



Higher Education Review of Activate Learning

October 2015

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Activate Learning. The review took place from 29 September to 2 October 2015 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Tessa Counsell
- Dr Mark Lyne
- Miss Nina di Cara (student reviewer)

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

In Higher Education Review, the QAA review team:

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

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are found on page 4 followed by numbered paragraphs starting on page 5.

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

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

¹ The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at:
www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code.

² Higher Education Review themes:
www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=2859.

³ QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us.

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

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Activate Learning

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Activate Learning.

- The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies **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** at Activate Learning.

- The effective strategic commitment to develop and enhance student employability which is linked to learning opportunities (Expectation B4).

Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to Activate Learning.

By January 2016:

- ensure that all programme specifications for the Pearson awards include contextualised programme-level learning outcomes that clearly articulate to outcomes at unit level (Expectations A2.2, A3.2, B1 and C)
- strengthen the process for the internal approval of new Higher National programmes to enable consideration of the academic case through formal committee structures (Expectations A3.1 and B1)
- work with OBU to clarify the process for providing external examiners with draft assessments and ensure the procedure is rigorously monitored (Expectation B7)
- review the Comments, Suggestions and Complaints Procedure to ensure that a clear timeline is specified for all stages of the complaints process (Expectation B9).

By July 2016:

- further develop the VLE to enable its use as an effective pedagogic tool (Expectation B3)
- provide clarity at programme level on the student entitlement to tutorials and how they are managed and monitored in accordance with the Tutorial and Progress Review Policy (Expectation B4)
- strengthen the student representation system to further engage students as partners in quality assurance and enhancement, and to introduce a system to monitor its effectiveness (Expectation B5).

Theme: Student Employability

Employability is central to Activate Learning's Strategic Plan 2014-18 and is demonstrated in practice by a portfolio of vocationally focused programmes which incorporate some aspects of work-related, work-based learning or placement that are designed to prepare students for

the world of work. Activate Learning has strong links with employers, and teaching staff provided examples of how their experience and links with industry shaped the student experience at programme and module level. Students are positive about how their studies are preparing them for employment and/or further study. Activate Learning has many modules that are designed to develop employability skills, for example through engagement in 'live' project briefs set in collaboration with external companies and organisations.

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

About Activate Learning

Activate Learning is an education group comprising schools, colleges, higher education, apprenticeship and workforce training, consultancy, commercial business and social enterprise. It was launched in November 2013 as the new name for the Oxford and Cherwell Valley College Group. The college division of Activate Learning (the Group) is made up of Reading College, City of Oxford College, and Banbury and Bicester College. Its mission is 'to transform lives through learning'.

At the time of its Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) by QAA in 2011, Oxford and Cherwell Valley College had 334 higher education students (154 full-time and 180 part-time). It now has 537 students on higher education programmes (361 full-time and 176 part-time).

The Group offers a range of foundation degrees, honours 'top-up' courses, Higher National Certificates and Diplomas (HNCs and HNDs), and a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) course. The Group delivers programmes as part of its relationships with two awarding bodies and an awarding organisation: Oxford Brookes University (OBU), Buckinghamshire New University (BNU), and Pearson.

The Group has identified a number of key challenges facing its higher education provision, including: ensuring and maintaining consistency of student experience across three colleges; adapting to changes in funding, student support for the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), and student number control limits and the impact these have had on widening participation; student engagement at senior committees; and the marketing of the higher education provision.

The Group has made good progress with the recommendations and further development of good practice made in the IQER. The new higher education management structure and the growing emphasis on employability and strong relationships with employers have enhanced the higher education provision.

Explanation of the findings about Activate Learning

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 (FHEQ) 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 degree-awarding bodies, Oxford Brookes University (OBU) and Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) require the Group to confirm the alignment of their awards with the FHEQ and, where appropriate, the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*, as part of both the approval and periodic review processes. The processes consist of a development stage in collaboration with the awarding body, an internal Group programme approval process, a University Learning Partnerships Advisory Group (LPAG) approval stage and an approval event. The same processes also requires the Group to refer to the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements in the development of programmes. Programme specifications note the reference to Subject Benchmark Statements and provide a record of the titles of awards, the level of modules and their credit rating in accordance with the FHEQ and the Higher Education Credit framework for England. Programme specifications also contain programme-level learning outcomes. External examiners are asked as part of their annual report to confirm and comment on the alignment of Group's awards with the FHEQ and benchmark statements.

1.2 Although many of the awards delivered by the Group are mapped against relevant professional standards, only one, the Foundation Degree (Science) in Motorsports: Performance and Automotive Technology, is accredited by a professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), that is the Institute of Engineering and Technology (IET) and

the Institution of Mechanical Engineers (IMechE). In the case of Higher National awards validated by Pearson, the approval form confirms the level of qualification and the credit rating of units. Pearson provides the Group with the assurance that its awards have been aligned to the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements and the Group produces a programme specification for each award. The approval and review processes that it engages in with its awarding partners would enable it to meet the Expectation.

