



# Higher Education Review of Petroc

November 2014

## Contents

<b>About this review .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Key findings.....</b>	<b>2</b>
QAA's judgements about Petroc .....	2
Good practice .....	2
Recommendations .....	2
Affirmation of action being taken .....	2
Theme: Student Employability.....	3
<b>About Petroc.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Explanation of the findings about Petroc .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>This section explains the review findings in more detail. ....</b>	<b>5</b>
1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies .....	6
2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities.....	17
3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities .....	35
4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities .....	38
5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability.....	41
<b>Glossary.....</b>	<b>43</b>

## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Petroc. The review took place from 25 to 28 November 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Chris Stevens
- Mr Nabeel Zaidi
- Miss Alyson Bird (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Petroc and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 6.

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

The [themes](#) for the academic year 2014-15 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review](#)<sup>4</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents. For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code)

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Review themes: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106)

<sup>3</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review web pages: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review)

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about Petroc

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

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its 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 Petroc.

- The strategic approach to developing and extending student employability skills, which are integrated into the curriculum across all programmes (Expectation B4).
- The range of additional learning support in place for students accessing and undertaking higher education programmes (Expectation B4).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Petroc.

By April 2015:

- ensure that procedures for moderation and marking, including the use of a third marker, are clearly defined, fair and transparent (Expectations B6 and A3.2)
- ensure that admissions policies and procedures provide a transparent and reliable framework for making and recording decisions on non-standard entrants and can demonstrate fairness (Expectation B2).

By September 2015:

- develop and implement a formal process to ensure that information for all stakeholders is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy (Expectation C)
- implement a more robust process for the development of policies and procedures to ensure they are comprehensive and informed by evaluation of practice (Expectations C, B2, B5 and B10)
- develop a more systematic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities, including the effective identification, dissemination and embedding of good practice (Enhancement).

### Affirmation of action being taken

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

- the actions being taken to formalise procedures for the support and development of lecturers that are aligned to the particular needs of those delivering higher education programmes (Expectation B3).

## Theme: Student Employability

The College approach to employability is grounded in the Strategic Plan and reflects the needs of local employers and learners.

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

## About Petroc

Petroc (the College) is a large provider of further and higher education programmes that was formed by the merger of North Devon College and East Devon College in 2008. The College offers a broad curriculum delivered across campuses in Barnstaple, Tiverton and Holsworthy to serve principally the communities of north, mid and east Devon, Torridge and north Cornwall. At the time of the review, the College had approximately 5,000 students, of which 500 were enrolled onto higher education programmes. The majority of higher education provision is delivered at the Brannams site in Barnstaple and is offered in six of the seven academic schools at the College, namely: Architecture and the Built Environment; Business Manufacturing and Transport; Creative Industries; Humanities and Science; Health, Fitness and Supported Learning; and Lifestyle. The programme portfolio mainly consists of full-time and part-time foundation degree programmes although the College also offers four Higher National Certificates and a BA (Hons) Professional Development framework delivering bachelor awards in business and management, creative industries and early childhood studies.

The College vision is to be 'An outstanding college at the heart of an outstanding learning community; economically, culturally and socially' and the underpinning mission statement is to 'Drive forward educational, economic and cultural success by continually raising the aspirations, knowledge and skills of individuals, communities and businesses'. Its Strategic Plan 2011-16 identifies higher education as one of four key strategic areas for development with the overall aim to increase the number of higher education learners. The key strategic objectives in the plan are expanded on in the Higher Education Strategic Plan. The strategic direction is led by a Principalship which consists of the Principal, Deputy Principal, Vice Principal and Director of Resources. The Senior Management Team meets weekly and comprises the Principalship; a Deputy Director; Heads of School; Head of Administration; and Head of Student Services. Since 2011, one of the Heads of School has also fulfilled the role of the HE Coordinator and reports regularly on higher education matters across the College.

All higher education programmes at the College are delivered through a partnership arrangement with the Plymouth University. The terms and conditions of the relationship are outlined in an Academic Cooperation Agreement which was most recently updated in 2013.

The number of higher education programmes offered by the College has increased significantly since the last QAA review (an Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in 2010) and there has been a slight increase in the overall number of higher education students. The School structure and senior management arrangements remain largely unchanged. Higher education provision continues to be delivered exclusively at the Barnstaple campus across two sites. A significant development in this regard is the designation of the Brannams site for the exclusive delivery of higher education programmes. Since September 2014, the majority of higher education provision has been based at the Brannams site. The College has also recently approved its first provision at level six of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) with three honours degrees now being delivered.

The 2010 IQER reported seven features of good practice and seven desirable recommendations for action. Although some of these features of good practice, such as the use of external academic frames of reference, are reflected in current practice, the review team did not see evidence of how other aspects of the good practice had been maintained or developed since the last review. With regards to the recommendations, while all areas had undergone consideration by the College, actions relating to some recommendations had only recently been completed. For example, the IQER recommended that the College discuss with the University whether a periodic review process for higher education provision would be beneficial. While this discussion had taken place since 2010, the first periodic reviews were only conducted in June 2014. Similarly, discussions had been recommended between the College and University on whether the proportion of change permitted to programmes in any one year was too high. An internal College meeting was held in June 2014 and discussion with the University did not take place until July 2014, which has not fully addressed the concern raised at the last review. Although it is recognised that progress on some actions are dependent on the University, the review team considers that the College has not adopted a systematic approach to addressing the outcomes from external reviews, and progress in some areas have not been timely.

## Explanation of the findings about Petroc

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

**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 Academic Co-operation Agreement is drafted in line with the Quality Code and sets out the University's and College's respective obligations, undertakings and parameters of operation. The University is the sole degree-awarding body for higher education provision delivered at the College and retains overall control of the design and content of programmes, the setting of academic standards and quality assurance processes that ensure the maintenance of academic standards. The University's Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes (2013-14) specify the credit weighting of undergraduate awards, signpost the correct titling of undergraduate awards and outline the grading and classification thresholds for qualifications.

1.2 The review team examined a range of documents relating to the setting and maintenance of academic standards, including the partnership agreement between the University and the College, the University's academic regulations, the University's guide to designing programmes and modules, minutes of validation meetings and approval documents. The team also met senior staff, programme managers and lecturers during the review visit to explore the use of external frames of reference.

1.3 The review team confirms that the College makes appropriate use of external reference points in the design and assessment of programmes, including the FHEQ, Subject Benchmark Statements and the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*. Additionally, the College uses the South East England Consortium (SEEC) for Credit Accumulation and Transfer level descriptors in setting learning outcomes. These frames of reference are applied during programme approval and validation and in the production of the Programme Quality Handbooks that are provided to students. During the visit, senior staff, programme managers and lecturers provided detailed examples of how the FHEQ is applied in programme design, with clear reference being made to level descriptors across levels 4, 5 and 6. Good use is made of Subject Benchmark Statements in designing programmes, and University templates used to demonstrate engagement with benchmarks are clear.

1.4 The review team confirms that the College fulfils the requirements of the degree-awarding body effectively and ensures that academic standards are set and maintained with reference to appropriate external benchmarks. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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 University is ultimately responsible for securing the academic standards of the programmes offered at the College. The College is responsible for the design, delivery and assessment of the programmes offered and operates within the frameworks outlined in the University's Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes. This document is used to specify and govern the accumulation of credits and academic progression for higher education programmes offered by the College.

