



Higher Education Review of Dudley College

June 2014

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Dudley College. The review took place from 3 to 5 June 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Mark Davies
- Ms Ann Hill
- Miss Kate Wicklow (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Dudley 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)¹ setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review the QAA review team:

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

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

In reviewing Dudley 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,² and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

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

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

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

³ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus.

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

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Dudley College

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

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

Good practice

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

- The analytic and data-driven approach to course monitoring and review, including the effective use of a comprehensive online monitoring tool (Expectations B1 and B8).
- The provision of diagnostic screening for all applicants to higher education programmes (Expectation B2).
- The responsiveness of staff of all categories and levels of seniority to issues of importance to students (Expectations B3 and B4).

Recommendations

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

By December 2014:

- establish a clear mechanism for course closure, ensuring in particular that the interests of current students are fully protected (Expectation B8)
- ensure that all higher education policy documents and formal advice to students are accurate, complete and current (Expectations C, B3 and B9)
- ensure that the confidentiality of examination board minutes is in all cases assured (Expectation C)
- ensure that all higher education committees have clear terms of reference (including quoracy rules) and reporting lines, and that all minutes of such committees contextualise as well as specify the outcomes (Expectations C, A4, A6, B5 and B6)
- develop and ensure the adoption of consistent nomenclature for all deliberative structures and posts within higher education (Expectations C and A6).

By July 2015:

- ensure through staff development that all relevant staff understand the national expectations underpinning teaching and learning in higher education (Expectations B3, A2 and A3)
- establish a strategic approach to planning the professional development of staff involved with higher education (Expectation B3)

- develop an explicit strategic approach to the enhancement of higher education provision (Enhancement).

Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following action that Dudley College is already taking to improve the educational provision offered to its students.

- The steps being taken to formalise student engagement in quality assurance (Expectations B5 and B1).

Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

The College is making significant progress towards embedding its partnership approach to quality assurance and enhancement by encouraging, facilitating and engaging actively with student comment and involvement.

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

About Dudley College

Dudley College (the College) is a long-established further education college offering a wide range of courses to some 12,000 further education and 250 higher education students (a little over two per cent of the student population). It employs around 750 staff and engages with 1,500 local and regional employers annually, as well as having links with local schools and higher education institutions. Its higher education programmes are validated by the University of Wolverhampton (teacher training and a Foundation Degree in Musical Theatre) and Pearson (a range of Higher National Certificates and Diplomas).

The College underwent successful reviews by QAA (2010) and Ofsted (2013), QAA signing off the action plan from the 2010 review in 2012. Since this review the College has invested in its estate, introduced a new management structure and extended its range of courses. It identifies its main challenges as decreases in public funding, the introduction of student loans and a lack of capacity to meet demand for places. Its seven strategic priorities, which include but are not restricted to the higher education courses with which this review is concerned, are: outstanding teaching and learning; a relevant and responsive curriculum; outstanding facilities and resources; meeting employers' needs; supporting its local community; investing in people; and financial strength.

Explanation of the findings about Dudley College

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

1 Judgement: Maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards

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

Quality Code, *Chapter A1: The national level*

Findings

1.1 Ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of programmes offered by the College lies with the degree-awarding body or awarding organisation concerned. The review team scrutinised partnership agreements, approval and review documentation and external examiner reports and confirms that qualifications are allocated and delivered at the appropriate level of the FHEQ; that effective arrangements are in place to ensure that this is so; and that the College discharges its obligations appropriately.

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

1.2 The College believes that since it does not offer honours degree-level courses this expectation is inapplicable. This is not correct, since it offers a foundation degree on behalf of the University of Wolverhampton. The review team confirms that this programme is aligned with the expectations of the *Foundation Degree qualification benchmark*.

1.3 Given this misunderstanding on the College's part, the team explored teaching and managerial staff's knowledge and understanding of the main external reference points relevant to their responsibilities. Among teaching staff such knowledge and understanding were extremely limited; managerial staff had a greater, though still incomplete, appreciation of relevant external reference points, stressing that responsibility for ensuring that learning and teaching engages with such reference points rests with the degree-awarding body and awarding organisation. Since, however, the framework within which teaching is delivered is self-evidently relevant also to College staff, and since institutional ownership of this framework is an expectation of institutions teaching at higher education level, as identified in Expectation B3 (paragraph 2.5) the team recommends that the College ensure through staff development that all relevant staff understand the national expectations underpinning teaching and learning in higher education (see also paragraph 1.5).

