



# Higher Education Review of South Devon College

December 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 South Devon College. The review took place from 8 to 10 December 2014 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Colin Stanfield
- Ms Fiona Tolmie
- Mr Ken Harris (student reviewer)

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by South Devon 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 academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

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

In reviewing South Devon 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 2014-15 are Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Student Employability,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

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

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

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

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

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

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about South Devon College

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

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

### Good practice

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

- the clear and rigorous processes for programme development (Expectation B1)
- the use of the virtual learning environment to provide detailed information for prospective students (Expectations B2 and C)
- the collective approach of College staff to working with students in their development as independent learners (Expectation B3)
- initiatives which link academic and employability skills through curriculum design and delivery (Expectations B1, B3 and B4)
- the extensive and effective engagement with the student body to assure and enhance its provision (Expectation B5 and Enhancement)
- the proactive approach to the development and management of assessment processes including effective use of the virtual learning environment (Expectations B6 and C)
- the provision of consistently accessible and high quality information for all stakeholders (Expectation C)
- the effective implementation of the strategic approach to enhancing its provision and the pervasive ethos of continuous improvement (Enhancement).

### Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The work being undertaken to develop a more systematic approach to the monitoring of employability initiatives and their outcomes (Expectation B4 and Enhancement).

### Theme: Student Employability

The College's Higher Education Strategy 2014-19 includes, under strategic aim four, the target to 'actively support employers, skills and economic growth'. This therefore includes the aims of providing students with real work experience through engagement with employers, embedding employability and enterprise across the higher education curriculum, and developing employability initiatives with the University and other partners.

The College has a number of employability initiatives and also includes skills development modules in foundation degree courses. Higher education students benefit from the inclusion of sessions delivered by guest speakers and from the input of industry experts. The College plans to further develop its work in this area by appointing an Employability Champion.

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

## About South Devon College

The College predominantly focuses on serving the learning needs of Torbay and South Devon's 14-19 year old, higher education and adult learners. This focus is reflected in its mission of 'Inspiring our community through learning for all'. The vision statement for higher education is 'South Devon College is passionate about providing accessible, employment focused and high quality Higher Education'.

South Devon College is a medium-sized, general further education college with 586 higher education students. The College has been delivering higher education qualifications since the 1940s with 27 higher education programmes offered for September 2014. Current programmes include level 6 provision leading to either BA or BSc (Hons) qualifications in addition to foundation degrees and Higher National Certificates (HNC). Courses cover a range of curriculum areas relevant to local economic needs.

The College has expanded rapidly over the past five years. It has significantly increased the number of higher education programmes and distinct pathways, including the provision of level 6 awards. During 2014-15, higher education student numbers have increased to an all-time high of 586, compared with 355 in 2007-08.

The most recent addition to the higher education portfolio at the College has been the approval to run three level 6 courses to top up from the Foundation Degrees in Healthcare Practice, Early Years Care and Education, and Sports and Exercise Science. A further two top-up programmes in Creative Practice and Animal Science are in development.

Since 2010, the College has created a dedicated higher education team which includes a Higher Education Manager. This team also includes an administration function for the programmes and the admissions process, a dedicated higher education resources specialist and a member of staff responsible for promoting the progression opportunities into higher education both internally and externally.

Higher Education Lead posts have also been introduced. These posts are held by experienced members of the teaching team who are given additional responsibility to coordinate the annual quality cycle for programmes in their own areas in liaison with other members of staff.

The College faces a challenge to ensure that employers and parents are aware of the higher education offered and to assure them of the standard of this. To meet this challenge, it has produced a marketing strategy to communicate the standard of the provision and the levels of student satisfaction. Through the use of case studies of successful students and their destinations, the College hopes to inform and inspire employers, parents and potential students of the benefits of 'staying local' without needing to accept a lower standard of teaching and learning.

Despite the challenge to raise awareness, the College has experienced success in terms of increased student numbers on higher education programmes. If this trend continues, there is a concern that the current higher education provision will outgrow the current University Centre accommodation. The College therefore has plans for further development of the

current site and has acquired additional land to allow for future expansion if required. The College continues to work on the part-time higher education provision available as well as actively reviewing the progression routes for all students.

Providing a vibrant social experience in a further education setting with under 1,000 higher education students is also a challenge that the College is continuing to work on with both the College Students' Union and the University Students' Union. The College uses its Higher Education Forum to seek feedback on this issue from students and is committed to following up as many of the recommendations from the students as are practicable.

All of the College's higher education qualifications are approved and validated by Plymouth University (the University) in accordance with an Academic Cooperation Agreement which is updated annually. The College is therefore a member of the University's College partnership across the South West. South Devon College has one programme run as a franchise, while all others are validated. The franchised programme is Year Zero Science and the College delivery follows the same programme structure, modules and assessments as the programme at the University.

The last QAA review of South Devon College was an Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in May 2010. There were seven features of good practice, one advisable and four desirable recommendations from this review. The College continues to have an effective partnership with Plymouth University and has addressed the recommendations identified in the IQER.

The College monitors its higher education provision through a variety of ways, including the production of an annual overarching higher education action plan. National Student Survey and Student Perception Questionnaire data is shared across the College via the Senior Management Team. This enables good practice to be identified as well as any points requiring intervention.

The number of student withdrawals has decreased since the previous review. The College operates a clear admissions procedure, including the use of interviews. There is pre-course information available to students via the College virtual learning environment (VLE). Students also have access to resources at the University.

There is evidence of a range of staff development opportunities to ensure that individuals have the appropriate qualifications and experience for their roles. Staff members are also provided with extensive support through the Higher Education Quality Handbook which is available through the VLE. The internal verification process has been standardised internally, and updates on processes are provided through the Higher Education Forum.

## Explanation of the findings about South Devon 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: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations**

**Expectation (A1):** In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

**a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* are met by:**

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

**b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics**

**c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework**

**d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

## **Findings**

1.1 The College is not a degree-awarding body but delivers programmes which are validated or, in one case, franchised by Plymouth University. The University holds ultimate responsibility for ensuring compliance with the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), the QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics, relevant national credit frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements.

1.2 The University's ultimate responsibility for meeting these reference points cannot be delegated. However, the Academic Cooperation Agreement allows the College to propose qualifications which enable the University to meet the reference points. Once the proposals have been scrutinised and approved by the University, the College then maintains them in accordance with the relevant reference points. The Expectation in Chapter A1 is therefore met in design.

1.3 The team tested this Expectation by reviewing relevant College and University documentation. This included quality assurance and curriculum approval documents, external examiner reports, programme specifications, assignment and staff development documentation. The team also met senior staff and teaching staff, including representatives

from the University, to explore the College's use and understanding of the reference points in the design and maintenance of programmes to meet academic standards.

1.4 The College considers relevant reference points as part of its curriculum development and approval process. This includes the determination of new programme titles, prior to submission to the University for formal approval. The College works within the University Academic Regulations to uphold the National Credit Framework in the design of programmes. The relevant Subject Benchmark Statement is clearly referenced in the programme specification.