1.6 The review team explored the use of academic frameworks by reviewing relevant documentation, including policies and regulations, programme specifications and Programme Quality Handbooks. The review team met programme managers, academic and support staff and students during the visit to discuss their understanding of the academic frameworks and regulations that govern higher education provision.

1.7 All programmes of study are organised by module, with the majority of these set at the value of 20 credits. Each taught module has a module record, which can only be changed through a submission requiring University approval. The module record states the academic level at which the module is assessed and also contains the aims, intended learning outcomes and the teaching and assessment strategy. Module records are held within the programme specifications which are embedded within Programme Quality Handbooks. The documentation detailing changes to programmes is held by the University alongside existing validation records relating to the programme.

1.8 Module, level and award pass marks are stated in the University's Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes, and meetings with staff assured the review team that these are clearly understood. Programmes hold two Subject Assessment Panels a year before submitting agreed marks to the Awards Board where external examiners and representatives from the University are present. The Awards Board officially confers the awards and results are published to students within one week. Student results are held by both the College and the University.

1.9 The College operates within the regulatory framework of the University which are transparent and comprehensive in governing how academic credit and qualifications are awarded. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

1.10 As defined in the partnership agreement, it is the responsibility of the University to maintain the definitive records for each approved programme and qualification. Each programme has a Programme Quality Handbook produced to a University template. This contains the programme specification and module records and serves as the definitive document used as the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme by College staff. Validation documentation, and details of any subsequent changes to programmes are held by the University. The University provides all students with a transcript recording their results at the conclusion of each stage of their studies and on completion or exit. The transcript provides an overview of results for each component piece of assessment as well as aggregate marks. The University also issues the degree certificate for students on successful completion of their studies.

1.11 The review team analysed information relating to this Expectation in programme specifications, Programme Quality Handbooks, validation documentation and transcripts. During the review, the team met programme managers, academic and support staff and also examined documentation available online.

1.12 The review team confirms that Programme Quality Handbooks are comprehensive, useful and accessible documents. The inclusion of the programme specification within these handbooks improves the visibility of the programme specification to students. Programme Quality Handbooks are kept up to date and made accessible to students throughout the year through the virtual learning environment (VLE). While progression information is included in the College Student Quality Handbook issued at induction, not all Programme Quality Handbooks reviewed by the team were consistent in including programme-specific progression information. Although the University formally issues records of study to students, the College also keeps a record of student achievement which is used for monitoring progression trends. Students the team met are generally aware of how the award classifications are calculated and expressed content with the level of support they receive from tutors when results are released.

1.13 Overall, the review team considers that the College fulfils its responsibilities to the awarding body and makes effective use of definitive programme records as the reference point for the delivery and assessment of programmes. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

1.14 The approval of higher education programmes offered at the College is ultimately the responsibility of the awarding body. The College is, however, an active participant in the design and development of its higher education programmes and has also introduced initial approval procedures prior to the commencement of the University approval process (see section B1). Awarding body approval is managed through two stages, both of which are overseen by the University and attended by appropriate staff from the College. The first stage provides a 'critical-friend approach' to assist the programme team and scrutinises the documentation to determine that it is fit for approval. The second stage gives formal approval and enables external assessors to determine that the programme meets University requirements and national expectations. The University provides advice and guidance through the Faculty Partnership Manager and Academic Liaison Person to support the College in programme development. Once approved, changes can be made to programmes through a formal process which requires approval by the University.

1.15 The review team tested the approach to programme development and the consideration of subject and qualification benchmark statements by scrutinising a range of documentation submitted as part of programme approval processes. During the visit, the team met staff, employers and students to explore the operation of the University process and the College's internal approvals policy and procedure.

1.16 The review team confirms that the College produces validation documentation in line with University requirements, comprising an approval document, an operations specification, a programme specification, and module and resource descriptors. Both stages of the University process have clear terms of reference, a consistent agenda, and produce minutes and action plans. The team saw consistent evidence that academic and professional/employer expertise is used at the second stage of approval. Conditions and recommendations at stage two are clearly set out, and formally signed off by the University. Validation reports and meetings with academic and support staff confirmed that relevant guidance is available to staff regarding academic levels, and that the characteristics of programmes and learning outcomes have been mapped to appropriate benchmark statements.

1.17 The College is permitted by its awarding body to modify up to 50 per cent of the modules in a programme, each year, without recourse to re-validation. The IQER report raised concerns over whether the proportion of change permitted to programmes in any one year was too high. Following discussion between the University and College in June 2014, the view was taken that a change to this might compromise the ability to maintain programme currency and that the College would not operate the change procedure in such a way as to affect standards. The review team confirms that the module change process is operated in accordance with the regulations of the awarding body and that module changes are approved by external examiners. Although the review team saw no current evidence that standards were at risk, the action taken since the IQER has not fully addressed the issue or put any additional safeguards in place.

1.18 The review team considers that the College carries out its responsibilities effectively to ensure that the programme design process takes account of relevant professional and subject benchmark statements. The College adheres to the approval processes of its awarding body, including those for the production of definitive information about the programmes of study. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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 The College is responsible for setting and marking assessments in accordance with the awarding body assessment policies, procedures and regulations, including the University's Academic Regulations for Taught Programmes. The framework for the moderation and marking of student assessed work is set out by the University in its Marking and Moderation Policy and disseminated through the College document Higher Education Assessment, Marking and Feedback to Learners. As stated above, each programme has a programme specification, which sets out the aims and intended learning outcomes and maps these to the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. The programme specification also identifies any exemptions to the University academic regulations that may apply. Assessment is managed at module level and module records contain details of the aims, academic level, learning outcomes and assessment methods. A scheme of work for each module is produced for students with further details on the method of assessment. Assessment briefs and feedback sheets also outline the relationship between intended learning outcomes and assessment. The University operates a two-stage process for the consideration of assessment marks and awards through Subject Assessment Panels and Award Boards.

1.20 The review team considered the effectiveness of the approach to the award of credit and qualifications by looking at relevant University and College policies, regulations and procedures, programme specifications, assessment information and reports from validation and assessment boards. The review team also met academic staff, support staff and senior staff to discuss the procedures in place.

1.21 The review team confirms that assessment is designed to ensure that programme learning outcomes can be met. Programme specifications and module records produced through the approval process demonstrate that each qualification is allocated to the relevant level of the FHEQ and the University validation processes ensure that the level and volume of study are appropriate. The review team saw evidence that the College produces and maintains well-constructed definitive module records and assessment briefs. Staff met by the review team demonstrated an understanding of the assessment regulations and policies and provided evidence of engagement with them. From the evidence of minutes, the team was able to confirm that the operation of Subject Assessment Panels and Award Boards was robust. The review team found, however, that while information on assessment processes produced by the University and College was generally clear, there was a lack of specificity within the documentation regarding the approach to resolving assessment differences between the first and second marker which is discussed in more detail in section B6 of this report.