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter A3: The programme level

Findings

1.4 The review team confirms, from documentary study and discussion, that the College provides specifications for programmes offered through Pearson, both electronically and as hard copy; that it provides all students with undergraduate and area handbooks; that it provides foundation degree students with module guides; that students find these materials accessible and comprehensive; and that the documentation is satisfactory in content and aligned with all relevant external reference points.

1.5 Nevertheless, while the Foundation Degree Handbook contains all relevant information, the review team, in spite of repeated requests, was not provided with a definitive programme specification but directed to the Course Guide. The team concludes, therefore, that not all relevant members of the College appreciate the specific nature of programme specifications and, as identified in Expectation B3 (paragraph 2.5), recommends that the College ensure through staff development that all relevant staff understand the national expectations underpinning teaching and learning in higher education (see also paragraph 1.3).

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

1.6 The review team scrutinised the College's approval and monitoring procedures, and confirms that they reflect its contractual responsibilities, are widely understood by relevant staff, and that students understand the aims and learning outcomes of their programmes of study. Nonetheless, the fact that the documentation makes so little reference to the Quality Code suggests that there is scope for these documents to be reviewed with a view to making their alignment with all relevant external reference points clear.

1.7 The review team was unable to establish definitively where College-level responsibility lies for assuring the appropriateness of academic standards, and how the quality assurance cycle achieves both coherence and integration. The team was told that relevant discussion takes place in several forums, notably the Higher Education Board of Studies, but remained unclear, having reviewed all relevant terms of reference and reporting lines, as to the locus for formally and systematically scrutinising higher education practice, and for ensuring that actions are completed and formally signed off prior to submission to the degree-awarding body or awarding organisation. The team has made a recommendation under Expectation C (paragraph 3.4) that the College ensure that all higher education committees have clear terms of reference (including quoracy rules) and reporting lines, and that all minutes of such committees contextualise as well as specify the outcomes (see also paragraphs 1.10, 2.14 and 2.18).

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter A5: Externality

Findings

1.8 External examiners are appointed by the degree-awarding body and awarding organisation, visit the College at least annually, and offer expertise which staff find valuable. Their reports, which confirm overall agreement with College-level assessment recommendations, are made available to students through the virtual learning environment, although students do not routinely read them. The review team noted that while one such report had been critical of examination board arrangements, the College had subsequently addressed the concern satisfactorily. Overall the team found that the College fulfils its contractual obligations, makes use of appropriate externality, and prepares appropriately for, and engages appropriately with, external participation in the assessment process.

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 is based on the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.

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

Findings

1.9 The review team, having explored the manner in which relevant College staff understand and meet their institutional responsibilities, confirms that they have been appropriately trained in the application of the Assessment Policy and that assessment practice is competent. Assignment briefs are internally verified; external examiners confirm that sound internal verification processes are in place; assessment procedures, including second marking, internal moderation and external moderation, are satisfactory; and student handbooks contain assessment information appropriate to their intended readership. Students who met the review team expressed satisfaction with the College's approach to assessment, including the general quality of feedback. Nevertheless, since this view does not wholly reflect that expressed in the student submission, the quality and consistency of assessment feedback are areas the College may wish to keep under review.

1.10 The review team examined the conduct, remit, minuting arrangements, reporting line and membership (internal and external) of examination boards, and the levels of attendance at recent meetings. In doing so it noted that because the functions of examination boards extend to activities which would elsewhere fall within the remit of a board of studies or equivalent body, the College addresses the possibility of students being excluded from broad-based discussions about their own programmes by including student representation in examination board meetings, the representatives withdrawing when individual results are discussed. The team also found inconsistency in the nomenclature of examination boards (which are sometimes referred to as assessment boards) and that these boards do not always have a clear remit or terms of reference. The team accordingly recommends under Expectation C that the College both develop and ensure the adoption of consistent nomenclature for all deliberative structures and posts within higher education (paragraph 3.5), and ensure that all higher education committees have clear terms of reference (including quoracy rules) and reporting lines, and that all minutes of such committees contextualise as well as specify the outcomes (paragraph 3.4, see also paragraphs 1.7, 2.14 and 2.18).

