

# Higher Education Review of Alton College

March 2014

## Contents

<b>About this review .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Amended judgement July 2015.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Key findings.....</b>	<b>4</b>
QAA's judgements about Alton College.....	4
Good practice .....	4
Recommendations .....	4
Theme: Student Employability.....	5
<b>About Alton College.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Explanation of the findings about Alton College.....</b>	<b>7</b>
1 Judgement: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards.....	8
2 Judgement: Quality of student learning opportunities.....	16
3 Judgement: Quality of the information produced about its provision.....	33
4 Judgement: Enhancement of student learning opportunities .....	36
5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability.....	38
<b>Glossary.....</b>	<b>39</b>

## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Alton College. The review took place from 25 to 27 March 2014 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Kevin Kendall (reviewer)
- Miss Kate Wicklow (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Alton College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (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 threshold academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

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

In reviewing Alton College the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [themes](#) for the academic year 2013-14 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement, and Student Employability,<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/qualitycode](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/qualitycode).

<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/aboutus](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus).

<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).

## Amended judgement July 2015

### Introduction

In March 2014, Alton College underwent a Higher Education Review, which resulted in 'meets UK expectations' judgements for standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body; and the enhancement of student learning opportunities. The College also received a judgement of 'does not meet UK expectations' for the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

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

The College published its action plan in August 2014 describing how it intended to address the recommendations, affirmations and good practice identified in the review, and has been working over the last 12 months to demonstrate how it has implemented that plan.

The follow-up process included three progress updates and culminated in a desk-based analysis by the two original reviewers of the provider's progress reports and the supporting documentary evidence received over the preceding months.

The desk-based analysis confirmed that the recommendations and affirmations related to the quality of information about its provision had been successfully addressed. Actions against recommendations relating to the quality of learning opportunities, which received a positive judgement, had also been completed on schedule and contributed to progress against the quality of information provided.

### QAA Board decision and amended judgement

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

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

The review can be considered to be signed off as complete.

### Findings from the follow-up process

The team found that the College had made progress against the recommendations as follows.

Recommendation - Expectations B2, B9 and C

The College's new procedure for the development and publication of promotional materials clearly outlines the responsibilities of the course staff and course leader in regard to the formal sign-off of information by the University's Quality Management Division and the Programme Leader. The College has produced a bespoke Higher Education Student Handbook, which is available to both current and prospective students, and has developed dedicated pages on the website about its higher education provision. Within these pages accurate and clear information is presented about fees, additional costs, teaching and

learning, and complaints and appeals which is easily accessible. The College is also measuring student satisfaction with the quality of information provided.

Recommendation - Expectation B7

Examiners and their reports are now signposted to students in the Higher Education Student Handbook. Reports are also available to the public through the College's website. The new Student Representative Handbook also gives information on the role of the external examiner. Ninety per cent of students who were surveyed during the College's autumn 2014 survey knew who the external examiner was for their course, showing that the College has made significant progress in assuring students are aware of the role.

Recommendation - Expectation B10

Since the review, the College has developed a handbook for employers and mentors which provides comprehensive information about the role of a student mentor and signposts relevant support services at the College and the University. This guide is also being tailored to each subject area by the relevant programme leaders.

Recommendation - Expectation C (Information)

The College has made very effective progress in focusing policies and procedures more explicitly on meeting the requirements of the sound management of academic standards, learning opportunities, information and enhancement in higher education. Policies and procedures are in the process of being reviewed and those that have been completed, for example the Higher Education Assessment Policy and the Learner Engagement Strategy, show a clear commitment to the effective management of these processes. The Higher Education Lesson Observation Framework is more focused on the needs of higher education students; it includes appropriate references to independent learning and scholarly activity and is referenced to the Quality Code. The Higher Education Committee structure is focused on higher education matters; has student representation; is working effectively; and is set to enable robust programme monitoring and review and effectively inform the College Self-Assessment Report and Quality Improvement Plan.

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about Alton College

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

- The maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information produced about its provision **does not meet** 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 Alton College.

- The engagement of students in lesson observations (Expectation B3).
- The expertise of staff in enabling students to link the learning outcomes of the programme to real work experience, which enhances their employability (Expectation B3).
- The tailored support provided to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes as they progress through each level of the programme (Expectation B4).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Alton College.

By September 2014:

- formalise the College's procedures for design and approval of a new higher education programme prior to approval by the degree-awarding body (Expectation B1)
- establish a formal process for checking that information for prospective and current students can easily be accessed and understood and is fit for purpose for higher education students, complete and consistently presented (Expectations B2, B9 and C)
- ensure that formal systems of student engagement for higher education students are in place and accessible to all higher education students (Expectation B5)
- ensure that students are informed about the role and identity of the external examiner and bring to students' attention the availability of external examiner reports (Expectation B7)
- review the way in which relationships with students' employers are managed to assure and enhance the quality of student learning opportunities (Expectation B10)
- develop a strategic approach to the enhancement of higher education provision that differentiates appropriately between higher education and other provision offered by the College (Enhancement).

By September 2015:

- review policies and procedures to ensure that they specifically address and consistently document the requirements of sound higher education management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement (Expectation C).

## **Theme: Student Employability**

Student employability is central to the Foundation Degree in Early Years, Care and Education at Alton College and is embedded in all units of study on the programme through teaching, learning and assessment that occurs both inside and outside the classroom. Staff delivering the programme are well qualified, highly competent and up to date with current industry practice. Staff use their expertise to enable students to link the learning outcomes of the programme to real work experience, which enhances their employability. There is a requirement that all students must work in an early years environment for 12 hours or more per week for the majority of the year or have an involvement such that they can achieve the practice outcomes of the programme. Progression rates from the programme to further study, promotion and employment are high and demonstrate the impact of the development of employability skills throughout the programme.

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

## **About Alton College**

Alton College (the College) is a large sixth-form college and the only post-16 college in rural East Hampshire. The College's mission is to provide high-quality education and training in an inclusive, supportive and challenging environment, enabling young people and adults in the community to achieve their full potential.

The College has undergone extensive redevelopment of its campus over the last decade. It now has new purpose-built buildings and facilities for science, media, engineering, art and design, performing arts, English, and humanities, along with a new learning resource centre. Recruitment of full-time 16 to 18-year-old learners has increased to over 2,000 during the last few years, over 85 per cent of whom are on level 3 courses. A further 500 adult learners are recruited each year, mainly to study part-time vocational courses. Higher education students currently number 53 - 18 of whom are in their first year of study, 20 in their second and 15 in their third and final year. The College also provides education and training for about 30 severely disabled students and accommodates a small population of students from local schools on part-time vocational courses.

Higher education provision has been offered by the College since 2001. At the time of the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) visit in 2009, the College was offering several programmes awarded by either the University of Portsmouth or the University of Southampton. Currently, the College is offering just one programme: the Foundation Degree in Early Years, Care and Education under franchise from the University of Portsmouth. Plans to expand the higher education portfolio and develop a new Foundation Degree in Engineering, validated by the University of Portsmouth (the University), are well advanced.