1.3 The review team considered the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining partnership agreements, approval and review documentation, external examiners' reports, and programme specifications. The team also held meetings with senior and teaching staff.

1.4 The evidence reviewed shows the procedures to be effective in practice. The review team saw evidence that the programme approval processes for OBU and BNU provision are clearly documented and comprehensive. Emphasis is placed on the need to meet the requirements of the FHEQ, align with qualification and Subject Benchmark Statements, and establish the levels and credit rating of modules. Both internal and external stages of the approval and review process ensure that external reference points are used effectively in establishing threshold academic standards. For example, the team saw evidence of the effective way in which a variety of approaches to work-related learning are used throughout the Group's provision to show alignment with the *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark*. The Group makes effective use of programme specifications to provide a clear and comprehensive record of programme titles, the level of modules, their credit rating and the use that has been made of external reference points. Numerous external examiners' reports also confirm consistent alignment and comparability with sector standards.

1.5 The regulatory framework and processes for Pearson awards also ensure that reference has been made to the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements to support the establishment of appropriate threshold academic standards. The programme specifications also provide a clear record of the main features of the Higher National programmes. However, in all but one case, they are less clear in terms of the programme-level learning outcomes (see Expectations A2.2, A3.2, B1 and C).

1.6 While the awarding partners have ultimate responsibility through their own regulatory frameworks for ensuring that the relevant external reference points are adhered to, there is evidence that the Group effectively manages its own responsibilities for doing this within its partnership agreements. This is confirmed through a variety of mechanisms including approval and validation events held by the awarding bodies and the conclusions from external examiners' reports. The review team therefore concludes that Expectation A1 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 The regulatory frameworks of the awarding partners determine academic standards and award of credit for each programme. The Group designs, delivers and assesses its programmes in accordance with the frameworks and processes set out in the awarding partners' regulations, guidance, and partnership agreements. Operation manuals, updated annually, set out how the validating universities' requirements are expected to be implemented by the Group for each programme of study. In the case of Pearson awards, the Group uses the BTEC procedures for standards verification and external examining, and the BTEC Guide to Assessment Levels 4 to 7. The Group has also introduced its own Assessment, Internal Verification and Appeals Policy for Higher National programmes. Examination committees for university awards and assessment boards for Pearson provision are convened to confirm that students have met the requirements of their award.

1.8 Programme specifications for all higher education provision define the names of awards and the level and credit rating of their constituent modules. For university awards, module descriptors are provided in programme handbooks and define level, credit value, learning outcomes and the mode and weighting of assessment. In the case of Higher National awards, the Group uses the unit descriptors published by Pearson. Approval from the relevant university is required for any changes to programme specifications and module descriptors. The Group's processes would allow it to meet Expectation A2.1.

1.9 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining academic frameworks and regulations, partnership agreements, operation manuals, terms of reference and minutes of relevant boards and committees, programme specifications, unit/module descriptors, and programme handbooks. The team also held meetings with teaching staff and senior staff.

1.10 The evidence reviewed shows the procedures to be effective in practice. The respective responsibilities of the awarding bodies and the provider are clear and transparent and the review team saw evidence that the Group effectively and consistently adheres to the frameworks and regulations in the award of credit and qualifications. This occurs through the implementation of a rigorous programme approval process and the effective operation of examination committees and assessment boards. The operations manuals are particularly helpful in enabling the Group to manage their awards in accordance with university expectations by embedding and defining course requirements in terms of a clear programme specification. In the case of Pearson awards, the Assessment, Internal Verification and Appeals Policy for Higher National Programmes is a valuable resource containing information regarding a wide range of processes including internal verification, appeals, plagiarism and accreditation of prior learning.

1.11 The awarding partners have responsibility for academic frameworks and regulations. Within the context of the partnership agreements with its awarding partners, the team concludes that the Expectation is met both in theory and in practice, 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

1.12 Responsibility for producing and maintaining the definitive record of each approved programme and qualification, in the form of programme specifications, is shared between the Group and its awarding partners. For Pearson provision, this requires the Group to produce tailored programme specifications based on the guidance and definitive information provided by the awarding organisation. The Group states that the definitive information includes programme aims, learning outcomes and achievements, and reference to the FHEQ level, and is made available in programme specifications, module guides, programme handbooks, and the virtual learning environment (VLE). The Group produces the programme specifications based on templates approved by the awarding bodies who also check the information through the annual and periodic review processes. These approaches would allow the Group to meet Expectation A2.2.

1.13 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining programme specifications, and their role in internal quality assurance procedures, as well as programme handbooks and module guides.

1.14 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be partially effective in practice. For programmes offered in partnership with the awarding bodies, the team found that all programme records clearly outline the relevant information. For Pearson programmes, the team found that the Group made appropriate use of unit specifications and these were clearly laid out for students and used appropriately to map assignments against unit-level learning outcomes. However, with the exception of HNC Construction, the Group, as required by the awarding organisation, had not produced tailored programme specifications with contextualised programme-level learning outcomes and had instead transferred the 'higher level skills' created by the awarding organisation in their overall qualification specifications. The team therefore **recommends** that, by January 2016, the Group ensures that all programme specifications for the Pearson awards include contextualised programme-level learning outcomes that clearly articulate to outcomes at unit level (see also Expectations A3.2, B1 and C).