1.5 There is a shared understanding by programme staff of how and why programmes are approved, delivered and assessed at different levels. This information forms part of the new staff induction, and for existing staff, guidance is provided in the online higher education staff Quality Handbook and the continued professional development programme. It is also referenced within the College Standards for Assessment Practice. Within this Standards for Assessment Practice document, there is guidance for tutors to indicate the amount of assessment that would be typically required to demonstrate the level and credit value of a module. QAA updates are an agenda item on the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee in order to highlight any relevant changes to Subject Benchmark Statements.

1.6 The review team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and that the associated level of risk is low.

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



**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.7 The College is required by its agreement with the University to work within the University Academic Regulations and Assessment Policy. Changes to the Academic Regulations are communicated by the University to the College via the Academic Partnerships Forum, where discussion and training on new processes takes place. Changes to Academic Regulations are then cascaded to Higher Education Leads and, for significant changes, to all staff via the Higher Education Forum. The approach of the College enables Expectation A2.1 to be met in design.

1.8 The team reviewed the College and University documentation to test this Expectation, including the Standards for Assessment Practice. The team also met senior staff and teaching staff, including representatives from the University, and students. These meetings enabled the team to explore the College's use and understanding of the academic frameworks and regulations governing the award of academic credit and qualifications.

1.9 The College makes transparent and adheres to the academic frameworks and regulations put in place for it by the University. The College has also taken steps to further increase the transparency of the academic frameworks and regulations governing the higher education qualifications it delivers. It has done this by developing, in collaboration with students, a guidance document called Standards for Assessment Practice. Personal tutors and the Academic Skills Officer introduce students to the academic regulations using a common presentation during the first weeks of the programme of study.

1.10 Therefore, review team concludes that the College, in partnership with the University, meets the Expectation and that the associated level of risk is low.

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

**Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.11 The College does not have degree awarding powers and all programmes are approved through the Plymouth University process. Changes to any definitive elements are therefore approved in line with the University Academic Partnership policy.

1.12 The College provides the University with a programme handbook on an annual basis and in accordance with its requirements. This Programme Quality Handbook includes the programme specification and module records and is signed off by the College Higher Education Lead or Section Head before submission. College processes in association with the University enable Expectation A2.2 to be met in design.

1.13 The review team examined a number of sources of evidence to test this Expectation. These included examples of annual reporting to Plymouth University, programme specifications, Programme Quality Handbooks and evidence of definitive records. The review team also met a number of staff from the College and University representatives and had a demonstration of the virtual learning environment (VLE).

1.14 The programme quality handbooks serve as definitive records at the College. They clearly detail all areas relating to the programme specifications and provide the academic governance arrangements between the College and the University. The documents are reviewed and discussed at senior level before being signed off by the Higher Education Lead or Section Head.

1.15 The review team confirmed that the definitive record of each programme is available online. Programme approval and changes to programme specifications are discussed formally at the Higher Education Strategy Group and the Joint Board of Studies. The College has a specific Programme Change document from the University outlining the process should changes to a programme be required. Staff members demonstrated their understanding of the relevant processes through meetings with the review team.

1.16 When students complete their period of study they receive a certificate, transcript and diploma supplement. Documentary evidence and the VLE demonstration confirmed the provision of records of study.

1.17 The College has processes in place to contribute to the maintenance of a definitive record of each programme and qualification. This record does constitute the reference point for the delivery, assessment, monitoring and review of its programmes of study and the provision of records to students and alumni.

1.18 The review team concludes that the College is aware of and fulfils its responsibilities with the University. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

**Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

## **Findings**

1.19 The College is responsible for the design and development of its programmes and for any subsequent changes. It does so in accordance with its own processes and with those of the University.

1.20 Initial proposals for new programmes are brought to the College Higher Education Strategy Group. When proposals are approved further investigation is then undertaken by Higher Education Leads and programme teams. Consultation with students, employers, sector representative organisations or accreditation bodies is part of this process. At this point the College evaluates the current staffing resource and identifies the future need for new provision. Following the conclusion of these investigations a final proposal is submitted to the College Senior Management Team.

1.21 Successful proposals are subject to the two stage approval process of the University. During this phase external academic and industry advisers critically consider the proposal. College processes in association with the University enable Expectation A3.1 to be met in design.

1.22 The team reviewed approval documentation from both the College and the University to test this Expectation. The team also discussed the implementation of the approval processes with College managers, programme teams and representatives from the University.

1.23 The evidence provided and the ensuing discussions confirmed that clear and robust processes are in place and that these are understood and followed by staff at all levels. There is active engagement with employers, students and relevant benchmarks at all stages. Human and physical resources are key considerations and the College is diligent in ensuring that both are in place before programme delivery commences.

1.24 Representatives from the University confirmed the rigour with which the College undertakes programme design and approval. Employers also commented positively on their engagement with programme design and approval processes.

1.25 The team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and that the associated level of risk is low.

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

**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.26 The College offers programmes that are validated and approved through the University. It also offers a BSc (Hons) Extended Science Year Zero, which is franchised from the University. In all cases the College has the responsibility for assessing the intended learning outcomes.

1.27 The College has processes for assessment that are aligned with and underpinned by the Regulations and Assessment Policies of the University. These are augmented by the College's Standards for Assessment Practice, an operational document to support staff. Templates for assessment briefs and feedback are provided and staff are supported in their assessment practice with online resources and professional development. The processes for securing academic standards enable Expectation A3.2 to be met in design.

1.28 In testing this Expectation, the team reviewed documentation including external examiner reports, minutes from Subject Assessment Panels and Award Boards. The team also met College managers, programme team members and representatives from the University.

1.29 The College has sound processes in place to ensure that assessments are appropriate and allow students to meet the intended learning outcomes of each module and programme. These processes operate consistently and effectively and ensure that the achievement of intended learning outcomes is fully evidenced. Programme teams engage productively with external examiners to confirm assessment decisions. These processes ensure that confirmed assessment decisions are efficiently recorded and subsequently shared with students. External examiner reports confirm that processes to ensure standards of assessment are effective.

1.30 The College confirms assessment decisions at Subject Assessment Panels which are chaired by the subject Higher Education Lead and attended by representatives from the University and the external examiner. Award Boards confirm assessments at programme level and are chaired by the University, again with external examiners and programme team members present. Boards have administrative support and confirmed decisions are communicated to students within 10 working days of the Board.

1.31 The team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and the associated level of risk is low.

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

**Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.32 The awarding body, Plymouth University, holds the primary responsibility for programme monitoring and review. However, the College manages its responsibility through a process of annual monitoring, action planning and reporting.

1.33 The College's annual monitoring process requires programme teams to work with student representatives to review the programme and to develop an action plan for improvement. Based on a set agenda, including employability, the process is informed by student feedback data, key performance indicators and external examiner reports. Programme changes may be identified in the action plan and, if so, they are subsequently processed through the University Change Procedures. The processes for the monitoring and review of programmes enable Expectation A3.3 to be met in design.

1.34 In testing this Expectation, the team considered a wide sample of monitoring reports from programme, curriculum and service areas. These were corroborated at meetings with managers, programme teams and with staff from support areas.

