

# Higher Education Review of Carlisle College

April 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 Carlisle College. The review took place from 29 April to 1 May 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mark Langley
- Fiona Tolmie
- Duncan Lean (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Carlisle College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<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 7.

In reviewing Carlisle 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 webpages: [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education/higher-education-review)

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about Carlisle College

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

- The maintenance of the threshold academic standards of the awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding bodies **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **does not meet** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information produced about its provision **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following feature of **good practice** at Carlisle College.

- The higher education study skills programme in promoting progression and embedding support for students to develop their academic potential (Expectation B4).

### Recommendations

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

By September 2014:

- make College programme specifications readily available to students on Higher National programmes (Expectations A3 and C)
- produce, make accessible and use a clear guide to assessment processes and regulations for higher education staff and students (Expectations A6 and B6)
- produce, and make accessible to students and staff, academic assessment regulations for Higher National programmes (Expectations B6 and C)
- make external examiner/verifier reports available to students (Expectation B7)
- produce and make accessible an academic appeals policy and process which adheres to the requirements of its awarding bodies and Pearson (Expectations B9 and C)
- ensure that programme handbooks are accurate and complete (Expectation C)
- ensure that guidance to staff on the management and delivery of higher education programmes is comprehensive (Expectation C).

By January 2015:

- produce and implement a formal process for the approval and modification of College programme specifications for Higher National programmes (Expectation B1)
- produce and systematically monitor an effective strategy, reflecting appropriate national frameworks, that articulates and enhances higher education teaching and learning practice, and embed this within staff development processes (Expectation B3)

- develop a deliberate and planned approach, at provider level, to the identification, dissemination, implementation and monitoring of good practice and evaluate its impact on the enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities (Enhancement).

### **Affirmation of action being taken**

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

- The development of a proactive approach to addressing the staffing issues experienced in specialist, hard-to-recruit areas of provision (Expectation B4).
- The introduction of the corporate support function for leadership and management to develop a systematic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities (Enhancement).

### **Theme: Student Employability**

Carlisle College regards industry and skills-based education as central to its widening participation and employability agendas and is active in shaping regional skills plans through its role in the Local Enterprise Partnership for Cumbria and Skills Commission. The College has strong links with local employers at all levels of the organisation which are used to inform the programme portfolio and identify skills needs for the region. Many organisations sponsor their employees to undertake higher education programmes and/or host work placements for students at the College.

Engagement with employers is largely informal and does not feature as part of the College quality assurance processes for higher education, with the exception of work-based aspects of programmes such as placements. The College uses a variety of approaches to support employability including the incorporation of guest speakers in programme delivery, student involvement with local business events, external visits and contact with professional institutions. Career support and advice is available through personal tutors and the central student services.

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

## About Carlisle College

Carlisle College (the College) is a small general further education college delivering mainly vocational programmes to serve the post-16 education and training needs of the region. The College has around 3,000 students, of whom 5 per cent are studying on higher education programmes. The higher education provision consists of foundation degrees and Higher Nationals delivered across three of the nine curriculum areas within the College and a Certificate and Postgraduate Certificate in Education delivered by the department of Quality Improvement & Teaching and Learning.

The College mission is 'to be recognised as an outstanding and inclusive College providing life changing skills and experiences'. This is underpinned by three strategic aims articulated in the College Strategic Plan around the use of the curriculum; the quality of teaching, learning and assessment; and leadership and management. These aims are contextualised within the Higher Education Strategy 2012-15, which identifies key strategic objectives for the period.

The strategic direction of the College is set and overseen by the Corporation Board and the Executive Leadership Team, led by the Principal and supported by an Assistant Principal and Vice Principal Curriculum and Quality. The Vice Principal has overall senior responsibility for provision within the College curriculum and is supported in this regard by a Director of Curriculum and by the Quality Improvement & Teacher Training Director, who has responsibility for implementing quality assurance processes and procedures. The College previously employed a Higher Education Coordinator, although this post has been vacant for some time.

Until recently, the Director of Curriculum received reports through Heads of Faculty who had devolved responsibility for standards and quality within their areas. However, Head of Faculty roles have been removed in recent months and these responsibilities are undertaken by the extant Curriculum Team Managers who now have a direct reporting line to the Director of Curriculum. Teacher training has a slightly different reporting model with a Head of Teacher Training as programme leader for the Certificate and Postgraduate Certificates in Education reporting directly to the Quality Improvement & Teacher Training Director. Key formal committees for the management and oversight of programmes are the cross-College Curriculum Quality Meeting and the Higher Education Strategy Meeting which both report to the Executive Leadership Team, although the College also employs other management functions to monitor the delivery of programmes such as regular 'health check' meetings.

The College faces a number of challenges in delivering its Strategic Plan. The district within which the College operates is characterised by marked differences in deprivation and health indicators. This creates challenges in shaping a programme portfolio which supports local skills requirements, stimulates the local economy, encourages young people to remain in the area and promotes inclusivity through widening participation. Furthermore, the number of higher education students has been in decline in the College since 2006 and the introduction of fees has brought more uncertainty to the higher education market. The Principal considers the College to be well placed to respond to future challenges and cites its broadening of the curriculum offer, improvements in teaching and investment in resources, including a new Digital and Creative Enterprise Centre in association with employers, as key strengths in this regard.

The College delivers higher education through agreements with other awarding bodies and institutions. The College has a longstanding relationship with the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), with whom the College delivers a full-time Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care, full-time and part-time Foundation Degrees in Computing and full-time and

part-time Certificates and Postgraduate Certificates in Education. The College is part of a network of further education colleges in the North West region that deliver these programmes on a franchise basis. The College also delivers a full-time BTEC Higher National Diploma in Business and a part-time BTEC Higher National Certificate/Diploma in Engineering through a licence centre agreement with Pearson. In addition, the College delivers a part-time Foundation Degree in Business with the University of Cumbria although the College has ceased recruitment to this programme and the final cohort are due to complete in 2013-14.

The College underwent an Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) by QAA in 2009. The review identified three aspects of good practice, four advisable recommendations and eight desirable recommendations to improve higher education provision at the College. It was evident to the current review team that progress had been made in addressing some of the recommendations: the College has developed a Higher Education Teaching and Learning Strategy which has been embedded into the overall Higher Education Strategy; publishing responsibilities have been identified and checking procedures established; the Higher Education Strategy Group now has a student member; use of the virtual learning environment (VLE) by staff is embedded across programmes; regular continuing professional development (CPD) sessions are used to share good practice; and changes have been made to the estate to provide accommodation more suited to higher education learners.

However, in a number of areas, progress on meeting the recommendations was not so evident. Of particular note was the recommendation to produce a guide to staff on the College's responsibilities for assessment, and while assessment documents have been brought together on the staff intranet, this is incomplete and does not clarify responsibilities in relation to awarding body requirements (see Expectations A6, B6 and B9). The recommendation to align policies and procedures with the *Code of practice* has not been fully implemented and documentation provided by the College did not demonstrate a clear understanding or thorough engagement with the *Code*.

Furthermore, the IQER report made three recommendations relating to staff development for those delivering higher education, including supporting scholarly activity, keeping staff appraised of current higher education practice, using higher education criteria in lesson observations and including a higher education focus in the work of the advanced practitioners' team. While changes have been made to the staff development processes since the IQER including specific sessions on higher education pedagogy, there was little differentiation in the approach to further and higher education pedagogic development and no reference to higher education national frameworks for learning and teaching in the lesson observation scheme. There were also few examples of scholarly activity and little evidence on how such scholarly activity was monitored and planned (see Expectation B4).