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

1.11 Dudley College fulfils its contractual commitments to its degree-awarding body and awarding organisation. It engages appropriately with external participation in assessment, and responds reliably and constructively to advice and recommendations from external sources.

1.12 This section of the report contains recommendations. These, however, are for the most part subsidiary cross-references to recommendations primarily belonging elsewhere, and do not cast doubt on the overall positive conclusions of this section of the report. The maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body and awarding organisation **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 The College's planning cycle for programme design and approval includes engagement with local employers and other interests to ensure that provision is and remains aligned with market demand. Within the College, plans for future programmes are discussed at the Higher Education Board of Studies and recommended for delivery, taking into account market needs, progression opportunities, staffing expertise and resource requirements. The extent to which students are involved in course design and approval varies in nature and degree: while all courses include class representative meetings where students' views are discussed, the College acknowledges that more could be done to systematise the involvement of students in this area (see paragraphs 2.13 and 5.1). As identified in Expectation B5 (paragraph 2.16) the review team affirms the steps the College is taking to formalise student engagement in quality assurance.

2.2 The College emphasises what it describes as the sophisticated nature of its business planning: the tool deployed is designed to ensure that all items logged as requiring action are addressed and signed off. The analytic and data-driven approach to course monitoring and review, including the effective use of a comprehensive online monitoring tool, is a feature of **good practice** (see also paragraph 2.22).

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

2.3 The College's Admissions Policy includes clear advice-giving, assessment screening and procedures for approving prior learning. The review team examined the application of this policy, noting that all applicants are interviewed for suitability, screened in English and Mathematics, may be invited to submit written work as additional evidence of potential, and are supported throughout by the Student Support Team and course tutors. A complaints and appeals procedure is available to applicants, and current students spoke positively about the process as a whole. Admissions decisions are monitored by the Higher Education Board of Studies and the Corporation's⁵ Standards Committee, but the nature of the minutes of these meetings restricted the team's capacity to evaluate the extent to which the College makes strategic use of the data.

2.4 The College has a clear drive to support applicants, many of whom are unfamiliar with the norms and expectations of higher education. The review team noted in particular the care and professionalism with which applicants are screened for suitability both for the programme for which they have applied and for others of which they may be unaware: outright rejection is unusual. The provision of diagnostic screening for all applicants to higher education programmes is a feature of **good practice**.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

⁵ The Corporation is the College's governing body, sometimes referred to as the Board of Governors. The Standards Committee is one of five committees of the Board.

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

2.5 The College has confidence in the quality of its teaching, while acknowledging that scope exists to do more to help good teachers become outstanding. The review team examined all relevant arrangements from the perspective of higher education, in relation to which the Outstanding Practitioner Team has recently appointed a specialist member to work primarily with staff teaching at this level. Staff development days are well attended but not specific to higher education: while the team was told that the Quality Code was discussed at a recent such event, staff who met the team had little awareness of it and therefore little understanding of its relevance to their teaching. The team **recommends** that by July 2015 the College ensure through staff development that all relevant staff understand the national expectations underpinning teaching and learning in higher education.

2.6 Students rate their teaching highly, valuing in particular the industrial experience of many teaching staff and the informal and non-hierarchical staff-student ethos appertaining. Full-time students have a weekly tutorial, with proportional arrangements for part-timers: this system was valued by students who met the review team. In a broader context, the Caring for the Learner Policy details the support available to a wide range of students, including those from overseas and those with special needs: overall the College offers its students extensive and well managed support. The responsiveness of staff of all categories and levels of seniority to issues of importance to students is a feature of **good practice** (see also paragraph 2.12).

