



# Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) of ABI College Ltd

February 2016

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## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at ABI College Ltd. The review took place from 23 to 25 February 2016 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Anthony Whitehouse
- Mr Martin Stimson.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by ABI College Ltd 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 (Alternative Providers) 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 check is also made on the provider's financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG) with the aim of giving students reasonable confidence that they should not be at risk of being unable to complete their course as a result of financial failure.

In reviewing ABI College Ltd 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 2015-16 are Student Employability, and Digital Literacy,<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.

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.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).<sup>4</sup> 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=2859](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859)

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

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Pages/Educational-Oversight.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Pages/Educational-Oversight.aspx)

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about ABI College Ltd

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

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

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** for ABI College Ltd.

- The thorough and detailed use of version control procedures for managing policy documentation (Expectation C).
- The sustained and systematic development of the VLE in order to provide accessible learning and teaching support for staff and students (Expectation B3 and Enhancement).

### Recommendations

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

By July 2016:

- establish formal written agreements with providers of work placements in order to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each party (Expectation B10).

By September 2016:

- further develop procedures for scheduling and recording the business of Academic Board in order to strengthen oversight of provision (Expectations B8 and A3.3)
- ensure that the revised Admissions Policy is evaluated in order to measure its effectiveness on student retention and achievement (Expectation B2)
- consolidate enhancement activities in order to manage the further development of student learning opportunities (Enhancement).

### Affirmation of action being taken

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

- The steps being taken to manage the outcomes of external reviews through the use of a single Extended Action Plan (Expectations B8, B7, A3.4).
- The actions underway to implement the recently developed Teaching and Learning Strategy (Expectation B3).

## Theme: Digital Literacy

The College relies on word processing procedures and systems for assessment, using plagiarism-detection software. Student research practices are encouraged through use of internet sources, including search engines. The College supports students with the development of a range of standard digital literacy skills, which extend to the use of databases for data manipulation, social media, email, presentation software, and electronic whiteboards.

The College's accessible and flexible virtual learning environment (VLE) is an integral part of the resource base for students. It is introduced at induction and reinforced in subsequent classroom sessions by tutors. The delivery of programmes involves blended learning approaches, with extensive use of presentation software and social media resources as well as online articles and publications, including with access to the College's awarding body online facilities. Student assignments involve the use of downloaded templates from the virtual learning environment.

Digital literacy is also promoted through continuing professional development opportunities for teaching and support staff, including the College's introduction of a new student information system.

## About ABI College Ltd

ABI College Ltd (the College) is a private limited company located in Acton and Reading. It was founded in 2004 as the Queensland College of London, an independent college of higher education for international students. In 2012 it selected the three principles of academic excellence, business orientation, and innovative learning as the basis for creating its new title.

The mission of the College is 'to excel in the delivery of high quality teaching, in collaboration with external partners recognising the ever-changing needs of our students through the provision of a responsive and innovative portfolio of programmes and to engage our diverse learning community in an outstanding education experience.' In so doing, the College identifies six core values within its vision for higher education provision: education, partnership, community, accountability, fairness, and environment. These values underline the refocusing of provision on the needs of local communities that are characterised by cultural diversity and low participation within higher education.

The initial curriculum portfolio in Accounting and Business has expanded to Health and Social Care, Management, and Computing. The College works with Pearson as the awarding organisation for a suite of HND programmes, and the University of St Mark & St John as the awarding body for Level 7 programmes in Strategic Leadership and Management. In 2014-15 there were 365 full-time enrolments, comprising 43 postgraduate and 322 HND students with no provision for part-time learners. In recent years there has been a decline in student numbers, leading to an increasing reliance on fractional staff for the delivery of teaching. At the time of the review visit there were four full-time staff alongside a team of part-time academic staff employed by the College.

The management of the College includes an Academic Board involving the Chief Executive Officer, Principal, Registrar, and Quality Adviser. The College's Governing Council has oversight of all operations, operations and policies. Since the last Review for Educational Oversight (REO) in 2014, the College has continued to develop good practice with the development of website operations. It has also implemented a range of recommendations that include improving annual monitoring, student assessment and feedback, introducing

new information systems, increasing access to external examiner reports, and reviewing the accuracy of programme handbook information.

As part of the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers), the review team considered the College's progress in completing an action plan following a full investigation under QAA's Concerns process in March 2015. The outcome of the investigation was published on QAA's website in July 2015. The Cause for Concerns team upheld one allegation concerning completion rates, and noted some of the inadequacies with learning resources, but found no evidence to support the remaining allegations. The College was then required to prepare and publish an action plan to set out how these weaknesses were to be addressed. In order to progress and monitor implementation the College established an extended action plan managed by the management team with oversight by Academic Board. Reference is made to the Cause for Concern at appropriate points in this report, particularly in Expectations B2, B3, B4, B5, B6, B8 and Enhancement. The College has completed the action plan, and the review team recommends that it can be signed off by QAA.

## Explanation of the findings about ABI College Ltd

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 delivers master's programmes in partnership with the awarding body, the University of St Mark & St John (the University), and Level 5 and 7 programmes with the awarding organisation, Pearson. The University has also approved the College to deliver undergraduate programmes. The College uses processes designed by these awarding partners for monitoring quality and is responsible for all aspects of programme design, including alignment with national credit frameworks, reference to The Qualifications and Credit Framework, *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), and reference to the relevant Subject and Qualification Benchmark Statements. This framework would allow Expectation A1 to be met.

1.2 In order to confirm the College's understanding of their responsibilities for the maintenance of standards the review team scrutinised the written evidence and discussed details with senior and teaching staff and with the University's representative.

1.3 The College secures academic standards through using appropriate frameworks, guidance on qualification characteristics, and Subject Benchmark Statements. The review team confirmed the relevance and accuracy of documentation relating to partnership agreements, programme specifications and module handbooks. College staff are aware of the requirements of the approval process and of the relevant academic frameworks and

guidance. Appropriate individuals are conversant with external reference points, and articulated an understanding of their responsibilities for maintaining academic standards, as agreed with their awarding partners. Staff have received training in how to use the Quality Code.

1.4 Programme specifications and handbooks demonstrate adherence to the FHEQ and other reference points for academic standards as contained within Part A of the Quality Code, with the awarding partners retaining ultimate responsibility for setting standards.

1.5 Full programme specifications are available to staff and students for each programme of study. Module-level information provides learning outcomes, methods of assessment and the assessment criteria. Regular partnership meetings with the University are held together with Programmes Committee meetings to discuss the delivery of individual programmes of study. Monthly review meetings are held to consider student progress.

1.6 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and 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 College governance is overseen by a Governing Council and an Academic Board which, from November 2015, has included a student member. The University is represented on the Council and the majority of Council members are external appointments, one of whom is elected to chair meetings of the Council. The University monitors its programme through regular Partnership Board meetings, some shared teaching, control of assessments and annual reviews. The awarding organisation appoints external examiners to verify assessment results and completes an annual management review to confirm that the College is adhering to the relevant quality assurance processes.

