Concerns about standards and quality in higher education

Sussex Coast College Hastings, January 2015

Introduction and background

1   This report is of a full investigation at Sussex Coast College Hastings as a result of an application to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) Concerns about Academic Standards and Quality Scheme (Concerns Scheme) by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The concerns relate to a Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Business (Management) delivered through distance learning.

2   The issues relate to the potential threat posed to the quality of the student learning experience as a result of the College's decision to deliver a HNC Business (Management) through distance learning. During 2014-15 the College undertook a significant increase in part-time student recruitment, rising from 144 to 648, an increase of almost 500 over a six month period. In pursuing this development the College took the decision to enter into an agreement with a private company, Acquire Learning. Through its agreement with the College, Acquire Learning acts as a recruitment agency providing guidance through the application stage, and making offers to standard-entry students. Acquire Learning also makes arrangements, through subcontraction, to supply the required distance learning materials. Throughout the course it provides students with support by telephone and online, offers careers guidance and at a later stage helps students with finding a job. The College is responsible for academic decisions, including admission to the programme, providing academic support, academic tutoring and carrying out assessment. The organisation responsible for making the award is Pearson UK (Pearson).

3   The particulars of the concern relate to the:

- management of the approval and monitoring of its partnership with Acquire Learning to deliver a distance-learning programme
- recruitment, selection, admission and retention issues
- resource implications, including the College's prior experience of delivering distance learning, staffing, and the arrangements for providing distance learning materials
- arrangements for quality assuring the programme.

4   The investigation was conducted under QAA's Concerns Scheme by a concerns team (the team) comprising Professor Ann Holmes (Reviewer) and Mr Alan Weale (Reviewer and QAA Coordinating Officer). The concerns team visited Sussex Coast College Hastings on 2 February 2015.

5   The College cooperated fully with the investigation, providing all requested evidence promptly.

Findings

6   The concerns team uphold the majority of the concerns raised and makes eight recommendations to the College identifying areas for improvement in the academic management of its Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Business (Management) delivered through distance learning.

Management of the approval and monitoring of its partnership with Acquire Learning to deliver a distance-learning programme

7   The College is a Pearson approved centre for Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes. The College already delivers the HNC in Business (Management) to on-campus students. The development of the HNC in Business (Management) by distance learning in partnership with Acquire Learning was a rapid development. An initial approach was made by Acquire Learning to the College in April 2014 and students were enrolled on the programme in July 2014.

8   The concerns team found that, notwithstanding the short lead-in time and the absence of a formalised partner approval and monitoring processes, the College had exercised due diligence both financially and legally in setting up the partnership with Acquire Learning and the agreement was signed before students were recruited to the programme. However, there was a lack of formality associated with both partner approval and the subsequent monitoring of the agreement. This has the potential to place student interests at risk and has resulted in a situation where the expectation that 'Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively' as set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education with Others* is not met. The College should rectify this situation promptly and before it enters into any further partnership arrangements for the delivery of higher education.

Recommendation

The College should:

- put in place a clearly articulated process for developing, approving and monitoring partnership arrangements for the provision of learning opportunities for higher education students.

Recruitment, selection, admission and retention issues

9   The development of distance learning is part of the College's Higher Education Strategy 2015-2018. The strategy refers to the development of three e-learning HNCs with the potential to recruit 1,500 part-time learners per annum. The concerns team noted the large increase in student numbers already resulting from this one development. As recruitment takes place on a monthly basis the potential for further large increases in student numbers, in a relatively short period of time, is considerable.

10   Retention rates have been poor from the outset and only marginal improvements have occurred in the six months of the programme. Retention is currently between 31 and 48 per cent. The concerns team noted that the College is aware of the poor retention rate and is attempting to address them. However, the team concluded that the failure to retain students is indicative of contributory weaknesses in the admissions policy and procedure. The process is not effective in identifying students with a suitable profile likely to facilitate their successful completion of the programme. This was considered by the team to be particularly so with regard to non-standard entrants who, in the absence of standard entry qualifications, are only required to complete a 100-word statement. In the view of the team this is not a sufficiently robust assessment tool.