2.7 All teachers and assessors are expected to be, if not already qualified, working towards a teaching-related qualification. Since this need not be higher education specific, the review team examined the support or encouragement provided for staff minded to take higher education qualifications and discipline-related developmental activities, including research-based ones, with a view to assuring or strengthening their competence. The team was told that funds or remissions are not routinely available to academic staff wishing to pursue higher degrees (although individual requests may be entertained), but that since many staff are current or recent industry practitioners they can be considered well placed to keep abreast of new industrial developments - again, however, not necessarily in a higher education context. The team was unable to discern an institutional-level drive to ensure staff involved in higher education are engaged in scholarly activity, whether discipline-based or pedagogic; no examples were given of current staff research; and little awareness exists at any institutional level of the UK Professional Standards Framework, and therefore little understanding of its relevance to the development of learning and teaching in higher education. The team **recommends** that by July 2015 the College establish a strategic approach to planning the professional development of staff involved with higher education.

2.8 The College uses its virtual learning environment as a repository of information and, in many programmes, as an active learning tool. Students noted in their submission that usage was variable, although those who met the review team took a more positive view: given this contradictory information the College will doubtless continue to monitor compliance with its benchmark requirement. While the team noted the College's strategic drive to develop the virtual learning environment through the IT Strategy and E-Learning

Priorities, it noted also that the strategy with which it had been provided was out of date (see also paragraphs 2.25 and 3.2).

2.9 Responsibility for annual teaching observations lies with the Outstanding Practitioner Team. There is no requirement for higher education teachers to observe each other or for observations of higher education teaching to be set in the context of national higher education frameworks and expectations, though the College produced an annual report of the outcomes of observations in 2012 with a constructively critical higher education section. Observations are graded, and the sharing of good practice is encouraged but not systematised; outcomes and actions are mapped to ensure that actions are addressed in a timely manner.

2.10 The College claims that this scheme ensures the continual development of teaching staff: the review team, not having investigated the point, has no reason to question the efficacy of the scheme across the College as a whole. Nevertheless, other than in the context of the virtual learning environment (see paragraph 2.8), where such an approach is discernible, it found little evidence of widespread deliberate, strategically driven institutional-level steps to enhance higher education teaching in particular.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.11 The College states that it monitors and reviews resource allocation systematically and effectively at executive level, and has invested heavily in learning resources relevant to its higher education programmes. These investments include a higher education study room, a virtual learning environment and an online library database. The review team confirms that these claims are accurate; that resourcing is a standing item on Higher Education Board of Studies agendas; that learning support has attracted positive comment from external examiners; that the College informs students of developments by means which include an update magazine; and that students expressed satisfaction with the resources available and the College's responsiveness to problems arising.

2.12 The College offers specific support for students with disabilities, declared or not (students are offered dyslexia screening), and for international students. This proactive approach constitutes a considerable support for students striving to reach their potential, and students who met the review team spoke positively of the academic and pastoral support provided. The College offers appropriate learning resources and support for its students, and the team saw examples of students commenting on the resources provided, thereby contributing to their strengthening, and of the College responding promptly, flexibly and constructively to the views expressed. As identified in Expectation B3 (paragraph 2.6) the responsiveness of staff of all categories and levels of seniority to issues of importance to students is a feature of **good practice**.

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

2.13 The College regards engaging higher education students in their learning as a distinctive feature of practice, citing examples which include the cross-College Learner Voice system, a Student Support Officer appointment and the associated establishment of a Student Board of Studies. It acknowledges a need for greater student involvement in course design, monitoring and review (see paragraphs 2.1 and 5.1), and that optimising engagement with part-time students remains a challenge. The review team examined these arrangements, focusing in particular on the extent to which they extend to all higher education students, and noting the College's emphasis on the importance and scope of the representative role. Students who met the team expressed satisfaction with the College's responsiveness and the team found many examples of appropriate responses to students' views.