1.15 Within its partnership agreements, the Group largely fulfils its responsibilities for maintaining definitive records. Information is made available to students in a number of ways. The team did make a recommendation for the Group to produce contextualised programme-level learning outcomes that clearly articulate to outcomes at unit level. The Expectation is met because of the completeness of the information regarding programmes offered in partnership with the awarding bodies and the adequacy of the unit-level learning outcomes. However, the level of risk is moderate because of the Group's lack of clarity about responsibilities in relation to the requirements of its awarding organisation, and shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which the relevant quality assurance procedures have been applied.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Moderate

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

1.16 The awarding partners are ultimately responsible for ensuring that academic standards are set at an appropriate level and are in accordance with their academic frameworks and regulations. The partnership agreements with the awarding bodies and their respective approval processes set out the framework within which the Group works to develop higher education programmes. The Group's planning process for designing and developing its new higher education programmes begins with the completion of the Group's programme proposal template. The template includes a number of key factors including the rationale and aims for the proposed programme; the target market and an assessment of demand; evidence of employer engagement; progression routes into and from the programme; resource requirements; and indicators of quality. The template is submitted to the Higher Education Programme Approval Panel (a subcommittee of the Higher Education Academic Board) for initial approval. Programmes which require University approval progress into the relevant University faculty approval process once approved by the Group's Programme Approval Panel. Programmes which are awarded by Pearson go through the Group's own approval process before being submitted to the awarding organisation. These processes would enable the Group to meet Expectation A3.1.

1.17 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining documentation relating to programme approval, awarding partners' academic frameworks and regulations, approval events, partnership agreements, programme specifications, external examiners' reports, and the Quality Handbook. The team also held meetings with senior staff, teaching staff, and students.

1.18 The team saw evidence that the internal and awarding body processes for the approval of university-awarded programmes are effective in ensuring that academic standards are set at an appropriate level. These processes also include the research of employer needs in programme development, together with consideration of the progression aspirations of further education students at the Group. .

1.19 However, the team did find evidence of some weaknesses in the operation of the programme approval processes for Higher National programmes (see paragraph 2.4 for a full explanation). The review team therefore **recommends** that, by January 2016, the Group strengthens the process for the internal approval of new Higher National programmes to enable consideration of the academic case through formal committee structures (see also Expectation B1).

1.20 Overall, the Group adheres to the procedures of its awarding bodies and has its own effective processes for the design, development and approval of higher education programmes. The review team does make one recommendation which is to strengthen the internal approval processes for Higher National programmes. Despite this recommendation, the team concludes that the Expectation is met. The level of risk is moderate because of

some weaknesses in the operation of part of the Group's academic governance structure. In addition, while quality assurance procedures are broadly adequate, there are some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

1.21 The Group works within the assessment regulations and guidance of its awarding partners. The Group has also introduced its own 'Assessment, Internal Verification and Appeals Policy for Higher National programmes'. Information about assessment requirements are outlined in operations manuals, programme handbooks, module guides, and assignment briefs. For OBU provision, there is also a requirement to align assessment practices with the University's Assessment Compact and map learning outcomes against graduate attributes.

1.22 The review team tested the Expectation by scrutinising the evidence provided by the Group, including minutes of the examination committee and assessment board, the academic regulations of the Group and its awarding partners, operations manuals, programme handbooks, module guides, and external examiners' reports. The review team also held meetings with senior and academic staff, and students.

1.23 The evidence reviewed shows the practices and procedures to be partially effective in practice. The team found that the processes in place for University-awarded programmes are effective. There is evidence that programme and module learning outcomes for these programmes are clearly mapped to assessment, and teaching staff whom the team met clearly described the respective responsibilities of the programme coordinator and internal and lead verifiers in assessment planning. Students on these programmes were clear regarding all aspects of assessment, including assessment criteria and the role of double-marking and the external examiner. Cross-college moderation and standardisation allows for comparison of assessment methodologies and is seen as a useful part of the induction of staff new to higher education.

1.24 While the team found that programme-level learning outcomes are included in the programme specifications for the University-awarded programmes, this is not the case for the majority of the Pearson provision. Programme specifications for these programmes include information on skills and 'other attributes' and unit learning outcomes, but not those at overall programme level as required by the awarding organisation. While unit learning outcomes are robust and mapped against unit assignments, included in programme handbooks, assignment briefs, and schedules for internal verification, they are not explicitly mapped to programme-level learning outcomes. The team therefore **recommends** that, by January 2016, the Group ensures that all programme specifications for the Pearson awards include contextualised programme-level learning outcomes that clearly articulate to outcomes at unit level (see also Expectations A2.2, B1 and C).