The College considers the environment in which it is operating to be competitive and subject to rapid change, particularly in terms of meeting the needs of the broader local community, working towards greater social cohesion and responding to the UK government's agenda in relation to colleges.

At the 2009 IQER review of the College, several features of good practice were identified by the review team in relation to the Foundation Degree in Early Years, Care and Education. The 2014 review team noted the ways in which the College has built on some of these features to ensure that they still make an important contribution to the quality of student learning opportunities. They include high-quality academic and tutorial support, learning support offered by the College, and effective use made of staff development. The College is still relying on a mixture of formal and informal processes for gathering the views of staff and students, noted as a feature of good practice in 2009, but the 2014 review team considers it time for the College to strengthen the influence of the student voice by formalising its arrangements for student representation for all higher education students.

The 2009 review team regarded it as essential that the College strengthen its management of its higher education provision and, in response, the College established the Higher Education Management Board. While acknowledging the improvements this has brought about, the 2014 review team considers there is more to be done in terms of setting out clearly and documenting consistently the College's policies and procedures as they apply specifically to its higher education provision.

One of the five recommendations considered advisable by the 2009 review team concerned a programme which is no longer offered by the College. The 2014 review team noted that a satisfactory response had been made by the College at the time. Two of the recommendations concerned the provision of staff development opportunities, one targeted specifically at staff teaching on higher education programmes. In response, the College, working with the University and other franchised colleges, has provided events to increase awareness of the Quality Code and enhance the quality of learning opportunities. The distinctiveness of higher education provision was given further emphasis when the College decided to take the recommendation that it amend its annual self-assessment report a step further and adopted the University's framework for annual programme review. Less satisfactory progress has been made on the recommendation that the College establish a formal and transparent procedure for gathering and responding to issues raised by students in a timely manner. The benefits of the Higher Education Management Board notwithstanding, the 2014 review team considers that processes for ensuring that the student voice is heard need to be formalised.

Two recommendations that the 2009 review team considered desirable concerned aspects of the College's relationship with the University. The 2014 review team notes the efforts made by the College to secure timely responses to annual reports and that the University's new virtual learning environment (VLE) has the potential to bring about further improvements. While the College has not aligned the criteria used in lesson observations with those of the University, as recommended in 2009, the 2014 review team notes that all staff teaching on the College's higher education provision are observed annually by a member of the University and assessed against University criteria.

## Explanation of the findings about Alton College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

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



## 1 Judgement: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards

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

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: The national level**

### Findings

1.1 The College, along with two other colleges franchised by the University, delivers the programme of study leading to the University's Foundation Degree in Early Years, Care and Education. The University validates the programme specification and confirms that it is appropriate to the level of study and aligned to the qualification descriptors in the FHEQ. The programme also has early years sector endorsement which is arranged centrally through the University. Delivery of the programme is guided by the University policy that sets out its strategy and policy on collaborative provision. These arrangements enable the College to meet Expectation A1.

1.2 The review team considered how effectively these arrangements were working by reading relevant University policies; examining the programme specification and other documents concerned with programme approval; and talking to students and several members of staff, from both the College and the University, who play key roles in maintaining academic standards at the College.

1.3 The programme specification details the aims and learning outcomes, teaching and learning strategies and methods, and assessment. A variety of assessment methods are used and tasks are designed to assess relevant generic skills as well as subject-specific knowledge and skills. At least two summative assessments are employed on each module at levels 4 and 5 to ensure students have the opportunity to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes. Students confirm that they are very aware of the learning outcomes, both from teachers and course handbooks, and that there is an increase in challenge from levels 4 to 5. The Board of Studies at the University agrees the assessment briefs for use across all the colleges in the consortium and they are then approved by the external examiner before being published to students. Samples of student work are double-marked and moderated by the University. The assessment process follows the University's examination and assessment regulations.

1.4 The programme is delivered over three years on a part-time basis and students must be in relevant employment during this time to enable them to practise and achieve the learning outcomes. Many assessments relate directly to this employment. The course handbooks for years one, two and three show the term dates and assessment schedule, which also indicates that there is sufficient volume of study to enable the learning outcomes to be achieved.

1.5 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation A1 is met and risk in this area is low as systems are well established and running effectively. Learning outcomes are matched to qualification descriptors in the FHEQ, and there is evidence that students undertake a sufficient volume of study to enable them to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: The subject and qualification level**

**Findings**

1.6 The University ensures at validation and review that the programme takes account of relevant subject and qualification benchmark statements. These include the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* and the requirements set out by the Department for Education (DfE) for early years, care and education. Meeting these requirements enables the College to meet Expectation A2.

1.7 The review team checked that the College was meeting these requirements by reading relevant University and government documents; examining programme specifications and other documents concerned with programme approval and review; and talking to staff at different levels of the organisation, students and students' employers.

1.8 The programme was validated originally to meet the now superseded Department for Education and Science (DfES) requirement for sector-endorsed foundation degrees in early years and subsequently received annual endorsement by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), most recently in 2011. This entails the programme meeting the 12 criteria required by the CWDC for endorsement. The University produces a detailed annual report showing how the programme meets these criteria.

1.9 The programme is based on the Early Years Foundation Stage as set out by the DfE and is DfE-validated for specialists in childhood development from birth to the age of five, enabling successful students to use the foundation degree as evidence for early years qualified teacher status (EYQTS) awarded by the National College for Teaching and Leadership, which is part of the DfE.

1.10 The qualifications and experience of the teaching staff at the College ensure that they are very aware of the requirements for education and training in this area and are able to effectively pass this on to students.

1.11 There is no evidence of ongoing input from employers and other interested parties in the development of the programme. The College refers to a professional liaison committee which meets twice a year to ensure a link between local authorities, training providers and students but the review team found no evidence of its effectiveness in this role. Students' employers are also not consulted on curriculum development, although those with whom the review team met reported that they would welcome this.

1.12 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation A2 is met and this area constitutes a low risk due to the policies and procedures in place. The programme meets the requirements of sector endorsement, provides evidence for EYQTS, and meets the requirements of the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* and the University's validation requirements. Practice in this area could be strengthened by engaging students' employers in programme development.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: The programme level**

**Findings**

1.13 The College produces definitive information about the programme in the programme specification and course handbooks. By these means the College is enabled to meet Expectation A3.

1.14 The review team tested how well this is operating by looking closely at the programme specification and the course handbooks distributed to students and by talking to students and teaching staff.

1.15 The programme specification is validated by the University and states that the DfES has endorsed the foundation degree, and that annual reports to maintain sector endorsement continue to ensure currency within the sector. Employability skills are an intended learning outcome of the course and are described in the programme specification along with learning aims which indicate how the foundation degree supports employability.