1.8 Academic Board is required to maintain and enhance the quality and standards of all aspects of College educational provision, to receive annual monitoring reports (AMRs) from the Courses (now Programmes) Committee, and to take action as may be necessary. The framework and regulations would allow Expectation A2.1 to be met.

1.9 The review team explored the College's implementation of frameworks and regulations through discussions with staff and students and a review of documentation, including the terms of reference and minutes of Academic Board, the minutes of Examination Boards, external examiner reports, and AMRs. Meetings allowed for the discussion of details with staff and students.

1.10 The review team confirmed that the College has established appropriate procedures for the implementation of appropriate frameworks and regulations. The Examination Board is a subboard of Academic Board, which has ultimate responsibility for managing assessment and operating internal examination boards for programmes involving Pearson.

1.11 The College works with Pearson's progression and Award Boards in order to ensure responsibilities for setting, second marking or moderating all assessments, and for appointing external examiners.

1.12 The College produces assignments for Pearson programmes, which are then reviewed along with the results by the relevant external examiner prior to releasing or blocking results.

1.13 Overall, the governance structures are clearly stated and implemented with effective monitoring by awarding partners. Awarding partners hold ultimate responsibility for academic standards, with the College discharging its responsibility for the oversight and maintenance of academic standards effectively with regard to delivery of the programmes. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and 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**

1.14 Definitive course records, in the form of programme specifications, are developed and documented through the approval processes of each awarding partner. These documents provide reference points for the delivery and assessment of each programme.

1.15 The College is responsible for ensuring that definitive documents are contextualised in the form of programme handbooks, which are made available on the College VLE.

1.16 Monitoring and review of programmes takes place at Programmes Committee, with reports provided to the Academic Board. Annual monitoring reports are produced by each programme leader and by the University for their programmes delivered at the College.

1.17 Records of study are maintained by the recently appointed Registrar. These documented procedures would allow Expectation A2.2 to be met.

1.18 The review team corroborated the evidence by reviewing relevant documentation, including programme handbooks, specifications, module documents. Under the direction of the team a member of teaching staff and a student demonstrated their use of the VLE. The team held meetings with senior, teaching and support staff, students and a University representative who manages the partnership.

1.19 Staff and students are able to access relevant course information through programme handbooks, which are readily available on the College's VLE.

1.20 These handbooks provide details of unit content, learning outcomes and relevant assessment criteria. Staff and students confirmed that they have access to this information.

1.21 A Teaching and Learning Strategy, together with Programmes Committee meetings and monthly review meetings, informs and monitors delivery. Staff demonstrated understanding of the process and purpose of contextualising units, and clarified their use in assessment planning, delivery, monitoring and review for all programmes. They were also clear about where programme information is held, and who holds responsibility for updating records.

1.22 Students confirmed their awareness of programme and unit specification information available through the College VLE and were confident that these are accessible and used effectively to support their learning.

1.23 Overall, College staff, together with its awarding partners, understand their responsibilities for maintaining a definitive record of each programme. Information about the aims, intended learning outcomes and expected achievement is readily available to students. The review team concludes that 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**

1.24 The College's awarding partners have procedures in place for the approval and monitoring of taught programmes. The responsibilities of both partners and the College are enshrined in the Memorandum of Agreement with the University, which is kept under review via the Partnership Board. The formal relationship commenced in 2012 with the College delivering a Level 7 MA in Management and Leadership. The University is responsible for confirming that programmes meet the qualification descriptors and threshold standards specified in the FHEQ, and in Subject Benchmark Statements, using its own procedures.

1.25 Pearson approve delivery by the College of a suite of Pearson HNDs and the respective responsibilities for course approval are described in the responsibilities checklist. Pearson is responsible for ensuring that academic standards are secure and established when a course is developed and approved.

1.26 Programme design includes setting assessment activities at the appropriate level for the qualification, and checking through internal verification and external examining processes. External expertise informs programme development through the degree-awarding body validation processes. New programmes involving Pearson would be selected from the range available and the College would design the assessments to meet the prescribed learning outcomes. The College has not developed any new programmes since 2012, but has aspirations to develop new courses. When new programmes come forward, internal approval is required by the Academic Board prior to approval by the awarding partners.

1.27 The College states that it follows the required procedures of both awarding partners and is subject to their external monitoring processes. This framework for policies and processes would allow Expectation A3.1 to be met.

1.28 The review team considered College documentation relating to programme approval and the related documentation from awarding partners. Internal processes were discussed with senior, support and teaching staff, as well as students, in order to ascertain their level of engagement with the described internal and external processes.

1.29 The REO in April 2014 indicated that the College aligns its activity with Part A of the Quality Code. The portfolio of provision is stable with no approvals since 2012. In the light of the College's strategy, and its responsibilities, the review team confirms that the College fulfils its responsibilities for course approval and participates fully in the approval processes of both partners.

1.30 Staff demonstrated to the review team an understanding of the internal processes to be followed if and when new initiatives are considered. It was confirmed that ideas for new programmes would be identified by the Senior Management team (SMT) in response to local needs and included in the Strategic Planning process.

1.31 Information relating to the setting of academic standards established at the approval stage is disseminated widely. The academic regulations, module descriptors, programme specifications, Pearson documentation, intended learning outcomes and assessment requirements are included in programme handbooks and made clear to students during induction.

1.32 The partnership agreement with the University and the responsibilities checklist demonstrate awareness of the responsibilities for maintaining standards and ensuring an appropriate quality of learning opportunities. A constructive relationship has been developed between College staff and the University link tutor and Pearson external examiners.

1.33 In the context of the partnership agreements the arrangements in place with the awarding partners for approving new programmes are considered appropriate. Evidence indicates that the College is engaged fully with the appropriate frameworks and regulations.

1.34 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met, and 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**

1.35 Ultimate responsibility for the academic standards of programmes offered by the College lies with its awarding partners. They ensure that the requirements of FHEQ are met, and that the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements are considered as part of the validation process. They also ensure through external scrutiny, including the use of external examiners, that the achievement of the relevant learning outcomes have been demonstrated through assessment.

1.36 The College is responsible for delivering its approved programmes through partnerships with its awarding partners, and assessing students in line with the validated programme specifications and unit guides. The responsibilities of the College and its partners for maintaining academic standards are set out in the relevant partnership agreements. Programme documentation identifies the awarding of credit where the achievement of the learning outcomes occurs.

1.37 For awarding body provision, learning outcomes and threshold standards are identified in programme specifications. Programme content is mapped against the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements during the validation process. Academic Standards for HNC/HND programmes are embedded in programme and module specifications documentation established by the awarding organisation, Pearson. The College implements modules taken from an approved listing and designs its own assessment instruments, which are approved externally.

1.38 The College ensures that staff members are appropriately qualified to deliver programmes at the associated academic level. Threshold standards and their own standards are maintained through dissemination of a policy on Marking and Assessment and through staff development activity.

1.39 The use of approved programme documentation and adoption of the systems and processes prescribed by the College's awarding partners would allow Expectation A3.2 to be met.

1.40 The review team considered the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining programme documentation, College course handbooks, module and unit descriptors, internal verification reports, external examiner reports, staff CVs and staff development activity. The team also held meetings with students, senior and teaching staff, and a representative of the University.