The review team therefore considered that insufficient progress had been made in addressing some recommendations from the last review and noted that similar issues remained.

## Explanation of the findings about Carlisle 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**

1.1 The awarding bodies and Pearson map modules and programmes against the FHEQ and each qualification the College offers is allocated at the appropriate level. All module descriptors and awards conferred by the Universities align with the FHEQ. Pearson documentation indicates the level of study expected of each module and uses the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) as the frame of reference for academic levels. Partnership agreements with UCLan and the University of Cumbria require the College to allocate the quality of teaching, learning and assessment at the appropriate level within the FHEQ.

1.2 The College's awarding institutions cite external reference points in their academic and quality manuals, against which the College maps its policies and quality assurance procedures. Key documents supporting staff engagement with the FHEQ and the QCF are the College's Academic Standards and Quality Policy, UCLan's Academic Quality Assurance Handbook and quality assurance documentation on the Pearson website. For UCLan-validated programmes, College teams work across a partnership network to design assignment briefs and learning materials and contribute to any programme redesign.

1.3 The team considered programme handbooks and specifications, module outlines and unit descriptors, external examiner/verifiers' reports and the College's quality and strategy documents for higher education. During the visit, the team spoke to senior staff about the overview of College quality processes and met with teaching staff to explore how they differentiate between academic levels. In addition, the team met with full-time and part-time students to discuss their experiences of different levels of study.

1.4 Through the review, the team was assured that the College delivers programmes to the appropriate academic level. External examiners/verifiers consider the academic standards achieved to be comparable with other similar courses. Staff, many of whom deliver further and higher education, clearly differentiate between academic levels and students confirm awareness of the difference in academic standards. College documents make minimal reference to the level of study and the review team did not see evidence of how staff are supported by the College in their understanding of academic levels beyond the published guidance provided by the awarding bodies.

1.5 The review team considered that University and Pearson programme materials provide a secure framework for the allocation of qualifications at the appropriate academic level. The team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter A1* and that the level of risk to academic standards is low.

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



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

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: The Subject and Qualification Level**

1.6 Both awarding bodies and Pearson set the learning outcomes for their programme and direct engagement by the College with subject and qualification benchmark statements is through assessment and teaching. The College cites the programme and quality assurance documentation of its awarding institutions as key reference points and states that assessment processes reflect subject and qualification benchmark statements.

1.7 Both the Universities and Pearson design all programmes and modules to ensure that learning outcomes cross-reference appropriate subject and qualification benchmarks. University-validated programmes fully engage with external benchmarks. In particular, UCLan shares many of its programme design and assessment activities across its partnership network, through which College staff input into module design. College staff design assessment activities for all Pearson programmes, ensuring their effectiveness through the internal verification process.

1.8 In ascertaining the approach to benchmarks statements, the review team considered a range of programme handbooks and specifications, module outlines and unit descriptors and external examiner/verifiers' reports. During the visit, the team spoke to teaching staff about the approach to Subject Benchmark Statements and in addition explored the professional benchmarking for the education programmes.

1.9 The review team was assured that the design of programmes by the awarding bodies and Pearson took account of relevant benchmarks, including Subject Benchmark Statements and the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*. The College follows the guidance of the awarding bodies in this regard and College policies and procedures do not make reference to subject or qualification benchmarks or promote staff awareness of such benchmarking. Academic staff design assessments and contribute to module design and the review team saw evidence of such involvement in the recent rewrite of the education programme, which responded to significant changes in government policy.

1.10 The involvement of awarding bodies and Pearson in programme and module design ensures that the College's higher education programmes reflect relevant benchmark statements. The review team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter A2* and that the risk to academic standards is low.

**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**

1.11 Pearson module outlines and University programme handbooks provide definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements of their respective programmes of study. The College makes this information available to students through programme handbooks and the College's VLE. The University of Cumbria and UCLan produce all documentation pertaining to their programmes. College staff design programme handbooks in line with University templates as part of the partnership networks. For Pearson programmes, the College produces programme specifications and handbooks. The College has a generic programme handbook template which does not include a specification template for higher education programmes.

1.12 The team reviewed a range of programme handbooks and specifications, module outlines and unit descriptors. During the visit, the team spoke to teaching staff about involvement in producing programme documentation for both University-validated provision and BTEC Higher Nationals. The team also met with students to explore the effectiveness of the ways in which they receive information about their studies.

1.13 The students confirmed that definitive information on programme aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements for their programmes is provided. Students confirm that they receive programme handbooks during induction. The VLE breaks down each programme into modules of study, each of which features a wide range of information including both programme and module handbooks. Under the arrangement with Pearson, the College produces programme specifications that reflect the modules it offers for each programme. While the review team saw an example of a programme specification devised by the College, it was not clear how this was made available to students and students were not aware of having received this document. The team therefore **recommends** that the College make programme specifications readily available to students on Higher National programmes.

1.14 The involvement of the awarding bodies and Pearson in the production of key programme documentation and the structured provision of module information through the VLE ensure that students receive definitive information on the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected learner achievements of their programmes. The review team concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter A3*, although there is a moderate risk that the lack of student access to programme specifications may inhibit a thorough overview of their programme of study.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

1.15 Both Universities manage the process of programme approval across a partnership network, which College staff support through annual monitoring processes. The College's internal approval process considers the business case for a new programme, an additional cohort or a change of module (see Expectation B1 for more detail). The internal monitoring and annual review process intersects with the requirements of the awarding institutions. All courses complete annual reports and action plans which inform curriculum-level reports and these in turn are used to produce the College-wide Self-Assessment Report and Quality Improvement Plan. Alongside this process, Curriculum Team Managers prepare position papers which are discussed with the Principal, Vice Principal and Assistant Principal through regular 'health check' meetings. A separate Higher Education Report is also drafted by the Vice Principal for presentation to the Corporation Board and the College presents an additional annual monitoring report to UCLan (see Expectation B8).

1.16 The awarding bodies conduct periodic reviews of their provision at the College. The next review by UCLan is scheduled to take place in May 2014 and includes visits from UCLan subject Internal Advisers and University library services prior to the review event. Pearson's quality assurance processes do not include a requirement for periodic review of the Higher National provision during the accreditation period although annual monitoring activities are undertaken.

1.17 Prior to the review visit, the team considered a range of documentation including internal and external validation documents, annual reports and external examiner/verifiers' reports. During the visit, the team explored the process of programme approval and review with senior managers and teaching staff. The College subsequently provided further explanation and illustration of the approval and review processes.

1.18 The review team considered that the awarding body frameworks ensure that programme approval processes are sound in terms of academic standards. However, greater clarity around internal approval processes would have a positive impact on the quality of learning opportunities (see Expectation B1). The College's annual monitoring process is thorough and intersects with those of its awarding bodies. Pearson and both Universities provide clear guidance on their requirements for annual monitoring and these are reflected through the College processes (see Expectation B8). The College's Student Involvement Strategy outlines the processes for engaging students in programme monitoring, although engagement of higher education students is not as fully embedded as the College would like (see Expectation B5).

1.19 Overall, the review team concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter A4*, and as the existing processes intersect with those of its awarding bodies, the risk to academic standards is low.

**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**

1.20 The awarding bodies and Pearson appoint external examiners and verifiers respectively, who ensure independent and external participation in the management of threshold academic standards. The College draws on external examiner/verifier reports and University-led assessment boards throughout its annual monitoring processes (see Expectations A4 and B7). Course teams respond to external examiner/verifier comments in annual review documentation and the Quality Improvement & Teacher Training Director comments on all reports and produces a summary for consideration by the Corporation Board.