1.16 The College provides information on the aims of the programme to all students through the course handbooks and the programme specification which is available through the University's website, and students confirm that this is the case. The information provided through the course handbooks describes the intended learning outcomes of each of the units studied along with the learning outcomes of the programme as a whole, as described in full in the programme specification. Unit handbooks also state the aims and learning outcomes for each unit to be studied.

1.17 Expected learner achievements of the programme are described clearly in the programme specification and state the number of units to be studied and the number of credits to be achieved to be awarded the Foundation Degree in Early Years, Care and Education. Assessment schedules and assessment requirements are published in each year of the course handbooks and these are given to students at induction each year.

1.18 Students and teaching staff are able to propose changes to the programme design and these are discussed and agreed at the Board of Studies with the University and the other colleges in the consortium. If required, these changes then follow University procedures for modifications to programmes. Any changes made are then published in the definitive documents for staff and students.

1.19 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation A3 is met and risk in this area is low as appropriate mechanisms are in place and operating effectively.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter A4: Approval and review**

**Findings**

1.20 The University first approves the provider to be recognised as a delivery organisation for University programmes and then arranges for the validation of individual programmes as stated in the agreement. As a delivery organisation, the College is subject to two relevant University policies, namely the collaborative provision policy and the programme monitoring and review policy, procedures and guidelines. Adherence to these policies and procedures enables the College to meet Expectation A4.

1.21 The review team tested the effectiveness of the approval, monitoring and review processes in maintaining academic standards by studying relevant University policy documents; examining documents concerned with programme approval and review; reading reports and records of meetings; and talking to staff, students and students' employers about their experiences of annual and periodic review.

1.22 The College is subject to periodic partnership and programme review every three years as well as annual programme review. The College states that these reviews assess standards and quality of learning opportunities and check that the Expectations of the Quality Code are being met.

1.23 The periodic collaborative partnership review panel comprises independent senior representation from the University, an external assessor and the senior registrar of the University's quality management division. In addition, the heads of quality from the franchised centres attend as observers. The constitution of the panel ensures they not only have the necessary knowledge and experience but there is also clear externality. The panel has responsibility for considering the partnership arrangement and the student experience and for ensuring annual monitoring and review processes are effective.

1.24 The most recent meeting of the Periodic Collaborative Partnership Review Committee was in May 2011. The outcome of this review was that the fitness for purpose of the partnership arrangement was confirmed and the annual monitoring and review processes were effective. It was also confirmed that the College is a suitable location, with appropriate resources and infrastructure, for the delivery of the programme under a collaborative arrangement. The College reports these findings to the Higher Education Management Board which takes action if appropriate.

1.25 For annual review the Course Leader completes an Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review self-evaluation document which evaluates academic standards, quality and enhancement of learning opportunities and reviews the effectiveness of steps taken as a result of the previous year's review, as well as the steps taken in-year in response to any concerns relating to academic standards. The University then responds to the Course Leader following the Collaborative Programme Board of Studies' consideration. The Course Leader then reports the outcomes to the College's Higher Education Management Board.

1.26 Employers do not have any formal method of inputting into programme reviews but overall the review team concludes that Expectation A4 is met, as an effective system is in operation to approve and periodically review the validity and relevance of programmes, including CWDC endorsement and DfE validation. Risk is considered low in this area

because both the College and the University are implementing tried and tested systems and staff understand what is required of them.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

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

**Quality Code, Chapter A5: Externality**

**Findings**

1.27 The College works with the University through annual partnership and periodic review, boards of study, professional development activity and engagement with external examiners to ensure there is an appropriate degree of external participation in the maintenance of threshold academic standards and consistency across the University's franchised provision. These arrangements and activities enable the College to meet Expectation A5.

1.28 The review team evaluated the effectiveness of the College's approach to externality by studying relevant University policy documents; reading reports about programme approval and review and records of meetings; and talking to staff and students.

1.29 The external examiner visits the course team at the University annually to review samples of work from all franchised colleges for all units, and examine course and unit handbooks and the programme specification. The external examiner also attends the Unit Award Board held at the University. The Course Leader at the College meets with the external examiner during the Board of Teachers meeting scheduled on the same day as the external examiner's visit. The external examiner is also supposed to meet with students but this has not proved possible at the College due to employment commitments of students.

1.30 The review team found evidence that the College meets its obligation to supply the external examiner with what is required and completes appropriate reporting although with limited student engagement activity. External examiners' reports are considered at both the Higher Education Management Board and the University Board of Studies which is timed to take place following the receipt of the report. The reports cover all the colleges in the consortium and College staff report that while no issues specifically concerning the College have arisen to date, a mechanism is in place to deal with issues should they arise. Teaching staff also receive a copy of the external examiner's report and are able to give feedback to the Course Leader. The College states that external examiner reports are discussed with students via an oral update from the Course Leader and are accessible on the University's VLE. However, students whom the review team met were not aware of the identity and role of the external examiner and did not recall having discussed or seen the reports.

1.31 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation A5 is met and the risk is considered low in this area, as the College is making effective use of external participation in maintaining threshold academic standards and has systems in place to capture and act on issues raised by the external examiner.

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

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

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

## **Findings**

1.32 Assessment is governed by the University's examination and assessment regulations for collaborative programmes. Assignments for assessment are set by the University course team. Double-marking and internal moderation across all the University franchised colleges ensures that assessment of students is rigorous, consistent and effective.

1.33 The review team tested the rigour of these arrangements by studying the University's regulations and the College's policy documents, reading external examiner reports, looking at several assignment briefs, and talking to staff and students about their experiences of assessment at the College.

1.34 The College's arrangements for marking all student work and giving feedback to students are in line with the requirements of University regulations, which students can access through the University's website. Students are aware of this and reported that they value the assessments, confirming that they are fair, clearly related to real work and test the intended learning outcomes.

1.35 The review team found evidence that assessment briefs are initially agreed by the University's Board of Studies, circulated to all partners for comment, and finally approved by the external examiner before being published to students. Samples of student work are double-marked, moderated at the University and examined by the external examiner. External examiner reports for 2012-13 confirm that all work submitted for scrutiny is internally verified and standards, student performance and assessment processes are sound and fair.

1.36 The review team noted that the College does not have an assessment policy specifically for higher education or an overarching policy that differentiates between higher education and other provision in this respect. They found some evidence of inconsistent practice in word counts highlighted in an external examiner's report which could be rectified by such a development. This matter is taken up later in this report under Expectation C.

1.37 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation A6 is met since processes to monitor and review assessments are effective, assessment of students is robust, valid and reliable and the award of qualifications is based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. Risk is considered low in this area because appropriate processes are all in place and are being applied consistently.

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

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

1.38 In reaching its judgement about threshold academic standards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook. All of the applicable Expectations in this area have been met and the risk is judged low in each case, with no recommendations arising.