1.22 Overall, the College follows the arrangements for assessment set out by its awarding body and carries out its responsibilities effectively to ensure that the achievement

of relevant learning outcomes has been demonstrated through assessment. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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 monitoring and review of programmes is conducted in line with the processes established by the University. The College principally conducts ongoing programme monitoring and review of higher education provision through Programme Committee Meetings held for each programme and a single Joint Board of Studies attended by the University. Programme Committee Meetings occur twice a year and follow a standard agenda set by the University which requires discussion of each module and considers teaching, assessment, availability of resources, external examiner feedback and programme management. These meetings report to the Joint Board of Studies held twice a year which maintains and monitors an overall action plan for improvement. This action plan is submitted annually to the University. A periodic review process for programmes was introduced for the first time in 2014. This was conducted for all higher education provision, the outcomes of which inform the current Higher Education Enhancement Action Plan.

1.24 The review team tested the approach to monitoring and review by analysing documentation, minutes and actions plans pertaining to Programme Committee Meetings, Joint Boards of Study and the periodic review process. During the review, the review team met staff and student representatives engaged in monitoring and periodic review activities.

1.25 Programme Committee Meetings are attended by programme managers, teaching staff, the HE Co-ordinator, support staff and student representatives, the last of which are required for quorum. From its meetings with staff and students and from its review of documentation, the review team can confirm that the Programme Committee Meetings offer an effective means of enabling the College and its awarding body to ensure that standards are being reviewed and maintained. The Joint Board of Studies, which involves staff from the University and senior College managers, offers both a strategic and operational perspective of programme management and performance. Members of staff met by the review team demonstrated a clear understanding of the processes involved, and the team confirmed that Joint Board of Studies offered a robust mechanism for determining that academic standards were being maintained. The team saw clear lines of responsibility and timescales for completing monitoring activities and clear templates as to how reporting should be undertaken. Although the periodic review structures are at an early stage of development, the team was able to confirm that the new process offers an effective mechanism for offering assurance to the awarding body that standards are being maintained.

1.26 The review team considers that the College effectively carries out its responsibilities for monitoring and period review in accordance with University requirements and these processes ensure that academic standards are being achieved and maintained. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

1.27 As outlined under Expectation A3.1, the College undertakes a two stage validation process for new programmes with the second stage involving external advisers. Such advisers are nominated by the College and approved by the University. Each programme has an allocated external examiner, nominated by the College and appointed by the University, who visits twice a year to report on the programme, attend the Award Board and participate in the Subject Assessment Panel. External examiners are responsible for ensuring that the academic standards are met and report to the University on an annual basis. The College discusses and responds to the findings of external examiner reports through Programme Committee Meetings and Joint Boards of Studies.

1.28 The review team considered a range of documents relating to the recruitment, selection and involvement of external advisers and external examiners, including the partnership agreement, validation documentation and minutes, external examiner nomination forms and reports and the minutes from assessment panels and boards. The review team also met staff, students and employers during the review to explore the College approach to externality.

1.29 In meetings with the review team, senior staff, programme managers and lecturers noted that they rely on advice and guidance given by external examiners during visits and the outcome of their reports to ensure academic standards are maintained. This is evident in monitoring external examiner feedback and follow-up activities during Programme Committee Meetings and related action plans. The College's responsiveness to external examiner feedback is considered in Expectation B7.

1.30 The review team considers that the College makes good use of external and independent expertise in programme design, delivery and assessment in order to ensure that academic standards are appropriately set and maintained. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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

1.31 In determining its judgement on the maintenance of threshold academic standards of awards at the College, the review team considered the findings against the criteria as outlined in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. All Expectations in this area are met and the level of risk is considered low in all cases.

1.32 Although the degree-awarding body retains ultimate authority for setting and maintaining academic standards, the College plays an active part in enacting the University's processes for programme design, approval and assessment. The College consistently applies these procedures and in doing so fulfils its responsibilities as set out in the partnership agreement. Where the College has developed its own procedures, such as those for initial programme approval and on assessment marking and feedback, these are aligned with the requirements of the University. Staff are aware, and regularly use, the relevant frameworks for higher education in the design and delivery of programmes and are familiar with the academic frameworks in place for maintaining academic standards.

1.33 The review team therefore concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards at the College **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 As noted in paragraph 1.14, the design and approval of higher education programmes offered at the College is ultimately the responsibility of its awarding body. The College has, however, established its own internal systems and procedures for the development of new programmes. The decision to seek approval for a programme rests with the Senior Management Team based on strategic fit with the College Higher Education Business Plan after which a detailed programme proposal is drafted and submitted to the University. The Programme Proposal identifies how proposed programmes will be designed, so as to ensure that the qualification descriptors on the FHEQ will be addressed, and an adequate volume of study to enable learning outcomes will be provided. From spring 2014, an Academic Development Committee has been established, chaired by the Principal and containing senior staff with quality and resource responsibilities, to undertake this initial approval stage. Following internal approval, the programme team at the College are supported by the HE Coordinator and staff from the University to prepare the required validation documents. The documentation is then considered, amended and finally approved through the University's two-stage approval process as outlined in A3.1. Programme changes are similarly presented to the awarding body through University templates for approval.

2.2 In reviewing the approach to programme approval, the team met a range of College staff, including those involved with the development, design and approval of programmes, and looked at a range of programme documentation, approval reports and minutes, including those of the awarding body.

2.3 The review team confirms that the programme design and approval process is a collaborative activity involving academics and senior managers within the College, university staff and external stakeholders. Meetings held with staff during the review demonstrated awareness of the programme development process and the importance of the Quality Code. New proposals are demand-led, as evidenced in part by the market research undertaken, and the review team saw evidence that the initial approval process was appropriate in ensuring that new proposals conform to the College Higher Education Business Plan and take into consideration Student Number Controls, the business model and strategic plan. Staff value the support, advice and guidance provided by the awarding body through the Faculty Partnership Manager and Academic Liaison Person.

2.4 The review team considers that the College operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes and discharges its responsibilities to the awarding body with regards to academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

2.5 The College has a Higher Education Admissions Policy that sets out the requirements for entry to higher education programmes, including preparatory programmes offered by the College. This policy is published on the website and VLE. The College is registered for UCAS and is responsible for setting its own entry requirements which are made available to prospective students on the College website, UCAS and in the prospectus. They are also published in Programme Quality Handbooks alongside programme progression requirements. All applicants are required to attend an interview, and offers made at interview are confirmed via UCAS. Admissions decisions are made in line with the College's Equal Opportunities Policy.

2.6 The review team tested the operation and effectiveness of the admission, recruitment and selection process by examining the strategic plan, admissions policies and procedures, interview records and by meeting with students and staff including programme managers responsible for admissions decisions.

2.7 The College has a commitment to widening participation informed by its partnership agreement and strategic plan, which is widely embedded in the culture of staff teaching higher education programmes. A number of students progress to higher education after completing further education or preparatory programmes at the College. Students met by the review team spoke positively about the support and guidance from the College before, during and after the application process. Interviews are conducted by a trained programme manager in order to assess the prospective student against the entry requirements and determine an offer for admission, as well as provide information to the applicant. Programme managers keep records of admissions interviews, although there is not a consistent approach to this and the College indicated its intention to introduce a standardised form.