1.25 Due to the weaknesses outlined above, the team concludes that this Expectation is not met because the Group cannot be fully assured that programme-level learning outcomes for Pearson provision are always being met through assessment. The associated level of risk is moderate because of the Group's lack of clarity about responsibilities as required by

the awarding organisation, insufficient emphasis given to assuring standards in the Group's planning processes, and also the shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which the relevant quality assurance procedures are applied.

Expectation: Not met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

1.26 The Group conducts annual programme reviews culminating in a report which is based on a standard template. This internal process also satisfies the requirements of the awarding partners as set out in the institutional agreements. The higher education quality assurance cycle requires the annual review reports to be fed into the relevant Quality Panel meeting in September each year, followed by impact reviews which enable the programme team to review the enhancement plans on a regular basis. The Higher Education Manager is subsequently responsible for producing the annual Group self-evaluation document and enhancement plan which is approved by the Higher Education Academic Board and presented to the Group Board. The Academic Board agenda contains a standing item to review progress against the action plan. The awarding bodies undertake periodic reviews on a four-year cycle. The Group introduced a periodic review policy in 2014 for the Pearson provision whereby Higher National programmes are also reviewed every four years, starting with the review of HND Creative Media Production. The procedure for the periodic reviews of Pearson provision is based on that used by the Group's awarding bodies. The Group's own processes and its adherence to those of its awarding bodies and organisation would enable it to meet Expectation A3.3.

1.27 The effectiveness of the Group's practices was tested by examining relevant documentation including annual programme review reports, periodic review reports, minutes of the Quality Panel, impact review and Academic Board meetings, and external examiners' reports. The team also held meetings with students, senior and academic staff.

1.28 The evidence reviewed showed the procedures to be effective in practice. The review team saw evidence that annual programme review reports and the Group's self-evaluation document are comprehensive and contain detailed commentary and enhancement plans. The Group has effective processes for feeding these reports through the higher education cycle. These processes include the thorough consideration of feedback from external examiners' reports and interim visits, and assessment boards. The team also saw evidence of the Group's participation in the awarding bodies' periodic review processes, for example through the attendance of relevant teaching and managerial staff at review meetings, and a thorough review carried out by the Group of the HND Creative Media Production. Higher National programmes are currently selected for periodic review on a cyclical basis but, in future, the Group will be adopting a more risk-based approach.

1.29 The evidence from documentation and meetings clearly shows that the Group has effective systems in place for programme monitoring and review and is operating in accordance with the requirements of its awarding partners. The Group also takes appropriate account of reports from external examiners and the awarding partners. Therefore the team concludes that Expectation A3.3 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

1.30 The awarding partners have ultimate responsibility for making use of external and independent expertise to set and maintain academic standards. As part of the process for programme approval, the awarding bodies require input from independent external academic staff who attend the approval event. The direct involvement of the validating universities on the approval panel provides them with an opportunity to ensure that programmes are in line with their own academic standards. External input from employers is sought as part of the Group's programme development process with an explanation as to how employers have been engaged included as a section of the programme proposal template. However, there is no requirement for industry to be represented at approval or reapproval events. External examiners are appointed for each programme by the awarding partners, and their reports comment on whether academic standards have successfully been achieved and maintained by the Group. Periodic review events are attended by external academic advisors as well as a representative from another faculty in the university. These approaches would allow the Group to meet Expectation A3.4.

1.31 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining policies, procedures and minutes of meetings relating to programme approval, monitoring and review, and external examiners' reports. The team also held meetings with senior and teaching staff.

1.32 The review team found these processes to work effectively in practice. The team saw evidence of external representation at both approval and periodic review events. External examiners are appropriately involved in the relevant stages of the assessment processes including the sampling of marked student work, attendance at examination boards and the submission of annual reports.

1.33 The team saw evidence of employers being involved in various ways by the Group in programme development and delivery, ranging from the development of an entire Foundation Degree programme in the case of Policing through to industry-focused assessment briefs in Graphic Design. This engagement contributes to programmes meeting relevant expectations regarding professional and academic standards.

1.34 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that, overall, the Group is effectively managing its responsibilities for maintaining academic standards and making use of external expertise. This is confirmed by external examiners' reports and the team saw evidence of productive relationships with local employers. The team therefore concludes that this 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

1.35 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. All but one of the Expectations for this judgement area are met, the exception being A3.2 where the review team recommends that the Group ensures that all programme specifications for the Pearson awards include contextualised programme-level learning outcomes that clearly articulate to outcomes at unit level. The level of risk for Expectations A2.2, A3.1 and A3.2 are moderate because of the Group's lack of clarity about responsibilities as required by the awarding organisation, insufficient emphasis given to assuring standards in the Group's planning processes, and also the shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which the relevant quality assurance procedures are applied.