1.35 The College has a comprehensive annual monitoring process. Each curriculum area with higher education provision develops an annual Self-Assessment Report and Operating Improvement Plan, as do those support areas which service the provision. Programme action plans inform the College Higher Education Action Plan, which identifies cross-College good practice and areas for improvement. The action plan is agreed by the Academic Improvement and Development Board. All action plans are monitored and updated 'in year' and those at programme level are formally received at the programme committee meetings held in the autumn and spring terms.

1.36 These processes were found to be implemented consistently and rigorously across all those areas with or supporting higher education provision. Staff at all levels exhibited a good understanding of the processes and their role in enhancing provision. Representatives from the student body and from the University confirmed their engagement with annual monitoring and action planning. The University also confirmed that the College fully meets its obligations to the awarding body for programme monitoring and review.

1.37 The team concludes that the College has rigorous programme monitoring processes which align with the requirements of the University. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

**Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:**

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.38 Academic standards are set during the approval process by the College in partnership with the University. Independent external academic and industry advisers also provide input in this process.

1.39 External examiners are recognised as an essential element of the verification of assessment and they confirm the assessment standards of modules at the Subject Assessment Panel at the end of the academic year. The Award Board External Examiner confirms the overall academic standards of all programmes. The arrangements for using external and independent expertise enables Expectation A3.4 to be met in design.

1.40 To test this Expectation, the team reviewed examples of course approval documentation from each of the three previous years as well as subject assessment panel and award board minutes and a considerable range of external examiner reports and responses to those reports. The team also met employers involved with the programmes and discussed external involvement with managers and members of the programme teams.

1.41 The team found evidence of the involvement of external and independent academic and industry expertise during course development and approval. This expertise is also evident in relation to the award of credit through extensive external examiner involvement in assessment boards and in the external examiner reporting process.

1.42 The team concludes that the College in partnership with the University meets the Expectation and the associated level of risk is low.

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

## The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations: Summary of findings

1.43 In reaching its judgement about the maintenance of academic standards, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.44 The College effectively uses the processes of its awarding body, Plymouth University, in ensuring that academic standards are maintained in line with the relevant level of the FHEQ and external reference points. The College's own internal processes, including rigorous programme approval and monitoring procedures, also make a valuable contribution to the maintenance of standards. There are appropriate opportunities for the use of external expertise within these processes.

1.45 The College has met all seven Expectations in this area and the associated level of risk is low. Therefore, the review team concludes that the College's maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of its degree-awarding body **meets** UK expectations.



## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval**

#### **Findings**

2.1 The College's Higher Education Strategy Group is responsible for the management of the programme development process. It does so in line with the requirements of the University.

2.2 Programme development begins at least 24 months in advance of the planned course start date. The initial phase involves a formal proposal to the College's Higher Education Strategy Group, who, if the proposal is accepted, requires the relevant Higher Education Lead and course team to undertake further, detailed investigations. This further work relates to demand for the programme, recruitment, employment and progression opportunities, academic content and structure.

2.3 Course teams draw on information from students, employers and external examiners and make links to relevant points of reference, including benchmark statements and, where needed, professional statutory regulatory body (PSRB) requirements.

2.4 Following this initial phase the College Senior Management Team (SMT) receives a formal, detailed proposal. Only when approved by the SMT does the proposal move forward to the University's two-stage approval process. At this point external academic and industry advisers are engaged in the process. To date, formal student engagement in this latter phase has been limited to one approval event as a trial exercise. The College and its higher education student body are keen to extend this and are working with the University to do so. The processes for programme design and approval enable the Expectation in Chapter B1 to be met in design.

2.5 In testing this Expectation, the team reviewed approval documentation from both the College and the University. Meetings were held with members of the College SMT, programme team staff and representatives from the University.

2.6 The process for programme design and approval is robust. The procedures implemented align with and go beyond the requirements of the awarding body. This allows the College to develop its higher education provision in a planned and strategic manner and ensures that it maps with 'feeder' programmes at the College, from which a significant proportion of its higher education students are recruited. The review team regards the clear and rigorous processes for programme development as **good practice**.

2.7 Highly effective use is made of a wide range of evidence and points of reference to support proposals. In particular, student and employer input at strategic and programme level usefully informs course proposals and developments. The College Higher Education Manager is effective in supporting teams in this process. The College uses its curriculum design and approval processes effectively in ensuring that there are opportunities to link academic and employability skills which is highlighted as good practice under Expectation B4, paragraph 2.31.



2.8 The team concludes that the College implements rigorous processes for the design, development and approval of programmes. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission***

**Findings**

2.9 The College has a number of documents for fair recruitment, including an admissions policy as well as a dedicated admissions team. The admissions policy details the College's mission, aims and procedures for fair recruitment. It also details processes for full and part-time applicants, and contains information for students with disabilities. Information on complaints and appeals procedures, overseas applicants and non-traditional entry routes are also covered within the policy along with a diagram that maps the application process.

2.10 All applications are processed via UCAS. The higher education admissions team has responsibility for the recruitment of students and work in conjunction with the Higher Education Leads who have responsibility for making admissions decisions. Admission is by way of interview or assessment. The admissions system, policies and procedures in place enable the Expectation in Chapter B2 to be met in design.

2.11 The review team looked at the Higher Education Forum agenda and minutes and the higher education student handbook in order to test this Expectation. The team also reviewed minutes of meetings including the Higher Education Strategy Group, the Academic Board and Programme Committee Meetings. The team met staff and students, examined evidence of the admissions processes being reviewed and considered information to demonstrate that staff were suitably trained. The team also looked at the College website, the VLE and a range of printed and digital publications.

2.12 The admissions policy is reviewed annually by the higher education team at the Higher Education Strategy Group and the Academic Board. This Higher Education Strategy group also reviews enrolment and progression data. The admissions policy includes information on students' rights to appeal the admissions decision-making process. Admission is by way of interview or assessment, and this information is clearly displayed in print and online publications.

2.13 The College provides comprehensive information about the institution, its programmes and its admissions policies in a variety of formats in order for applicants and progressing students to make informed decisions. The processes and policies allow for students to understand the programme of study that they plan to enter and students comment positively about the admissions process.

2.14 Staff are suitably trained in the admissions processes, receive regular updates and support. The higher education team attend regular continuing professional development events in order to discuss and review the admissions process. The review team also found that recruitment data is reviewed each year. Students are asked about their experiences as part of an induction survey and this information is reviewed by the higher education team. Weekly sessions are held with the admissions team in order to ensure that the College continually reviews the admissions process and staff remain trained and current. Reports are made to the Joint Board of Studies where the activities such as the Applicant Day undertaken at enrolment are discussed and evaluated.

2.15 The College enables all applicants to access the VLE, which is particularly helpful as a wide range of information is provided to assist prospective students in making informed decisions. The resources available include provisional timetables, newsletters and information to help students prepare for higher education study, such as documents relating to academic literacy. The use of this VLE facility is monitored through the student induction survey and this reveals that an ongoing challenge is to encourage all students to access it. However, those prospective students that did access the information did benefit from it. The review team therefore regards the use of the virtual learning environment to provide detailed information for prospective students as **good practice**. Similarly, the College website contains a wealth of information that is available for existing and prospective students and enables informed decisions to be made. The College's schedule of events and publications details the information and support for prospective students, including an induction with activities for new starters.