2.14 At institutional level the higher education representative system is well developed, to the extent that representatives are, very unusually, members of examination boards (see paragraph 1.10). Programme management is devolved to departments, and while the review team was told that students attend the variously entitled course team meetings, from the minutes, which do not differentiate staff and students, it is not evident that this is always so. In fact some such meetings include consideration of both individual student progress (from which student exclusion would be proper) and student-relevant issues (where it would be unusual). The question arises, therefore, as to how extensively and consistently students contribute to local-level planning. The team also noted that some meetings with students identify matters of potential import for the College, including attendance problems, financial viability, the absence of performance descriptors and the possibility of introducing mixed level teaching. While the College states that such matters, and in particular the student perspective on them, are formally communicated to the Higher Education Board of Studies for consideration, the team could find no evidence of these minutes being routinely forwarded for formal review at more senior level. This is identified in the team's recommendation made under Expectation C (paragraph 3.4) that the College ensure that all higher education committees have clear terms of reference (including quoracy rules) and reporting lines, and that all minutes of such committees contextualise as well as specify the outcomes (see also paragraphs 1.7, 1.10 and 2.18).

2.15 The results of the National Student Survey are discussed at the Corporation's Standards Committee, in the presence of the President of the Students' Union. The review team was told that discussions also take place at the Higher Education Board of Studies but no record of this was found in the minutes provided: the College did, however, provide the team with a three-year review of the relevant data, undertaken in academic year 2012-13. The College also operates a local survey, the results of which contribute to annual quality improvement plans and course self-evaluation documents; and it is piloting a module evaluation scheme.

2.16 Overall the College is taking sound steps towards ensuring that the student voice is embedded in higher education quality management at local as well as institutional level; it acknowledges that areas for development continue to exist. While students express strong satisfaction with the nature and level of institutional engagement with their views, the informality and inconsistency of some local-level committee meetings and minutes make it difficult to confirm either that students are consistently involved in decision-making at this

level or that unmodulated differences across programme teams do not exist. The review team **affirms** the steps being taken to formalise student engagement in quality assurance (see also paragraph 2.1).

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

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

Findings

2.17 The College is confident that all students have the opportunities captioned in this section, citing internal verification and local arrangements in all higher education courses, in addition to the external oversight of the degree-awarding body, awarding organisation and external examiners. The review team explored these claims both institutionally and at discipline level, finding that the College offers students a wide range of opportunities to show that they have achieved the desired outcomes.

2.18 All assignments are subject to internal verification and degree-awarding body or awarding organisation monitoring. While the College's contractual obligations to its degree-awarding body and awarding organisation differ in kind, in both cases external examiners confirm that the College meets its obligations. Examination boards take place at subject level, with a reporting line to the Higher Education Board of Studies, though the membership and remit of such boards remain unclear (see also paragraphs 1.7, 1.10, 2.14 and 3.4). Students told the review team that expectations for assessment, including timings, format and marking schemes, were made clear in advance, and that they were satisfied with the wide range of assessment methods, which in some cases helped to improve their communication skills.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B7: External examining

Findings

2.19 External examiners are appointed by the degree-awarding body and awarding organisation, to which they also report (see paragraph 1.8). At College level each external examiner report is actioned as an agenda item for the annual discipline-level examination boards, with actions carried forward and addressed as appropriate, and cross-College oversight provided by the Higher Education Board of Studies.

2.20 The review team, having scrutinised the College's discharge of its contractual obligations and noted that feedback from such reports contributes ultimately to the annual quality improvement plan for the programme concerned, confirms that the College meets its obligations in this area.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review

Findings

2.21 The College operates an annual self-evaluation procedure which, it acknowledges, requires tailoring to meet the needs and expectations associated with higher education. The review team found that progress is being made, with higher education programme leaders completing a discrete termly self-assessment report collated into a quality improvement plan for ultimate submission to the Higher Education Board of Studies.

2.22 Programme monitoring and review are coordinated by the Standards and Performance Directorate. The review team noted both the reliability of the commercial tool used for this purpose and its appropriate adaptation to the needs of the College's higher education portfolio, including identifying underperforming courses and ensuring the production of responsive action plans. As identified in Expectation B1 (paragraph 2.2) the College's analytic and data-driven approach to course monitoring and review, including the effective use of a comprehensive online monitoring tool, is a feature of good practice.