1.39 The review team concludes that the maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards **meets** UK expectations.



## 2 Judgement: Quality of student learning opportunities

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

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

### Findings

2.1 Overall responsibility for programme design and approval of the College's higher education provision rests with the University. The College describes its approach to the development of new courses as evaluation of a business case which considers local needs, human and physical resources, niche markets and the potential for progressing learners from level 3 courses at the College and ultimately into employment destinations. The development of proposed new courses is monitored by the Higher Education Management Board, the Student Learning and Quality Committee and through senior manager meetings. These processes, together with adherence to the University's procedures, enable the College to meet Expectation B1.

2.2 The review team checked how well these arrangements were working by examining documents such as the agreement between the University and the College and policies and procedures for programme design and approval, including programme specifications; by reading minutes of relevant meetings; and by talking to College and University staff, students and students' employers about their experiences of programme design and approval.

2.3 The review team found that College staff are aware of University procedures and the way in which external subject and qualification benchmark statements have been used to develop its current higher education programme, as well as the occupational standards required for foundation degrees in early years.

2.4 At the time of the review, the College was in the final stages of developing a new Foundation Degree in Engineering (FdEng) programme with the University which was co-designed by College staff using University procedures. They have also explored the possibility of developing several other higher education programmes, although these are yet to progress to formal stages. However, the review team did not see any formal documentation of the College's approach to the development of new higher education programmes and references to such developments in the minutes of the Higher Education Management Board were brief. The College is still in the process of developing its higher education strategy, which the review team noted has been discussed but not yet finalised by the Higher Education Management Board. As it was made clear to the review team that higher education is seen as a major growth area for the College and several new programmes are being actively explored and designed by the College itself, the review team **recommends** that by September 2014 the College formalise its procedures for designing and approving a new higher education programme prior to approval by the degree-awarding body.

2.5 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B1 is met and the risk in this area is low given the limited role the College plays in designing and approving provision franchised by the University, and the evidence presented to the review team demonstrating the College's thorough approach to the development of the FdEng programme, due to be validated shortly after the review visit. However, particularly in light of the College's plans to expand its higher education portfolio, it is recommended that the College formalise its procedures.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B2: Admissions**

**Findings**

2.6 Students apply to the College programme through the University, specifying the College as their chosen location of study. The College interviews these students in alignment with University application procedures. Unsuccessful applicants are provided with feedback by the College in line with the University's Admission Code of Practice. Applicants may use either the University or College complaints procedure, available on their respective websites. By these means the College is enabled to meet Expectation B2.

2.7 The review team tested the effectiveness of the procedures by browsing the College and University websites; reading annual review reports and the minutes of meetings where data about admissions was analysed; and talking to teaching and frontline support staff, students and students' employers about their experiences of admissions.

2.8 Marketing for the course is housed on both the College and University websites. The programme specification is available on the University website and details admission criteria for prospective students. Because of the vocational nature of the course, students are required to have a minimum of 12 hours per week working in a relevant setting. This is made clear to students on the website and tested at interview, and student employers are required to sign a letter confirming the applicants' access to the workplace. Current students commented favourably on the applications process and particularly on the interview at the College. As well as ensuring they were enrolling on the right course, students appreciated discussing what studying at higher education level entails. This helped them understand how they could manage their academic workload while also working.

2.9 The College is responsible for ensuring that prospective students are informed about arrangements with the University as the degree-awarding body. This includes information about the management of academic standards, complaints and appeals procedures and their rights and responsibilities as students. The College manages this through the induction process and through delivery of the first taught unit, where students are introduced to the VLEs of both the College and the University.

2.10 Senior staff whom the review team met reported that they had streamlined their approach to promoting the course to ensure that information on the website remained factually accurate. However, the review team noted some misleading information on the College site, including contradictory information about fees and signposting to guidance documents, such as the Adult Education Handbook, that are not always relevant to higher education students. The review team therefore **recommends** that by September 2014 the College establish a formal process for checking that information for prospective and current students can easily be accessed and understood and is fit for purpose for higher education students, complete and consistently presented (see also Expectations B9 and C).

2.11 As part of the Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review process, the Course Leader evaluates students' entry qualifications. This helps identify whether changes to the curriculum, learning and teaching or student support are required. Admissions statistics and outcomes from the annual review process are monitored and reviewed by the Higher Education Management Board.

2.12 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B2 is met and the risk in this area is moderate. Admissions policies and procedures are fair and consistently applied, but

the College's management of information for prospective students was identified as an area of weakness and it was recommended that the College formalise its approach.

**Expectation: 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**

2.13 The College has a number of College-wide strategic documents, which set out its agenda for learning and teaching. These include the Strategic Development Plan and the Quality Improvement Plan. The College's approach to learning and teaching in the context of higher education is described in the early years programme specification. The approach outlined in these documents enables the College to meet Expectation B3.

2.14 The review team evaluated the way the College quality assures learning and teaching by studying policies and strategies about learning and teaching; reading training material such as the programme offered to workplace mentors; and talking to staff, students and students' employers about learning and teaching activities.

2.15 It was clear to the review team that the College makes use of its policies and strategies in the management of its learning and teaching, including its higher education provision. It was less clear how specific requirements of the higher education portfolio are identified and met in this context where it represents a very small percentage of the College's provision.

2.16 To ensure that staff teaching on the higher education programme are appropriately qualified, CVs of College staff are submitted to the University. Once the University has observed the new member of staff teaching, Partner Associate Lecturer status is granted along with access to the University staff development programme. The College also has its own Learning Development Plan which develops staff in line with College priorities. This includes a lesson observation scheme to ensure that the standard of teaching is set at appropriate levels. The scheme enables regular evaluation of quality and standards of teaching and learning by senior managers and curriculum specialists. Outcomes of lesson observations contribute to the College's appraisal system where staff are expected to review their strengths and areas for improvement in their practice. This leads to appropriate and targeted professional development aligned to both personal and curriculum priorities. Criteria for observation are generic to all College provision and no specific criteria have been identified for higher education. As a result some aspects of learning and teaching in higher education, such as independent study, research and scholarly activity, are under-emphasised or omitted.

2.17 Student engagement is an important part of lesson observation and is emphasised in the guidance. Students report that they are actively involved in lesson observations and were able to give examples of recent engagement. The review team identified the engagement of students in lesson observations as **good practice**.

2.18 The College Health and Safety Committee ensures compliance with Health and Safety Executive requirements. Audit, inspection and service-level agreements make the College confident that the physical and social environments are safe and accessible to all students and reports on these matters to the College Audit Committee.

2.19 Students on the programme made it clear to the review team that they understand their responsibilities to engage in learning opportunities and course activities such as reflective learning journals, assignments and practitioner-based enquiry which support the development of employability skills. They understand how to avoid plagiarism and were made aware of this during induction.

