reports, and module reviews, and held meetings with students, senior staff, and academic staff.

2.35 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. Students confirmed a high level of satisfaction with the processes related to assessment, and made mention of the ease of access they had to tutor support, including that provided by mentors and critical friends in work-based settings. External examiners' reports provide evidence regarding consistency of marking, appropriate methods of assessment and levels of student achievement in assessments.

2.36 Mechanisms for providing feedback on students' work are effective, with students reporting a clear understanding of assessment tasks and grading criteria. Recent changes allowing feedback to be provided prior to the completion of all stages of moderation enable students to receive comments on their work within four working weeks following submission, as stipulated within the draft Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy. The College had identified a potential lack of consistency regarding timeliness of feedback but the guidance now addresses this problem. In addition, staff now provide feedback return dates within module guides. Students whom the team met were positive about these changes, as in previous years the timeliness of feedback had been a negative issue for some students and had impacted on subsequent assessments. The policy also identifies guidance to staff in relation to the extent of comments provided on student assessment drafts prior to submission.

2.37 In conclusion, the team found evidence of a clear strategy for assessment, which gave a shared set of principles across the programme teams. Assessment methods were appropriately designed or approved by the awarding bodies, thus providing opportunities for students to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes. Criteria and expectations for assessment were clearly presented to students, and feedback received was helpful and now more timely. Cross-marking and moderation events assure standards, and the regular

review of programmes, which draws on evidence from external examiners, module reviews and student feedback, provides evidence of appropriate assessment practices within the College. For these reasons, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining

Findings

2.38 With regard to the programmes delivered in partnership with Staffordshire University, it is the responsibility of the awarding body to appoint and train the external examiners. The University is also responsible for the policies and strategies relating to external examiners and for collating information from their reports. The external examiners use the University's pro forma when writing their reports. For the new HND offered in conjunction with the University of Salford, it is again the responsibility of the awarding body to appoint the external examiners, although the College will also be engaged in the selection process. The College considers comments from external examiners' reports at the HE and Skills Quality Group and responds with an action plan or comments where appropriate. External examiners' reports and responses to them are published on the College VLE and HE Ambassadors are informed of progress. These arrangements and responsibilities allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B7: External Examining*.

2.39 The review team considered a range of documentary evidence in external examiners' reports and responses to them, action plans, partnership agreements, and minutes of the HE and Skills Quality Group, and held meetings with students, senior staff, and academic staff.

2.40 Overall, the review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. External examiners' reports and action plans indicate that there are no major concerns regarding the higher education programmes and that the College actively addresses any matters which appear to relate to its provision.

2.41 The College is, however, still working with Staffordshire University to ensure that information from external examiners' reports is made more specific to it as a delivery centre. The pro forma used by the College asks for comments to be made that are specific to a provider if there is more than one delivery centre involved. The team saw evidence that the University is working with its external examiners to encourage them to identify which matters relate to which college and that this is beginning to filter through in their reports. The College has also been working with the University to ensure that the reports are fed through to them in a more consistent and timely manner so that it makes it easier for the College to act on the findings from the reports. In the rare instances where reports have been specific, the team saw evidence that the College considers the comments at the HE and Skills Quality Group and responds with an action plan where appropriate.

2.42 Not all students whom the team met were aware of the role of external examiners, with some confusing it with the second marking and moderation process. Some students were unaware of the contents or whereabouts of external examiners' reports, while others were clearer as to what the process entails and had seen reports. Staff did, however, indicate that awareness training about the role of external examiners and their reports would form part of the future training for HE Ambassadors.

2.43 In conclusion, external examiners' reports suggest that the higher education programmes at the College are being managed effectively and that academic standards are being upheld. The College is working with its awarding body to ensure that findings from reports are made more specific to it. In addition, the College is introducing into future training for HE Ambassadors information about the role of external examiners and their reports and

how they fit into the College's quality assurance and enhancement processes. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.

Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review

Findings

2.44 The College's approach to managing and overseeing its higher education provision is informed by its Higher Education Strategy 2013-2016. The Strategy defines areas for future development with respect to higher education. As well as having its own regular and systematic process for monitoring and reviewing programmes, the College is also required to contribute to the annual and periodic review procedures required by the awarding bodies. These processes are described in paragraph 1.23. These arrangements and responsibilities allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review*.