1.36 The review team concludes that, overall, the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of degree-awarding bodies and/or other awarding organisations at the Group **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 ultimate responsibility for the design, development and approval of programmes rests with the awarding partners. The partnership agreements with the awarding bodies and their respective approval processes set out the framework within which the Group works to develop higher education programmes. The Group's design, development and approval processes as they apply to the awards offered on behalf of its awarding partners are set out in paragraph 1.16. The Group's Higher Education Strategy states that the majority of programmes are designed in close collaboration with employers and industry representatives, and that the Group aims to 'enhance the higher level skills in the communities it serves'. The adherence of the Group to the awarding partners' formal procedures for programme design, development and approval, and its own internal processes, would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.2 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these practices and procedures by examining documentation relating to programme design and approval, approval and validation events, partnership agreements, programme specifications, and the Higher Education Strategy. The team also held discussions with teaching staff, support staff, senior staff, employers and students.

2.3 The Group's processes for programme design, development and approval are partially effective in practice (see also Expectation A2.2). Reports of internal approval and validation meetings, and the establishment of a programme development team demonstrate that the process fully considers academic standards and student learning opportunities and the use of academic externality for the programmes validated by the awarding bodies. The team also heard evidence regarding the importance of considering employability, the input of employers, and work-related opportunities in the design and development of all higher education programmes. Examples of collaborative working with employers include the development of the Foundation Degrees in Policing, and Health and Social Care, and the HNC Mechanical Engineering.

2.4 However, the team did find evidence of some weaknesses in the operation of the programme approval processes for Higher National programmes. The terms of reference for the Higher Education Approval Subcommittee indicate that all aspects of the Higher Education Programme Proposal template are checked but, at present, this does not include consideration of a draft programme specification nor contextualised programme-level learning outcomes. In addition, while the internal approval procedure states the progression of Higher National programme proposals, following initial approval, to the relevant higher education quality and standards groups, this is not reflected in those groups' terms of reference nor minutes of meetings. While the academic case is considered at an earlier stage of programme planning, its omission at the approval stage for Higher National programmes leads to a lack of formal consideration of the academic case for new programmes through deliberative committees. The review team therefore **recommends** that, by January 2016, the Group strengthens the process for the internal approval of new Higher

National programmes to enable consideration of the academic case through formal committee structures (see also Expectation A3.1).

2.5 Overall, the Group adheres to the procedures of its awarding bodies and has its own effective processes for the design, development and approval of higher education programmes. The team does make one recommendation which is to strengthen the internal approval processes for Higher National programmes. Despite this recommendation, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met. The level of risk is moderate because of some weaknesses in the operation of part of the Group's academic governance structure. In addition, while quality assurance procedures are broadly adequate, there are some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.6 The Group takes responsibility for the recruitment and admission of students. The Group has a higher education admissions policy, available on their website, which outlines its commitment to applicants, a complaints procedure and gives an overview of the application process. It also stipulates the arrangements available for applicants requiring reasonable adjustments at interview. The Group has a Higher Education Applicant Feedback, Appeals and Complaints document for those students wishing to appeal or complain about the admissions process. Prospective students can find relevant programme information through the Group website, or by attending an information day. It employs a higher education admissions coordinator to oversee the admissions process and to ensure that all relevant members of staff are adequately trained to interview prospective students. The processes outlined for recruitment and admissions would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.7 The review team examined the effectiveness of the recruitment, selection and admissions policies and procedures by analysing documentation including the Higher Education Admissions Policy and the Feedback, Appeals and Complaints document, and by analysing the information made available to applicants and prospective students. The review team also held meetings with students and support staff.

2.8 The review team found that the policies and procedures for recruitment, selection and admission work effectively in practice. Students whom the team met confirmed the usefulness of the information provided on the website and at open days, with it being an accurate reflection of the programme they enrolled on. Overall, the team found information on recruitment, selection and admissions to be fit for purpose, with just one instance of inconsistency for the HND Creative Media Production where academic entry criteria, such as English language requirements, do not appear in the programme specification. The Group has now recognised this omission and these inconsistencies should be eradicated with the strengthening of the internal programme approval processes outlined in Expectation B1 (see paragraph 2.4).

2.9 Staff are adequately trained to carry out interviews, and applicants are offered support, if needed, during the interview process. For example, students with disabilities can indicate on application forms if they require adjustments which are then provided by the Group's student support team in liaison with the relevant programme coordinator. The review team heard other examples of the services offered by the student support team including the introduction of a free writing diagnostic assessment at interview stage to identify students with dyslexia, and assistance with applying for the DSA. The review team saw evidence of changes to the interview process that had been made as a result of student feedback via the interview evaluation questionnaire, for example the free writing exercise for PGCE applicants being brought forward in the schedule.

2.10 The evidence from documentation and meetings shows that the Group has recruitment, selection and admissions policies and procedures which adhere to the principles of fair admission. The Group supports students by offering a good experience

at initial application and admissions stages and by offering appropriate support to those who need it. Information for prospective students is clear, accurate and widely available. The team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met both in design and operation 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

2.11 The Group's commitment to providing students with a high quality learning experience is articulated through their Higher Education Strategy 2014-17 which focuses on key areas such as critical study skills, learning environments, use of e-learning technologies, additional study support and the active participation of students in quality assurance processes, and employer engagement. The Group has a higher education learning technologies and IT infrastructure strategy which, with the exception of two action points, is structurally rather than pedagogically focused. The Higher Education Information Policy identifies who is responsible for managing the information, including course material, on the VLE, with higher education programme coordinators being responsible for the accuracy and completeness of information.