2.23 The review team noted that the College lacks a clear procedure for programme closure. While accepting that enforced closure has yet to occur, the sensitivity of any such occurrence in the future makes it proper for the College to meet the expectations of the Quality Code and have a procedure in place. The team **recommends** that by December 2014 the College establish a clear mechanism for course closure, ensuring in particular that the interests of current students are fully protected.

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

2.24 The College states that it has procedures for both complaints and appeals; that they are made available to students; and that there have been no academic appeals, either internally or to a degree-awarding body or awarding organisation, since the previous QAA review. The review team found the internal procedures for handling complaints and appeals sound, noting that the progress of both is tracked electronically by the Standards Directorate and that the results are standing items at some, but not all, course-level meetings.

2.25 The review team found that information on complaints and appeals is readily available to students in hard copy and online. While students who met the team were aware of the procedures and regarded them as supportive, the team was unable to find the information on awarding organisation procedures in the handbook for students studying for Pearson awards. The team noted also that both the documented procedure for complaints and the complaints form mention recourse to the Skills Funding Agency, which is not the appropriate body for higher education students. This incorrect information is potentially disadvantageous to students and contrary to the expectations of the Quality Code. As identified in Expectation C (paragraph 3.2) the team recommends that the College ensure that all higher education policy documents and formal advice to students are accurate, complete and current (see also paragraph 2.8).

Expectation: 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

2.26 While the College does not have degree awarding powers it is responsible for managing its relationship with employers, and for student work placements. From a scrutiny of procedures and meeting minutes, and from meetings with staff, the review team found a variety of appropriate work experience opportunities available and that procedures for supporting students undertaking them are fit for purpose.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research degrees*

Findings

2.27 The College offers no postgraduate provision.

Quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.28 In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities the review team found that the College's higher education students receive a level of support which provides them with the opportunity to fulfil their potential, and that the College's commitment to its students and its region is beyond question.

2.29 The review team identifies as features of good practice aspects of three areas of activity: admissions; the supportiveness and responsiveness of teaching staff; and the way in which the College deals with matters requiring positive action, whether to solve a problem or make an improvement. The team also makes several recommendations, of which most cluster around a single broad theme: strengthening the support the College affords its higher education portfolio. For example, it is a normal expectation within higher education that teaching staff are familiar with the national expectations surrounding higher education: while the College's programmes engage with these expectations the College currently relies heavily on the degree-awarding body and awarding organisation to ensure that this is so, rather than ensuring that its own staff have a sense of ownership of them.

2.30 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 College is confident that the information it provides for students and the public is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, highlighting the personalised advice and information it gives potential and actual (including new) students, many of whom are unaccustomed to an educational environment. The review team confirms, from documentary study and discussion with staff and students, that this information is well regarded, and that policies are in place to ensure the integrity of web-based information.

3.2 Students receive a comprehensive common handbook complemented by curriculum handbooks, a brief 'essentials' guide (which includes a student charter), in the majority of cases (see paragraph 2.25) detailed programme specifications, and access to extensive further information on the virtual learning environment, including external examiner reports and committee minutes. While the students who met the review team expressed satisfaction with this information the team noted both that the College incorrectly refers complainants to the Skills Funding Agency as external arbiter, and that the documentation makes no reference to the Pearson complaints and appeals procedure (see also paragraph 2.25). Given also that eight policy documents given to the team were out of date (in that their review date had been exceeded), and noting that the College subsequently claimed that while out-of-date policies were provided to the team current documents were available on the intranet, the team **recommends** that by December 2014 the College ensure that all higher education policy documents and formal advice to students are accurate, complete and current (see also paragraphs 2.8 and 2.25).

3.3 The review team further noted that while students have access to a variety of minutes for committees, including examination boards, the College needs to assure itself that sensitive information is not accidentally divulged. During a tour of the virtual learning environment the team noted examples of grades of named students being disclosed in a selection of examination board minutes available to students; the fact that they were redacted later that day confirms the team's view that this disclosure was a lapse, and indicative of a lack of rigour on the College's part in safeguarding the integrity of its records. The team **recommends** that by December 2014 the College ensure that the confidentiality of examination board minutes is in all cases assured.