2.45 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining the Higher Education Strategy, minutes of the HE and Skills Quality Group, module and award monitoring forms, Higher Education Self-Assessment Report, Self-Evaluation Document, Quality Improvement and Enhancement Plan, partnership agreements, and validation documents, and by talking to the Principal, senior staff, and academic staff.

2.46 The review team found these monitoring and review processes to work effectively in practice. The processes analysed by the team are explained more fully in paragraphs 1.25 to 1.26.

2.47 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for monitoring and reviewing the programmes delivered on behalf of its awarding bodies. Programme teams review existing provision drawing on data from module-level feedback, student performance, and feedback from external examiners and present this through the annual programme review process. The College ensures oversight of its programmes, and proposals for the development of new ones, through its deliberative structures. This ensures that academic standards and quality of learning opportunities are achieved and that the requirements of the awarding bodies are being maintained. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.

Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints

Findings

2.48 The College and its awarding bodies share responsibility for handling complaints and appeals. The College has its own Complaints Policy and an HE Admissions Appeals Policy. For cases involving academic misconduct or appeals, the early stages are managed by the College but are referred to the awarding bodies as appropriate. This procedure is outlined in the awarding bodies' policy guidelines for academic appeals and complaints. Information about complaints and appeals can be found on the College and University VLEs and in course and module handbooks. These policies and procedures enable the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints*.

2.49 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining the College's Complaints Policy and HE Admissions Appeals Policy along with the appeals and complaints policies and procedures of the awarding bodies, and by holding meetings with senior staff, support staff, and students.

2.50 The review team found the policies and procedures for complaints and appeals to work effectively in practice. Students whom the team met confirmed that they knew where to find the information about complaints and appeals and that information held by both the College and its awarding bodies was easily accessible. They were also clear about the difference between a complaint and an appeal and knew who to talk to should they require further information. Staff whom the team met stated that if a student took the decision to make an appeal, the tutor would provide guidance on the processes involved. In addition, HE Ambassadors are now being trained in how best to support students who wish to make a complaint or appeal.

2.51 The College stated that there have been no formal complaints in higher education in the last three years because issues raised by students tend to get resolved at a 'local' level before they escalate to formal complaints. The team heard about several examples including the opening hours of the LRC. The College reacted quickly to this feedback and improvements have been made to access for part-time students.

2.52 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for handling complaints and appeals. Policies and procedures are clear and accessible and students showed a clear understanding regarding meaning and where to access information should they need it. The team also heard several examples of how informal feedback has led to improvements in the students' learning experience. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.

Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others

Findings

2.53 Nearly all of the higher education programmes delivered by the College involve work-related learning delivered in the workplace. For the Education and Early Childhood Studies programmes, it is a requirement that the student already works (in a paid or voluntary capacity) in a setting that relates to their area of study. The College confirmed that the achievement of learning outcomes does depend on the students on these programmes being in a relevant place of work. In most cases, the students are already in employment prior to enrolment. If not, they are expected to find a relevant paid or voluntary position. For a small number of PGCE students that do not have relevant employment, the College places them with College departments, but only where the department has been rated as a 1 or 2 under Ofsted grading criteria. The courses delivered by the College which involve work-based learning are regulated by Ofsted and so the College has to date been assured of the quality of provision offered in the environments in which students have been working. Where students change workplace environments during their course, the College undertakes risk assessments prior to the students taking up their new positions. In addition, the College also ensures that up-to-date Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks have been undertaken where appropriate. For the Foundation Year Health Studies, students are advised to seek voluntary work but this is not a formal requirement.

2.54 As part of their work-related learning, students are supported either by a Mentor or a Critical Friend, depending on the programme being studied, and it is the responsibility of the student to select them. On the Early Childhood Studies programmes, students are encouraged to have a Critical Friend but this is not a requirement. Those acting as Critical Friends receive a handbook from the University explaining what is required of them. Students on the PGCE programme are required to have a mentor who is involved in observing and assessing the student during their teaching practice. Mentors receive a handbook outlining what is required of them. These procedures enable the College to meet the Expectation in *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

2.55 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining the relevant learning agreements and the Mentor and Critical Friend Handbooks, and holding meetings with senior staff, teaching staff, employers and students.