2.12 While each of the three Colleges making up the Group has a distinctive approach to staff support, a central continuing professional development (CPD) Strategy was introduced in September 2015 as part of the Group's Learning and Development Policy. Higher education staff at the Group are provided with a range of CPD opportunities including support for attending conferences, workshops, an annual higher education conference, training programmes and access to short and long-term award-bearing courses. In addition, staff are encouraged to participate in CPD activities offered by the validating university with whom they have affiliate staff status. Staff are required to hold, or are supported to gain, a recognised teaching qualification and the annual appraisal process is used to identify individual CPD needs. The Group has also recently become a subscribing member to the Higher Education Academy (HEA), providing staff with access to additional resources and the opportunity to apply for HEA recognition. In addition, the Group is currently introducing a new peer development scheme. The Group's processes would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.13 The review team examined the effectiveness of teaching and learning procedures by reading relevant documentation including the higher education strategy, higher education learning technologies and IT infrastructure strategy, higher education information policy, learning and development policy, CPD strategy, evidence of CPD activities carried out by staff, and online resources. The team also held meetings with the Chief Executive Officer, students, employers, and management, teaching and support staff.

2.14 The review team found that the strategies, policies and procedures for teaching and learning work effectively in practice. Evidence from student surveys and meetings with students suggest a high degree of satisfaction with their teaching and learning experiences and the support and opportunities available to them. Students are positive with regard to the development of their academic and employability skills through study skills modules and the wide range of opportunities to interact with employers and industry. Although there was some variability reported in the student written submission with regard to the adequacy of library resources, this was not reflected by the students whom the team met who reported that they were satisfied with their access to resources either through the Group libraries or from Oxford Brookes University.

2.15 The team saw evidence of the take-up of a wide range of CPD activities by Group staff engaged in the delivery of higher education programmes. These included registration for higher degrees, attendance at conferences and workshops, and participation in well attended higher education conferences organised by both the Group and Oxford Brookes University. Staff whom the team met reported positively about the effectiveness of the appraisal process in identifying their CPD needs. The introduction of a well-structured peer development scheme, and the Group's subscription to the HEA, with approximately 25 members of staff having attended a recent professional standards workshop, are also valuable initiatives to enhance teaching and learning.

2.16 References to the VLE in documentation, such as the Higher Education Learning Technologies and IT Infrastructure Strategy and the checklist of the minimum core information that programmes are required to publish, and during meetings held with staff and students emphasise its use as a repository of information rather than a pedagogic tool. Although students reported some variability in their experience of the VLE, the team did see evidence of the recent upgrade of the VLE and how this had begun to improve students' experiences in terms of navigability and consistency of information. The review team also heard of the improvements in the support being offered to programme coordinators and their teams through bespoke training and online support materials. Senior staff acknowledged that the VLE had historically been a repository of information and that they were now moving towards developing its use more systematically, for example through the development of a working group to identify ways to extend learning beyond the classroom. The review team was also made aware that a senior appointment of Group Director - Information and Learning Technology had just been made with responsibility for strategic development in this area. Much of this work appears to be in its early stages and therefore the team **recommends** that, by July 2016, the Group further develops the VLE to enable its use as an effective pedagogic tool.

2.17 The Group has a coordinated approach to teaching and learning with a strong emphasis on student employability and the development of academic staff. The review team does recommend the Group to further develop the VLE as a pedagogic tool. Despite this, the 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

2.18 The Group states in its Higher Education Strategy 2014-17 that teaching and learning are at the heart of their mission, strategy and values and that these activities focus on the individual and collective needs of students. The Group provides a wide range of support for students including diagnostic testing at interview or induction to identify additional learning support needs and/or eligibility for the DSA; a focus on the development of study skills including a specific module in the first term for the majority of programmes; as well as individual and group tutorials with roles and entitlement set out in the Quality and Standards Handbook, student handbooks, and the Tutorial and Progress Review Policy. There is also support for opportunities for work-related learning and development of employability skills in all programmes; and the provision of additional specialist support where necessary including tailored support, drop-in sessions and workshops delivered by three Higher Education Study Support Tutors.

2.19 The business planning process, by which physical and learning resources are allocated, operates to a specified timeline with the approval of new programmes considering their resourcing as part of the business case. There is a specific higher education budget for library resources and a process for their review, and students are also able to access Oxford Brookes University resources where appropriate. The Group has an annual planning cycle, managed by the Executive Team, for the provision of resources across the whole of the Group, with an annual operational business plan being translated into a college-by-college plan. This process includes the opportunity for bids to be made for more substantial capital items. The provision of appropriate resources is also considered during the programme validation process and this information feeds into annual operating statements at programme level that also confirm the staffing lists. Discussions about resources are a standing item on programme committee agendas. The adequacy of resources is also monitored through a variety of other mechanisms including module evaluations, the NSS, an annual internal higher education survey, and annual monitoring reports and enhancement plans. The processes the Group has in place would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.20 The review team tested the effectiveness of the Group's arrangements and resources by scrutinising relevant documents relating to the Higher Education Strategy and policies, procedures and handbooks that describe the resources and support available to students. The team also held meetings with students, teaching and support staff.