2.8 Applications from non-traditional learners are encouraged in the Higher Education Admissions Policy and programme managers are permitted to use discretion when making admissions offers to students who do not meet the standard entry requirements. The College does not have an agreed approach for the use of discretion and there is no formal mechanism to record when discretion has been used and the rationale for the decision made. Discussions with staff involved in admissions confirmed that there is inconsistency in how discretion is used, with programme managers citing a number of different, and sometimes unquantifiable, qualities or attributes that they would recognise in a prospective candidate when making an admissions offer. The review team also saw evidence of where the College had taken risks in admitting students to a higher education programme, resulting in a number of students leaving the programme. The College has significantly increased its UCAS tariff entry requirements for October 2014 entry and the review team notes that, in the context of the College's commitment to widening participation, the use of discretion in admissions decisions would likely become more widespread. The lack of criterion for the appropriate use of discretion and absence of a mechanism to record when discretion is used indicate shortcomings in the strategic oversight of admissions decisions and is deemed by the review team to present challenges for the effective consideration of applicants' complaints and appeals. In light of the issues raised above, the review team therefore **recommends** that the College ensure that admissions policies and procedures can

demonstrate fairness and provide a transparent and reliable framework for making and recording decisions on non-standard entrants.

2.9 The review team also notes that the Higher Education Admissions Policy contains incorrect information about the entry requirements for the preparatory programmes offered by the College. Although the policy has been last reviewed in October 2014 and formally approved by the Senior Management Team, the review team identified that the error was evident in both the new and previous version. The review team considers that this demonstrates a weakness in the College mechanisms for the production and monitoring of published information which is outlined in more detail later in section C of this report.

2.10 The review team heard that the College has intentions to improve the admissions process through standardising interview forms and mapping student achievement at entry and upon completion for management information purposes. The team was also cognisant that external examiners had not raised any concerns regarding the suitability of students enrolled on higher education programmes. However, the lack of transparency in the admissions process in relation to non-standard entrants called into question the College's ability to demonstrate that admissions processes are reliable and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is not met and the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

2.11 In October 2014, the College approved a Higher Education Learning and Teaching Strategy, outlining the overarching strategic objectives for higher education delivery. At subject level, each programme produces a Teaching, Learning and Assessment Handbook, the structure of which is based on a University template. Further information about teaching methods and delivery modes is contained in programme approval documents. The College seeks to improve the quality of learning and teaching by supporting lecturers in undertaking academic and teaching qualifications and self-directed research, providing remission from normal duties for such activities. It also facilitates regular staff development days and an annual scholarly activity conference. This is supplemented by a Learning and Performance Coach, who provides developmental support to lecturers and oversees the peer review process. Students provide feedback on teaching and learning through Programme Committee Meetings and also through a Student Perception Questionnaire (SPQ) and National Student Survey (NSS), the results of which are considered at programme and senior management meetings.

2.12 The review team examined a range of documents relating to learning and teaching, including relevant strategies and policies, survey results, minutes of meetings; handbooks, lesson observation and peer review records, programme approval documents, as well as a range of information published on the VLE for staff and students. During the visit, the review team met senior staff, programme managers, lecturers, support staff, student representatives and students to discuss the approach.

2.13 Senior staff and programme managers demonstrated a clear understanding of the differences in approach when delivering learning and teaching across academic levels. There is ample evidence of staff engaging in staff development activities and research activity, including attendance at HE Staff Development Days and examples of staff research on subject specific, management-related and pedagogical matters, which were subsequently published on the VLE for staff and students to access. Lecturers and students also noted the positive impact that staff development was having on learning and teaching, with instances of industry practice informing sessions and learning materials.

2.14 Until April 2014, the College used both Ofsted-aligned lesson observations and higher education peer reviews to support and develop lecturers delivering higher education programmes. The College's stated intention is to standardise the documentation for peer review and use this process to ensure high quality teaching on all higher education programmes. The College no longer applies the Ofsted-aligned lesson observations to higher education provision and is implementing a new peer review framework entitled PRIDE (Peer Review, Induction and Evolve). A range of support structures and strategies are now being formalised to facilitate this new peer review approach and ensure it is more appropriate for higher education; for instance, the former approach made no distinction between the support needs of new and existing staff, no mentoring support was in place for new higher education lecturers and there was no means of ensuring objectivity during peer review. The review team therefore **affirms** the actions being taken to formalise procedures

for the support and development of lecturers, which are aligned to the particular needs of those delivering higher education programmes.

2.15 Overall, the review team considers that the College articulates, evaluates and enhances the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices and that further development and formalisation of procedures will underpin a more consistent and supportive approach for higher education staff. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

2.16 The College Strategic Plan outlines the objectives for higher education which includes: strong underpinning and progression from further education programmes at the College; clear and realistic progression opportunities to honours level study; and a curriculum which meets the requirements of local employers and communities. This strategy informs the approach to the support arrangements and resources provided for higher education learners, particularly with regards to progression routes and embedding employability skills within programmes.

2.17 Resources and support arrangements for programmes are considered by senior management as part of the initial approval undertaken by the College against the Business Plan, with more detail provided in the documentation submitted as part of the University validation process. In addition, the College has overarching policies relating to support arrangements, such as the Additional Learner Support Policy and the HE Marking, Assessment and Feedback to Learners Policy, which outline how students are supported in their learning. Support and resources are reviewed through Programme Committee Meetings and the Higher Education Enhancement Action Plan. Each programme is allocated a designated Learning Technologies and Library Services (LR) Co-ordinator, who liaises with lecturers and attends Programme Committee Meetings to discuss the provision of higher education resources.

2.18 The review team examined a variety of documents relating to student development, including the minutes of Employer Advisory Groups, validation documentation, notes from senior management meetings, relevant module guides and schemes of work, information on additional learning support and the support provided through the VLE. During the visit, the team met senior staff, students, employers, programme managers, lecturers and support staff.

2.19 The College provides support for students prior to enrolment, through presentations and open days, and this support is continued through induction and the first year of study so that students are aware of the internal and external progression pathways available. A University Academic Liaison Person normally visits students in the first year of the foundation degree to discuss progression opportunities. Students met by the review team confirmed that programme expectations are made clear through admission and induction activities and that information on progression is provided. Students commented favourably on tutorial support provided by lecturers which are supplemented by support staff, notably the Learning Technologies and Library Services Co-ordinator who delivers workshops on academic library and research skills and information literacy.

2.20 The College ensures that it provides all students with opportunities to develop their employability skills. In furtherance of this, it has established seven Employer Advisory Groups across Art and Design, Care, Construction, Engineering, Hair and Beauty, Music Performance and Technology and Performing Arts. These meet at least twice a year, are chaired by Heads of School and are tasked with aligning the curriculum to meet stakeholder needs and facilitating work related learning opportunities. The College are also resourcing a series of Graduate Employability events and workshops for higher education students which involve local employers.