1.41 The documentation confirms that the design and approval of courses, modules and units by the awarding partners, and their implementation by the College, follow agreed systems and processes.

1.42 Approved programme specifications, unit guides and module descriptors are implemented carefully. This ensures that the qualifications are aligned with the appropriate level on the FHEQ and the learning outcomes defined. The credit requirements on each programme are also determined by the awarding partners.

1.43 The documentation confirms that staff are appropriately qualified and supported to design and deliver assessment at the appropriate level. Staff demonstrated a clear understanding of the detailed assessment procedures, which were described with confidence. Staff are aware that the external reference points are available on the VLE. Students also understand the assessment process.

1.44 Assessment and assignment design by the College is consistently and accurately linked to programme and learning outcomes and confirmed through internal verification. Following internal verification of assessment outcomes, the Examination Board confirms that assessment enables students to achieve the learning outcomes and programme outcomes. Assessment Boards confirm the achievement of programme aims and the award of credit.

1.45 The review team confirms that the College, degree-awarding body and organisation processes ensure that the awarding of qualifications takes place only as a result of the achievement of learning outcomes. Documentation confirms that assessment design, internal verification and moderation of assessment activities ensures that students have the opportunity to achieve outcomes at the appropriate levels.

1.46 External examiners employed by the University confirm the maintenance of academic standards. College assessors and internal verifiers for Pearson programmes consider merit and distinction levels as defined in the Pearson award framework, with external examiners' reports highlighting the contextualisation and consistent application of grade criteria.

1.47 The team concludes that the Expectation is met 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**

1.48 Overall responsibility for monitoring and review in relation to Academic standards, and ensuring alignment with the UK threshold academic standards, rests with the awarding partners. They are responsible for this Expectation through the application of external examiner and periodic review procedures, with the College using annual monitoring processes that enable Expectation A3.3 to be met.

1.49 The review team tested this Expectation by reading College documentation relating to monitoring and review, and by considering AMRs produced by the College, and external examiners' reports. Details were explored through discussions with staff involved with the monitoring and review process, student representatives, and a representative from the University.

1.50 The review team recognises that the College has not yet been subject to periodic review by the University. The College has a detailed, systematic and consistent approach to annual monitoring, which contributes to the oversight of the awards by the awarding partners. External examiner reports seen by the review team indicate that programmes meet required academic standards. Pearson provides a comprehensive external quality report and the University provides a link tutor report.

1.51 The College produces programme-level AMRs for its awarding partners. They address programme-specific information on student progression, completion and achievement, as well as programme enhancement, such as responses to external examiner reports, staff development and scholarly activities.

1.52 The College's Programmes Committee carefully and methodically considers AMRs. This process includes the systematic use of external examiner feedback and reports from its awarding partners, although - as discussed in Expectation B8 - more oversight is required from the Academic Board.

1.53 The review team concludes that 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**

1.54 The awarding partners have ultimate responsibility for making use of external and independent expertise, through validation and revalidation procedures, in order to set and maintain academic standards. The College is responsible for ensuring that appropriate consideration is given to the feedback provided by external examiners on the management and delivery of programmes.

1.55 External members contribute to validation processes, and external examiners appointed by the awarding partners oversee the maintenance of academic standards. College processes use external examiner reports for annual review and action planning. External verification of HND courses is undertaken by the awarding organisation, Pearson. The University employs external examiners who report annually on the UK threshold standards in order to assure that the College sets and maintain appropriate academic standards.

1.56 These procedures and responsibilities would allow Expectation A3.4 to be met.

1.57 The review team considered the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining documentation on programme design, external examiner reports, AMRs and the minutes of Programmes Committee meetings. The review team also discussed details with senior and teaching staff, as well as a representative from the University, and students.

1.58 The review team noted that external examiner reports are not mentioned specifically in the responsibilities checklist with Pearson but are considered under the College's responsibilities for responding to reviews. The team found evidence within the AMRs that external examiner reports are considered by programme teams, and responses are included in the programme-level actions plans. External examiner annual reports are considered by the Programmes Committee. Meetings with senior staff and programme leaders, as well as student representatives, confirmed that they are engaged in the process of reviewing external examiner reports and contributing to action plans. Senior management also consider the responses and, as discussed in Expectation B8, monitor the action taken through the use of an extended action plan.

1.59 The College's contribution to the role of the awarding partners in meeting this Expectation is effective. The annual monitoring processes make full use of external examiners to ensure that threshold standards are maintained and that the academic standards of the awarding body and organisation are maintained. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met 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

1.60 In reaching its judgement about the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered by the College, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.61 All of the Expectations in this area have been met, with a low level of associated risk in each case.

1.62 Programme outcomes and volumes of study are mapped to appropriate levels in the FHEQ, with recognition of specific Subject and Qualification Benchmark Statements. Systems and procedures are in place for maintaining and updating definitive information for programmes, with the regulatory frameworks used consistently at all times and for all levels of award. Expert external authorities are involved in the approval and periodic monitoring of programmes in order to assure the integrity of higher education provision.

1.63 The review team concludes that the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards at the College **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, Development and Approval**

### Findings

2.1 The College follows the procedures identified by the awarding body and organisation for the design and approval of courses. The strategic plan identifies potential areas for development, including fashion and design. New programme proposals, as well as new specialist units within HND programmes, from any College staff are considered by the SMT. Following internal discussion and any decision to proceed, a senior member of staff will be tasked with contacting the awarding body or organisation and liaising with the SMT. Advice on the development of new programmes is provided by the Quality Advisor.

2.2 The adherence of the College to the awarding partners' formal procedures for programme design, development and approval would allow Expectation B1 to be met.

2.3 The review team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining documentation including partnership agreements, minutes and terms of reference of key academic committees and meetings, validation reports from the University, and background documents. Details were explored in meetings with senior, teaching and support staff, as well as students.

2.4 The College has not developed any new programmes over the last four years. Evidence relating to its existing programmes confirms that it adheres to the processes and procedures identified by the awarding partners.

2.5 Verbal evidence from staff indicated that knowledge of the Quality Code and its application to the design and approval of new programmes is limited among new staff. Although there are no immediate plans to develop new programmes the team recognised understanding by senior staff, including the role of the Quality Advisor, of the need to follow appropriate processes. Discussions confirmed that the process identified in the College's self-evaluation document, submitted as a part of this review, would be adhered to in future development activity.

2.6 The College's processes of programme design and development adhere to the requirements of its awarding partners. The review team concludes that 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 to Higher Education***

**Findings**

2.7 The College produces strategic plans that include annual student number targets. Admissions are guided by an Admissions Policy and Process, which sets out guidelines for recruitment, selection and the admissions procedures, including entrance tests and interviews. The College's website provides the admissions policy, the admissions process, and enquiry and application forms.

2.8 The processes for admission and registration of students on awarding body programmes is determined by the Head of Registry services at the University and reviewed and agreed annually. Students are formally registered as students of the University, with student records maintained by both it and the College.

2.9 These procedures and responsibilities would allow Expectation B2 to be met.

2.10 The review team discussed recruitment and admissions details with a range of senior, teaching and support staff. Documentation relating to the admissions procedure, including interview guidance and reports and the adoption of formal tests for English language as required by Pearson, was also scrutinised.