2.21 Overall, the team found that the procedures for implementing, monitoring and evaluating arrangements and resources work effectively in practice. Evidence from module evaluations and meetings with students confirmed the value and effectiveness of the study skills modules in preparing students for their higher education studies, particularly those who were returning to education. The module specifications include an appropriate range of skills relating to critical thinking, referencing and plagiarism, group work, and academic writing.

2.22 Staff, students and employers whom the team met emphasised the commitment of the Group, as highlighted in the Higher Education Strategy, to providing higher education opportunities that are distinctive in terms of their industry focus and the development of employability skills. The team identified numerous examples from across all programmes of the way in which teaching and learning opportunities are industry focused and effective in developing employability skills. These range from programmes where students' learning is

directly linked to their voluntary or paid employment, through to those programmes incorporating work placements and assignment briefs based on live industry projects. The effective strategic commitment to develop and enhance student employability, which is linked to learning opportunities is **good practice**.

2.23 All students undergo a diagnostic test either at interview or induction. The review team heard examples from students and support staff of how these tests were used to identify additional support needs, and then how high quality support was put in place for the students. The Group captures the effectiveness and impact of the support provided through its annual higher education study support services reports.

2.24 Although evidence from internal surveys and meetings with students confirmed that they are well supported in their studies and could seek help when they needed, the team did find some discrepancies in the information provided to students regarding their entitlement to personal tutorial support. For example, the expectation set out in the Tutorial and Progress Review Policy, of the review of individual progress approximately every six weeks, contradicts the entitlement stated in the Quality and Standards Handbook and some programme handbooks of a meeting once a term. While the team recognises the need for flexible ways of delivering tutorial support due to differences in modes of attendance, they also found variation in the terminology used to refer to 'personal tutors', inconsistencies in tutorials appearing on timetables, whether the entitlement to individual tutorials set out in the policy was always being met, and how flexibility in tutorials were being delivered in accordance with the policy. The team therefore **recommends** that, by July 2016, the Group provides clarity at programme level on the student entitlement to tutorials and how they are managed and monitored in accordance with the Tutorial and Progress Review Policy.

2.25 The Group has a systematic approach to ensuring that students have access to the support and resources they require to develop their potential. The team identified one feature of good practice regarding student employability. It also made one recommendation to provide clarity for student entitlement to tutorials. Overall, the team concludes that the Group meets the Expectation and that 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

2.26 The Group has a student representative system in line with the aim of the Group's Higher Education Strategy to encourage active participation from students in quality assurance processes. Student representatives are included in the terms of reference of the Higher Education Quality and Standards Committee and Programme Committees, and, following the creation of a lead student representative role, this person is to sit on the Higher Education Academic Board. Student representatives are elected by their peers at programme level and they are all provided with a handbook and training from the Group in partnership with Oxford Brookes University. Students' opinions can be collected and shared at student forums, which are organised when needed, for example to discuss the closure of a programme. The Group also collects student feedback through the NSS, module evaluations, student surveys, and an anonymous feedback features on the VLE called 'My View'. The views of students are taken into account during programme design, periodic review and the appointment of new staff through the consideration of survey responses, inviting student representatives to attend committees, and setting up feedback meetings with students. These strategies and procedures would enable the Group to meet the Expectation.

2.27 The review team tested the effectiveness of the procedures in place to engage students by examining documentation including sources of student feedback, details of the student representation system, the Higher Education Strategy, and minutes and terms of reference of relevant groups, committees and boards. The team also held meetings with senior staff, teaching staff, students and student representatives.

2.28 The team found the processes for engaging students in practice to be partially effective. Evidence showed that students are provided with various mechanisms to feed back about their experiences. For example, the anonymous 'My View' feature on the VLE has been used 84 times in the past academic year and the feedback discussed at the Higher Education Quality and Standards Committee. In meetings with students, however, it was clear that the student body was not wholly aware of this tool. Both staff and students also spoke of the willingness of the latter to discuss issues on an informal basis with tutor and programme coordinators or via student representatives. Evidence from students suggests this feedback is acted upon to bring about positive changes, for example the purchase of a colour printer for those studying Furniture: Design and Make programmes.

2.29 The team heard from student representatives that they are satisfied with their training and believe it enables them to be effective in their roles. The training is supported by a comprehensive student representation handbook, and the Group shared plans in meetings to increase the support available for the lead student representative.