2.20 It was clear from speaking to staff, students and students' employers that the programme plays an important part in students' professional development and is having a positive impact on students' places of work. Staff, students and students' employers are all aware of the relevance of the learning outcomes to the world of work. The review team identified as **good practice** the expertise of staff in enabling students to link the learning outcomes of the programme to real work experience, which enhances their employability.

2.21 Students are encouraged to identify a workplace mentor to support the application and evaluation of their academic studies within their practice. Staff report that mentors are usually the students' workplace managers, or people within the workplace who have previously completed the course, and the College supports them in this role. However, students' employers whom the review team met were unaware of any support available to them either as employers or mentors and students were also unaware there was training available for their mentors. Students do know, however, that their mentors can contact the Course Leader if needed. Employers are not given any formal information from the College about the programme on which their employee has enrolled, but report that they gather information about the learning outcomes of the programmes either through discussions with their employees who are enrolled on the programme or through the College website.

2.22 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B3 is met as the expertise of staff was apparent and students were able to demonstrate how the programme is enabling them to develop as independent learners and practitioners. Risk is considered low in this area since there is currently only one higher education programme operating and student numbers are very low. Practice could be strengthened, nevertheless, by articulating and foregrounding the distinctiveness of higher education learning and teaching. Expansion of the higher education portfolio would increase the urgency of this measure. This contributes to the recommendation, noted under Expectation C, that the College review policies and procedures to ensure that they specifically address and consistently document the requirements of sound higher education management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement.

**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**

2.23 Information about support available to students is provided in the University Student Handbook and the College Adult Education Handbook. Specific sources of support are available in module guides. The College operates a central student support service called Student Hub which has both a physical and virtual presence and supports students, staff, visitors and parents. International student support, disabled student support, careers and counselling are all housed within this one service. The College operates several initiatives to support students transitioning into and through their degree programme, including Saturday schools, summer study tasks, tutorials and integrated study skills within the curriculum. The College learning support team supports programme staff in developing students' study skills and providing careers guidance. The College Learning Resources Centre opens during the evenings to students, who also have access to the University resource centre. Students have access to both the College's and the University's VLEs. These arrangements enable the College to meet Expectation B4.

2.24 The review team checked how well these arrangements were working by reading the student handbooks, annual review reports and minutes of the Higher Education Management Board; visiting the College VLE and virtual Student Hub; and speaking to staff and students about their experiences of student support.

2.25 The College evaluates student achievements and progression through the Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review which is discussed at the Higher Education Management Board. Data gathered for the review indicate that support offered by the College correlates with improved outcomes for students, notably 100 per cent of students completing the course in 2012-13, with over 75 per cent progressing or intending to progress to the BA (Hons) programme.

2.26 Students whom the review team met were very happy with the level and quality of support they receive and commented specifically on how helpful they find tutorials, Saturday schools and summer tasks in enabling their academic development, particularly as they progress from one level to the next. The review team identified as **good practice** the tailored support provided to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes as they progress through each level of the programme.

2.27 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B4 is met and the risk is considered low in this area as student support is well managed, systematically reviewed and appreciated by students. The learning environment for higher education students could be improved, however, by greater recognition of their distinctive support needs. This contributes to the recommendation, noted under Expectation C, that the College review policies and procedures to ensure that they specifically address and consistently document the requirements of sound higher education management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student engagement**

**Findings**

2.28 There are a range of opportunities for students to give feedback to the College and the University including end-of-unit evaluation, course representation, the Staff-Student Consultative Committee, the College Higher Education Management Board, and informal discussions with the Course Leader. There are elected student representatives for each year of the programme who are able to attend a University Staff-Student Consultative Committee which brings together students and staff from franchised colleges once per term. Changes made to the course as a result of student feedback are shared with students through the Course Leader at the start of the following academic year when any changes are implemented. The student voice is also present in a number of annual processes such as lesson observations and the Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review. Through this range of opportunities, the College is enabled to meet Expectation B5.

2.29 The review team examined minutes of committees in which students are represented; studied the Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review report; and spoke to staff and students about student engagement in quality assurance.

2.30 The College does not provide formal training or support to course representatives, although the review team heard that the University Students' Union plans to develop training for franchised colleges. Formal training and support and student engagement opportunities offered at the University are not being taken up by College students. With one exception, the review team found no evidence of College students attending the Staff-Student Consultative Committee or the Higher Education Management Board. The College acknowledges that the delivery mode of the programme and the fact that students are all working make attendance at committees problematic and has tried varying the times of meetings. To ensure the student voice is fed into these committees, the Course Leader takes responsibility for meeting with students before meetings. Elected course representatives were unclear about their role and uncertain about the added value of attending the meetings themselves. The review team therefore **recommends** that by September 2014 the College ensure that formal systems of student engagement for higher education students are in place and accessible to all higher education students.

2.31 Staff and students whom the review team met are able, nevertheless, to cite examples of the student voice developing College practice, including extending the opening hours of the Learning Resource Centre, changing the delivery pattern of the psychology unit and developments in relation to staff engagement with the College's VLE.

2.32 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B5 is not met on the grounds that the independent student voice is lacking in formal settings and the absence of representative engagement in committees makes it difficult to achieve critical distance between collecting student feedback and deliberating upon it. Risk is considered moderate since the College acknowledges that more needs to be done to ensure that all higher education students are engaged as active partners, regardless of their mode of study. This issue will become more pressing as the College expands its higher education portfolio.

**Expectation: Not met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

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

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

**Findings**

2.33 The principles of assessment are described in the programme specification and the programme employs a variety of assessment methods. The amount and timing of assessment is set out in the course handbooks and in the assessment map within the programme specification. The scheduling and volume of assessment is managed by the University but can be adjusted by the College to take local term dates into consideration. The College is required to adhere to the University's marking policy. These arrangements enable the College to meet Expectation B6.

2.34 The review team tested the effectiveness of arrangements for assessment of student learning by examining relevant documents such as programme specifications, assessment regulations, University policies and external examiner reports; by reading examples of assessments given to students; and by talking to students, College and University staff and students' employers about their experiences of assessment.

2.35 Staff CVs are provided to the University to ensure they are qualified to undertake both teaching and assessment. Examples of assessment briefs demonstrate the way in which assignments link to students' workplaces. Students whom the review team met understand the marking criteria used in assessment and are confident they know what they need to do to succeed. Marking of student work conforms to the Examination and Assessment Regulations of the University which are available to students through the University's website. Samples of student work on the programme are double-marked and internal moderation is spread across the teaching team. Staff engage in moderation activity, organised by the University, in conjunction with other franchised centres delivering the qualification. This is designed to ensure that standards of assessment are consistent within the College and across all franchised centres. Samples of student work are also submitted to external examiners, who have not raised any concerns.

2.36 Students are informed about ethical practices in relation to evaluating their experiences within their own workplace to ensure that confidential or protected information is not included in pieces of work. Despite the close link between assessment and practice in the workplace, the review team noted that the College does not communicate directly with employers who report that they are only informed about assessments by the students themselves.