2.56 The review team found the procedures for delivering learning opportunities with other organisations to work effectively in practice. The team found evidence of very comprehensive guidance given to Mentors, Critical Friends and students regarding their respective responsibilities. The team heard that mentors and critical friends are in regular contact with College staff. In the rare instance where a Critical Friend cannot be found by the student, the Course Leader personally takes on the role.

2.57 The employers whom the team met commented on the skills acquired by the students at the College and how these benefited them in the workplace. They also praised the clear and high-quality information given to them by the College to explain their role and what was expected of the students. Students whom the team met spoke of feeling confident in their work environments because of the good education being delivered by the College, stating that they felt better able to cope in the workplace than employees who were studying

elsewhere. Students also welcomed the support from teaching staff and from their peers and benefited enormously from sharing their experiences and learning with fellow students.

2.58 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with other organisations. Both employers and students commented on the information and support they receive. The team considers that the College effectively manages its current level of work-based provision and has in place proportionate measures for supporting this aspect of the learning process. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is 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

2.58 The College does not offer research degrees, therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.59 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All of the Expectations relating to the College's quality of student learning opportunities are met. Apart from Expectation B5, where the level of risk is moderate, the associated levels of risk for the Expectations were low.

2.60 The review team makes one new recommendation and one new affirmation in this section. The recommendation relates to the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the recruitment, scope and participation of HE Student Ambassadors. The affirmation concerns the actions being taken to improve the accessibility of information available to students on the VLEs. There were two features of good practice: the comprehensive and high-quality support given to students from initial enquiry through to graduation; and academic staff are highly qualified and actively encouraged and supported to pursue a comprehensive range of CPD activities. The review team concludes that, overall, the quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

Findings

3.1 The College and its awarding bodies publish information in various places about the higher education provision, primarily in programme specifications, information packs, course and module handbooks, the University Course Guide, the HE Staff Handbook, VLEs, and the website. Course and module handbooks are written by Staffordshire University for its courses and by the College for the HND offered by the University of Salford. Responsibilities for monitoring different types of information lie with the Senior Admissions Officer, Marketing Assistant, curriculum staff, and support staff. When monitoring and reviewing information, the College adheres to guidelines in the form of a document entitled Approval of Partner Marketing and Publicity Material. The College has an HE and Skills marketing and communication cycle. These practices and procedures allow the College to meet the Expectation in *Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision*.

3.2 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining the website, VLEs and documentation referred to in the preceding paragraph, and by meeting senior staff, employers, students, teaching staff, and support staff.

3.3 The review team found the procedures for delivering learning opportunities with other organisations to work effectively in practice. The vision and mission of the College are clear and accessible to current and prospective students and to other stakeholders. The team examined the information provided by the College and found it to be accurate, accessible and fit for purpose. The College follows the guidelines set out by the awarding bodies and this is embedded within its marketing and communication cycle. The team heard evidence that marketing at the College is enhanced by word of mouth, with students, alumni and employers advocating the College as a place to study.

3.4 Some students were unaware of the contents or whereabouts of external examiners' reports, while others were clearer as to what the process entails and had seen reports. Staff did, however, indicate that awareness training about the role of external examiners and their reports would form part of the future training for HE Ambassadors. Students whom the team met stated that they were aware of the key pieces of information and knew where to find them. Detailed information packs contain information that helps prospective students in many ways including enquiries, application and student finance.

3.5 Examples are provided in paragraphs 2.15, 2.17 and 2.23 of how the College has responded positively to students' concerns about the VLEs, the LRC and study space for higher education students. The team again affirms the actions being taken to improve the accessibility of information available to students on the VLEs (see also Expectations B3 and B4).

3.6 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the College is effectively managing its responsibilities for providing information about its higher education provision that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. Overall, students were positive about the information provided by the College and know where to find what they want.