2.11 The College is responsible for marketing, recruiting, admission and enrolment of all students seeking to enter a Pearson programme at the College. Under the agreement with the University, the College is responsible for marketing and recruitment.

2.12 The College's Admissions Policy and Process follows a two-stage process and seeks to comply with *Chapter B2* of the Quality Code. Completed application forms are sent to the College. On receipt of an application College staff verify the applicant's entry qualifications against documented programme entry criteria. Applicants who meet the entry criteria are required to pass an entrance test and attend an interview with the Principal, or another trained member of staff.

2.13 The University, as awarding body, requires the College to confirm applicants' qualifications prior to submitting each application for a decision. Successful applicants receive an offer from the University. All applicants who do not meet the standard entry requirements for degree programmes are referred to the University.

2.14 The College has responded to the QAA Cause for Concerns Report and has produced an extended action plan, which is regularly monitored by the SMT and substantive committees. The team noted that the analysis and evaluation of data from previous cohorts resulted in the identification of students who were not academically experienced or prepared for higher education levels of study.

2.15 The College has strengthened its admission process, which now seeks to test an applicant's intention to study. During interview the suitability of the course to meet the applicant's aspirations is also considered. Under the new admissions process a large

proportion of applicants are now rejected. Both management and teaching staff confirmed that the more selective admissions process has improved attendance and retention rates.

2.16 In order to meet Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) requirements the College is implementing a new student information system, which seeks to improve the reporting structure further. Monthly review meetings are held with the Principal to identify students who are considered to be 'at risk' through poor attendance and/or failure to submit assignments. Such students are required to attend a documented pastoral meeting with the Principal and Programme Leader and to sign an Individual Learning Contract, which sets out specific deadlines, also stating that failure to meet these deadlines will lead to expulsion.

2.17 Each programme is reviewed annually with admissions, retention and pass rates being considered. The review team **recommends** that because new arrangements have been introduced during the current academic session, the College should ensure that the revised Admissions Policy is evaluated in order to measure its effectiveness on student retention and achievement.

2.18 Information on how complaints and appeals regarding applications and admissions are dealt with is available on the College website. Students whom the review team met confirmed that they were provided with all the information necessary to make an informed choice of programme and that the process they had experienced was fair and effective.

2.19 The College has responded successfully to the recommendations from the Cause for Concern investigation regarding admissions, and has appropriate recruitment and selection systems and procedures for supporting students who are able to complete their chosen programmes. The review team concludes that 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**

2.20 The Teaching and Learning Strategy is overseen by the Principal and directed by the Head of Teaching and Learning. The College regularly reviews learning and teaching through a variety of methods, most notably the monthly review meetings and Programmes Committee meetings.

2.21 The main resource available to staff and students for teaching and learning is the College VLE, ABILearn. The College seeks to enhance the quality of the learner experience by monitoring, reviewing and continuously improving the quality of teaching through peer review, and also through classroom observations completed by the Principal. Monthly meetings for each programme are held to discuss delivery issues and for staff to share good practice.

2.22 The College requires all academic staff to have relevant professional experience as well as an academic qualification and a teaching qualification, or the willingness to acquire one. All staff teaching on awarding body programmes have to be approved by the University.

2.23 Staff are recruited through the use of a revised policy, and attend an induction process that includes provision of a handbook that clarifies their teaching and administrative duties. Contracts of employment require staff to participate in the staff appraisal process.

2.24 An induction process for students, together with programme-specific handbooks, introduces teaching and learning strategies and methods to be used; advice is also provided on how to complete programmes of study successfully. Assessment for each programme requires students to demonstrate their ability in analytical, critical and creative thinking.

2.25 The processes and procedures in place would allow Expectation B3 to be met.

2.26 The review team discussed details associated with teaching and learning with senior and teaching staff, as well as with students. A range of evidence was considered, including the VLE, policies, external examiner reports, records of staff qualifications and staff observation and appraisal forms.

2.27 The Principal and the Head of Teaching and Learning, guided by the Quality Assurance Policy, provide effective oversight of the quality of teaching. Staff are observed in accordance with the recently produced Teaching and Learning Strategy, which clearly outlines the principles for observations and the links with staff appraisal. Staff observation sessions are documented and discussed with staff during annual appraisal meetings with the Quality Advisor.

2.28 Staff confirmed that teaching observations are now carried out twice per year, which, together with student and staff feedback, form part of the annual monitoring process. On the basis of this evidence the team **affirms** the actions underway to implement the recently developed Teaching and Learning Strategy.

2.29 Teaching staff are qualified to the levels required by the College's awarding partners, and the College offers support to those who are without a teaching qualification. To resolve the problem caused by the unexpected loss of a key member of teaching staff the College now ensures that more than one member of staff is engaged in programme delivery. The external examiner for Health and Social Care acknowledges that there were effective measures in place to ensure continuity of delivery when a key member of staff left the College at short notice. Students confirmed that any staff changes have been well managed.

2.30 Student feedback on teaching is positive, although staff and students have identified the need to provide further study skills support in numeracy to all future cohorts. Monthly review meetings are held to discuss delivery and progress of individual students. Monitoring reports provide evidence of evaluation of student feedback on individual staff. These monitoring reports focus on external examiner reports, student attendance, retention, submission rate of assignments and the achievement rates.

2.31 Evidence of evaluation of many aspects of teaching and learning, including resources, are considered in each report. The review team directed a demonstration of the content and accessibility of the College VLE by a student and a staff representative, and noted the enthusiastic comments from students regarding the ability to gain access to the VLE from smart phones and tablets from a variety of geographical locations. The VLE contains complete programme information, including tutor notes and links to both e-books and e-journals. Students confirmed that they have access to external examiner reports, with adequate opportunity to discuss suggestions and issues of concern. The College has demonstrated a clear commitment to continuing its VLE development since November 2012, in order to enhance the teaching and learning provision.

2.32 The sustained and systematic development of the VLE in order to provide accessible learning and teaching support for staff and students is **good practice**.

2.33 In response to student commentary and feedback, and the QAA Cause for Concern recommendations for assessment and resourcing, the College now provides an opportunity for students to receive formative feedback on each assignment two weeks prior to the formal submission. This opportunity, together with access to the Principal for pastoral care, enables students to reflect on their progress.

2.34 The review team is satisfied with the continuous progress being made with learning and teaching and that students are being provided with a supported learning environment, enabling them to achieve the award for which they are registered. The review team concludes that 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**

2.35 The services provided to support student development and achievement are regularly monitored and evaluated through the self-assessment and the quality improvement process. The Teaching and Learning Strategy confirms a commitment to providing suitable learning, with monthly review meetings identifying students at risk. The College's Pastoral Care Policy identifies staff responsibilities and sets out the support provided during the students' journey from initial application through the complete period of study. The agreement with the University as awarding body requires its Academic Link Tutor to confirm that College staff are appropriately qualified prior to teaching on relevant programmes.

2.36 These procedures and systems provide a support framework that would allow Expectation B4 to be met.

2.37 The review team evaluated the arrangements in place through scrutinising minutes of meetings, student guidance information and programme specifications, and through discussions with a range of staff and students.