2.16 The review team concludes that the College has clear, fair and explicit admissions procedures that are consistently applied. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk 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***

#### **Findings**

2.17 The College has a strategic commitment to high quality learning and teaching as demonstrated by its Strategic Framework, Higher Education Strategy, and Teaching, Learning & Assessment Strategy. The College takes the adequacy of the staffing base, as well as issues of physical resource, into consideration at strategic level before presenting proposals for new provision to the University.

2.18 The College's Higher Education Teaching Learning and Scholarship Framework, and associated staff development documentation, contain details of its strategic approach to the delivery of higher education. This includes a commitment to all teaching staff achieving a recognised teaching qualification by their second year of employment and a teaching observation approach which maps to the UK Professional Standards Framework. College staff development activities include sessions which are specifically designed for those teaching in higher education. Staff delivering higher education programmes are given 14 days each year for their own professional development and scholarship. Staff are therefore encouraged to undertake discipline-based and pedagogic research and scholarly activity.

2.19 The College Student Charter makes it clear, through its '36 hour approach' that students have a responsibility to commit to appropriate levels of independent study and preparation for assessment. The College places considerable emphasis on the tutorial system as a means of supporting the academic development of students with individual or group sessions timetabled every week. Tutors provide general sessions relating to academic skills and assessment literacy and encourage students to engage in personal development planning. These tutors are also a first point of reference for students in signposting the further support available. The College's approach to learning and teaching enables the Expectation in Chapter B3 to be met in design.

2.20 In testing this Expectation the team reviewed a range of documentation relating to College policies and processes, including evidence of appropriate staff qualifications, study and other continuing professional development currently being undertaken. The team also considered examples of teaching observation notes and how they are used in appraisals, annual monitoring documentation relating to learning and teaching and evidence of staff engagement with pedagogic research. The team reviewed results from the National Student Survey and Student Perception Questionnaires and was given a demonstration of the VLE from both the student and staff perspective. The team also reviewed materials provided to students and met a range of senior and programme staff, learning support staff, students and alumni.

2.21 The majority of the College's higher education courses are taught in the University Centre which was built in 2009-10. It includes dedicated social space for higher education students. Students have access to IT facilities both in the University Centre and on the main campus, where the library facilities are. Higher education students also have access to the library facilities at the University. Students have free wireless access throughout the College campus, including access to a higher education-specific world-wide network through the University. This network facilitates student access to University resources, including

electronic journals. The College makes extensive use of its VLE and has expertise which is recognised externally in the use of e-systems for providing learning opportunities.

2.22 The team observed a general ethos of enthusiasm among the staff, students and employers whom it met. The staff spoke very positively about the development since the IQER of a dedicated higher education team able to work collectively in supporting student learning. Both staff and students gave examples of the commitment of the College to equality and diversity in terms of strategy, including staff development and the Research and Employability Scholarships and positive consequences for individual students. Staff members explained the mechanisms used by the College to enable the effective sharing of good practice in learning and teaching. Examples of such developments include the focus on study skills for all students during the induction process and the extension of the Research Showcase from one area of provision to encompass all areas.

2.23 The team noted the appreciation that both staff and students had of the difference in the intellectual demands on students as they progress through the levels of the programmes. There was recognition of the greater requirement to work independently and with an increased degree of critical analysis. Additional staff development in relation to level 6 dissertations meant that staff members were able to offer appropriate support and guidance for students. The team reviewed documentation relating to the 'flipped' online research methods resource developed for use with the level 6 dissertations which encourages students to conduct pre-session work. The team concludes that the collective approach of College staff to working with students in their development as independent learners is **good practice**. This collective approach includes both staff delivering modules and those supporting learning in other ways.

2.24 The team noted the extensive support provided for the academic development of students through the induction process and the embedded tutorials as well as the availability of dedicated higher education academic skills support staff. The tutorial system is an effective way of providing students with the regular opportunity to reflect on their progress. The pervasive nature of this support was evidenced, for example, by the approach of the library in balancing assistance to students with the need to develop their ability to find materials independently. The team also noted the opportunities in the curriculum for students to link the development of academic and employability skills, which is highlighted as good practice under Expectation B4, paragraph 2.31.

2.25 The team found that students are involved in the annual monitoring process both indirectly through the consideration of survey results and directly through involvement in the programme committees. The consistent approach of the College in responding to suggestions for improvement from students is clear from documentary evidence and discussions with staff and students. For example, the College provided social space, clarified assessment processes and introduced the link to a world-wide roaming access service in response to student feedback. Students confirmed that although there had previously been some confusion about the ability to access the facilities at the University, an initiative had been put in place during 2014 in response to this. Students are now taken to the University as a group during their first semester.

2.26 The review team concludes that the College works effectively with staff, students and other stakeholders in developing and reviewing its provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices. Students are enabled to develop as independent learners and encouraged to develop their analytical skills. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.27 The College Higher Education Strategy confirms its commitment to inspire students to develop themselves and this is reiterated in the Student Engagement Framework which indicates the support students can access to make the most of their opportunities. The College Higher Education Student Charter outlines the expectations of both the College and students in relation to tutorial support, learning resources and support services and also provides students with an understanding of the commitment which is required from them in relation to their own development.

2.28 The arrangements in place specifically to support the development of higher education students include induction, with a study skills day; the tutorial system; the first year study skills focused module; the Research and Employability Scholarships; the Research Showcase; and progression events. The College describes progression and employability as being 'nested' within the tutorial system. There is also a Higher Education Study Skills Facilitator and the Academic and Information Skills Officer. In addition, the Jobzone and Helpzone, which have dedicated staff with information, advice and guidance qualifications, are available to all students at the College and provide general support, including that relating to careers.

2.29 The Study Skills Facilitator's role is to advise staff and current and potential students on disability support in higher education. This advice includes information relating to well-being support, study skills, disability and dyslexia support. The Study Skills Facilitator also produces an annual report outlining the support received by students and the outcome of their study. The College has an agreement with an external agency which acts as the referral point for all assessments of disabled students' allowance needs and is the primary supplier of all non-medical helper support. The other higher education-specific support role is the Academic and Information Skills Officer who supports staff and students with the development of academic skills required for effective higher education study. The College's arrangements enable the Expectation in Chapter B4 to be met in design.

2.30 In testing this Expectation, the team examined College documents such as the Higher Education Strategy and the Student Charter. The team considered National Student Survey and Student Perception Questionnaire survey results and an internally administered survey on higher education student support services. The team also reviewed documents relating to the Research and Employability Scholarships, the tutorial system and to annual monitoring as it related to support for student development. The team had a demonstration of the virtual learning environment and met senior staff, teaching staff, professional support staff, students, alumni and employers.

2.31 A number of the initiatives draw together both academic and employability skills. The first year study skills focused module, often known as the Developing Research and Practice module, is designed to support students in developing skills and reflective practice appropriate to level 4 in their study area. Generic resources have been developed within the VLE to support this module. The Research and Employability Scholarships enable students to bid for funding so they can undertake activities which will either enhance their employability or their scholarship. A requirement of these scholarships is that students present the findings of their research at the Research Showcase. This involves final year students and staff presenting their research alongside industry and academic speakers

disseminating current thinking in key sectors aligned to the curriculum offer. This event provides students with an opportunity to develop academic and employability skills in tandem and to enhance the research ethos of the higher education provision at the College. The team finds that the College's initiatives which link academic and employability skills through curriculum design and delivery are **good practice**.