11   Delays in the registration of students with the awarding organisation, Pearson, had also occurred. This had been due to an administrative error and resulted in only a very small number of students (14) being registered with Pearson within the required 30 day period. Current students were unaware that, although enrolled with the College, they were not actually registered with Pearson and that therefore the facility to complete a Pearson award was not guaranteed. Such a situation does not meet the expectation of the Quality Code,

Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education for transparency. The failure to register students with the required period was a fundamental breach of the awarding organisation's requirements.

12   The concerns team concluded that the recruitment, selection and admissions processes for this programme have significant weaknesses that need to be addressed promptly. In particular, selection processes need to meet the requirements of the awarding organisation. Additionally, the College has not managed the registration process with the awarding organisation effectively and have failed to keep students fully informed of their situation.

Recommendations

The College should:

- develop a clear strategy and action plan to develop a more effective admissions process that ensures students are selected based on their potential to complete the award and maximise retention
- take urgent steps to fully inform students of their position regarding admission, enrolment and registration
- ensure that systems are in place to make sure that accurate and complete student data is provided to relevant stakeholders in a timely manner.

Resources: The College's prior experience of delivering part-time distance-learning programmes.

13   The College does not have prior experience in the delivery of distance-learning programmes but does have experience of integrating e-learning into its further education programmes. The intention to develop distance-learning programmes is established within the College's Higher Education Strategy 2015-2018. The risk assessment undertaken by the College identifies the partnership with Acquire Learning as a way of mitigating the risks associated with significant investment in distance learning on the part of the College.

14   The concerns team concluded that the College had limited prior experience of delivering distance-learning programmes. At this early stage of the development the College, through its contracted arrangements and its own internal provision, has provided appropriate learning materials and academic support for its students. However, with the potential for continuing rapid expansion, the College will need to have a clear strategy and operational plan which ensures that resources match planned growth in a timely manner.

Recommendation

The College should:

- develop a clear strategy and operational plan which ensures that resources match planned growth in a timely manner.

Resources: The adequacy of the teaching staff to student ratio of 1:100

15   The College confirmed that the planned staff to student ratio (SSR) for the programme is 1:100 although this is expressed as a head count rather than a full-time equivalent. The current operational SSR is 1:90. Recruitment of additional academic staff to support the programme had taken place; some were dedicated specifically to the programme and there was also a dedicated programme administrator. The concerns team was informed that there are plans to continue to recruit additional staff to support this programme when recruitment of students recommences.

16   The concerns team concluded that the SSR of 1:100 has not resulted in any issues thus far. However, the College should keep the SSR under review to ensure that there is sufficient staffing capacity and expertise to maintain and enhance the student experience as student numbers increase.

Recommendation

The College should:

- monitor and evaluate the staff to student ratio as student numbers increase and ensure that there is sufficient staffing capacity and expertise to maintain and enhance the student experience.

Resources: The appropriateness of the arrangements for providing distance learning materials

17   Acquire Learning, through its agreement with the College, arranges for learning materials to be made available through a learning management system. This was originally through Pearson's own portal but Pearson are no longer offering this facility. As a consequence, Acquire Learning has entered into an agreement with a new commercial provider for a learning management system, ULearn, which provides access to the learning materials, skills support, assessments, and a discussion board.

18   The concerns team concluded that students had been fully informed of the migration from the Pearson portal to ULearn and that students were generally satisfied with the new learning management system.

Arrangements for quality assuring the programme

19   The College has an academic governance and quality assurance system in place for quality assuring the programme. It mirrors the standard approach used by the College for its campus-based provision. Because the programme had only recently been launched the concerns team was unable to assess the effectiveness of these arrangements for this particular programme.

20   The students on the programme complete an online survey, although it was noted by the concerns team that only one cohort had yet completed a module. The team also noted that the response rate for that module was very low. Students spoken to by the concerns team were also unclear how they could inform the College of their opinions about the programme. The College should find ways to optimise the response rate for module evaluation and higher education surveys as part of the student voice policy for distance-learning students.