1.21 For the UCLan programmes, external examiner reports are considered at Assessment Board meetings held by UCLan across the range of partner colleges. Where reports consider the entire partnership network, course teams welcome additional informal information from external examiners on specific areas for improvement.

1.22 The College does not receive any reports from professional, statutory or regulatory bodies, nor does it use employer feedback as a regular feature of its quality assurance processes.

1.23 As part of its desk-based review, the team considered external examiner/verifiers' reports, the College-produced document that draws together examples of good practice from those reports, and annual monitoring reports. In addition, the team reviewed minutes of course assessment boards produced by UCLan, which external examiners attend. During the visit, the team discussed externality with senior managers and teaching staff, as well as with students and employers.

1.24 The clear guidance of both Universities and Pearson ensures that the College efficiently uses reports from external examiners and verifiers. External examiners comment on the excellent communication with the College and their reports do not indicate any areas of concern. The composite external examiner report provided for the Corporation Board provides a useful summary of the reports, and while the issues raised by external examiners are addressed through the College self-assessment process, there is little evidence of responses to this composite document being tracked through the subsequent quality cycle. The use of externality in managing academic standards at the College is largely confined to the involvement of external examiners/verifiers and there are few formal opportunities to engage a broader range of independent and/or external perspectives in the quality assurance processes.

1.25 In adhering to the requirements of their partners, the College engages appropriately with external examiners'/verifiers' reports and draws together the reports for effective institutional oversight. The team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter A5* and the risk to academic standards is low.

**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**

1.26 The College ensures the validity and reliability of assessment through its partnerships with its awarding institutions, its internal verification process and College procedures and guidance regarding assessment practice. Course teams hold internal verification meetings to ensure the validity of assessment processes and practices. All assessment instruments are internally verified prior to issue to students, and a representative sample of student output is moderated internally prior to consideration by the awarding University. Information on assessment for higher education courses is available to staff online, including material provided by Pearson and the awarding Universities. Since 2011, the College has used plagiarism software to assist in the prevention and identification of assessment malpractice.

1.27 UCLan monitors student assessment through its assessment boards, which function across the partnership network. Staff apply the assessment regulations of the relevant University when marking work and, when appropriate, malpractice and disciplinary regulations. College staff attend appropriate external meetings with both Universities to ensure academic standards are maintained.

1.28 Prior to the visit, the team reviewed the assessment policies and procedures provided by the College. The team met with senior managers, teaching staff and students to discuss the College's approach to assessment. The team additionally analysed internal verification records and reviewed further documentation on the College's approach to assessment provided during the visit.

1.29 The review team considers that the College's internal verification procedure is robust and that assessment processes for marking are fair and appropriate. UCLan provides clear guidance concerning internal verification, second marking and moderation of assessed work which is adhered to by course teams. The College's process meets the requirements of Pearson in terms of designing assessment activities and meets the requirements of all awarding bodies in terms of marking and moderation. The College uses one internal verification process for all courses, and while this currently works for higher education on a functional level, there is no specific differentiated focus within the process to allow strategic oversight of aspects relevant to higher education programmes. Students were generally satisfied with the assessment process and noted that feedback is timely and helpful. Plagiarism detection software is used by staff to ensure compliance with procedures regarding plagiarism.

1.30 While information on assessment is available to staff through various documents, the College has not met the advisable recommendation from its IQER report to produce a guide to higher education assessment practice that includes a description of the College's assessment responsibilities to each of its awarding bodies. The College cites several documents, including its Higher Education Strategy, Teaching and Learning Strategy and Teaching and Learning Policy, as evidence of meeting the recommendation. However, these documents do not fulfil this function or the intention of the advisable recommendation. For example, the Teaching and Learning Strategy has limited information on assessment and does not describe the College's assessment responsibilities to its awarding bodies and Pearson.

1.31 Nor does the College's Assessment Procedures for Higher Education Courses document fulfil the recommendation. The document is in draft form, inaccurate and

contradicts clear guidance given by UCLan and Pearson. For example, the document states that students can appeal against an assessment decision, which UCLan processes do not permit. Furthermore, the document does not mention Pearson's referral process. The Pearson handbook template also includes prompts for sections on referrals but a handbook reviewed by the team does not include any information on referrals or late submission. Significantly, Pearson's Centre Guide to Assessment requires the College to publish its own assessment regulations relating to higher-level programmes, but the College has not done so. Although no issues have arisen to date, the flaws in this documentation are significant. The team therefore **recommends** that the College produce, make accessible and use a clear guide to assessment processes and regulations for higher education staff and students.

1.32 The review team considered that the College does not have a strategic overview of assessment, manifest in its lack of appropriate and accurate policies and regulations. Of chief concern are the Pearson programmes for which the College has failed to meet the requirements set out in the BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment and the Pearson Specification for Higher National Diplomas. It is also significant that the College's academic appeals process contradicts UCLan guidance (see Expectation B9). The review team therefore concluded that the College does not meet the Expectation as defined in *Chapter A6*. Currently, external examiners/verifiers and University boards provide some safeguarding of standards. However, these mechanisms alone are not sufficient controls in the light of the risk posed to academic standards by the significant shortfall and inaccuracies in College policies and the absence of an internal assessment framework for higher education programmes. The lack of awareness of the institution of its responsibilities in this regard and the lack of progress on the related recommendation from the previous IQER mean that there is a moderate risk to academic standards.

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

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

1.33 In determining its judgement on the maintenance of threshold academic standards of awards at the College, the review team considered the findings against the criteria as outlined in Annex 2 of the published handbook. With the exception of A6, all Expectations in this area are met and the level of risk is considered low in nearly all cases, although there is a moderate risk in A4, and an associated recommendation with regards to programme specifications being made available for Higher National programmes.

1.34 The review team concluded that the College does not meet the Expectation as defined in *Chapter A6* of the Quality Code. The approach to maintaining academic standards at the College is largely defined by the respective Universities and by Pearson and, in the main, the College adheres to the requirements of the awarding body. However, where the College is required to develop and implement its own policies, procedures and/or regulations under these agreements, the review team found significant gaps or inaccuracies, and the documentation for which the College is responsible calls into question the College's ability to ensure that assessment of students takes place in a robust regulatory environment. The College did not appear to be fully aware of the significance of this issue or demonstrate a sound understanding of its responsibilities in this area. The lack of clarity on assessment responsibilities and practices noted in the last IQER report remains extant and the College has not addressed the advisable recommendation made by the previous review team. While the internal verification process and involvement of external examiners/verifiers provide safeguards, the team concluded that the absence of comprehensive guidance and regulations on assessment presented a moderate risk, which without action could lead to serious problems over time with the maintenance of academic standards. The team recommends that action be taken by the College to clarify assessment responsibilities for the benefit of staff and students.

1.35 The review team therefore concluded that the maintenance of the threshold academic standards of awards at the College **requires improvement to meet** 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**

2.1 The College's responsibility for the design and approval of programmes differs markedly between the provision validated by the awarding Universities and the BTEC Higher National provision validated by Pearson. For the former, the Universities manage the design and approval processes with input from their partner colleges and final approval of programmes rests with the awarding body. For Higher National programmes, the Pearson qualification specification sets out the parameters within which the local programmes of study are to be designed and the Pearson Centre Guide for Assessment expects providers to engage in a design process and produce a local programme specification.