2.21 Employability skills are further embedded through the delivery of a Developing Graduate Skills (DGS) module in the first year of all programmes. This common module is contextualised to each programme and develops independent learning skills and reflective practice, with an underpinning employability theme to support subsequent work-based learning activities. The College supports staff in continuing professional development to update their skills and inform programme content, resource provision and learning and teaching delivery. Lecturers and students noted several instances of this, including importing real world practice into module learning, such as professional website design, exhibiting examples of professional practice on site and the commissioning of a book that was co-produced by staff and students. All students are required to engage in work placements or other work-based learning, and the College has provided music and events management related projects through its own commercially run operations in areas where exposure to the music industry would not otherwise be available locally. Students commented favourably on their experience of undertaking projects and the employability skills gained from completing the DGS module. Overall, the College takes a strategic approach to developing and extending student employability skills that are integrated into the curriculum across all programmes and the review team considers this to be **good practice**.

2.22 The College offers a range of additional learning support for students, which is underpinned by its Additional Learning Support Policy. For example, the College encourages disabled students to apply for a Disabled Student's Allowance (DSA). This extends to disability, long-term health conditions, mental health conditions and specific learning difficulties. Student additional learning support needs are also considered by the College during work placements for UK-domiciled disabled students in receipt of DSA and non-UK-domiciled disabled students, for whom the College can access support funding through the widening participation fund. Students are positive about the variety of additional learning support available and stated that the College had fully supported their particular needs during their programme. The review team considers the range of additional learning support in place for students accessing and undertaking higher education programmes to be **good practice**.

2.23 The review team saw evidence that the provision of learning resources was discussed through College meetings and acted upon accordingly. The liaison between academic staff and support services staff was effective in ensuring that developing resource needs were considered. The review team also saw evidence of where resource issues raised by students had been addressed by the College, most notably the development of the Brannams site to create a more appropriate higher education environment and resource.

2.24 Overall, the review team considers that the College provides, monitors and evaluates the support arrangements and resources for higher education and that these arrangements enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

2.25 The College encourages each programme to elect two student representatives per level to participate in quality monitoring procedures, notably through membership of the twice yearly Programme Committee Meetings. New student representatives are trained by existing representatives and the Plymouth University Students Union, who also issue a training handbook. Students are made aware of their student representatives in classes and via the VLE. Students are also represented on the Joint Board of Studies Committee, which the College recognises as a strategic link to the University for higher education students. All students can attend regular open meetings with the HE Coordinator, known as Student Forum Meetings, and termly meetings with the Principalship. Information gathered at these various meetings is reported to the Senior Management Team and result in action plans published online. The College is in the process of developing a Student Engagement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement Strategy which was in draft form at the time of the review.

2.26 The review team analysed the operation and effectiveness of student engagement by examining the involvement of student representatives in College committee structures, the impact of the student voice, and the feedback provided by the College in response to student comments. The review team examined documentation, explored the use of the VLE and met students, student representatives, staff and employers during the visit.

2.27 The review team confirms that students have a number of opportunities and a variety of mechanisms to provide feedback to the College. Student representatives play an active part in Programme Committee Meetings and provide feedback on the student experience, learning and teaching quality and the provision of learning resources, all of which are standing items on the agenda. The student representatives met by the team understood and recognised the value of their role. Other students expressed satisfaction with the system and are aware of their representatives, noting that contact details and photos are made available on the VLE.

2.28 The relatively small higher education provision and strong relationship between staff and students means that student feedback is often dealt with informally. Students are made aware of the any actions taken by the College through 'You Said, We Did' posters displayed around the College, a Higher Education newsletter and regular interactions with their student representatives and staff. Students generally consider their views to be appreciated and acted upon by the College. The review team saw evidence of the College responding to student feedback, including the creation of the Brannams site which also involved students in advising on the design of the space. The draft Student Engagement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement Strategy builds on this collaborative approach to student involvement and includes a proposal to involve students in programme design and development. However, this strategy is not yet approved by the Senior Management Team, does not appear to have been developed from a comprehensive review of the existing mechanisms used to engage with students, and does not appear to have involved students or the wider staff constituency in its compilation (see also section C).

2.29 Overall, the review team concludes that the approach to student engagement is appropriate. Students are appreciative of the range of opportunities to engage with the College, which will be further strengthened by the current work being undertaken by the

College to develop a strategy for engagement. Therefore, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**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**

2.30 As outlined under Expectation A3.2, the regulatory framework for assessment is determined by the awarding body, whose staff chair the assessment boards that determine final awards and classifications. Assessment tasks are set and marked by the programme teams at the College and lecturers are encouraged to design assessments that make an effective contribution to student learning. In October 2014 the College approved a Higher Education Assessment, Marking and Feedback to Learners document, written in alignment with the University policy, which includes general principles underpinning its approach to assessment. Students are provided with information through assessment guidelines and briefs, and the marking criteria for each assignment is provided through handbooks and the VLE. There are systems in place for the recognition of prior learning, and procedures for managing extenuating circumstances and academic misconduct.

2.31 The review team explored the approach to assessment by reviewing relevant documentation including policy and procedure documents, programme documentation, student handbooks, assignment briefs and feedback to students. During the visit, the team also met senior staff, academic staff, and professional service staff involved in supporting assessment.

2.32 The review team confirms that students are provided with clear and transparent assessment guidelines and briefs. Students met during the review confirmed that feedback is timely and effective, notably citing one form of assessment where feedback is given immediately after the assessment activity, subject to ratification of the mark. Staff are appropriately supported in assessment and the review team saw evidence of staff development activity provided by the University and College, aimed at enhancing the quality of assessment outcomes.

2.33 The framework for the moderation and marking of student assessed work is set out by the University and further defined through the College document, Higher Education Assessment, Marking and Feedback to Learners. This document is generally detailed and outlines the key aspects of the assessment approach including the preference for anonymous marking wherever possible, the transparent alignment of assessments to learning outcomes, the volume of assessment and the need to minimise over-assessment of learning outcomes through assessment design.

2.34 Staff met by the review team understood their responsibilities for assessment and the processes to be followed. However, the review team identified a lack of clarity in the documentation and through discussions with staff regarding the procedures for dealing with a disparity in marks awarded by first and second markers. The documentation outlines the parameters for when a third marker is required and indicates that the piece of work should be referred to the programme manager for a decision. Through meetings with staff, the review team noted some uncertainty regarding the application of this process, particularly when the programme manager was either the first or second marker. While the review team did not see evidence of third marking being a frequent occurrence, or any concern from external examiners regarding the confirmation of marks, the moderation arrangements would

benefit from further detail, including arrangements to ensure that there is no conflict of interest in the appointment of a third marker. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College ensures that procedures for moderation and marking, including the use of a third marker, are clearly defined, fair and transparent.

2.35 Overall, the review team can confirm that the College operates equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment in accordance with the requirements of the awarding body. Staff are appropriately supported in assessment and the procedures are well known to staff and students, although there is a lack of clarity regarding responsibilities for moderation. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is therefore 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

2.36 The College nominates an external examiner for each of its programmes in line with the awarding body criteria and forwards these to the University for approval. External examiners are appointed for a maximum of four years and only in exceptional circumstances is this term extended or a reappointment approved in the future. The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are defined by the University, which also monitors their performance to verify they are acting in accordance with its requirements. Initial induction training is organised by the University and external examiners undertake two visits to the College per year. External examiners are required to review assessment briefs, examination papers and samples of marked student work and produce an annual report, which is considered through Programme Committee Meetings and Joint Boards of Studies. Issues arising from external examiners reports inform programme action plans and the Higher Education Enhancement Action Plan. Reports are also considered during quality reviews and through reports submitted by Programme Managers to their Heads of School.