21   Assessments are set and marked by College tutors and internal verification takes place. There is a standard template for tutors to provide feedback on assessments. An Academic Management Review undertaken by Pearson highlighted some issues relating to the lack of rigour in the internal verification process resulting in grades being too high, and a lack of detailed justification for those grades against the grade descriptors. As a result, Pearson had 'blocked' the programme. The concerns team concluded that the College should take steps to ensure its internal verification process meets the requirements of the awarding organisation.

22   Overall, Pearson, as the awarding organisation, does not believe that the College has appropriate systems in place to ensure that the programme is managed to the standard expected of a Pearson approved centre. The QAA concerns team concurred with this conclusion.

Recommendations

The College should:

- find ways to optimise the response rate for module evaluation and higher education surveys as part of the student voice policy for distance-learning students
- ensure the internal verification process meets the requirements of the awarding organisation.

Conclusion

23   The College took steps to carry out due diligence checks in setting up the partnership but it did not have the security of an agreed and formalised procedure to guide it. This has resulted in a situation where the College's management of higher education with others does not meet the expectation of the Quality Code, *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education with Others* that 'Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.'

24   There has been a rapid rise in higher education student numbers arising from the development of the programme with almost 50 per cent of higher education student numbers accounted for by the HNC in Business (Management) by distance learning. While the issues raised in this report relate to only one course they nevertheless affect a significant proportion of the College's higher education students, which increases proportionately the impact of the associated risks.

25   The admissions process is not sufficiently robust to ensure that students, particularly non-standard students, are being selected appropriately. Early retention rates for the programme are poor and underpins concerns about the admission and selection process. In addition, students have not been kept informed of the issues being experienced with their registration, which demonstrates an unacceptable lack of transparency. Taken together the College does not meet the expectation set out in the Quality Code, *Chapter 2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education* that '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.'

26   The standards achieved by students so far have been questioned by the awarding organisation and concerns about the rigour of the internal verification system have been raised.

27   The management of data and the delay in registering students with the awarding organisation has not been effective and has led to uncertainty about the continued ability of students to complete their chosen award with Pearson. This is a fundamental failure of the College's agreement with Pearson and needs to be addressed with urgency.

28   At this early stage of programme delivery, resources, both staffing and material, have been managed adequately but if the expansion of provision is to continue at the current rate, careful planning and monitoring is required to ensure that student learning opportunities are protected.

29   The views of students are sought through module evaluations, and higher education surveys. However the response rate so far is poor and some students appeared to be unaware of how they could provide feedback.

30   The overall conclusion of the concerns team is that the College's initiative to deliver

a distance-learning programme in partnership with Acquire Learning has been developed with unwarranted haste. The decision to recruit to a programme at such a rapid rate, to a course mode of which it has little experience, was not advisable and would have been better managed through a more carefully planned and staged introduction.

Recommendations

- Put in place a clearly articulated process for developing, approving and monitoring partnership arrangements for the provision of learning opportunities for higher education students (paragraphs 7 and 8).
- Develop a clear strategy and action plan to develop a more effective admissions process that ensures students are selected based on their potential to complete the award and maximise retention (paragraph 10).
- Take urgent steps to fully inform students of their position regarding admission, enrolment and registration (paragraph 11).
- Ensure that systems are in place to make sure that accurate and complete student data is provided to relevant stakeholders in a timely manner (paragraphs 11 and 12).
- Develop a clear strategy and operational plan that ensures resources match planned growth in a timely manner (paragraph 13 and 14).
- Monitor and evaluate the staff to student ratio as student numbers increase and ensure that there is sufficient staffing capacity and expertise to maintain and enhance the student experience (paragraphs 15 and 16).
- Find ways to optimise the response rate for module evaluation and higher education surveys as part of the student voice policy for distance-learning students (paragraph 20).
- Ensure the internal verification process meets the requirements of the awarding organisation, Pearson (paragraphs 21 and 22).

31   The College should, within six weeks of the publication of this report on the findings of the investigation, draw up and submit to QAA an action plan to address the issues herein.