2.2 The College process for approving proposals for new provision is documented in a diagram for staff which includes a set of templates to be completed. Initial agreement on new/replacement programmes is approved by Curriculum Quality Meeting via a Course Approval Form. Curriculum teams then liaise with the University partnership networks concerning any programme development, or Pearson guidance regarding unit choice for Higher National programmes. A final Course Approval Form and costing sheet are then submitted to the College Registry prior to delivery and the Quality Improvement & Teacher Training Director informs the Executive Leadership Team of approval. Course teams also have the ability to make changes to the programme of study within the discretionary parameters of the overall Pearson specification. Such changes are signed off by the Curriculum Team Manager and reported to Registry on a Course Details Amendment Form. Review of curriculum is included in the UCLan annual monitoring template and reference to curriculum development is included in course appraisal position statements. Changes in the list of programmes which constitute the portfolio of higher education programmes are reported to the Corporation Board.

2.3 During the desk-based stage of the review, the team analysed a range of documentation relating to College participation in UCLan approval processes. The team requested further documentation outlining the College processes for developing new curriculum and making changes to existing curriculum, and requested access to locally produced Higher National programme specifications. During the review, the team met with senior managers and academic staff to discuss the approach to the design and approval of programmes.

2.4 The review team saw evidence of College participation in the UCLan approval processes and considered these to be effective. With regards to the College's internal approval process, this is a financial and resource-based model that does not account for the development of programme content and makes little reference to the College's Strategic Plan. The internal validation checklist that is signed off by the Vice Principal or Director of Curriculum deals with operational issues for the delivery of a new programme. There is no document setting out any criteria employed in the internal approval process and no formal process for the scrutiny and approval of the curriculum chosen by the course team. The review team was informed that employers' needs are taken into consideration in choosing the modules although employer input is not captured formally in the process.

2.5 Similarly, there are no criteria against which a proposed change to a programme is assessed and no formal process for ensuring that student views are taken into account in considering curriculum changes during the delivery cycle. Although staff indicated that any changes were discussed with students, this was not verified by students affected by a recent



change. The Course Details Amendment Form required for recording changes does not include any rationale or criteria for the change and the example provided by the College recorded a change of module that was inconsistent with the current Programme Specification and Programme Handbook. In the example provided, the change in the modules being delivered had potentially significant implications in terms of the student experience and the ability of the programme to meet the employability focus of the College and higher education strategies. College oversight of curriculum change, however, does not take place above the level of Curriculum Team Managers who sign off the changes made by the course team. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College produce and implement a formal process for the approval and modification of the local programme specifications for Higher National programmes.

2.6 The review team considered that while the processes for the design and approval of programmes validated by UCLan and the University of Cumbria are effective and robust, there is an absence of effective processes in relation to the design, development and approval of the Higher National provision as put together by the College within the Pearson parameters. The team concluded, therefore, that the College does not meet the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B1* and the risk is serious, since the absence of internal criteria for the development of Higher National programmes and the lack of appropriate oversight represent a significant gap in the College's quality assurance processes, inhibiting its ability to respond effectively to strategic, student and employer needs.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B2: Admissions**

2.7 The College has clear and comprehensive policies and procedures regarding the provision of information for prospective students and the admission of students. The College follows UCLan and University of Cumbria admissions policies where appropriate and its own policies for admission to Pearson courses. All students apply directly to the College and are interviewed by College staff using a standard format. Decisions on admissions are made by academic staff in line with the agreed policies and procedures. The College website and prospectus detail course requirements and progression opportunities which are all reviewed regularly. Student support services provide relevant assistance to prospective students including information sessions to further education students who are aspiring to progress internally. Support staff are also involved in advising on an individuals' additional education requirements and the online College application form allows for early identification of needs.

2.8 Admissions are overseen by an applications group, which reports to the Curriculum Quality Meeting. This group monitors and reviews the process as well as tracking application statistics and arising issues. Through the College Student Perception of Course (SPOC) survey and Student Council, students comment on the admissions process and the pre-arrival information received.

2.9 The team reviewed the policies and procedures for managing and reviewing the admissions process and analysed minutes and papers of relevant meetings. During the visit, the team met with senior managers, academic staff and support service personnel to explore the operation of the policies and procedures. The team also met with full-time and part-time students to discuss their experience of admission to the College.

2.10 Students met by the review team expressed their satisfaction with the application and admissions process. The support for part-time students, and students from within employment, was particularly noted. The Student Charter and admissions policies enable prospective students to be informed in a reliable and relevant manner about the processes for admission. The College also provides higher education academic skills support to students seeking to progress from internal courses which helps raise student confidence and provides a good foundation for higher-level study (see good practice identified under Expectation B4). Staff are initially mentored in the admissions process and use a standard interview checklist to ensure consistency in approach. Student feedback, annual self-assessments and the role of the Curriculum Quality Meeting allow for oversight of the process and pre-admissions information at a strategic level.

2.11 The team considered that the policies, procedures and practices for recruiting and admitting students are clear, fair and explicit. The review team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B2* and the consistent application of the admissions policies means that the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

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

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

**Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

2.12 The College has a specific Higher Education Strategy, as well as a Learning and Teaching Strategy for higher education, and has access to relevant student feedback, internal and external course evaluations, allowing the College adequate mechanisms for oversight of teaching and learning. Responsibility for monitoring and implementation of the Strategy rests with the Higher Education Strategy Group, with the Curriculum Quality Meeting also receiving regular updates. In addition there is a regular update and an annual Higher Education Report for the Corporation Board, both of which include progress on and outcomes from staff development activities. The College reviews programmes and support services annually and, through the use of health checks, is able to assess the needs of courses with regards to learning opportunities and teaching practices.

2.13 New members of staff are required to have an appropriate teaching qualification on appointment, or are supported in achieving this during their probation period. Staff CVs are checked internally through course planning and also by the external examiner/verifier prior to teaching on higher education programmes. Staff are encouraged to attend cross-College staff development sessions every month and monthly course team meetings also provide an opportunity for course-specific staff development activities.

2.14 The College places priority on higher education staff development. Staff are supported in carrying out development with agreement of their manager and in accordance with their and the awarding body's needs. The College staff development process is partly informed by a lesson observation system which operates uniformly across further and higher education. At an individual level, line managers encourage and support staff development by jointly identifying needs through the staff development and performance management process and the College encourages scholarly activity.

2.15 The review team analysed relevant policies and procedures relating to the development of learning and teaching practice at the College, including information on staffing and staff development. In addition, the team met with senior managers and academic staff to discuss the approach to higher education pedagogy and spoke to central support service staff about their role. The team also met with full-time and part-time students to explore their experience of learning and teaching at the College.

2.16 The regular internal staff development activities organised by the College are generally well attended and valued by staff. These sessions involve internal and external presenters and are planned by senior management in consultation with Curriculum Team Managers. Most sessions cover issues which are generic to further and higher education although some presentations on higher education practice have been included in the programme. Staff also attend events held by the awarding bodies.

2.17 The review team heard that staff development requests for higher education were given priority and examples of up-skilling in subject knowledge were cited by staff. While scholarly activity is encouraged, the annual report recognises that time for such activity is limited, and staff considered that participation in development events hosted by the awarding bodies met this aim. The last IQER report included an advisable recommendation

to facilitate and monitor staff engagement in scholarly activity but the review team was not shown evidence of how this recommendation has been meaningfully progressed.