2.37 The review team considered a range of documents related to external examining, including the partnership agreement, external examiner nomination forms, and a sample of minutes from Programme Committee Meetings, Joint Boards of Studies, Subject Assessment Panels and Award Boards. During the visit the team met senior staff, lecturers and support staff, programme managers and student representatives.

2.38 Senior staff and programme managers met during the review articulated the process of engaging with and responding to external examiner findings, including discussion through Programme Committee Meetings and Joint Boards of Studies, written responses to external examiner findings and the related action plans. A sample of minutes from these meetings and action plans demonstrate an active engagement and responsiveness to external examiner feedback. Programme Committee Meeting minutes also demonstrate the monitoring of external examiner appointments and termination. The review team confirms that external examiner reports, responses and related minutes are published on the VLE, which can be accessed by all students. The students met during the review demonstrated an awareness of the external examining role with some student representatives having met their examiner. Module leaders outlined their engagement with external examiners, including one-to-one meetings during visits to discuss current assessments. Although the processes for responding to issues raised by external examiners are robust, the review team did not see evidence of how good practice highlighted by external examiners is systematically identified and disseminated to enhance student learning opportunities (see section on Enhancement).

2.39 The review team considers that the College has robust processes in place for receiving, considering and responding to external examiner reports and makes scrupulous use of this external input. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

2.40 As noted in paragraph 1.23, the College monitors and reviews its higher education provision through its committee structure. Programme Committee Meetings follow a standard agenda and consider feedback on programme delivery from programme teams, external examiners and students. Action plans, produced from each meeting, are monitored and updated throughout the year. The outcomes from these meetings are reported to Joint Board of Studies, attended by the University, which also follow a set agenda and produce an action plan in a format set by the University. A process for the periodic review of programmes was recently introduced which involved the submission of self-evaluation documentation by the College and a series of meetings with the University. It is intended that the outcomes of both these processes should feed into the Higher Education Enhancement Action Plan which is considered by the Senior Management Team.

2.41 In testing the approach, the review team met staff and students engaged in monitoring and periodic review. The team also read relevant documents, including the minutes and action plans of Programme Committee Meetings and Joint Boards of Study, the College Higher Education Enhancement Action Plan, and self-evaluation documents for periodic review.

2.42 Staff met by the review team demonstrate a clear understanding of the processes involved. Action plans from Programme Committee Meetings clearly identify proposed actions, responsibilities, and appropriate timescales. Due consideration is given through these meetings to student feedback from the representatives present but also through the review of NSS results and the outcome of the College's SPQ. Feedback from external examiners is also routinely considered and informs the action plan. The Joint Boards of Studies provide an effective mechanism for ensuring that issues identified through the monitoring and review process regarding the quality of learning opportunities are considered at institutional level and reported to the University.

2.43 The periodic review process introduced in June 2014 involved the submission of a self-evaluation document covering the whole of the College higher education provision after which programmes were reviewed in clusters, each with an additional self-evaluation document. The periodic review team held formal meetings with student representatives within each cluster. Areas for enhancement identified through the periodic review process are incorporated into the Higher Education Enhancement Action Plan which was considered by the College in September 2014. Although the periodic review structures are at an early stage of development at the time of the review, the process offers an effective mechanism for assuring the awarding body that standards are being maintained and that the programmes remain current and valid.

2.44 Overall, the review team confirms that the lines of responsibility, timescales and templates for completing monitoring are clear. The team considers that the College carries out its responsibility for the monitoring and review of programmes effectively and therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

2.45 The College process for handling complaints for enrolled students is set out in the Comments, Compliments and Complaints procedure, which also forms stage one of the University's Student Complaints Procedure. Students who wish to submit an appeal against assessment board decisions are referred to the University appeals procedure which is outlined in its Assessment Board Appeal Policy. Policies and procedures for appeals and complaints are made available to current students and support is provided by the College. A report on complaints and resolutions is presented to the Board of Governors on an annual basis. The complaints and appeals process for applicants is outlined in the College Higher Education Admissions Policy made available on the College website.

2.46 The review team tested the operation and effectiveness of the complaints and appeals procedures by examining documentation, including the relevant policies and associated reports. During the visit, the team explored how these policies were implemented in practice by meeting students and staff, as well speaking to the HE Coordinator and Heads of School regarding their involvement in the investigation of complaints.

2.47 The review team confirms that information for current students on appeals and complaints is made available at induction via the Student Handbook, on the VLE, and is displayed in some teaching rooms. The formal documentation for the complaints procedure and the appeals policy are clear in outlining the process, indicating how issues can be escalated in the College and to the University, and specifying timescales for each stage. There is also appropriate demarcation of procedures where an appeal incorporates a complaint. The approach allows for appropriate independence of those considering appeals and complaints, including student representation in the latter stages. Students met by the team are aware of the policies and of the support available to them while engaging with the complaints and appeals procedures. The review team also saw evidence of annual reporting on the number of College-wide complaints and their resolutions, although there had been no formal complaints from higher education students since 2011 and therefore little evidence of how the College used this information for enhancement purposes.

2.48 Overall, the review team considers that the complaints and appeals processes operated by the College are fair, accessible and timely with appropriate mechanisms in place to deal with student issues. Students and staff are generally aware of the procedures in place and appropriate support is available. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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**

2.49 All higher education programmes incorporate work placements or other work-based learning activities, such as work-based projects, commissioned work and consultancy activities as part of the learning experience. Under the terms of the partnership agreement, the College is responsible for the organisation and management of all such work-based learning opportunities undertaken with external organisations. The College manages work placement relationships between itself, students and employers through a range of documents contained in the Work Placement Essential Information pack, which it issues to students and employers prior to the commencement of work placements. Information provided to students and employers for other work-based learning varies depending on the activity. The College uses a customer relationships management (CRM) database to manage its relationship with employers which also records health and safety checks. The College also uses Employer Advisory Groups to advise and facilitate work-based learning opportunities within the curriculum. Strategic oversight of work-based learning takes place at programme level, with Heads of School evaluating the approach and management of work-based learning in their programme areas and noting this in Programme Committee Meetings and related action plans. Following the periodic review, the College developed the Higher Education Work Based Learning Strategy for 2014-15 to encourage greater consistency in the approach across subject areas.

2.50 The review team considered a range of documents and information relating to working with other organisations including the partnership agreement, placement information packs, completed templates and forms, written agreements between parties, health and safety checks, risk assessments and examples of employer feedback forms. The review team also had a demonstration of the College's CRM database and met employers, senior staff, programme managers and students.