2.37 Students are informed about academic conduct in the University Student Handbook. The College also has its own Commitment and Misconduct Policy, which is available to all students through the College VLE; this does briefly mention plagiarism but is largely about unacceptable behaviour in general. On submission of assignments, students complete and sign an author declaration stating that the work is their own and they recognise sources appropriately.

2.38 The College is committed to returning summative feedback to students within four weeks of submission. Formative and summative assessment provides students with feedback on what they need to do to improve further, promoting learning, and tutorials are often timed to coincide with feedback opportunities. Students declared themselves generally



happy with the time taken to receive feedback, and appreciated tutorials which help them understand the feedback they have been given.

2.39 Assessment decisions are forwarded to the University's course administrator, who uploads results to the University's VLE for students and staff to access. Marks gained by students are presented to the University Board of Examiners who validate the outcomes and recommend progression.

2.40 Upon successful completion of the programme, students have the opportunity to progress to the BA (Hons) Education and Training Studies programme, the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies (level 6, top-up) programme, or they may use their qualification to meet the requirements for the registered teacher route to EYQTS. Progression routes from the programme are clearly described in the programme specification.

2.41 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B6 is met and the risk in this area is low since the College adheres to University assessment procedures and enables students to understand what is required of them and how they will be judged.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B7: External examining**

**Findings**

2.42 The University is responsible for the appointment and management of external examiners. The Course Leader at the College provides the Programme Manager at the University with the appropriate documentation and internally verified student work for external examination. The external examiner visits the course team at the University annually to review samples of work from all centres for all units. The external examiner also reviews course and unit handbooks, the programme specification and meets with students. External examiner reports are sent to the College through the University VLE and are discussed where necessary at the Higher Education Management Board. The full report is available to students through the University VLE. Through these systems and procedures the College is enabled to meet Expectation B7.

2.43 To check how well the arrangements were working in practice, the review team scrutinised relevant University policies and procedures and external examiner reports; read the minutes of meetings where external examiner reports are discussed; and talked with students and both College and University staff about the use made of external examiners.

2.44 The College is not required to respond to external examiner reports itself but is able to provide feedback via staff attending the course team meeting run by the University. They are required, however, to report on external examiner comments in the Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review and the review team found evidence that reports are given consideration. However, although the College states that the Higher Education Management Board receives the external examiners' reports, it is unclear from the minutes provided to the review team where this has happened.

2.45 Copies of external examiners' reports are not given to students; the Course Leader summarises orally some of the key positive points made by external examiners. Students whom the review team met were unaware of the role and confused about the identity of the external examiner, and had no recollection of being told about the reports by staff. The review team therefore **recommends** that by September 2014 the College ensure that students are informed about the role and identity of the external examiner and bring to students' attention the availability of external examiner reports. This recommendation also contributes to the judgement on Expectation C and the quality of the information produced about its provision.

2.46 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B7 is met and the risk low because the College generally meets the requirements of the University in this respect. The College needs to improve practice, however, by better informing and engaging students.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review**

**Findings**

2.47 Annual and periodic review processes are set for the College through the University's Programme, Monitoring and Review Policy. The College submits an Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review report to the University 'which evaluates the extent to which academic standards have been maintained, describes the quality and enhancement of learning opportunities and enables quality assurance of the collaborative arrangement'. The evidence base for the report includes the reports of external examiners; analysis of student achievement and progression for each programme; formal and informal feedback from students and University colleagues; student qualifications on entry; retention, progression, achievement and destinations data; and learner support services. The final report is considered by the University's Collaborative Programme Board of Studies. The Course Leader reports on the outcomes to the College's Higher Education Management Board highlighting any key areas of strengths or concern at the appropriate meeting. The University conducts a periodic collaborative partnership review of the College every three years. By these means the College is enabled to meet Expectation B8.

2.48 The review team tested these arrangements for monitoring and review by reading the Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review reports from 2011-12 and 2012-13 and minutes from the Higher Education Management Board; and by talking to College and University staff and students about their involvement in these activities.

2.49 The Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Review reports contain a detailed account addressing each of the necessary areas and include information about enhancements made to the course as a result of student feedback and changes to the delivery of the programme made as a result of quality assurance procedures across the consortium. It was clear to the review team that the Higher Education Management Board actively considers the content of the reports.

2.50 The most recent periodic collaborative partnership review of the College took place in May 2011 where the panel confirmed the fitness of partnership arrangements for a further three years.

2.51 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B8 is met and risk is low in this area since the higher education portfolio currently contains only one programme and the College complies with the University's arrangements for monitoring and review. In light of the College's plans to expand its portfolio, the review team encourages the College to review its policies and procedures in this area. This contributes to the recommendation, noted under Expectation C, that the College review policies and procedures to ensure that they specifically address and consistently document the requirements of sound higher education management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B9: Complaints and appeals**

**Findings**

2.52 The College has a Complaints Policy and Procedure and a College Charter. These are generic policies covering both further and higher education. An overview of the College complaints procedure is made available to students in course handbooks and the Adult Education Handbook. They are then directed to the full complaints procedure. The College Governing Body receives an annual complaints report to monitor the number of formal complaints received. Students are also able to access the University's complaints and appeals procedures, detailed in the University Student Handbook. These procedures enable the College to meet Expectation B9.

2.53 To test the effectiveness of the procedures, the review team examined relevant documents including College policies, the College Charter, the University Student Handbook and extracts from minutes where complaints were discussed. They also talked to College and University staff and students about complaints and appeals.

2.54 Students are informed about the complaints and appeals processes at induction and students report that they would use a common-sense approach to work out which of the processes they should use, depending on the situation. Students can gain help in submitting a complaint from the Course Tutor, Course Leader, Adult Education Manager or Director of Student Services and Admissions. The College also has a counsellor to provide further support for students, and students can get help from the University directly. Students whom the review team met were confused, however, about how the appeals process works but reported that they were confident they would be able to find the necessary information within their student handbooks. Students have knowledge of staff at the University whom they could contact if they had a problem they did not want to raise with College staff.

2.55 The University Handbook gives accessible and trustworthy information on complaints and appeals, but the College Adult Education Handbook and course handbooks contain information about the process for making a complaint that higher education students could find misleading or confusing; for example, the complaints procedure refers to the Skills Funding Agency without making it sufficiently clear that this does not apply in a higher education context, and does not mention the possibility of escalating the complaint to the University or to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. Staff are clear that the College complaints process must be exhausted before a student can complain directly to the University, but no evidence of this process being plainly set out to students was found. Therefore the review team **recommends** the College establish a formal process for checking that information for prospective and current students can easily be accessed and understood and is fit for purpose for higher education students, complete and consistently presented.

2.56 Extracts from the minutes of meetings where complaints are discussed indicated that virtually no formal complaints about higher education are made and higher education is not analysed separately.