2.18 The lesson observation system is clearly embedded within College practice and all teaching staff confirmed their engagement with this process. The documentation which supports the process does not incorporate any specific higher education reference points for staff and lesson observation templates do not require observers to comment on how teaching takes account of the level of study. A desirable recommendation from the last IQER visit was to include the use of criteria relevant to higher education teaching and learning. While the College indicated that further development is still required in this regard, the review team did not see any plans to amend the existing process to explicitly reflect higher education practice.

2.19 Although the annual Higher Education Report produced by the College for 2012-13 includes reflection on staff development activity, there is little evidence of a joined-up strategic approach to higher education teaching and learning and the report does not make reference to the aims in either the Higher Education Strategy or Higher Education Teaching and Learning Strategy, or to any College-level strategic enhancements.

2.20 In light of the above, the team **recommends** that the College produce and systematically monitor an effective strategy, reflecting appropriate national frameworks, that articulates and enhances higher education teaching and learning practice, and embed this within staff development processes.

2.21 The review team considered that there were limitations in the development of higher education teaching and learning and the College does not use the various mechanisms to systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices. The team therefore concluded that the College does not meet the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B3* and, in light of the lack of progress on recommendations made at the last IQER visit, the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is moderate.

**Expectation: Not 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**

2.22 The College's approach to student development and achievement is detailed in the Strategic Plan, Learner Support Policy and Student Charter and is primarily focused at course level, with input from supporting services. The College has mechanisms for listening to its students (see Expectation B5) and providing for their needs. This starts through early identification of needs at the application stage and continues through active promotion of student services while students are undertaking their programmes.

2.23 The College provides a programme handbook and an induction to the College. Combined, these encompass introductions to the Learning Resource Centre, student support mechanisms, learner voice arrangements, information regarding academic practice, and access to the VLE as well as an introduction to the course. For students studying on UCLan courses, there is involvement from the awarding body in the induction process.

2.24 All students have a personal tutor who acts as the first point of contact. Students also have access to a range of central services including support for study skills and career advice. There is a Learning Resource Centre on campus and the College has secured access to local learning resources through the CHELPS system, allowing access to a wider range of physical resources. In addition, students registered with UCLan can access the resources of the University. The College has developed specific spaces for higher education students including a dedicated part of the Learning Resource Centre and a student common room.

2.25 The College monitors completion and retention rates and learning resources are checked annually by course teams for currency, in association with its awarding bodies. While student support arrangements are proactively driven by individual initiatives, the College is working on explicitly aligning support services with the College's strategic aims.

2.26 The review team analysed documentation made available regarding the support for student development and achievement. During the visit, the team met with staff and students to discuss the College approach. The review team also received demonstrations of the Pro-monitor software package used to record student achievement and the College VLE.

2.27 Students confirmed that the induction process had been effective and there was good awareness of the support and resources available. The review team was assured that the College makes extensive use of the VLE and while there are no minimum requirements on staff, the team confirmed that the information provided was extensive and easily accessible. Teaching staff clearly articulated the value of the VLE as a learning resource and students expressed satisfaction with both its content and performance.

2.28 The review team considered that the College has adequate student support mechanisms and student progress is monitored through internal and/or awarding body procedures. Students and staff confirmed that the personal tutor approach worked well and the course tutor is the main conduit for student support. The College has introduced a rolling study skills programme for higher education which encompasses referencing, academic writing and guidance on assignments. This facility is available to current and aspiring higher education students and is also provided to part-time students on a personalised basis. The College intends to further develop this programme next year and the team considered that the rolling higher education study skills programme was **good practice** in promoting progression and embedding support for students to develop their academic potential.

2.29 With regards to physical resources, students studying on University programmes were largely satisfied with the library provision although Higher National students expressed some reservations about the availability and suitability of texts. While the specific spaces created for higher education students are appreciated by students, creating a sense of identity within the College for higher education students is difficult due to the size and demographic composition of the student body. At course level, the College has worked with its awarding bodies and employers to enrich the experience for higher education students through the use of external presenters, visits and external learning resources associated with the course.

2.30 A number of programmes have been disrupted by staffing issues and the College is taking action to lower the impact on the student experience, including appointing temporary specialist staff and allowing students to defer their studies, with mixed success. The College has been working to alleviate this issue in the longer term and the review team **affirms** the development of a proactive approach to address the staffing issues experienced in specialist, hard-to-recruit areas of provision.

2.31 Overall, the College has in place arrangements and resources to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential and these are monitored and evaluated. The review team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B4*, although the difficulties posed by the staffing issues and concerns regarding the provision of resources for Higher National programmes mean that the level of risk to the quality of learning opportunities is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

**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**

2.32 The College provides a range of formal and informal opportunities for students to engage in the quality assurance of programmes. These opportunities are summarised in the College Charter, detailed in a College-wide Learner Involvement Strategy and outlined to students through the programme handbook. The College operates a formal student representative system, including course-level representatives and a student member on the Higher Education Strategy Group and the Corporation Board. There is also a College-wide Student Council which represents the interests of students, acts as a channel of communication with the College and organises activities, such as two student conferences per year. The College employs a Student Liaison Officer to provide training and support to student representatives and assist with the operation of the Student Council. Student feedback is obtained through surveys including the College SPOC, module evaluation questionnaires and the National Student Survey (NSS), with results being considered at course, management and board level. The annual Learner Voice report produced for the Corporation Board, while not specific to higher education, facilitates strategic oversight of student engagement activities and outcomes.

2.33 In advance of the visit, the review team analysed the available documentation regarding the College approach to student engagement. During the review, the team met with senior managers, academic staff and support service staff to explore the effectiveness of the approach to student engagement and received further information on the approach to the learner voice. The team also discussed the arrangements for student involvement in quality assurance with part-time and full-time students.

2.34 While the College evidently involves its students in decisions about courses and responds to relevant concerns, there has been low engagement by students in the formal representation system due to the size and nature of the higher education population. In recognition of this, the College has recently started a Learner Voice programme allowing senior managers to engage directly with students by attending lectures and holding open surgeries. Course teams reflect on student surveys when completing course appraisals, although the College recognises that response rates are low. However, students met by the team were generally satisfied that their views were heard. Teaching staff and students agree that informal conversations, tutorials and course meetings are the most successful means of gathering feedback and that the main channel of communication was the direct link between students and academic staff.

2.35 Similarly, engagement with the Student Council by higher education students is limited. Although the student conferences include Learning and Teaching forums to discuss academic and pastoral matters, these conferences are not specific to higher education and attendance by higher education students is low. The College uses a variety of means for communicating actions to students, including 'you said we did' posters and programme team meetings, although it was noted that communication on actions generally came through verbal updates from tutors rather than formal channels.

2.36 Although the formal student representation system for higher education students is poorly used by students, the multitude of other formal and informal mechanisms for engagement allows issues to be raised and addressed. The team therefore concluded that the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B5* is met and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

**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**

2.37 As outlined in Expectation A6, the College follows the policies and procedures set by the University awarding bodies for assessment strategies, regulations and recording and communicating assessment decisions. The College designs and sets assessments for higher education students and staff attend the assessment boards managed by the awarding Universities. Provision is in place for staff to access relevant professional development relating to assessment. The College operates an internal verification process for assessment which applies to all provision (see Expectation A6 for further detail).

2.38 The review team analysed a range of documentary evidence relating to assessment including the internal verification process, University Assessment Board processes, student survey results and external examiner/verifier reports. The review team also accessed the information made available to staff on assessment through the College intranet. During the visit, the review team were provided with a complete set of assessment details from one foundation degree and had a demonstration of the online tracking system for assessment processes. The team spoke to senior managers, academic staff and students regarding their understanding and experience of assessment.