2.51 The review team confirms that the Work Placement Essential Information pack is a detailed and useful document in managing and supporting the placement experience and includes guidance on sourcing placements, clear statements regarding expectations, legal requirements, codes of conduct, a tri-partite agreement and employer feedback forms. The review team also saw evidence that health and safety and risk assessments are completed where necessary. The pack includes information on links to other programme modules and details of any summative assessments and it was clear how work-based learning activities are interlinked with employability-focused modules. Other work-based learning opportunities, such as projects, commissioned work and consultancy are managed in a more flexible manner. For instance, programme managers liaise with employers to define the scope and content of the work-based activity, the audit trail for which can include a series of emails, a letter of introduction or informal meetings between the programme manager and employer. While staff responsible for the organisation of work-based activities other than placements are aware of the need for appropriate checks, the review team considers that the absence of formalised procedures and/or documentation similar to that produced for work placements, increased the scope for inconsistency in managing these activities (see also section C).

2.52 Employers met by the review team noted a long standing working relationship with the College across a range of programmes at different levels and described a collaborative

approach to planning and managing work-based learning projects. Students spoke positively of their experiences and provided examples of how work-based learning is managed by the College, including the use of the information pack, completion of a safeguarding course prior to undertaking the work placement and visits by lecturers during work placements.

Overall, the review team concludes that the College has appropriate mechanisms for managing and supporting learning experiences facilitated by external parties. The Expectation is met and the 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**

2.53 The College has no research degree provision; therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

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

2.54 In determining its judgement on the quality of student's learning opportunities at the College, the review team considered the findings against the criteria as outlined in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. All Expectations in this area are met, with the exception of Expectation B2. The level of risk is considered low in all cases apart from Expectation B2 where the review team considers there is a moderate risk to the quality of learning opportunities.

2.55 Under the terms of the partnership agreement, the College operates internal procedures to monitor and develop the quality of students' learning opportunities. Although the procedures for assuring and monitoring academic quality are generally sound, the review team considers that there are shortcomings in some of the documentation used by the College which demonstrates a lack of clarity on responsibilities in some areas and inhibits the rigour in which some procedures are applied. While the procedures are broadly adequate, these oversights and/or omissions create the potential for inconsistent practice. Specifically, the review team recommends that the processes for admissions and independent marking be strengthened in this regard to ensure transparency and fairness. The review team also identified two aspects of good practice in the College approach which both relate to the arrangements and resources in place to support students in their studies. The first of these relates to the strategic approach taken to ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop strong employability skills during their studies in preparation for employment. The second good practice relates to the additional learning support provided to students.

2.56 The review team therefore concludes that 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 provides information to a variety of stakeholders, including prospective students, current students, employers and College staff involved in programme delivery. Its website contains a dedicated section for its higher education provision which details the programmes on offer, how to apply, open day events and the strategies, policies and access agreements relevant to prospective students. The College also produces an annual printed prospectus. The degree-awarding body has ultimate responsibility for publishing the Key Information Set (KIS) data. Responsibility for the approval of information relating to the marketing of programmes ultimately lies with the University. Programme teams have responsibility for compiling this information, which is checked by the HE Coordinator and the Marketing Department prior to submission for University approval.

3.2 The College publishes information for enrolled students on a dedicated Quality HE page on the VLE which contains higher education policies, external examiner reports, the College Student Handbook, Programme Quality Handbooks, HE Newsletters and relevant course information. The Student Handbook provides generic information that is applicable to all students, whereas Programme Quality Handbooks contextualise the programme specific information for students. Responsibility for issuing students with the formal transcript of their studies and degree certificate resides with the University and all students receive a transcript after each stage recording their results.

3.3 The review team analysed the information provided by the College in printed format, on the website and on the VLE. The team also examined the process for managing published information. Meetings were held with staff, students and employers to explore the quality of the information available to stakeholders.

3.4 The review team considers that the process for approving marketing information through the University is functional. The Higher Education Enhancement Action Plan outlines an intent to improve the channels of communication between programme teams and the Marketing Department in this process. Meetings during the visit revealed that students are generally satisfied with the level of information they receive from the College although a few comments were made about the level of consistency on the VLE, information contained within Programme Quality Handbooks and potential misinformation regarding funding arrangements on one programme which was being investigated by the College. Students confirmed that they received the Student Handbook and Programme Quality Handbook at induction and that these documents are useful in defining expectations. Programme Managers have responsibility for ensuring the information within handbooks is accurate and individual members of teaching staff have responsibility for the accuracy of module information. This information is updated on an annual basis. Results of student surveys are available on the College website, as well as being displayed around the College on electronic screens. The College has a dedicated virtual learning site for employers and those met during the review confirmed satisfaction with the information received from the College.

3.5 The review team reviewed a number of published policies. In doing so, the team noted inaccurate information in the Higher Education Admissions Policy relating to the entry requirements for the preparatory programmes, despite this document being recently reviewed and approved through the senior management team process. The review team heard that all policies are subject to an Equality Impact Assessment and that some are submitted to the Governors for consideration but there was a lack of clarity regarding which policies should be submitted for further scrutiny and how the accuracy of these is verified. In light of this uncertainty and the omissions noted in the information provided to staff on independent marking and work-based learning arrangements noted elsewhere in this report, the review team **recommends** that the College develop and implement a formal process to ensure that information for all stakeholders is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

3.6 The College updates policies on a two year rolling cycle although few documents have dates or version numbers. A number of new higher education strategies, policies and procedures have been introduced over the last year, including a Learning and Teaching Strategy; Scholarly Activity Policy; Work-Based Learning Strategy; Assessment, Marking and Feedback Policy; and also a new Student Engagement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement Strategy and Employability Strategy that are available in draft form, although it is not clear what mechanism is in place to identify the need for new policies or procedures or how these are developed. The review team examined a number of documents where it was unclear how the new policy, procedure or strategy was underpinned by a review of the existing practice, and where staff and student awareness of these documents was not widespread. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that the College implement a more robust process for the development of policies and procedures to ensure they are comprehensive and informed by evaluation of practice.

3.7 Overall, the review team considers that information to stakeholders is generally fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy and the review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met. However, the review team considers that there are current weaknesses in the processes in place for both the development of internal policies and procedures and the approval of these documents and therefore concludes that the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

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

3.8 In determining its judgement on the quality of information produced the review team considered the findings against the criteria as outlined in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. The Expectation in this area is met and the level of risk is considered moderate.

3.9 The review team considers that information produced for prospective students is generally sound and subject to a formal checking process undertaken by the College and University. Information for current students on their programmes is provided through multiple channels and includes information on programme requirements, and the quality assurance of programmes, which is generally useful and trustworthy. The review team considers that information produced by the College on internal policies and procedures displays shortcomings both in the way that this is compiled and in the checking process to ensure accuracy and completeness. This represents a weakness in the operation of the governance procedures relating to policy development and approval and a lack of clarity of responsibilities which the team considers presents a moderate risk to ensuring that such documentation is coherent, comprehensive and consistently applied. The review team therefore recommends that the College implements a more robust approach to the development of policies and procedures and also develop and implement a formal process to ensure that information to all internal and external stakeholder groups is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

3.10 The review team concludes that the quality of information produced by the College about its provision 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 uses two main mechanisms for the enhancement of student learning opportunities. The first is management action, derived from the work of senior management in reflecting on the business and educational priorities of the institution. The second mechanism is derived from the College quality processes. With regards to the former, the College Strategic Plan for 2011-2016 identifies a number of strategic goals for higher education, including an increase in the number of higher education learners; the development of opportunities for progression to honours degrees; and ensuring that the College can meet the current and future higher education needs of the local economy. The Higher Education Strategy articulates these priorities further with actions assigned to senior managers and a related Business Plan sets out medium-term aims which are monitored through the Senior Management Team. The second mechanism for identifying and progressing enhancement activity is the Higher Education Enhancement Action Plan that draws together actions derived from standard programme monitoring and periodic review processes. This action plan also outlines measures to be taken to enhance the quality of learning opportunities, including responsibilities and target dates, and is also monitored through the Senior Management Team. The HE Co-ordinator plays a central role in both mechanisms, attending the Principalship when higher education provision is discussed, attending Senior Management Team meetings on a weekly basis, and formal bi-weekly meetings with the Deputy Principal/Director for Quality and Performance.