The College adheres to guidelines provided by its awarding bodies when monitoring and reviewing information. The team affirms the actions being taken by the College to specifically improve the accessibility of information on the VLEs. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.7 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The Expectation for this judgement area was met and the associated level of risk was low. The team makes no new affirmations in this section, but repeats one from Expectations B3 and B4 regarding the actions being taken to improve the accessibility of information available to students on the VLEs. The review team therefore concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Findings

4.1 The College's strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities is informed by its 'Vision of Enhancement', which has eight themes. The Higher Education Strategy 2013-2016 highlights a set of strategic aims for higher education with the aim of enhancing its provision. The HE and Skills Quality Group has a specific responsibility for the quality assurance and enhancement of the College's higher education provision. The College's procedures and strategies allow this Expectation to be met.

4.2 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these strategies and procedures by examining the Vision of Enhancement, Higher Education Strategy 2013-2016, minutes of the HE and Skills Quality Group, student surveys and focus groups, and by holding meetings with the Principal, senior staff and teaching staff.

4.3 Overall, the review team found that the strategies and procedures for enhancing student learning opportunities work effectively in practice. The College provided evidence to show the congruence between the strategic aims of the College and the enhancement of student learning opportunities. Examples include the new Academic Skills programme, the Induction Period Policy, the Review of Learning and a range of dedicated staff development events for higher education staff. All of these actions contribute to the College's Vision of Enhancement and enable the student to succeed personally, professionally and academically.

4.4 Another example was how the College was seeking to enhance student support. This was clear from the range of student surveys and focus groups being used, and has been instrumental in identifying some dedicated space for higher education students in the LRC. Paragraphs 2.10 and 2.16 highlight numerous examples of high-quality support provided by both academic and support staff. The team therefore again concludes that the comprehensive and high-quality support given to students from initial enquiry through to graduation is good practice (see also Expectations B2, B4 and B10). In addition, the team again recognises that academic staff are highly qualified and are actively encouraged and supported to pursue a comprehensive range of CPD activities and also considers this to be good practice (see also Expectations B3 and B4). The team felt that the extensive level of support provided to students suggested consistency with the strategy for enhancement, which places 'the successful student' at the centre of the College's approach.

4.5 Although the HE Skills and Quality Group has a specific responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement, a scrutiny of recent minutes of this group and other relevant meetings suggests that meetings are more concerned with operational matters, and references to enhancement lack detail. Moreover, the operation of the HE Skills and Quality Group does not overtly make reference to the enhancement of higher education as an item in its schedule of business. The team therefore **recommends** that, by April 2015, the College develops the committee responsible for higher education to include regular monitoring of the Enhancement Strategy.

4.6 The College provided evidence of how good practice was identified, disseminated and used to enhance the learning opportunities for students. Examples included how the results of a lesson observation informed a subsequent staff development training event, and how engagement with consortium HE in FE meetings led to the development of a helpful HE

Staff Handbook. The team also saw evidence of how standard quality assurance processes have fed into enhancement. For example, participation in University-led standardisation processes showed that a number of PGCE scripts revealed weaknesses with referencing and academic writing. This led the College to develop an academic skills programme to start in 2014-15 for all higher education students and to update related policy.

4.7 The team heard evidence from staff of a widely held understanding of the College's ethos and expectation of enhancement, but there was less awareness of how individual initiatives were aligned to the College's 'Vision of Enhancement' Strategy, and the minutes of key meetings did not make explicit reference to the strategy document. Senior staff explained that the strategy had been recently published, and that further events were planned to more fully communicate and embed its expectations and approach. The team **affirms** the steps being taken to fully disseminate and implement the strategic approach to enhancement.

4.8 The College has found it difficult to engage students in a representative role, particularly those who attend on a part-time basis. These difficulties and the action being taken by the College to address them are described more fully in paragraph 2.30. As these are very new developments, the team again recommends that, by October 2015, the College monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of the recruitment, scope and participation of HE Student Ambassadors (see also Expectation B5).

4.9 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that, overall, the College is effectively enhancing the learning opportunities for its higher education students. It was clear to the team that relevant sections of Part B of the Quality Code were being incorporated into the working practices of the College. The College had systems to disseminate good practice and make use of its review mechanisms to identify opportunities for improvement. A range of enhancement initiatives were ongoing that were linked to the College's various strategy documents. The review team has confidence that the shortcomings identified are minor and related to the need to more fully embed its Enhancement Strategy, an activity already underway. No major structural, operational or procedural change is required for the College to more fully meet this Expectation. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.10 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The Expectation in this area is met and the level of risk is low. The College has systems to disseminate good practice and make use of its review mechanisms to identify opportunities for improvement. A range of enhancement initiatives linked to the College's various strategy documents are ongoing. The review team has confidence that the shortcomings identified are minor and related to the need to more fully embed the Enhancement Strategy, an activity that is already underway.