2.32 Progression support is provided by relevant teaching staff, many of whom are currently practitioners in their fields, and by the higher education-specific support roles as well as by the Helpzone careers service. The College has recently identified the need for an Employability Champion who will encourage and support students in undertaking the Plymouth Award. This award is an extracurricular activity designed by the University to support the development of student employability skills. However, there is currently a very low rate of participation by students. The Employability Champion role will also involve the provision of support across the higher education area for the development and monitoring of employability resources. The team also noted that the College's knowledge of the eventual employability outcomes for its students and connection with its alumni was anecdotal rather than systematic, largely because the immediate destination of the majority of the students was further study. Individual staff members within the College appeared to remain in contact with students, particularly in the case of areas, such as Early Years, where former students provided work-based learning opportunities, but there is no systematic attempt to collect, retain and review this information. The team noted the requirement for programme committees to consider employability and employability outcomes annually and were encouraged to hear that the intention was that the role of the Employability Champion would include taking a more strategic approach to the outcomes of this exercise. The team therefore **affirms** the work being undertaken to develop a more systematic approach to the monitoring of employability initiatives and their outcomes.

2.33 Students are provided with information about College facilities, support and relevant policies through the higher education Student Handbook and the VLE. Student views on the provision of support are sought and acted upon, as evidenced by the development of the induction process for 2014-15 on the basis of views from the previous year. Students and alumni provided compelling evidence of the College's ability to develop student potential through the support provided. As noted in relation to Expectation B3, the staff spoke very positively of the development since IQER of a dedicated higher education team able to work collectively in supporting students.

2.34 Both academic and professional staff confirmed that they usually felt sufficiently well informed to be able to support students in developing employability skills and making progression decisions. However, they agreed that before the introduction of level 6 provision the advice they had been called upon to give largely related to progression to further study. The University Careers Service is available to students but, with the recent introduction of level 6 for students who are not already in work, the College recognises the desirability of additional specialist careers advice and has plans for further developing the staff available to provide careers support to level 6 students.

2.35 The College keeps arrangements under review in consultation with students through its annual monitoring processes. Student progression and employability reports are also considered by programme committees at their spring meeting.

2.36 The team concludes that the College has effective arrangements in place, which it keeps under review, to enable students to develop their potential. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

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

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

**Findings**

2.37 The College engages with students both formally and informally. Formal mechanisms include the use of a course representative system.

2.38 The College's approach to student engagement is outlined in the Student Engagement Framework and the student voice and representation system is defined in the Higher Education Student Charter. Student representatives are trained in their role and there are close links with the awarding body. There is a dedicated higher education student representative and regular meetings at the College where students are able to contribute as partners in quality assurance processes. The approach to student engagement enables the Expectation in Chapter B5 to be met in design.

2.39 In testing this Expectation the review team looked at the Higher Education Student Charter, Student Engagement Framework and evidence of course representatives in College meetings and decision-making committees. Meetings were held with a wide range of staff and students and a demonstration of the College's VLE was given.

2.40 In line with information in the Higher Education Student Charter, students are able to become representatives and engage in higher education committees and meetings at all levels of the College. The College has produced a specific role description relating to its expectations of a student representative and there is a document that clearly defines the higher education student voice structure. Training for student representatives is provided by the University and College staff are also able to provide additional support. This training and support allows representatives to engage effectively in the quality assurance of their College and maintain a student voice.

2.41 The College has embraced student engagement as evidenced by numerous examples of changes being made as a result of student voice feedback. The 'You Said We Did' document shows examples of changes such as the grade tracker, wireless access, online submission, new teaching space and IT upgrades. Students are able to feed their comments to the College formally through module evaluations, or informally with the personal tutor. Students feel satisfied with the level of opportunities to feedback on courses and teaching.

2.42 The review team found that there are multiple instances where students are able to contribute to College deliberative structures. Student representatives are on committees including the Joint Board of Studies, attend the Curriculum Group meetings and contribute to Annual Programme Monitoring. Student Consultative forums are chaired by Higher Education Lead Student Representative, who also attends the Academic Improvement and Development Board.

2.43 The College has undertaken a Student Engagement Partnership Project in order to evaluate and enhance its provision. The project document details an extensive network of 40 representatives across 23 courses. This project is contributing to the College's work on strategies to further develop its engagement with students, including the development of rolling action plans for student input. Higher education students comment positively on the support provided by the higher education team in the engagement of students, the student



representative system and the resulting developments, which contribute to overall levels of satisfaction.

2.44 There are systems in place that have created a sense of community spirit within the College. There is a commitment to supporting the role of the student representative and numerous opportunities for involvement in College deliberative structures. The review team regards the extensive and effective engagement with the student body to assure and enhance its provision as **good practice**.

2.45 The review team concludes that the College engages effectively with the student body in order to assure and enhance its provision. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning**

**Findings**

2.46 Assessment processes at the College are aligned with the University's Academic Regulations and Assessment Policies. Additionally the College has developed Standards for Assessment Practice to enhance the assessment of its higher education programmes.

2.47 Assessment strategies at course and module level are agreed at the programme approval stage and set out in programme specifications and module records. Any changes to assessment strategies are approved through the University's Change Procedures. Assessment strategies are communicated to students in module guides and on specific assignment briefs.

2.48 The Standards for Assessment Practice are the operational documents which support staff with assessment verification and feedback, providing standard templates for assessment briefs and examples of good practice. Tutors are supported in their assessment practice through scheduled professional development sessions and with online resources.

2.49 There is a formal process for the recognition of prior learning and experience, which aligns with University regulations. Applications by students are considered against intended learning outcomes. While the academic judgement decision is made by the module lead, this decision is subject to external verification and potential scrutiny by the external examiner for the course. The assessment arrangements enable the Expectation to be met in design.

2.50 In testing this Expectation the review team considered a wide range of documentation relating to assessment provided by both the College and the University. This included the University's Regulations and Assessment Policy and the College's Standards for Assessment Practice. Assessment policies and practice were discussed in detail in meetings with senior staff and with course teams. The review team also met students to establish their experiences of assessment.

2.51 The College is proactive in seeking to continuously improve its assessment practice. At module level, assessments are considered through module review, which is informed by student feedback. Subject Assessment Panels consider assessment practice and, where relevant, the impact of any changes to assessments, which is reported on in the Annual Programme Monitoring Report.

2.52 In 2013-14 the College engaged with its student body, led by the Higher Education Lead Student Representative, to review its assessment and feedback practices. This review resulted in a significant update to the Standards for Assessment Practice and the production of useful visual displays to promote student engagement with assessment feedback. Students comment positively about their experiences of assessment and on the quality of the feedback they receive.

2.53 Employers actively contribute to assessment activity in work placements and through the provision of work-related assessment tasks such as live briefs and case studies. This ensures that assessments relate to relevant sectors and are current and topical.