2.57 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B9 is not met and the risk is considered moderate in this area since there is no consistent understanding of the different complaints and appeals procedures by students, and there were factual inaccuracies present in the College's own published procedures. This contributes to the recommendation made under Expectation C that the College review policies and procedures to ensure that

they specifically address and consistently document the requirements of sound higher education management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing higher education provision with others**

## Findings

2.58 The College is part of a group of colleges franchised by the University to offer the Foundation Degree in Early Years, Care and Education. Quality assurance of the partnership is managed by Annual Standards and Quality Evaluative Reviews, engagement with University committees and periodic reviews of the partners by the University. The College itself does not have any formal arrangements with other delivery organisations or support providers in relation to its higher education provision. However, students must have access to relevant work opportunities to achieve the learning outcomes of the programme. The College offers training to those taking on the role of workplace mentor. Overall, the College does not consider that Expectation B10 applies.

2.59 The review team considered the ways in which the College manages any arrangements for delivery learning opportunities with others by examining the relevant documents and exploring the ways in which employers are engaged in the programme through discussion with staff, students and students' employers.

2.60 The College is not required by the University to have a formal relationship with students' employers and is therefore not obliged to visit a student's place of work, although many of the organisations where students are working are known by the College as part of their wider community and employer engagement through further education provision. Staff report that they assume the work environment is appropriate if it has received a positive Ofsted report, but Ofsted do not make a judgement about the learning opportunities provided for the College's students. The College also acknowledges that once a student is enrolled on the programme there is no formal method of checking that students continue to work in an appropriate setting. Employers with whom the review team met comment favourably on the course and the impact it is having on both the student's practice and their business. They do, however, feel it would be beneficial to have more contact with the College to better understand the content of the course and support their staff. Although all the employers with whom the review team met are mentors for their employees, none has received any formal training and were unaware this was available to them. Therefore, the review team **recommends** that by September 2014 the College review the way in which relationships with students' employers are managed to assure and enhance the quality of student learning opportunities.

2.61 The College places great emphasis on employability and the Principal insists that any potential future expansion of higher education provision must meet local employment needs. During discussions with the College about the development of the FdEng programme, the review team heard that local employers have been actively involved in the development of the programme which is being set up as a formal 'day release' scheme. The College has considered visiting students' places of work and developing employer relationships.

2.62 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation B10 is met since current practice in relation to the Foundation Degree in Early Years, Care and Education meets the basic requirements of the University. Risk is considered moderate, however, due to the omission of checks to ensure that student workplaces provide an appropriate learning

environment and the absence of any direct communication to employers such as basic information about the programme and the support available to workplace mentors. This contributes to the recommendation, noted under Expectation C, that the College review policies and procedures to ensure that they specifically address and consistently document the requirements of sound higher education management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

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



## Quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.64 In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook.

2.65 Eight of the 10 applicable Expectations in this area have been met with five recommendations arising in total. In six of the eight cases, risk is judged to be low. In the remaining two, risk is considered moderate but the College should be able to address the recommendations arising without major structural, operational or procedural change. Two of the applicable 10 expectations have not been met and in both cases risk is judged to be moderate. In one case the need for action has already been recognised by the College and in both cases the College should be able to address the recommendations arising without major structural, operational or procedural change.

2.66 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### 3 Judgement: Quality of the information produced about its provision

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

#### **Quality Code, Part C: Information about higher education provision**

#### **Findings**

3.1 The University validates the programme specification for the foundation degree which is available across the consortium of colleges. The College website contains a course overview under the adult education section of the website and has a link to the relevant page of the University website. The College website also has links to the Adult Education Handbook and a page on general information, containing term dates, student support, fees and refunds, a Statement of Support and College facilities. The College Charter is also available through the College website which details the expectations of the students and the College. Course handbooks, which are given to students at the start of each year, contain a generic section provided by the University followed by College-specific information provided by the College. By these means the College seeks to meet Expectation C.

3.2 The review team tested whether the information the College produces about its higher education provision is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy by browsing the College and University websites; reading and comparing different sources of information such as the College prospectus, the programme specification, course handbooks and other information produced for prospective and current students and students on completion of their studies; scrutinising policies and procedures that apply to the College's higher education provision; and talking to staff, students and student employers.

3.3 The College may only use University promotional material about the foundation degree. Where such publications require further information relating to the College, this must be approved by the University. It is, however, not clear to the review team how this takes place as there is no formal procedure published. The information provided by the University includes contact details, academic year dates, course aims and structure, accreditation of prior learning and module and assessment details. The specific College information contains extracts from the Adult Education Handbook, which contains information that could be misleading or confusing for higher education students such as reference to the Skills Funding Agency.

3.4 Higher education was not very evident on the College website which is primarily targeted at sixth-form students. It contains very little specific information about higher education and most of the generic information provided does not relate to higher education. The Adult Education Handbook and general information pages contain information on, for example, term dates, fees and funding and the complaints procedure which are not applicable to the higher education programme. The College Charter is mostly relevant but is primarily targeted at younger students with, for example, references to parents and homework. There is also a conflict between the fee level quoted on the College website, the University website and Unistats, after following the link from the University website. The review team noted that the periodic review panel in May 2011 acknowledged that there could be confusion in information provided for students and recommended that the College review, update and amend the documentation given to students to ensure clarity about facilities available to students via the University and to ensure all information is correct to

date. Although this recommendation was addressed at the time, accuracy of information remains an issue that needs constant attention by the College.

3.5 The Course Leader at the College provides effective guidance to applicants on the process of application and admissions to the programme through advice and guidance at interview. This ensures that the students who enrol on the programme have the appropriate qualifications and experience required for study and the College states that this contributes to the high rates of retention over each of the three years of the course. From the perspective of higher education prospective students, however, there is scope for confusion from conflicting or insufficiently differentiated sources of information emanating from either the College or the University, or from different sections of the College. For example, information for sixth form and adult education is not fit for the purpose of higher education prospective students. The review team therefore recommended under Expectation B2 that the College establish a formal process for checking that information for prospective and current students can easily be accessed and understood and is fit for purpose for higher education students, complete and consistently presented.

3.6 Current students have access to both the College and University VLEs containing course information, learning materials, assessments, student support and University regulations. Teaching staff provide resources through this route and students find it very helpful.

3.7 On completion of their studies, the University provides students with a transcript which details the units they have studied, their credit value and their achievement within these units, and this process is working effectively.

3.8 The College Quality Policy provides a framework for managing academic standards and quality improvement. It makes clear the responsibilities that staff, students and other stakeholders have in quality improvement across the College but does not specifically relate to higher education and the relationship with the University. Students whom the review team met were not aware of the identity and role of the external examiner and had no recollection of seeing or having external examiner reports discussed with them. The review team therefore made a recommendation under Expectation B7 that students be informed about the role and identity of the external examiner and the availability of external examiners' reports be brought to their attention.