2.39 The students met by the review team were generally happy with the clarity of assessment briefs, the marking process and the timely provision of useful feedback. Students are clear about the need to avoid plagiarism and are aware that the College routinely uses plagiarism detection software. There are sound processes for internal moderation of assessment tasks and student outputs which are well understood, consistently applied by staff and deemed effective by external examiners/verifiers. Students confirm that staff guide them through all assessment activities and clearly indicate how assessment tasks reflect the learning outcomes. The external examiner/verifier reports confirm that academic standards are sound and staff are receptive to external suggestions for improvements in assessment strategies.

2.40 From external verifier reports, annual self-assessment reports and meetings during the visit, the review team noted a lack of clarity among staff and students about assessment referrals for Higher National programmes. The review team also encountered considerable ambiguity in discussions with staff about the circumstances in which students could ask for extenuating circumstances to be taken into account or to lodge an academic appeal. This confusion can be attributed both to the absence of a College guide to higher education assessment (see recommendation under Expectation A6) and to the fact that the College has failed to produce a set of regulations to govern the Higher National provision as required by the BTEC Centre Guide to Assessment. The review team was not provided with the Higher National Assessment Board regulations which Pearson requires of centres and which an external verifier had drawn attention to in his 2013 report. The review team was informed that the College intends to establish a cross-College Higher National Assessment Board although to date, assessment boards are dealt with by the course teams without independent representation. In addition to the recommendation under Expectation A6, the review team **recommends** that the College produce, and make accessible to students and staff, academic assessment regulations for Higher National programmes.

2.41 The team concluded that although the actual assessment experience of students is largely sound, the absence of a secure regulatory framework for assessment for staff and students, particularly in relation to the Higher National programmes, means that the College



does not meet the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B6* and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

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

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

2.42 As outlined under Expectation A5, external examiners are nominated, appointed and trained by the awarding bodies for their respective programmes and external verifiers are appointed by Pearson for the BTEC Higher Nationals. External examiner/verifier reports are discussed by course teams, incorporated in annual monitoring processes and summarised for discussion at College level. The annual Higher Education Report to the Corporation Board also contains a section on external examiner/verifier reports.

2.43 The review team considered the College approach to the use of external examiners/verifiers by reviewing the reports and monitoring documentation produced at course and College level. The team also met with senior managers and academic staff to discuss their involvement with external examining.

2.44 The team saw evidence of engagement with external examiners/verifiers and reports are considered at a number of levels in the College. Staff are generally very responsive to comments made and welcome advice from external examiners/verifiers on opportunities to develop the quality of learning opportunities. The external verifier reports for the Higher National provision are specific to the College whereas the external examiner reports for universities are common to all colleges working in partnership with the awarding body. The review team was informed that in the case of the latter, there is sometimes no specific mention of the College in the reports but that the course team seek informal feedback from external examiners to inform College-specific improvements. The College does not share external examiner/verifier reports with students due to concerns over confidentiality. In accordance with good practice outlined in the Quality Code, the review team **recommends** that the College make external examiner/verifier reports available to students on a routine basis.

2.45 With the exception of sharing external examiner/verifier reports with students, the review team considers that the College made scrupulous use of the external examining systems put in place by the awarding Universities and Pearson. The team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B7* and that the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

2.46 The College arrangements for annual monitoring apply equally to further and higher education provision. Course teams complete course appraisals three times a year, resulting in a course self-assessment report and action plan. Students engage with programme monitoring through the NSS, two annual surveys and module evaluation questionnaires. Curriculum Team Managers draw together course-level reports into a self-assessment report and action plan for the curriculum area, combining both further and higher education provision. The College then draws these together into a College-wide Self-Assessment Report and Quality Improvement Plan although these do not explicitly refer to higher education provision.

2.47 In addition to the College monitoring processes, course teams use templates provided by the Universities to produce an additional annual report for each course which is submitted to the relevant awarding bodies. For UCLan the College also produces an institutional higher education annual report, and internally it produces a Higher Education Report for consideration by the Corporation Board. As noted under Expectation A4, periodic review is the responsibility of the partner Universities and the College does not implement its own periodic review processes.

2.48 The review team analysed documentation available on the annual monitoring process to ascertain how it worked at various levels within the College. The review team also met with senior managers and academic staff to understand the approach to annual monitoring and test the effectiveness of the arrangements.

2.49 The review team considered that the College has a robust, if somewhat complex, annual monitoring process. Apart from a useful diagram produced during the review, there is no College documentation outlining the approach and the terminology used to describe various parts of the process varies considerably. Despite the lack of consistency in the terms used, staff understand the stages of annual monitoring and the reports reviewed by the teams are appropriate. The annual monitoring documentation demonstrates reflection on external examiner/verifier comments and student views, and includes action plans which are updated in the following year's reports. While the review team heard that the 'health check' meetings are thorough in identifying and addressing emerging issues, the amalgamation of annual reports into curriculum-wide and College-wide Self-Assessment Reports means that recorded oversight of issues pertaining to higher education is less evident. Although a separate annual Higher Education Report is produced, this does not include clear action planning.

2.50 Overall, the review team considers that the College has effective procedures to routinely monitor higher education programmes and fulfils its responsibilities to its awarding bodies and Pearson. The team therefore concluded that the College meets the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B8* and that the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

**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: Academic Complaints and Student Appeals**

2.51 The College complaints procedure applies to both further and higher education and is clearly set out on the College website through a simple flow chart. Formal complaints are channelled through the Senior Receptionist to the Vice Principal who then assigns an appropriate Investigating Manager to review the issue and convey the outcome to the complainant. An annual report on complaints is considered by the Corporation Board with the latest report stating that practice often changes as a consequence of a complaint.

2.52 The UCLan Assessment Processes Handbook contains a very clear process for academic appeals. An abridged version of this appears in student handbooks for the UCLan provision. Information on academic appeals for Higher National programmes is included in the College handbook template.

2.53 The review team reviewed the information provided by the College on complaints and appeals in advance of the visit and requested additional information regarding College processes for the latter, which was not forthcoming. During the review visit, the team met with senior managers, programme teams, support service staff and students to discuss their understanding of the processes for complaints and appeals.

2.54 Staff and students met by the review team had a good awareness of the process for lodging complaints. Several of the students whom the review team met had used the process, although staff and students also stressed that it was frequently possible to resolve issues without recourse to a formal complaint. The review team was informed that there has never been an appeal against a complaint and that students were supported throughout the complaint process.

2.55 By contrast, the team did not receive a clear explanation on the process for academic appeals and both staff and students were less clear on the mechanisms in place for dealing with such requests. While there is reference to a College appeals procedure in the College handbook template, this merely sets out how an appeal can be made and not the grounds for an appeal, how the appeal will be considered or possible outcomes. The Assessment Procedures for Higher Education document provided during the visit included information on appeals which was at variance with the UCLan process, since it suggests that all students can appeal against academic judgement, which is not valid grounds under the UCLan appeals process. Furthermore, the information provided by the College on appeals does not meet the requirements outlined in the BTEC Centre Guide for Assessment regarding the provision of appeals information to staff and students. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College produce and make accessible an academic appeals policy and process which adheres to the requirements of its awarding bodies and Pearson.