2.54 For 2014-15 the College has introduced a requirement for all written assessments to be submitted through plagiarism-detection software which is also used to actively enhance student assessment literacy in advance of the final submission. Allied to this is the development of a grade book recording system on the College VLE which allows both tutor and student to report and track grades. Significantly, this is also used to enable personal tutors to engage with their tutees to discuss and agree targets for improvement as students seek to enhance their performance in future assessments. The review team regards the proactive approach to the development and management of assessment processes including effective use of the virtual learning environment as **good practice**.

2.55 The team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

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

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

**Findings**

2.56 The College has responsibility for nominating external examiners, in accordance with the University's appointment criteria, to the University; appointments are made by the University. External examiners are appointed to represent a single programme of study at the College and an Award Board external examiner is also appointed. The College works within University regulations and processes as a threshold for its engagement with external examiners.

2.57 The College has responsibility for providing programme level briefing and support for external examiner visits and ensuring that reports are considered as part of the annual monitoring process. The College makes external examiner reports available to students via the VLE and students are also involved in the consideration of the reports by the Programme Committees. An overview of the external examiners' comments is provided annually to the Academic Improvement and Development Board and cross-programme themes are integrated into the Higher Education Action Plan for discussion at the Joint Board of Study and approval at the Academic Improvement and Development Board. The planned use of external examiners enables the Expectation to be met in design.

2.58 In testing this Expectation the review team examined a range of documentation including the College register of external examiners, subject assessment and Award Board minutes, external examiner reports and responses to them, the external examiner overview report, programme committee minutes and minutes of the Academic Improvement and Development Board. The team also discussed the involvement of external examiners with both staff and students and assessed the use of the VLE.

2.59 The review team saw evidence of external examiner reports and responses on the VLE for students to see. Students the team met confirmed that they were introduced to external examiners and knew where they could read the reports if they wanted to do so. Some of the students spoke of tutors looking at the external examiner reports with them to help them understand their assessment requirements.

2.60 The College responds to external examiner suggestions through the annual monitoring process. For example, in responding to external examiner reports during the academic year 2011-12 the external examiner for the Foundation Degree in Computing recommended the introduction of additional mathematics. The programme team incorporated this into the annual monitoring action plan and this was then recognised with the external examiner report for the following year. The review team noted that external examiner reports were also used to identify and disseminate good practice.

2.61 The review team concludes that there is extensive and scrupulous use of external examiners. The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

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

**Findings**

2.62 The College has the responsibility for undertaking annual programme monitoring and does so in accordance with the regulations and procedures of the University.

2.63 The annual programme monitoring process is informed by key performance indicators such as retention and achievement, student feedback from internal questionnaires, the National Student Survey, student forums and by external examiner reports. Each programme review is based on a set agenda and takes place within a published quality schedule. Each review is required to consider employability as a key aspect of the programme. Programme reviews generate action plans, the progress of which is monitored during the year.

2.64 Cross-College areas for improvement and best practice are captured in a College Higher Education Report and Action Plan, which is formally submitted to the College's Joint Board of Studies, and the Academic Improvement and Development Board. A whole-College Self-Assessment Report and Operating Improvement Plan includes an assessment of higher education provision. The arrangements for programme monitoring and review enable the Expectation in Chapter B8 to be met in design.

2.65 In testing this Expectation, the review team considered key documentation relating to programme monitoring, such as the Annual Programme Monitoring guidance. The team also met College staff, representatives from the University and students.

2.66 There is a well-developed process for the annual monitoring and review of modules, programmes and the College higher education provision as a whole. Tutors contribute to and value the process and students also welcome the opportunity to have their voice heard throughout this process. Managers and tutors alike demonstrated a good appreciation of the annual monitoring process and its role in enhancing provision.

2.67 The practice of programme monitoring and review is applied consistently and effectively and makes a significant contribution to assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities at all levels. Action plans arising from monitoring reports are systematically addressed and monitored in year with effective oversight by senior managers.

2.68 Therefore, review team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and the associated level of risk is low.

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

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

#### **Findings**

2.69 The College operates two complaints procedures. One system covers the College and the other is specifically for students on higher education programmes. The complaints procedure for higher education students is provided by the University and available via the Student Handbook online.

2.70 The University has overall responsibility for the complaints and academic appeals processes. Students are informed of the appeals and complaints procedures through the VLE, printed information and support services within the College. The checklist of responsibilities notes that the College will direct students to the University appeals procedures and deadlines and provide information for the University Appeals panel. Complaints are initially dealt with informally by the College and students are then directed to University procedures if they wish to pursue a formal complaint. The complaints and appeals policies are approved annually by the Academic Board. The planned academic appeals and students complaints procedures enable the Expectation to be met in design.

2.71 In testing this Expectation the review team considered a number of documents, including the Complaints Policy, Guidance on Complaints, student handbooks, the College website, VLE, evidence of a complaints log and the complaints procedure. The review team also explored other sources of evidence to further test the complaints procedure and its effectiveness, such as the support available to students if they wish to make a complaint. The team also met a selection of staff and students during the review visit.

2.72 College documents detail all stages of the complaints and appeal processes. For example, the Students Complaints Procedure clearly details the various steps of the process and outlines the timeframe for resolutions. There is a separate document that covers an appeal against the decision of the Assessment Board. This document is owned by the University and also details the procedure, stages and timeframes for any appeals. The complaints and appeal documents are available from numerous sources both online and in print and are included within the student handbooks. There is also information about plagiarism, examination and assessment offences and regulations and the resulting penalties on the University website.

2.73 The information on complaints and appeals is clear and easily accessible, although students have commented on some confusion regarding the academic regulations. In response to this the College has provided advice and guidance on the VLE and in the Student Charter.

2.74 Staff and students are aware of and understand the complaints and appeals processes as well as appreciating the difference between complaints and appeals. The College takes steps to inform students of the complaints and appeals processes by providing information during the induction period and throughout the year by including information in student transcripts. The information is also available on the VLE and in leaflet form.

2.75 The review team tested how the College monitors and reviews its processes in order to ensure that systems are suitable and effective. The College has only recorded two formal higher education complaints and aims to resolve complaints informally whenever

possible. The complaints procedure is reviewed annually at the Academic Board meeting and the College has taken steps to further monitor the effectiveness of its processes by introducing pilot projects that capture the experiences of students.

2.76 The College has systems in place in order to support students through the complaints and appeals processes and provides this by way of the Students' Union advice, personal tutor and student representatives. In evaluating the evidence the review team found that the College takes steps to ensure that it has robust complaints and appeals procedures that are easily accessible and understood by all stakeholders. Students and staff are aware of the procedures in place and there is a clear understanding of the differences between complaints and appeals.

2.77 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

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

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others**

**Findings**

2.78 The College's arrangements for delivering learning opportunities in partnership with other organisations involve work-based learning. The College identifies three categories of working with others in discharging its own responsibilities. One category involves learning outcomes that are delivered and/or assessed by others, which relates to the FdSc Healthcare Practice with Torbay Hospital. The College also has placements that are required as part of a programme, for example, the Early Years provision, but with delivery and assessment by College staff. Finally, there are work placements or other support from employers which are not a definitive part of a programme but are encouraged.