2.38 Due to reduced cohort sizes the College has recently discontinued its policy of allocating individual personal tutors. The monthly review meetings with staff discuss student progress, and identify students at risk and the actions that are required. Support for students with disabilities is discussed at Programmes Committee meetings. Students identified as at risk are interviewed by the Principal before a Learning Contract is agreed. All students with identified needs are therefore given the opportunity for one-to-one support sessions. External examiners confirm that tutors are proactive in contacting students whenever they have concerns about their progress.

2.39 Feedback is collected from students at the end of each module delivery and includes their assessment of lecturers, facilities and general course provision. This information allows for the analysis by SMT and the Academic Board of opinions and for the planning of appropriate responses. Data is analysed and incorporated in AMRs. Action plans are produced to improve the quality and development of learning opportunities and students confirmed that information is disseminated to them at the Programmes Committee meetings.

2.40 The review team explored student access to, and the availability of, books and IT resources, following commentary within the student submission to this review and the Cause for Concern recommendation. Annual programme monitoring reports evaluate teaching and learning resources, with the extended action plan including relevant detail for support and development. Library provision has been improved with all teaching now located on the Acton campus. Students and staff confirmed that they make some use of the library at Acton, but are also guided systematically to other learning resources in public libraries as well as in the University, and that these materials are consistently used. As discussed in Expectation B3, the range of support information available to students on the VLE includes teaching notes, learning resources, advice and guidance, student news, timetables, attendance data, assignments, learning outcomes, grade descriptors, learning targets and progress reviews. The College also provides information to students to enable them to progress to higher levels of awards.

2.41 The College maintains records of student applications, including entry qualifications, entrance tests and admission interviews. Records are also maintained on student progress, including minutes of pastoral care meetings. A new student information system is in the process of being developed to enable complete tracking by tutors and senior staff.

2.42 The College offers a suitable range of support services, which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. The review team concludes that 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**

2.43 The concept of 'students as partners' is articulated via a Code of Commitment in the Student Handbook, and the importance of student representation is briefly outlined in policy documents. The importance of the student contribution to enhancement is identified in the policy on Student Feedback.

2.44 Opportunities for student engagement are provided at the Programmes Committee, and the College has recently extended student representation to the Academic Board. Students are also represented on the Health, Safety and Facilities Committee and on the College Governing Council. Students are encouraged to give feedback with the option of anonymity, for example after induction and also at the end of each semester, via a range of pro forma and online questionnaires.

2.45 The policy on student representation, as well as the use of student feedback and annual monitoring procedures, would allow Expectation B5 to be met.

2.46 The review team evaluated policy documents, minutes of meetings attended by student representatives, evidence of feedback surveys, and annual programme review reports. The student submission to this review was also considered and details were explored through discussions with senior, teaching and support staff, as well as a range of student representatives and non-representatives.

2.47 The report of the College's first Review for Educational Oversight (REO) in 2012 found that the opportunities for student involvement in College committees, and particularly the Governing Council, constituted a feature of good practice. The self-evaluation document, which was submitted as part of this review, states that engagement with College management is 'central to the College's educational ethos', although the review team could not find an explicit definition of student engagement in the College context.

2.48 Evidence within the student submission to this review was based on focus group discussions involving approximately 20 students. The students whom the team met were broadly unfamiliar with the document, as was the CEO. Students are satisfied with their experience of the College and during discussions indicated that their courses have lived up to their expectations.

2.49 The review team heard from staff and students that the small scale of the College's activities provided many opportunities for students to meet staff on an informal and one-to-one basis. The team recognises this positive aspect of the student experience. The students whom the review team met were complimentary about the staff/student relationship and the opportunities this provided for them to feed back to staff, and to engage with the development of learning opportunities. They commented that the College listens to their views and reacts to their feedback. Effectiveness of student engagement is now a heading in the AMR pro forma and includes a prompt to consider student engagement in the learning cycle, although this is primarily related to engagement with learning activity rather than quality assurance and enhancement.

2.50 The team discussed with staff and students the need to provide timely feedback to students, as noted in the student submission, the Cause for Concern, and the College's extended action plan. Students feel that this is no longer an issue for them.

2.51 Student representatives had been selected through a combination of selection and election and were satisfied with that approach. Although formal training is not provided for student representatives, representation is covered consistently at induction, with students stating that they are aware of the representative system and are supported effectively.

2.52 Meetings with staff and students confirmed that students are now represented on the Academic Board as well as on Programmes and Health, Safety and Facilities Committees. Students are invited to contribute to end-of-unit and module reviews, although the review team noted that the response rate is low. Student representatives are familiar with action planning at both programme and provider level. Staff and students discussed confidently the role of the Programmes Committee as a forum for staff and students to explore matters of common interest or concern, and to share good practice.

2.53 Evidence confirms that students are satisfied with the deliberate steps taken by the College to engage them in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience through a combination of informal and formal approaches and procedures. The review team concludes that 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**

2.54 Oversight of the College's assessment process is the responsibility of the awarding partners, who provide external verification and external examiners. The College's Quality Assurance Policy documentation supports staff, enabling them to deliver equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment. The assessment process is also articulated in line with the draft Strategy for Learning and Teaching.

2.55 Assessment activities are overseen by the Academic Board subcommittee, the Examination Board. There is an Exams Entry Policy and a policy for the Recognition of Prior Learning. Students can apply for extenuating circumstances. Any subsequent extensions to submission dates have to be approved by the Principal to ensure consistency in decision making. Appeals information is also available in the handbook.

2.56 A set of awarding organisation procedures for the assessment of students exists, and is monitored, through standardised templates for Internal and External Verification processes. Information about assessment is provided on the VLE and in the handbooks. Assessment of awarding body students makes use of the University's internal procedures.

2.57 Formative feedback on assessed work is provided through classroom sessions. In the case of the Management Research Report, which is an essential component of the master's programme, students receive a minimum of three meetings with their allocated supervisor.

2.58 Students receive a copy of the written feedback after each meeting. For the MA students summative feedback is provided by the University using a template.

2.59 The College's procedures for assessment, and its approach to complying with its awarding partners' regulatory systems and processes, would allow the Expectation to be met.

2.60 The review team scrutinised assessment documentation, partnership agreements, programme handbooks, minutes of the Programmes Committee, Pearson guidelines, programme specifications, AMRs, and external examiner reports. The College's responses to the REO and Cause for Concern report were referenced, and details on assessment were explored through meetings with senior and teaching staff, a representative from the awarding body, and students. An additional structured meeting for the demonstration of the VLE was used to confirm assessment information available to staff and students.

2.61 The documentary evidence indicates that the College makes effective use of the awarding partners' reference points. The College works in close partnership with them to ensure that they operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment. External examiners and internal verifiers scrutinise assessment instruments developed by College staff, to ensure that they are in line with the validated awards and enable students to achieve the learning outcomes and programme outcomes. Staff and students confirmed their

awareness of the course documentation on the VLE and the supporting policies and documentation developed by the College.