4.11 The team makes one new recommendation in this section, also repeating one from a previous section. This concerns the development of the committee responsible for higher education to include regular monitoring of the Enhancement Strategy. The repeated recommendation refers to the monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the recruitment, scope and participation of HE Student Ambassadors. The team makes one new affirmation in this section, which is the steps being taken to fully disseminate and implement the strategic approach to enhancement. The team also repeats the two features of good practice from a previous section, which are the comprehensive and high-quality support given to students from initial enquiry through to graduation, and that academic staff are highly qualified and actively encouraged and supported to pursue a comprehensive range of CPD activities. The review team therefore concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

Findings

5.1 The view of the College is that it needs to make significant improvements in its support of students' employability skills to ensure 'a more planned approach' and 'explicit referencing of employability skills' with its students. To assist with this, the Employability and Enterprise Manager, appointed in 2012, will be focusing more on higher education-specific employability from the beginning of the 2014-15 academic year. The team, however, found examples of the College performing well in this area.

5.2 There is a structure for supporting and promoting employability, with key senior personnel working closely with higher education and careers staff both at the College and the awarding bodies. Staffordshire University requires the 'Staffordshire Graduate' attributes to be embedded within all of its courses undergoing validation. The attributes are heavily focused on making students employable and the College is ensuring that the attributes are built into its learning and teaching. The University of Salford has a similar practice and therefore a similar employability focus. In addition, the College has recently developed its own separate 'Employability and Careers Offer' for higher education students which offers them assistance with a variety of topics including career planning, and guidance on interview techniques and CV writing. There is also a section on Careers and Employability in the new HE Staff Handbook, showing what initiatives the College offers, as well as information on the VLE, as part of the Wider Information Sets, for students to explore.

5.3 The College considers and analyses sector trends within the Higher Education Strategy which informs curriculum planning. Within programmes, students engage in many learning opportunities that support the development of employability skills, such as collating presentations, addressing groups, project planning, team working, report writing, research, and problem solving.

5.4 Notwithstanding that most students are already in employment, the College offers a good range of careers and personal development activities. Since 2012, there has been an increasing number of employability-focused activities, specifically for higher education students, to help them with career planning. Additionally, the Careers department is increasing greatly its focus on higher education as the number of students on this provision expands. It is possible for part-time students to make evening appointments with a member of the Careers staff and they are also able to engage with software which assists with careers research and planning. The College has published a new magazine titled 'Higher Education Ashton Review' (HEar) which includes a list of academic skills sessions for higher education students and articles such as 'Research Projects - Top Tips'.

5.5 The College states that it has maintained good links with the Education and Early Childhood Studies sector through the local authority Workforce Development Team and through marketing and direct links with employers. This was confirmed by Ofsted in its October 2011 report. Attempts have also been made to collect information from employers with whom the College has developed links in respect of the type of engagement they would like to have with the College. The employers whom the team met confirmed that they have successful and productive links with the College and that they valued the standard of education it provided for employees.

5.6 Many of the teaching staff are paid hourly and continue to work in the environments about which they are teaching, injecting significant, current realism into the classroom and learning environment (see paragraph 2.16). The planned use by the College of leavers' destination statistics in future may well also add helpful data as part of its strategy for the focus on externality.

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/assuring-standards-and-quality.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx.

Academic standards

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

Award

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

Blended learning

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

Credit(s)

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

Degree-awarding body

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

Distance learning

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

See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award

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

e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

Enhancement

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

Expectations

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

Flexible and distributed learning

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

See also **distance learning**.

Framework

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

Framework for higher education qualifications

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

Good practice

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

Learning opportunities

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

Learning outcomes

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

Multiple awards

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

Operational definition

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

Programme (of study)

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

Programme specifications

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

Public information

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

Quality Code

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

Reference points

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

Subject Benchmark Statement

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

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)

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

Threshold academic standard

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

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

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

Widening participation

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

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