2.79 In relation to the collaboration with Torbay Hospital over the delivery of FdSc Healthcare Practice, module leadership responsibilities have been shared between the College and the Hospital with all module leaders being full members of the programme team. Hospital module leaders participate in College higher education staff development and are included in the arrangements for teaching observation. The College designates a member of staff to support placement coordination with weekly attendance at the hospital. The FdSc is now also being delivered at Tiverton with all module leadership and assessment responsibilities being undertaken by College staff.

2.80 For those programmes requiring a placement, a Placement Coordinator supports students and undertakes visits. Students are expected to find their own placement in the first instance but the Coordinator will support them should they need to change placement. Where the placement involves the signing off of competencies, a workplace mentor is provided. A tripartite learning agreement is made between placement provider, College and student and the Placement Handbook outlines the role of the mentor. The arrangements for the management of higher education provision with others enables the Expectation to be met in design.

2.81 In testing this Expectation, the team reviewed documentary evidence of Torbay hospital staff being involved in programme committee meetings and in assessment processes as members of the programme team. The team also reviewed the role description for the Placement Coordinator and the FdA Early Years Care and Education guide which provides details of the role of the workplace mentor and contains the tripartite learning contract signed by the employer, College representative and student. The review team also met staff members, students and employers and discussed with them their experience of these collaborations.

2.82 Staff and students confirmed that students have the responsibility for providing themselves with a placement as part of the admissions programme, but the College is able to, and if needed does, assist with this. The relevant College programme team also provides support for students if a substitute placement is required.

2.83 It was clear from discussion with staff, students and employers, including those acting as workplace mentors, that those involved felt that they had sufficient briefing from and contact with the programme teams. While students are not given a formal opportunity to comment specifically on their placement experience, they are able to do so via the module



evaluation process. The College higher education study skills support staff also offer support to students while they are on placement.

2.84 The team notes that the higher education contract with Torbay Hospital now provides for lesson observations and twice yearly formal meetings and that, where a competency document has to be signed off for pass/fail, support is provided by a member of the College staff who is at Torbay Hospital every week.

2.85 The review team concludes that the arrangements for managing work-based learning opportunities are implemented securely and managed effectively. The expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Low**

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

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

**Findings**

2.86 The College does not award research degrees.

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

2.87 In reaching its commended judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. All of the Expectations in this area were met and the associated level of risk was low in each case. The team identified six features of good practice and one affirmation in this area. There are no recommendations.

2.88 The features of good practice identified include the clear and rigorous processes used by the College in its development of programmes. The review team also recognises the detailed information provided for applicants and the ongoing involvement of all staff in supporting students in their development as higher level independent learners. The College initiatives which link academic and employability skills through curriculum design and delivery make a valuable contribution to the student experience. There is extensive engagement with the student body in the assurance and enhancement of provision. The review team also recognises the proactive approach taken by the College in the development and management of assessment processes.

2.89 The College has a range of employability initiatives and these make positive contributions to the student experience. However, the tracking of student progression has been more focused at programme team level to date. The College has recognised the need for a more formalised and strategic approach and has appointed an Employability Champion. The review team therefore affirms the proactive work being undertaken to develop a more systematic approach to the monitoring of employability initiatives and their outcomes and to the dissemination of the good practices to be found within individual programmes.

2.90 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at South Devon College is **commended**.

### 3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

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

#### **Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision**

#### **Findings**

3.1 The Academic Co-operation Agreement includes details of the arrangements for marketing and publicity. This document also outlines the responsibilities of the College in working with the University to produce information about higher education provision.

3.2 The College provides and publishes information on its website about its mission, values and strategy. The admissions process is also described online and within the printed documentation. Prospective students are provided with information about the course and facilities before they start their programmes. The College provides students with a range of handbooks which are supplemented by other printed and digital materials. The College has systems in place including the Public Information Procedure to ensure and monitor the accuracy of the information it produces. The arrangements for the production of information enable the Expectation to be met in design.

3.3 In testing this Expectation, the review team looked at a number of sources of evidence including the College website, prospectus, mini guide and the VLE. The team also examined the Student Charter, Higher Education Handbook, policy documents, the Public Information Procedure, Higher Education Strategy and the Annual General Report. The team also met a range of staff and students and looked at documents provided to students as part of the enrolment process.

3.4 The College has a comprehensive website and a wealth of information is available online and via print. There is wide-ranging information available for existing and prospective students. The website brochures and course prospectuses contain information relating to course content, facilities, fees and funding, transport, term dates and general details about the College. Entry requirements are listed on the website and in course handbooks. The College has produced a specific higher education website that contains all of the relevant information for current and prospective students and a University mini guide is also available. The College provides all successful applicants with an induction letter which contains relevant information about starting their study. In addition to this they have produced a document online called 'Applicant VLE' which is a useful source that serves as a good tool for students. The review team recognises the use of the VLE to provide information for prospective students as good practice under Expectation B2, paragraph 2.15.

3.5 The College website includes a range of easily accessible information including governance documents and policies. The information contained in the programme quality course handbooks is comprehensive and detailed and lists a wide range of information, including course content, credit and module information. These handbooks do not contain information on plagiarism and academic appeals but this is provided separately. Learning outcomes are included in all handbooks and the information is updated annually. The review team finds the provision of consistently accessible and high quality information for all stakeholders to be **good practice**.

3.6 Enrolled students have access to an extensive information set, including a range of handbooks and electronic resources, principally through the website and the VLE. The VLE is used to support students with assessment and they are encouraged to use plagiarism-detection software. A grade book is also available so that tutors and students can track the assessment outcomes. The review team recognises the use of the VLE to support assessment as good practice under Expectation B6, paragraph 2.54.

3.7 The majority of students commented positively about the accuracy and quality of the information and resources such as course handbooks. However, some students had experienced difficulties with accessing information and materials in the 2013-14 academic year. The Student Perception Questionnaire results for 2014 relating to the communication of course changes were also lower than in previous years. The College responds to feedback from students in relation to the provision of information and makes improvements. The College uses the VLE to provide information relating to academic regulations, latest news updates and external examiner reports. The Student Charter serves as a useful document that details the expectations of current students and what they can expect of the higher education provider.

3.8 The College follows its Public Information Procedure and uses version control in ensuring that the details published are current and accurate. The College Marketing team facilitates the provision of external information, including items such as the prospectus, in partnership with the higher education team and Higher Education Leads. All of this information is checked by the University marketing team and approved before publication. Other documents such as College policies are reviewed annually and approved by the Board of Governors.

3.9 The review team concludes that there is a consistent approach to the way the College manages its information and ensures that this remains fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

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

3.10 In reaching its judgement relating to the quality of information about learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The team identifies one feature of good practice in this area with a further two features of good practice linked to the quality of learning opportunities. There are no recommendations or affirmations in this area as actions have recently been taken to address any concerns.

3.11 The College has robust systems for the production and monitoring of information. The review team regards the provision of consistently accessible and high quality information for all stakeholders as good practice. The team also recognises the effective use of the virtual learning environment for the provision of information for prospective students and for the management of assessment for current students.