2.62 After approval by SMT, templates of assignment briefs are published in the staff area of the College's VLE. Additional documents, such as approved internal verifier forms and supporting material for staff, are also uploaded to the VLE.

2.63 Standardisation of assessment is achieved through meetings between programme leaders and tutors, where existing practices are reviewed and actions and recommendations from external examiners considered.

2.64 In meetings with students and in the demonstration of the VLE the review team confirmed that assessment information is provided in advance, enabling students to plan their work load. Meetings with students confirmed that the College had successfully addressed some minor issues - such as the timing of assessments - and that students are satisfied with the assessment process.

2.65 Staff CVs indicate that lecturers are appropriately qualified to assess students. Staff confidently confirmed the application of the assessment processes, the effectiveness of induction, and the provision of comprehensive staff development opportunities.

2.66 Marking of students' assessed work occurs systematically using standardised sheets, and internal verification is consistently applied so that standards are maintained. Summative feedback is provided against each learning outcome. Assignment briefs produced by Programme Leaders are internally verified by the next senior tutor. The College ensures that these assignment briefs, and samples of student work, are sent to the University, with internal double-marked information made available to the external examiner and the link tutor. The minimum sample is 20 per cent of work at Levels 5 and 6 and a minimum of five assignments at Level 7. Sampling at all levels includes failing work and assessments representing each classification band. Anonymous double marking occurs on research projects.

2.67 All assignments require a statement of authenticity by the student, which is clearly specified in the assignment briefs, with submission involving the use of plagiarism-detection software for managing allegations of cheating. Students and staff confirmed the robust approach to cheating and plagiarism and all students are aware of the importance of submitting their own work, as well as the processes adopted to screen their submissions.

2.68 The review team noted two recommendations from previous QAA reviews. The 2015 Concerns report stated that the College should ensure that students are notified in a timely manner of the outcomes of assessments and periodically of their academic progress, and the 2014 REO noted that the College should adopt a systematic approach to providing formal feedback on students' work. The College has included relevant statements within its extended action plan, with a range of documentation, as well as discussions with senior and teaching staff and students, confirming that progress has been made in line with action points. The review team concludes that there are now more formalised approaches to feedback, with students receiving feedback on assessments in a timely manner and having opportunities to meet with staff regularly to update them on their academic progress.

2.69 An approved template is used to record marking by tutors, with comments being made electronically.

2.70 Marking is internally verified by the programme leader and other course tutors and then overseen by external examiners on behalf of the awarding body and organisation. The review team concludes that in managing its responsibilities for the assessment process the college makes effective use of the awarding partner's academic frameworks. This is in

addition to its own policies, which are overseen by external examiners and the Academic Board. The College is therefore able to operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning. The consistency of practice enables every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

2.71 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met 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**

2.72 External examiners are selected and appointed by the awarding partners, who also determine the format of their reports. External examiners normally visit the College and meet students and programme teams annually. The external examiner role is explained to students in their programme handbooks and the reports are made available to them through the College's VLE.

2.73 In the case of the awarding organisation, Pearson, external examiner reports are reviewed by the SMT and the Academic Board as part of the Annual Monitoring Process.

2.74 After consideration of reports at Programmes Committee, action points are incorporated into the AMRs and the extended action plan, with implementation checked in the following year's report. Students access reports on the VLE and, through the student representation system, at Programmes Committee.

2.75 The selection and recruitment of external examiners by the awarding partners, and the consideration of external examiner reports at programme level, would allow Expectation B7 to be met.

2.76 The review team examined a range of documentation including external examiners' reports and associated responses, minutes of relevant committees and meetings where reports and AMRs are considered, action and improvement plans generated from reports, and AMRs. Details were explored through discussions in meetings with senior and teaching staff, a representative from the University, and students.

2.77 The team confirmed that external examiner reports are considered by the Programmes Committee as a central part of the Annual Monitoring process and also by the Academic Board through the AMR for each programme. In both instances student representatives are members of the committee and contribute to the discussions and the development of action plans. In response to the recommendation in the April 2014 REO the review team confirms that external examiner reports are available to students on the VLE.

2.78 Tracking of recommendations from external examiner reports by the SMT occurs within the extended action plan. In most cases the action is devolved to the programme leader, with the Academic Board monitoring compliance. The awarding bodies are responsible for responding to reports after consulting the programme team; they also produce AMRs, which are considered by the College. For awarding organisation provision, programme leaders respond directly. On receipt; any matters raised requiring immediate attention are acted upon and reported to the Academic Board.

2.79 The team confirms that Programmes Committee, SMT and the Academic Board make full use of external examiner reports, ensuring that actions are taken. There is systemic activity as shown by a range of action planning, discussed in more detail in Expectation B8. Reflection at programme and provider level on the content of reports, coupled with the resulting action planning, ensures that external examiner feedback is scrupulously considered. The review team concludes that 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**

2.80 The College follows its awarding partners' processes for programme monitoring and review and has its own internal procedures to support this process. The Quality Assurance Policy states that the College will enhance the quality of the learning experience by setting and monitoring standards, and that it will have an annual monitoring process which will lead to action plans and continuous improvement. The SMT recently added the admission process to the review template.

2.81 The annual monitoring process starts in October and reflects on the previous year. Each course leader reviews progress against a standardised template of headings, focusing on areas of concern and good practice and taking into account student feedback. The subsequent AMR is sent to the Programmes Committee, which summarises outcomes and recommendations for Academic Board together with an action plan. Students are members of both committees. The College also undertakes a triennial review and contribute to the development of the next strategic plan for 2016-19.

2.82 The awarding partners' processes for monitoring and review, and the internal processes of the College, would allow Expectation B8 to be met.

2.83 The review team considered relevant documentation including AMRs, partnership agreements, reports from the awarding partners, external examiner reports, handbooks, and minutes of meetings. Details were discussed in meetings with senior, teaching and support staff, a representative from the University, and students.

2.84 The benefits of the informal working environment leading to a close working relationship with students are recognised by the review team, with staff and students commenting on the advantages of informal approaches to monitoring that offer immediate feedback to students, and achieve change. Students are members of the Programmes Committee and Academic Board, with evidence confirming their participation in action planning.

2.85 In response to the advisable recommendation in the 2014 REO regarding the need to ensure more consistency and detail for AMRs, the College has responded positively and has ensured that AMRs now contain full analyses of data and clear action plans. The AMR process at programme level complies with the Quality Assurance Policy and the Annual Monitoring Guide. Detailed template-driven reports are considered at Programmes Committee meetings involving Programme Leaders and Student Representatives, thus allowing information and good practice to be shared across the programmes.

2.86 Following meetings with the staff and students the team was assured that the responsibilities for annual monitoring were effective, and that actions were being taken to address issues raised. The explicit link between programme-level annual monitoring and provider level consideration of AMRs is, however, not explicit within current documentation, although meetings with senior staff confirmed that there is consideration at provider level. Minutes of meetings also confirm that AMRs are discussed, with outcomes traced to the Extended Action Plan, which, as discussed within the Expectation for Enhancement, is used for monitoring reasons rather than for continuous and deliberate improvement. The team

**affirms** the steps being taken to manage the outcomes of external reviews through the use of a single extended action plan.