2.56 The review team concluded that the procedure for handling student complaints is fair, effective and timely. However, with regards to academic appeals, the team identified inaccuracies in the limited information currently provided, and a lack of clarity in the College's quality assurance procedures with regards to both Higher National programmes and those delivered with awarding bodies. The review team therefore concluded that the College does not meet the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B9*. The absence of comprehensive information to assist students and staff in approaching academic appeals is mitigated to some extent by the oversight of the awarding bodies and Pearson and the review team therefore considers that the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is moderate.

**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***

2.57 A key objective of the College's Higher Education Strategy is to work with higher education partners to extend education and higher-level skills. The College aims to continuously review potential opportunities with new partners to meet regional skills needs. In this respect, the College also works closely with local employers and several programmes feature an element of work-based learning. Many students are already in current employment and in many instances the employers pay for their tuition.

2.58 Partnership agreements with both Universities are clear and the Universities manage quality procedures through a network of partner colleges. For both Universities, each programme requires a course representative at the College who liaises regularly with the University to ensure the effective management of the programme. For UCLan, representatives of the partner college network are included as members of the Academic Policy and Planning Committee and Academic Standards Committee of the University. The Principal of the College and the Vice-Chancellor of the University meet annually to review the partnership and agree a Strategic Plan for future development.

2.59 The team reviewed partnership agreements with the awarding Universities and met with senior staff, academic teams and a representative from UCLan during the review to discuss the relationship. With regards to the College's management of learning opportunities undertaken through placements and work-based learning, the team reviewed programme handbooks and employer guidance prior to the visit and met with College staff, employers and students to explore the approach to work-based learning within employment.

2.60 All UCLan programmes feature placements and in each instance UCLan provides guidance and placement handbooks to support students and employers. The handbooks are thorough and the process is secure and well established across the partnership network.

2.61 Employer engagement is primarily managed at course team level and the College has disbanded its Employer Adviser Forum as it was increasingly difficult to get employers to attend. Course tutors now maintain contact with employers who offer placements or who have employees studying at the College. Employers confirm that dialogue with tutors is thorough and that they are aware of the expectations when supporting students. The College checks all workplace environments for health and safety and has a database of employers. Placement tutors are also identified who maintain contact with the student and client.

2.62 Through ongoing relationships with the awarding bodies and local employers, the College maintains consistent and constant communication with both degree-awarding bodies and other organisations in the management of students' learning opportunities. The review team therefore concluded that the Expectation as defined in *Chapter B10* is met and the risk to the quality of learning opportunities is low.

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

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

**Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees***

**Findings**

2.63 The College has no research degree provision, therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

## Quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.64 In determining its judgement on the quality of student learning opportunities at the College, the review team considered the findings against the criteria as outlined in Annex 2 of the published handbook. Within this judgement area, six of the applicable ten Expectations are considered to be met. The risk to the quality of learning opportunities within these six met Expectations is low with the exception of Expectation B4, where there is a moderate risk regarding staffing and resource provision. Expectation B4 also includes a feature of good practice relating to the study skills programme and an affirmation of the work being undertaken to address staff vacancies.

2.65 Of the four Expectations that are not met, Expectations B3, B6 and B9 are considered to be moderate risks with a recommendation being made in each to improve higher education learning and teaching practice (B3), produce Higher National assessment regulations (B6) and produce an academic appeals policy and process in line with external requirements (B9). Expectation B1 is considered to pose a serious risk to the quality of students' learning opportunities and a recommendation has been made in this area to produce and implement a formal approval and modification process for Higher National programmes (B1).

2.66 The moderate and serious risks in Part B relate to gaps in policy and procedures in the College's quality assurance arrangements, particularly, but not exclusively, with regard to Higher National provision and a lack of clarity and understanding regarding quality assurance responsibilities within the College. The College has not recognised that it has major problems in the areas identified and there are no current plans to address the shortcomings identified by the review team. The lack of significant progress made by the College on the outcomes of the last review by QAA does not demonstrate that the College is consistent in ensuring that timely and appropriate actions are taken to address recommendations for the improvement of higher education practice. With the exception of the moderate risk on staff and resource shortages, there is little evidence to date that the quality of student learning opportunities has been unduly affected by the moderate and serious risks identified. However, despite the involvement of awarding bodies and Pearson there are limited internal controls in place for the approval and modification of some programmes, for the operation of some aspects of the assessment process or for the effective management of student appeals, which could jeopardise the quality of student learning opportunities going forward. The consequences of inaction in these areas may be severe.

2.67 The review team therefore concluded that the quality of student learning opportunities **does not meet** 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**

3.1 The College provides information for prospective students through the website, its printed prospectus and at interview. The College has a process for checking information published on the website. The UCLan Collaborative Marketing guidelines require the College to submit publicity material relating to UCLan provision to the University and an annual meeting is held with UCLan about the publicity material and other information relating to provision validated by the University. The University of Cumbria also has guidelines on branding to which the College is required to adhere.

3.2 Information for current students is contained in programme handbooks and on the VLE. In the case of provision validated by the Universities, the programme handbook is based on templates provided by the awarding bodies. For Pearson provision, there is a College template. Handbooks are checked for accuracy by the course leader and an editorial check is then undertaken by the Head of Marketing.

3.3 Information for staff on higher education policies, regulations and practice is provided electronically, mainly through the staff intranet, Adminnet, which is used as the default home page for staff teaching on higher education.

3.4 Prior to the visit, the review team accessed information on the College website and reviewed the documentation provided by the College, including programme handbooks and marketing materials. The team met with senior managers, course teams and support service staff and was also provided with a demonstration of the intranet. In addition, the team met with students to obtain their views about the accuracy and accessibility of information pertaining to their studies.

3.5 Information on higher education programmes on the website and in the prospectus is brief but accurate and as all students are interviewed, fuller information can be provided at that stage. The students whom the review team met generally felt that they had received adequate information at the pre-entry stage. The review team were told that the accuracy of the website is normally the responsibility of the Web Manager, currently a vacant post. The College has a process for ensuring that Key Information Set data is collated and published, although not all courses on the website contain this information.

3.6 Students spoke favourably of the information available to them on the VLE, although they were less clear when asked about the number and range of handbooks received. With regards to a Higher National programme, the review team heard that students were verbally told to access module descriptors through the Pearson website rather than being directed to this through the handbook or VLE. Local programme specifications for Higher National programmes were also not made readily available to students (see recommendation in Expectation B3). Programme handbooks are developed by course teams and overseen by Curriculum Team Managers, although there is no formal process recording the checking of handbooks. During the review, the team received two versions of the 2013-14 handbook for a Higher National programme, one of which did not contain details of extenuating circumstances and neither of which contained information regarding referrals, which is required in the College handbook template and by Pearson. As noted above,



information for students on assessment regulations for Higher National programmes and academic appeals for all students needs to be addressed (see recommendations under Expectations B6 and B9). The review team therefore **recommends** that the College develop processes to ensure that programme handbooks are accurate and complete.

3.7 Information for staff is available in a fragmentary and incomplete form through a number of strategies, policies and procedures which are mainly located on the staff intranet. Information for those teaching on higher education provision is not drawn together either on a cross-provision basis or in relation to specific awarding bodies (in accordance, for example, with the advice in the BTEC Centre Guide for Assessment). The Assessment Procedures for Higher Education Courses document is still a work in progress and not currently available to staff. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College ensure that guidance to staff on the management and delivery of higher education programmes is comprehensive and easily accessible.