3.12 The College has systems to enable student feedback to be gathered and uses these to contribute to its action planning. The College has therefore responded to student feedback relating to the accessibility of higher education resources, the communication of course changes and guidance and has mechanisms to monitor whether actions taken have been effective during the 2014-15 academic year. Most students were satisfied with the information they had received from the pre-course stage onwards.

3.13 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at South Devon College **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

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

### Findings

4.1 The College Higher Education Strategy ensures a planned and informed approach to the development of new programmes and to the enhancement of existing provision. Key aspects of this approach are evidenced in, for example the Teaching, Learning and Scholarship Framework and in the Employability and Student Enhancement Project.

4.2 The College's Annual Quality Improvement and Monitoring Schedule for its higher education provision sets out a comprehensive cycle for enhancement which engages staff, students and employers. The cycle is informed by a range of key performance indicators and aligns with the annual monitoring process to develop actions plans which are monitored in year. The approach to enhancement enables this Expectation to be met in design.

4.3 In testing this Expectation, the review team scrutinised a wide range of documentary evidence, including the Higher Education Strategy. The team also met a range of staff members and students.

4.4 Enhancement at the College is driven through and evidenced by its comprehensive quality improvement and monitoring processes. These align with the requirements of the University but additionally allow the College to take a strategic approach. This ensures that the College's higher education provision addresses local economic needs, fits with the overall strategy and meets the needs of prospective and current students.

4.5 The College has made significant progress since its last QAA review in developing the resources for and management of its higher education provision. It actively seeks input from a wide range of stakeholders and makes reference to relevant benchmarks. This ensures that enhancement actions meet the needs of employers and students alike. The College takes a proactive approach to its development and has recognised the need to improve the extent and consistency of its capture of employability outcomes to enhance the employability of its graduates as affirmed by the review team in Expectation B4, paragraph 2.32.

4.6 The College is effective in engaging with students to enhance provision, making comprehensive use of feedback mechanisms and direct conversation with students about their experiences. For example, the College's work with the National Union of Students to enhance the extent and quality of student engagement, the introduction of new social space for students and the provision of additional IT resources have all made a positive impact. The review team regards these initiatives to promote genuine engagement with the student body to assure and to enhance provision as good practice as recognised in Expectation B5, paragraph 2.44.

4.7 The College actively promotes the sharing of good practice so that enhancement activities can be implemented at all levels. For example the extension of the Research Showcase from the Animal Science programme across the entirety of higher education provision has helped to promote a more research-based approach to learning and teaching.

4.8 A comprehensive annual monitoring, review and action planning process is consistently applied and there is in year follow up of actions taken. The College's mechanisms for reviewing its practices contribute to the ongoing development of higher

education provision. The review team recognises the College's effective implementation of the strategic approach to enhancing its provision and the pervasive ethos of continuous improvement as **good practice**.

4.9 The College has fully demonstrated that it takes a strategic approach to the continuous enhancement of its provision. The review team concludes that the College meets the Expectation and the associated level of risk is low.

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



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

4.10 In reaching its commended judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The team identifies one feature of good practice in this area, with another feature of good practice and an affirmation linked to the quality of learning opportunities. There are no recommendations identified in this area.

4.11 The College takes a strategic approach to the enhancement of student learning opportunities. Enhancement initiatives are identified and implemented in a systematic manner across the College. There are clear mechanisms for sharing good practice and numerous examples of the positive impact of these. The College's effective implementation of the strategic approach to enhancing its provision and the pervasive ethos of continuous improvement is therefore recognised as good practice. The team also notes the College's extensive and effective engagement with the student body to assure and enhance its provision and affirms the action being taken to formalise the monitoring of the outcomes of employability initiatives.

4.12 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at South Devon College is **commended**.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 The College's Higher Education Strategy 2014-19 includes, under Strategic Aim 4: 'actively support employers, skills and economic growth', the aims of providing students with real work experience. This experience is through engagement with employers, embedding employability and enterprise across the higher education curriculum and developing employability initiatives with the University and other partners.

#### **Innovations in promoting the employability of students**

5.2 The College has developed initiatives which embed employability skills into the curriculum, a number of which have already been referred to previously; these include the Research and Employability Scholarships, the employability aspects of the embedded tutorials and the first year study skills module.

5.3 All the College's foundation degrees have embedded skills development modules in the first year which are designed to enhance professional development and employability skills, including providing help with curricula vitae, applications and covering letters and researching prospective occupational areas. The personal tutorial system is also designed to assist in the delivery of job-seeking skills and to determine appropriate progression routes for each individual. The Plymouth Award, an extracurricular award developed by the University to recognise achievements outside academic study, is also available to students although participation in this is currently very low.

5.4 Programme teams are able to bid for funding for activity which will develop student employability and the review team saw evidence of a wide range of trips and visits planned. As noted, students are also able to bid for Research and Employability Scholarships to support their employability development through research which they are then required to present at the Research Showcase.

5.5 Students are encouraged and in some cases required to include work experience within their programmes. They also have opportunities to enhance their employability by becoming student ambassadors or graduate assistants (recent graduates employed to support staff and students in a variety of ways).

5.6 Programme areas produce an annual report covering the employability initiatives implemented within the programme to support the development of employability skills. Examples identified by recent reports include the opportunity for work experience within the Developing Research and Practice module and through volunteering, guest talks delivered by employers, visits to work places, involvement of employers in assessment and use of industry-standard software. There were also references to the opportunities given to students to obtain ancillary qualifications such as door supervision, Barista and first aid at work.

5.7 As noted in Expectation B4, the College recognises the value of systematically monitoring the results of its extensive set of employability initiatives and is taking steps to make further progress in this regard.

#### **How employers are involved in the delivery and development of the curriculum**

5.8 Portfolio development is largely driven by the desire to support the local economy and approval for all new higher education courses involves employers. There are examples of courses being developed specifically with employers such as the Foundation Degree in Healthcare with the Torbay Care Trust. Links with employers can be seen in various contexts, particularly the Sector Focus groups held annually. As noted in Expectation B10,

employers are involved in the provision of work placement opportunities. The Innovation Centre on the College campus also provides opportunities for links with employers as well as the opportunity for student placements and support for those wanting to start their own businesses.

5.9 It is clear from the evidence of College showcases and from discussions with staff, students and employers that each subject area has extensive connections with employers. The proposed introduction of an Employability Champion will enable the College to enhance its strategic approach to links with employers as a means of developing the employability of its students.

## Glossary

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

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

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

### Academic standards

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

### Award

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

### Blended learning

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

### Credit(s)

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

### Degree-awarding body

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

### Distance learning

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

See also **blended learning**.

### Dual award or double award

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

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

### **Enhancement**

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

### **Expectations**

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

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

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

See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

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

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

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

### **Good practice**

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

### **Learning opportunities**

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

### **Learning outcomes**

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

### **Multiple awards**

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

### **Operational definition**

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

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

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

### **Programme specifications**

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

### **Public information**

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

### **Quality Code**

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

### **Reference points**

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

### **Subject Benchmark Statement**

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

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

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

### **Threshold academic standard**

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