2.87 The Academic Board has oversight of monitoring and review, and meets between two and three times per year, although the review team notes that there is some uncertainty about precise dates and times. The team also notes that subpanels often meet as required to consider issues such as expulsions. Academic Board minutes were sometimes titled Academic Board and Exam Boards meetings, which, although operating appropriately, were not always sufficiently detailed to allow clear links between AMR and action planning. This ad hoc and unscheduled basis for Academic Board meetings presents a weakness in the oversight of higher education provision and the annual monitoring process, as does the informal nature of the Academic Board subpanels and the lack of consistency in the recording of actions. While presenting only a low risk, the review team **recommends** that the College further develops procedures for scheduling and recording the business of its Academic Board in order to strengthen oversight of provision.

2.88 The College's review processes include analysis of recruitment, retention and achievement data, external examiner reports and student feedback. Action plans are produced at programme and provider level, and regular monitoring ensure the maintenance of standards.

2.89 The College effectively applies systems and procedures that comply with awarding body and organisation processes for monitoring and review, in line with the checklist of responsibilities. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met 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**

2.90 The College has a Complaints Procedure, which was modified in 2013 to ensure that it was fully aligned with the University's requirements. Students are made aware of the policy at induction. The policy has provision for complainants to appeal against a decision, with details included in student handbooks. The use of internal policy documentation, which is disseminated to students, describing the processes associated with complaints and appeals, would allow Expectation B9 to be met.

2.91 The team reviewed the documentation relating to complaints and appeals and discussed details in meetings with senior, teaching and support staff, as well as students.

2.92 The team confirmed that the policy is clearly documented and kept under review and disseminated via the programme handbooks and Student Handbook. Following the 2014 Review for Educational Oversight, the College reviewed its complaints procedures, which include information about academic appeals, to ensure that they were fit for purpose. They explicitly draw upon the Expectations and Indicators of the relevant chapter of the Quality Code.

2.93 Students are aware of the process for making a formal complaint or appealing against an assessment process. The review team heard that the informal character of the College enables students to raise matters directly and rapidly with staff so that they are resolved. Students confirmed that they would approach their tutors in the first instance when issues arise, and often obtain an informal resolution at that point in time. Alternatively they would look for the relevant process on the VLE or in the Student Handbook. Staff confirmed that they direct students to the complaints and appeals policy, but in most cases issues raised by students can be managed informally.

2.94 Procedures and policies exist for handling student appeals and complaints about the quality of learning opportunities and these are disseminated to students and staff. The procedures were found to be fair, accessible and timely. 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**

2.95 The operation of work placement processes and procedures involves the HNC/D Health and Social Care Management programme, using the awarding organisation's requirements and programme specification guidelines. Students are required to keep a log of their work activities, with work organisations witnessing the recording of evidence. Placements are included in annual monitoring, incorporating student and external examiner feedback. The policies and procedures followed by the College enable Expectation B10 to be met.

2.96 The review team considered a range of documentary evidence on placements within the Health and Social Care Management programme and discussed details with senior and teaching staff as well as students. A meeting was requested with work placement providers, but this could not be held as no employer representatives were available.

2.97 The team noted that the College ensures delivery of a core work placement unit within the HND in Health and Social Care, with Pearson's requirement for the completion by students of 200 learning hours within a suitable working environment. The unit encourages learners to develop as reflective practitioners effectively, through applying understanding and skills to their own health and social care setting. These arrangements are included within programme monitoring, with no concerns or difficulties being noted for the operation of work placements by external examiners.

2.98 Discussions with staff noted that while formal documented placement agreements were consistently in place between students and placement providers, arrangements between the College and providers are at present based on more informal agreements. The review team recognises that the College is aware of the need to strengthen these arrangements through the development of Service Level Agreements, although at the time of the review the relevant pro forma were in draft form. The team could not therefore test the effectiveness of the new arrangements, thereby presenting a moderate level of risk. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College should establish formal written agreements with providers of work placements in order to clarify the roles and responsibilities of each party.

2.99 Students and staff confirmed that at each stage of application, admission and induction the College provides clear statements and guidelines concerning student responsibilities for obtaining a suitable work placement, in order to enable the meeting the learning outcomes for the core unit. The College provides a list of organisations that have offered work placements or that have been used by previous students.

2.100 A work placement handbook is provided to the line manager of the student within the work placement environment, and students receive and use guidelines that include learning outcomes, expectations of employers and students, and assessment guidelines. Work placements are monitored and assessed by the unit tutor and records of attendance and progress are maintained by the College.

2.101 Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

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

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

### **Findings**

2.102 The College does not deliver research degrees, therefore this Expectation does not apply.

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

2.103 In reaching its 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.

2.104 All relevant Expectations in this area have been met, with a judgement of low risk being reached in each case except for Expectation B10, where a moderate risk level is noted.

2.105 There is one instance of good practice in this area, regarding Expectation B3, with the team concluding that the College VLE reflects the sustained and systematic development of accessible learning and teaching support.

2.106 There are three recommendations involving the formalisation of agreements with work placement providers (Expectation B10), developing Academic Board procedures (Expectation B8), and evaluating Admissions Policy (Expectation B2).

2.107 Two affirmations emerged for the use of the Extended Action Plan (Expectation B8) and the implementation of the new Teaching and Learning Strategy (Expectation B3).

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

### 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 College website is the main source of information, providing a wide range of information for prospective and current students, including the Strategic Plan and Quality Assurance Policy. Welcome pages are available from members of the senior staff, together with biographical details.

3.2 There are specific pages relating to the College's origins, location, strategic plan and mission statement, awarding partners, programme fees, contact details and a link to the most recent QAA report. The site also provides a section on College news, events and open days. Prospective applicants are able to review the programmes available and the student handbook, or make an enquiry or an application, through the website.

3.3 The College has produced a set of policy documents, including a Public Information Control Policy, all of which are available on the comprehensive College VLE. The University provides guidelines for, and monitors the use of, its name and logo. The information made available to all stakeholders would allow Expectation C to be met.

3.4 The review team scrutinised the wide range of information provided, including the access of the College website, and saw a demonstration of the College's VLE by a member of staff and a current student. Details were explored through discussions in meetings with senior and teaching staff as well as students.

3.5 An Admissions Policy and Process guides the application and admission of students, with full details on how to apply on the College website. Students confirmed that the College website provides sufficient information on programmes delivered by the College for them to make an informed choice of study.

3.6 At induction students are informed of the materials available on the College VLE and are provided with access to a programme handbook stored on the College VLE. For staff and students at the College the important sources of information are held on the College VLE, which contains programme specifications, the student handbooks, tutor and general study notes, external examiners' reports and other useful information.

3.7 The College has produced a Public Information Control Policy, which identifies the target audience and where information is to be published. The Principal is responsible for signing off all changes to public documents and the CEO is responsible for updates to the College website. Completed pro forma seen by the team demonstrate that the process is effective. Documentation is developed and reviewed under robust version control guidelines and each document carries a detailed and comprehensive control sheet, which identifies the author, history of changes and the date documents are reviewed. The review team considered the thorough and detailed use of version control procedures for managing policy documentation to be **good practice**.