4.2 The review team analysed how the College operates its stated approach to enhancement by reviewing a number of documents including reviews, reports, strategies and action plans. The team also discussed enhancement in meetings with the Principal, senior and academic staff, employers, students, and student representatives.

4.3 The review team saw a number of examples of enhancement activities that were both strategically driven by the College and had arisen from feedback gathered through the standard monitoring processes. For instance, the College has embedded employability in all programmes through work-related opportunities and the inclusion of a standard Developing Graduate Studies module across programmes. This strategic approach to developing employability includes establishing in-house facilities to support industry exposure in music and performing arts. The College has also delivered on the action identified in the 2013 Business Plan to offer level six programmes at the College. Since 2012 the College has both encouraged and financially supported higher education teaching and support staff who wish to join the Higher Education Academy. Notably, the College has also responded to concerns around the quality of the student learning environment that were raised through the monitoring processes, and delivered a bespoke higher education facility and library at the Brannams site which has been well received by students.

4.4 As noted in paragraph 2.43, the periodic review process is a recent development and the team was unable to evaluate its effectiveness in generating and fulfilling enhancement opportunities. The review team, however, saw evidence that staff were committed to the continuous improvement and enhancement of the student experience and the recent developments in this area, led by the HE Co-ordinator, have amplified this growing ethos of enhancement. In its approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the College seeks to build on the skills and knowledge of a range of

stakeholders. The College produces and uses a variety of data, such as a Student Perception Questionnaire and National Student Survey quantitative data, progression data, early leavers and destination report data and learner enrolment analysis. The College is also planning to evaluate the relationship between student admission and achievement. The review team, however, did not see evidence of how this and other data is used routinely and consistently to evaluate and enhance its provision. It was also not clear from the documentation or discussions with staff how the College sought to integrate and evaluate the various enhancement initiatives in a systematic way. Furthermore, although the College is robust in considering shortcomings identified through monitoring, there is little evidence of deliberate procedures or processes used to identify and share good practice across the higher education provision beyond informal mechanisms, and there is no formal mechanism for sharing good practice from external examiner reports. In the light of these considerations, the team **recommends** that the College develops a more systematic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities, including the effective identification, dissemination and embedding of good practice.

4.5 Overall, the College undertakes deliberate steps to improve the quality of the student learning opportunities and the review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

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

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

4.6 In determining its judgement on the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College, the review team considered the findings against the criteria as outlined in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. The Expectation in this area is met and the level of risk is considered low.

4.7 The College demonstrates that it takes deliberate steps to enhance the quality of student learning opportunities and actions have been driven strategically to improve the student experience for all students studying on higher education programmes. The quality assurance framework, largely defined by the University, allows the College to be responsive to feedback from students, external examiners and employers in order to rectify weaknesses and monitor resulting actions. However, there is little emphasis in these procedures on the identification and dissemination of good practice and there is scope for greater definition in the operation and implementation of the approach to enhancement. The team recommends that the College develops a more systematic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

4.8 The review team therefore concludes that the College **meets** the Expectation and the level of risk is low.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The arrangements for developing and promoting employability skills are described in Expectations B4 and B10. Student employability is embedded at a strategic, operational and programme level across all higher education programmes with some instances of innovative practice. This approach to employability is evident from the College's Strategic Plan, which seeks to 'ensure that offer matches the current and future needs of the local economy', which is particularly relevant since College data indicates that the vast majority of higher education students reside locally and are likely to remain local upon graduation.

5.2 Employer Advisory Groups provide the College with regular updates on local business requirements, while the HE Co-ordinator sits on the committee of the North Devon Manufacturers' Association (NDMA). These inform changes to the higher education curriculum at the College, with the Employer Advisory Groups identifying sector needs. The role of the Employer Advisory Groups is defined in terms of reference, which are contextualised to the needs of each School. Employers provided examples of effective student engagement during work placements and work-based projects, as well as instances of partnership working with the College to identify and respond to skills gaps in the local area.

5.3 The majority of programmes are designed to develop employability skills in the first year of study before students undertake a period of work related activity in the second year. As a result, all programmes include a Developing Graduate Skills module (or Professional Development module for honours degree students). Programme managers and lecturers commented favourably on the impact that this module is having on developing independence, preparing students for work-based learning activities and supporting them in acquiring employability skills. Student representatives and students were also positive about the module and its impact on their employability skills.

5.4 Students at the College engage with developing their employability skills in a number of ways, including through work-based learning, work experience, work related projects or research activities with external stakeholders. The outcome of such engagement is embedded and assessed in the curriculum at various points through programme modules. All programmes include work placements or work related activities as appropriate and realistic to the subject area. For instance, students on Health and Social Care and Early Childhood Studies undertake conventional work placements. Students studying Business can undertake live consultancy projects with local organisations to identify a significant business problem or challenge, which can proceed once signed off by the module leader. Sports students contribute to various projects involving local medical practices, schools and community groups to provide services and advice. For creative industries, the absence of local music-related opportunities led to the development of 'The Factory', which was described by one programme manager as a deliberate attempt to provide in-house work experience for students in an industry-standard facility in which students are involved in organising music events and managing bands and artists performing at the facility. The College also runs a revenue generating activity through 'Cheeky Monkey records', whereby students can enter into legally binding contracts with music artists or use the recording facilities to produce their own work. These revenue generating projects are publicised and attract a number of recognised music artists, and provide students with exposure to music related employability opportunities and experiences that would not otherwise be available locally.

5.5 Work-based learning activities within the curriculum are complemented by a range of extra-curricular higher education employability opportunities, such as the Graduate

Employability Event, workshops on Business Enterprise and the Arts and a University-led 'Dragons' Den' project. Evaluative student feedback is often sought by the College following such events.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 27-29 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#)

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality)

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

### Academic standards

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

### Award

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

### Blended learning

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

### Credit(s)

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

### Degree-awarding body

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

### Distance learning

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

See also **blended learning**.

### Dual award or double award

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

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

### **Enhancement**

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

### **Expectations**

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

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

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

See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

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

### **Framework for Higher Education Qualifications**

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

### **Good practice**

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

### **Learning opportunities**

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

### **Learning outcomes**

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

### **Multiple awards**

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

### **Operational definition**

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

### **Programme (of study)**

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

### **Programme specifications**

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

### **Public information**

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

### **Quality Code**

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

### **Reference points**

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

### **Subject Benchmark Statement**

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

### **Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

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

### **Threshold academic standard**

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

### **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.

## **QAA1107 - R4037 - Feb 15**

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786