3.4 The review team received a selection of minutes from college committees which reflected very different approaches to record keeping, ranging from action planning through informal notes to formal minutes. While the absence of a house style was confirmed by senior staff, it was not clear to the team whether (and to what extent) these different arrangements are centrally overseen, and by what means the College establishes the fitness for purpose of all records of meetings. In some cases it was unclear which categories of personnel were in attendance (staff and students were not normally distinguished, and no staff job titles were included); what the committee remit was (the team had difficulty in securing terms of reference); what decisions had been made (given the variable quality of recording); what discussion had led to that decision; what contribution to decision-making had been made by students; and how systematically decisions taken were followed up in

subsequent meetings. This lack of clarity in recording, particularly given the delegated nature of decision-making within the College, is potentially confusing, and for course managers it creates the risk of decisions not being effectively monitored, followed up and signed off. The team **recommends** that by December 2014 the College ensure that all higher education committees have clear terms of reference (including quoracy rules) and reporting lines, and that all minutes of such committees contextualise as well as specify the outcomes (see also paragraphs 1.7, 1.10, 2.14 and 2.18).

3.5 The review team noted the absence of standardised nomenclature for some College committees and staff titles. While accepting that this may be a matter of inconsistent usage or adherence to former titles, and while noting the College's response that this was simply an interim issue, the consequence for those seeking to understand the College's quality management arrangements is much the same. The team has seen the Higher Education Board of Studies referred to as the Academic Board, Academic Higher Education Board of Studies and the Academic Board of Studies; the Director for Higher Education has been variously described as Head of Dudley 6th and Director with HE Responsibilities; the Executive Director of Learning and Standards has been called the Executive Director for Learning and Teaching; the Director of Standards and Performance has been described as the Director of Standards; and course teams adopt variant titles for their meetings. The team **recommends** that by December 2014 the College develop and ensure the adoption of consistent nomenclature for all deliberative structures and posts within higher education (see also paragraph 1.10).

3.6 In reaching its judgement about the information the College provides about its higher education provision, the review team, while finding high levels of satisfaction among students with the information with which they are provided, also found areas where improvement is necessary. These include confidentiality, the absence of terms of reference for some committees, the lack of clear reporting lines, unclear recording, inconsistent nomenclature, and incorrect information being given to students about complaints. Accordingly the expectation is not met and the risk is moderate.

Expectation: Not met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

3.7 While the majority of the information provided by the College is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy, the fact that this section contains four recommendations relating to different aspects of the College's provision of information (information on complaints; clarity of decision-making; confidentiality of examination board decisions; and inconsistency in the way in which some titles of committees and individual posts are described) leads the review team to the view that, while the expectation not met does not present any serious risks, a moderate risk exists which, without action, could lead to serious problems over time; and that the College's procedures, while broadly adequate, have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied. The quality of the information produced about its provision **requires improvement to 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 Enhancement is defined by QAA as taking deliberate steps at provider level to improve the quality of learning opportunities. This definition means that enhancement is more than a collection of examples of good practice that might be found across a provider. It is about a provider being aware that it has a responsibility to improve the quality of learning opportunities, and to have policies, structures and processes in place to make sure it can do so. It means that the willingness to consider enhancement stems from a high-level awareness of the need for improvement and is embedded throughout the provider.

4.2 The Executive Director of Learning and Standards has strategic responsibility for quality improvement. This involves policies, procedures and actions (surveys, performance management, teaching observations, assessment practice, management information, course self-evaluation, quality improvement plans, staff induction and updating, investment in learning resources and the use of key impact measures) designed to achieve this end. Stand-alone initiatives designed to improve students' learning opportunities include the recently launched Peer and Self-Assessment Project and the development of the Outstanding Practitioner Team.

4.3 The curriculum self-evaluation document includes a section on enhancement of students' learning opportunities, and lists both improvements made to the various programmes and descriptions of current practice. Also reported through the curriculum self-evaluations for 2013-14 is the thematic element of student involvement in 'quality assurance enhancement'. This section, however, focuses more on students' involvement in quality processes and on responses to student feedback than on how enhancement has been approached and achieved. Furthermore, the review team noted that in some cases the text in these sections has simply been pasted in from other disciplines, not always with the necessary changes having been made: for example, in wording taken directly from Fashion and Textiles, the Musical Theatre text refers to a Fashion Show as 'the final event for HE learners'. The team found little evidence of opportunities for enhancement being identified, disseminated and systematised: hence, while the College states that good practice is shared through a variety of routes, the team could detect no coordination of these routes of a kind which would ensure the systematic exploitation of opportunities for the identification, support and dissemination of good practice.