3.8 The generic Student Handbook and the Programme Handbooks clearly outline expectations of both the student and of the College. As discussed in Expectation B10,

this includes the communication of student responsibilities for finding a suitable work placement within the HND Health and Social Care Management programme. Elements of the Student Code and Code of Commitment are included in handbooks, discussed at induction, and are available on the College VLE.

3.9 On successful completion of a programme the awarding partners provide certificates of attainment.

3.10 Information available is generally fit for purpose and reliable and there are processes in place that ensure published information is accurate and trustworthy. Information is updated and monitored regularly. Students and staff confirm that the information provided to them is helpful, accurate and comprehensive, and readily available on the College VLE. The review team concludes that 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

3.11 In reaching its judgement about the quality of the information about learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.12 The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. There are no recommendations or affirmations, with one feature of good practice for the use of robust and detailed version control procedures for policy documentation.

3.13 The College provides information for the public about its higher education provision. Information is accessible, appropriate and accurate for prospective and current students, as well as those with responsibility for maintaining standards and assuring quality.

3.14 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the 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 defines enhancement as 'the adoption of a critical, reflective approach to all of its activities with a continuing focus on how it can best serve its students, meet their learning needs and provide opportunities which will enable them to fulfil their academic potential'. The importance of the student contribution to enhancement is identified in the policy on Students' Feedback, with the concept of 'students as partners' articulated via a Code of Commitment in the Student Handbook.

4.2 In response to recommendations arising from significant external reviews, including the Cause for Concern, the SMT and Academic Board recently developed an extended action plan to enable them to manage recommendations for College-wide improvements.

4.3 These procedures and frameworks would allow the Expectation for the enhancement of student learning opportunities to be met.

4.4 The review team considered documentation relating to external examining, AMR reports, the extended action plan, and examples of enhancement provided by the College during the review visit. Details were explored in meetings with senior, teaching and support staff, and students.

4.5 The review team notes that the College does not use an explicit definition of student engagement, although the importance of student contributions are clearly stated in the Student Representation on ABI College Committees Guidelines, the policy on Student Feedback, and the Code of Commitment in the Student Handbook, where the student voice contributes to improvements in College services.

4.6 The College does not explicitly promote QAA's concept of enhancement, with no explicit link being made in documentation between quality assurance processes and enhancement of provision. Nevertheless, the College's internal quality assurance processes for annual monitoring are thorough and generate action planning, which the review team agrees constitute enhancement activity. Staff and students confirmed that the College's own definition of enhancement is used to provide a model for continuous improvement. The review team also recognised that the College's relatively small scale of higher education provision encourages informal dialogue between staff, and between staff and students. This enables student feedback and the sharing of ideas for improving the learning environment to be disseminated quickly and implemented.

4.7 Responding to a number of external reviews has been an essential institutional priority, and this has resulted in some enhancement activity being implemented. The extended action plan in particular is used effectively by the SMT to monitor efficiently the outcomes of a number of external reviews simultaneously. The plan now includes institutional actions arising from AMRs, including recommendations arising from external examiner reports, external reviews, and student feedback surveys. It is reviewed regularly by the SMT and Academic Board and, in conjunction with oversight by Programmes Committee and Academic Board, provides internal review opportunities for enhancement. The review team therefore **affirms** that steps are being taken to manage the outcomes of external reviews through the use of a single extended action plan.

4.8 Discussions with senior staff indicated that the SMT and Academic Board consideration of the extended action plan has tended to focus on compliance monitoring rather than enhancement activity. The documentary evidence indicates that the existing enhancement activity is significant and exists broadly as a consequence of recent external review rather than any systematic consideration of the outcomes of internal quality systems feedback. Meetings with staff and students provided additional evidence that student opinion was actively sought and discussed at programme level and acted upon, often through informal channels.

4.9 Reflections and deliberations at programme level have developed deliberate enhancement actions through the Programmes Committee, which have then been considered subsequently by the SMT and Academic Board. The review team recognised outcomes of the action planning process, including the provision of additional support for 'at risk' students, monthly monitoring of student progress, adjustments to staffing strategy, adjustments to the delivery of units at Levels 4 and 5, and the provision of timely feedback to students. Further examples of College-wide strategic initiatives were provided: VLE developments, the introduction of the Student Information System, and the re-appraisal of modifications to the admissions process.

4.10 Although such initiatives were not directly and explicitly developed from internal quality assurance monitoring and review processes, and were not recorded explicitly in the Extended Action Plan, the review team regarded them as significant developments at provider level for enhancing the learning environment. The review team formed the view that enhancement linked to internal rather than external quality assurance systems is emerging practice now that the College faces a period of stability. The outcomes of the internal quality assurance and enhancement processes might in future be more usefully included in the extended action plan to improve transparency and be more readily disseminated. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College consolidates enhancement activities in order to manage the further development of student learning opportunities.

4.11 Deliberate steps for the improvement of student learning opportunities have emerged through reacting to student feedback at programme level, as well as responding to annual monitoring and review recommendations. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

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

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

4.12 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.13 The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. There are no features of good practice, with one affirmation concerning the use of the extended action plan for combining priorities emerging from a series of reviews. There is also one recommendation for the consolidation of the full range of enhancement activities within College quality assurance and monitoring processes.

4.14 The review team concludes that the enhancement of learning opportunities at the University **meets** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Digital Literacy

### Findings

5.1 During the last three years the College has developed and embedded in its curriculum a range of digital literacy skills. Although this has not been explicitly or centrally planned in detail there has been a major cross-College focus on the VLE as a tool for learning (discussed in more detail in Expectation B3). The VLE provides a centralised hub for student activity where learning materials and College policies can be retrieved 24/7 and via mobile devices. This is complimented by the students, and a VLE student forum is being planned. Students' digital literacy skills are monitored as part of the College's normal tutorial and feedback policy.

5.2 The College has moved from a paper-based dependent system of data recording and storage to a networked electronic system. Consequently the College attempts to keep printed documentation to a minimum. There is an emphasis on electronic storage and retrieval of data as part of the College's recently enhanced management information system. Students are encouraged to use cloud-based storage for their work, and word processing, data spreadsheets and presentation software, as well as social media, are all used to support student learning. From conversations with staff and students it was evident that digital literacy is not a planned strategy with institutional objectives and targets, but that it is integrated across the provider's curriculum and recognised by students. Students whom the review team met recognised the importance of digital literacy to their future career opportunities.

5.3 Students within the master's programme access the University's online portal, which provides a rich source of academic material, academic database access and e-books. Digital literacy within the College is positively commented on by a number of external examiners in the context of the VLE.

5.4 Staff at the College provide opportunities for students to develop digital literacy skills through the use of blended learning techniques, and students submit course work via plagiarism-detection software. This is not yet embedded in the VLE. Continuing professional development opportunities exist, with requests from staff supported by the SMT.

## 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 22-25 of the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) 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.

### Awarding organisation

An organisation authorised to award a particular qualification; an organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications

### 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.

**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.

**Self-evaluation document**

A report submitted by a higher education provider, assessing its own performance, to be used as evidence in a QAA review.

**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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