3.9 Many of the policies and procedures that apply to the College's higher education provision relate to the College as a whole and are mainly focused on sixth-form and adult and further education students. While much of this material is relevant to all students, whatever programme they are studying, there are many instances (for example, in the Adult Education Handbook) where they need to be reviewed to make them more fit for purpose in the context of higher education provision and to highlight what is distinctive about higher education at the College. The review team therefore **recommends** that by September 2015 the College review its policies and procedures to ensure that they specifically address and consistently document the requirements of sound higher education management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement.

3.10 Overall, the review team concludes that Expectation C is not met. Information about higher education policies, procedures, and learning opportunities is not fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The review team also concludes that, due to the potential threats of complaints, appeals and litigation through incorrect information, risk in this area is serious.

**Expectation: Not met**  
**Level of risk: Serious**

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

3.11 In reaching its judgement concerning information about higher education provision, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook.

3.12 There is one recommendation - for a review of the College's policies and procedures to ensure that they are fit for the purposes of higher education which, in the review team's view, reflects a significant gap in the College's management of information about its higher education provision. There are links to two other recommendations one of which appears in both Expectation B2 (paragraph 2.10) and Expectation B9 (paragraph 2.45) while the other appears in Expectation B7 (paragraph 2.45). Both recommendations are relevant to this judgement area since they touch on information for prospective and/or current students. The expectation in this area has not been met on the grounds that information specifically for higher education prospective students is difficult to identify and much of the information for students in general either does not apply to higher education students at all or is erroneous and potentially misleading or confusing if applied to them. Policies and procedures for managing academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement do not consistently document arrangements as they apply to higher education provision. Risk is judged to be serious in this area because of the capacity for untrustworthy information to have severe consequences, including complaints and appeals.

3.13 The review team concludes that the quality of the information produced about its provision **does not meet** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: Enhancement of student learning opportunities

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

### Findings

4.1 The College defines enhancement as continual improvement to the quality of the learning experience. To achieve this it employs quality assurance processes across the further and higher education provision which take into consideration key management data and student feedback. These processes feed into the Annual Quality Improvement Plan which is monitored by relevant committees. Annual Quality and Evaluative Review Reports capture key improvements to the delivery of the programme, which are considered internally by the Higher Education Management Board and taken by College staff to the University Teachers Board for discussion. By these means the College is enabled to meet the Expectation about enhancement.

4.2 The review team tested the effectiveness of the College's approach to enhancement by studying Annual Quality and Evaluative Reports from the last two years, the most recent Quality Improvement Plan and minutes of the Higher Education Management Board; and by talking to the Principal and senior managers of the College as well as teaching and frontline support staff and students.

4.3 It was clear from speaking to staff and students that the College has an ethos of continuous improvement, and many examples were given illustrating how the student voice directly influences enhancement of the programme. Staff are clearly engaged in lesson observation, and consider that teaching on a higher education programme improves their teaching across the College. Staff are able to give examples of their practice being shared across the consortium of colleges delivering this programme. The College presented the review team with many examples of how they go beyond minimum requirements for delivery of the course. These include Saturday and summer schools and additional tutorials as described under Expectation B3. For example, as part of a Saturday school students have the opportunity to achieve an additional qualification in safeguarding which directly enhances their future employment potential.

4.4 The College does not have a specific strategic approach to the enhancement of higher education provision and the review team found no specific actions assigned in the Quality Improvement Plan that are relevant to higher education. The review team therefore **recommends** that by September 2014 the College develop a strategic approach to the enhancement of higher education provision that differentiates appropriately between higher education and other provision offered by the College.

4.5 Overall, the review team concludes that the Expectation about enhancement is met and risk is considered low in this area on the grounds that the College makes continuous improvements to the delivery of the current single programme. In light of the College's imminent plans to expand the higher education portfolio and play a more significant part in the design and development of new programmes, the review team underlines the recommendation, noted under Expectation C, that the College review policies and procedures to ensure that they specifically address and consistently document the requirements of sound higher education management of academic standards, quality assurance and enhancement.

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

## Enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.6 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex two of the published handbook.

4.7 The Expectation about enhancement is met and risk is considered low in this area with one recommendation arising. Given the College's emphasis on continuous improvement of its provision, it should be possible to address this recommendation without major structural, operational or procedural change.

4.8 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The Foundation Degree in Early Years, Care and Education takes account of the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark* and the requirements set out by the DfE for early years, care and education. The programme was validated originally to meet the DfES requirement for sector-endorsed foundation degrees in early years and has had annual endorsement by the CWDC. This entails the programme meeting the 12 criteria required by the CWDC for endorsement.

5.2 The programme is based on the Early Years Foundation Stage as set out by the DfE and is DfE-validated for specialists in childhood development from birth to the age of five. It enables successful students to use the foundation degree as evidence for EYQTS awarded by the National College for Teaching and Leadership, which is part of the DfE.

5.3 Student employability is therefore central to this foundation degree and is embedded in all units of study on the programme through teaching, learning and assessment that occurs both inside and outside the classroom. The programme specification lists how student employability is embedded in curriculum design within its unit learning outcomes map and also lists the practical and transferable learning outcomes of the programme.

5.4 There is a requirement that all students must work in an early years environment for 12 hours or more per week for the majority of the year or have an involvement such that they can achieve the practice outcomes of the programme. This is checked at interview prior to admission but is not routinely checked throughout the programme. There is also no systematic checking of the quality of the learning opportunity represented by the student's place of work; it is assumed that because they are inspected by Ofsted, the work environments must be suitable for the College's purposes.

5.5 Staff delivering the programme are well qualified, highly competent and up to date with current industry practice. Many have been delivering the programme for a sustained period of time, and some are employed or have recent employment experience in the early years sector. Staff use their expertise to enable students to link the learning outcomes of the programme to real work experience, which enhances their employability. Students are able to describe how learning outcomes become increasingly challenging as they progress through the levels of the programme.

5.6 Progression rates from the programme to further study, promotion and employment are high and demonstrate the impact of the development of employability skills throughout the course. In 2011-12, 64 per cent of third-year students progressed, or intended to progress, to further study following a year in employment. In 2012-13 this progression rate increased to 77 per cent.

## Glossary

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

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

### Academic standards

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

### Award

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

### Blended learning

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

### Credit(s)

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

### Degree-awarding body

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

### Distance learning

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

### Dual award or double award

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

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning.



### **Enhancement**

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

### **Expectations**

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

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

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

### **Framework**

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

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

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

### **Good practice**

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

### **Learning opportunities**

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

### **Learning outcomes**

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

### **Multiple awards**

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

### **Operational definition**

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

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

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

### **Programme specifications**

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

### **Public information**

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

### **Quality Code**

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

### **Reference points**

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

### **Subject benchmark statement**

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

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

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

### **Threshold academic standard**

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

### **Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

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

### **Widening participation**

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

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