4.4 When the review team explored this issue with relevant senior staff it was informed that a strategy for enhancement exists, but not in written form. On enquiring as to the details of the strategy the team was given examples of activities, some of them remedial, such as responding to student feedback or dealing with substandard teaching, and some deliberate attempts to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities. The team was also directed to a range of general documents and action plans at various levels: these, however, did not detail a strategic approach to enhancement.

4.5 The review team found clear evidence of the College's determination to improve the experience of its students, largely through systems it already has in place, but also that its activities are not fully coordinated, or part of an explicit overall strategy or framework that could serve as a vehicle for evaluating existing or developing new enhancement activities. Thus, what is lacking is a strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning

opportunities, and integration of enhancement initiatives in a systematic and planned manner at College level. Furthermore there was little evidence, through annual reporting, of the use of quality assurance procedures to identify opportunities for enhancement. The team accordingly concludes that neither the deliberative nor the executive functions of the College have effective oversight of quality enhancement as a deliberate process, and **recommends** that by July 2015 the College develop an explicit strategic approach to the enhancement of higher education provision. Accordingly the expectation is not met and the risk is moderate.

Expectation: Not met

Level of risk: Moderate

Enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.6 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team noted that the definition against which the College is judged involves enhancement being based on deliberate steps at institutional level and of these steps being embedded throughout the institution. The College, while its ethos is very supportive of students, was unable to provide convincing evidence of such an approach.

4.7 The criteria for a judgement of 'requiring improvement to meet UK expectations' include a situation in which procedures, while broadly adequate, have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied. In this case the College has a strong commitment to improving the quality of student learning and many initiatives designed to do so. It was not, however, able to demonstrate that these initiatives are linked into a coherent strategic whole, driven from senior levels and embedded consistently throughout the College. The enhancement of student learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Findings

5.1 The College is proud of its achievements in relation to student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement. Its activities are value-driven, and it believes the effectiveness of its work is demonstrable. The review team found evidence of students making a positive impact on programmes by informal interactions with staff, but the College acknowledges that it has more work to do to encourage students, particularly part-time students, to participate in formal quality assurance and enhancement procedures and initiatives (see paragraphs 2.1 and 2.13). Staff who met the review team appeared committed to ensuring that the student voice was actively used, and were in receipt of guidance from the Students' Union, which also, in partnership with the College, offers training for course representatives.

5.2 The College identifies as innovative its Learner Voice initiative, which aims to ensure that it acts as well as listens; its Learner Involvement procedure; its engagement with and support for the Students' Union, including establishing a Student Board of Studies; its Peer and Self-assessment Project, which it states strengthens both critical and social skills; its academic staff's open door policy; and its representative systems. It claims that an open, participative, supportive and constructively critical ethos underpins its educational activities and is welcomed by staff and students alike.

5.3 Overall the College is committed to ensuring that students are encouraged to provide feedback and to be actively involved in quality assurance and enhancement. It is making progress towards, but has yet fully to achieve, the embedding of a partnership approach to quality assurance and enhancement.

Glossary

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

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality.

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

Academic standards

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

Award

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

Blended learning

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

Credit(s)

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

Degree-awarding body

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

Distance learning

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

See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award

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

e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

Enhancement

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

Expectations

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

Flexible and distributed learning

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

See also **distance learning**.

Framework

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

Framework for higher education qualifications

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

Good practice

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

Learning opportunities

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

Learning outcomes

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

Multiple awards

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

Operational definition

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

Programme (of study)

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

Programme specifications

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

Public information

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

Quality Code

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

Reference points

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

Subject Benchmark Statement

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

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)

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

Threshold academic standard

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

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

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

Widening participation

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

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