3.8 Despite the recommendations relating to the provision of information above and elsewhere in this report, the review team considers that prospective and current students generally have the information they need to make informed choices about programmes of study and to undertake those programmes. The review team therefore concluded that Expectation C is met, although the risk posed by the various shortcomings is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

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

3.9 In determining its judgement on the quality of information produced about provision at the College, the review team considered the findings against the criteria as outlined in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The review team considered that the Expectation in this area is met but the risk is moderate due to the number of omissions and oversights identified by the team.

3.10 The review team considered that the information made available through the website to various stakeholders is generally fit-for-purpose and there are appropriate internal procedures for checking the accuracy of information. In this process, the College adheres to the guidelines and requirements issued by the awarding bodies and progress has been made since the last IQER report in identifying responsibilities and procedures.

3.11 With regards to information made available to current students, where this is overseen by the Universities, the review team considers that processes and information are generally sound. However, with regards to information which the College is wholly responsible for, such as information for Higher National students and advice and guidance for staff, the team noted a number of omissions and oversights. The review team therefore made two recommendations within this section, namely to ensure that information for staff on the management and delivery of higher education programmes is comprehensive and to ensure that programme handbooks are accurate and complete. The latter recommendation also reflects the various omissions in information noted under Expectations A3, B6 and B9 for which separate recommendations have been made within the relevant sections of this report.

3.12 In light of the differences in the quality of information provided to external and internal audiences, on balance the review team concluded that the quality of information produced about provision at the College **meets** 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.

4.1 The College has a strategic aim for higher education to continually enhance the student learning experience and to use student feedback as a means for understanding the areas it needs to improve. The Higher Education Teaching and Learning Strategy explicitly refers to enhancing learning through raising the quality of teaching and learning, collaborating to share best practice and developing the use of e-resources. The College recognises that actions to enhance provision are generally initiated and implemented at course level although the College has facilitated improvements to the estate for higher education students. The College identifies good practice in the institution through external examiner/verifier reports, annual monitoring processes, lesson observation reports, course and support service self-assessments, Learning and Teaching forums, student surveys and student representatives.

4.2 The review team considered the examples of course-level activities provided by the College in advance of the visit and requested additional examples of strategic approaches to the enhancement of learning opportunities, sharing good practice and the use of quality assurance procedures to identify and enact enhancement initiatives. During the visit, the team met with staff at all levels of the College to explore their understanding of the College approach to enhancement.

4.3 The review team received several examples of teams improving their programmes through the inclusion of outside speakers and site visits, although there is no formal oversight or monitoring of such activities by the College. The College is supportive of staff development, both bringing in external speakers and providing funding and support for staff who wish to further their development. Staff who engage in external events are expected to contribute to the staff development programme and share instances of good practice within the College.

4.4 The College has invested in a common room and dedicated space in the Learning Resource Centre for higher education students to facilitate the creation of a higher education identity within the student body and to enhance the student learning experience. This facility is being used by the Learning Resource Centre to help promote the study skills workshops and centre staff intend to use it to communicate with higher education students about other initiatives. Recently the College has been engaged in a Principal-led initiative, allowing support services to formally demonstrate alignment with the strategic aims and articulate their contribution towards supporting the student body. The team **affirms** the introduction of the corporate support function for leadership and management in developing a systematic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities.

4.5 As identified above, good practice in the institution is reflected and recorded through various quality assurance procedures. However, the College does not apply a systematic approach to capturing and monitoring such good practice, nor does the annual Higher Education Report to governors make reference to strategic-level enhancements based on the outcomes of the various monitoring mechanisms. With the exception of the 2013-14 work around improving English and Maths proficiency, there is little other evidence of planned approaches which apply to all higher education programmes. Furthermore, the 2013-14 Quality Improvement Plan has no actions specific to the enhancement of higher education. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College use its existing quality assurance processes to develop a deliberate and planned approach, at provider level, to the

identification, dissemination, implementation and monitoring of good practice and evaluate its impact on the enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

4.6 Although there was evidence of continual improvement of the provision at course level, the review team saw limited evidence of strategic steps being taken at College level to improve the quality of student learning opportunities. The review team therefore concluded that the Expectation is not met and the risk to the quality of student learning opportunities is moderate.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

## Enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.7 In determining its judgement on the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College, the review team considered the findings against the criteria as outlined in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The review team considered that the Expectation is not met and that the risk to student learning opportunities is moderate.

4.8 Through the devolved approach to the quality of learning opportunities, it is evident that course teams reflect on the delivery of programmes in the light of feedback and make ongoing improvements to the student experience at course level. The quality assurance processes also allow for such activities and other examples of good practice to be identified predominantly at course and/or curriculum level. However, the review team saw little evidence of a shared understanding on how the College approaches enhancement, how it adopts a strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities or how enhancement initiatives are integrated in a systematic and planned manner. The team therefore recommends that the College use the existing quality assurance mechanisms to develop a deliberate and planned approach, at provider level, to the identification, dissemination, implementation and monitoring of good practice and evaluate its impact on the enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

4.9 The review team therefore concluded that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **requires improvement to meet** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The Principal is the skills representative for the Local Enterprise Partnership for Cumbria and is heavily involved in developing skills plans for the region. This is an example of the College's long history of responding to employer needs. The College sees industry/skills-based education as central to its widening participation and employability agendas. The College recognises the importance of providing the right programme of study to meet current and future skills needs to stimulate the local economy. It aims to offer a higher education curriculum that meets the needs of learners and employers and contributes to the higher-level skills agenda for local and government priorities.

5.2 The College considers higher education a key means of developing progression and employability. The College's Strategic Plan does not refer to specific higher education approaches to employability, nor does it indicate how programmes respond to local employer needs or how employers inform its decisions. The College Strategy and Higher Education Strategy mention employability variously, although both are aspirational. The College's intent is clear, but it lacks a higher education employment strategy that draws together the many elements that the College aims to deliver.

5.3 There is evidence of strong links with local employers which the College seeks to build on. The loss of the Employer Adviser Forum since the last IQER visit is understandable, but while programme tutors meet employers regularly, the College has yet to find a way to capitalise on this informal discussion. The relationship with employers is most apparent when the College consults them on issues like its Higher Education Strategy or the development of programmes. This is not an ongoing dialogue that informs programme monitoring or assessment development. Given the College's central role in the Local Enterprise Partnership and Carlisle Area Plan, it has opportunities to build employer engagement into its development of higher education. A proposed digital media centre aims to provide such opportunities.

5.4 The College's higher education students come from various backgrounds. Internal progression from College Access or level 3 courses is a common route. Some students study on higher education programme on a day release scheme, for which their employers pay course fees. For example, employers and students on the Foundation Degree in Computing are positive about the value of the programme in terms of career development. A few students are on a 'fast-track' programme at work, because they have potential for technical or managerial advancement. In this respect, the College is responsive to student and employer needs.

5.5 The College uses a variety of approaches to support employability. Programme delivery draws on guest speakers, involvement with business events, external visits and contact with professional institutions. For the Pearson programme, unit choice addresses student employability, but the size of programme cohorts limits the College's ability to offer electives. For example, the HND Engineering combines mechanical and electrical engineering units, yet students tend to favour one area or the other. On average, 75 per cent of students consider the College's approach to employability to be effective. Fifty per cent of students are in full-time employment within six months of leaving the College and 22 per cent go on to further study, re-training or research.

## 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/about-us/glossary](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary).

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programme 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 **programme of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

### Degree-awarding body

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

### Distance learning

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

### Dual award or double award

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

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

### **Enhancement**

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

### **Expectations**

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

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

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

### **Framework**

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

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

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

### **Good practice**

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

### **Learning opportunities**

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

### **Learning outcomes**

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

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programme) 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 programme 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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