2.30 The Group acknowledged, both in documentation and in meetings, that there is a lack of student representation at senior committees. While there is some evidence that students contribute to programme-level committees, attendance at senior meetings has been limited. In meetings, students explained that they could not always attend programme committee meetings due to other commitments, but the team did see evidence that, in these instances, students send notes for discussion. While the inclusion of a higher education strand in the Learner Voice year plan is recognised by the team as a positive measure and ideas were put forward in meetings, the Group was unable to provide any evidence of a strategic plan to further engage students as partners in quality assurance and enhancement.

Therefore, the team **recommends** that, by July 2016, the Group strengthen the student representation system to further engage students as partners in quality assurance and enhancement, and introduce a system to monitor its effectiveness.

2.31 Overall, the Group has a number of ways to gather students' views and there is ample evidence of changes being made as a result of this feedback. Where there are weaknesses in the system, the Group has recognised these and is starting to develop ideas to address them. However, these are in the early stages and so the team has made a recommendation to strengthen the formal student representation system to further engage students as partners and to ensure that a mechanism is introduced to monitor the effectiveness of this system. The team concludes that the Expectation is met, but the associated level of risk is moderate because there are some weaknesses in the operation of the student representation system.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

2.32 The Group works within the assessment regulations and guidance of its awarding partners. The Group is responsible for the setting of assessment, first marking, internal moderation and feedback to students on the university-approved programmes, while the universities second mark or additionally moderate student work. For the Pearson programmes, the Group is responsible for ensuring its assessment opportunities cover learning outcomes, and also for first marking, moderation and giving feedback to students. Information about assessment requirements and criteria are outlined in operations manuals, programme handbooks, module guides, and assignment briefs. The Group has also produced a higher education guide to assessment for staff and students, and the Assessment, Internal Verification and Appeals Policy for Higher National provision. The Group uses a number of quality assurance processes to monitor the effectiveness of its assessment practices including module evaluations, annual programme review reports, and external examiners' reports. The Group has a Recognition of Prior Learning Policy which is outlined in the Higher Education Admissions Policy. The Group's own policies and procedures for assessment and its approach to complying with its awarding partners' regulations would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.33 The team reviewed the effectiveness of these policies and procedures by examining documentation including the Group's and awarding partners' academic regulations, programme handbooks, academic misconduct policies, operations manuals, the Higher Education Guide to Assessment, the Assessment, Internal Verification and Appeals Policy, Recognition of Prior Learning Policy, appeals procedures, Assessment Board and Examination Committee minutes, assignment briefs, external examiners' reports and annual programme review reports. The team also held meetings with students, senior staff and teaching staff.

2.34 The evidence reviewed showed the policies and procedures to be effective in practice. Students whom the team met confirmed their understanding of the information to do with assessment, including the tasks, criteria and deadlines, as well as being aware of how their work is marked and second marked, and the role of the external examiner. Students also reported that, on the whole, they now receive formative and summative assessment feedback by the due date, and are encouraged to reflect on their own work and critique the work of others. Students were aware of the link between theory and practice on their programmes, and gave examples of how this works in practice. Employers do not formally mark assessments but work closely with students and their tutors in assessment design and provide feedback, which helps to inform assessment outcomes.

2.35 The Group has an effective system for moderating assessments. Where more than one college delivers a programme, the Group has an effective system of cross-college moderation and standardisation of assessment marking with the internal verifier, module tutor, lead internal verifier and programme coordinator in attendance. The team heard that this has been particularly beneficial as part of the induction process for academic staff new to higher education.

2.36 Evidence from external examiners' reports shows that programmes are well managed with appropriate assessment practices. While the 2012-13 and 2013-14 external examiners' reports for HNC Construction reported negatively regarding the internal verification of assignment briefs prior to handout to students, and the internal verification of assessed work prior to return to students, the Group has since put in place a detailed schedule for internal verification on this programme. The team saw evidence that this schedule is being adhered to, alongside the action plan for the programme.

2.37 Arrangements for mitigating circumstances and alternative assessment are clearly stated in programme handbooks and in the Assessment, Internal Verification and Appeals Policy for Higher National Programmes. The Group has provided alternative assessments in a small number of cases but students have generally preferred to use the effective learning support available in order to complete the standard assessment tasks. Arrangements for the recognition of prior learning are clearly stated in the Higher Education Admissions Policy but, at the time of the visit, only one student had used the process to go directly into stage two of a programme.

2.38 The review team found that the detailed policies and processes in place are effective in ensuring that students are able to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought. Therefore, the team concludes that this 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

2.39 The awarding partners define the role of external examiners and take responsibility for their appointment. For the awarding bodies, the operations manuals set out the responsibilities and entitlements of external examiners which include the requirement to approve draft assignment briefs and examination papers, sampling of marked coursework and examination scripts for each module, and attendance at two examination committees at which the module results are considered. External examining for Higher National awards is conducted by an annual visit in accordance with Pearson's policy. Each of the awarding partners provides a standard template for the submission of external examiners' reports. Reports are distributed to the three College principals, programme coordinators and the senior members of staff responsible for higher education within each of the colleges before being published in full to students via their VLE. The Group responds to the reports via the awarding bodies or, in the case of Pearson, directly to the external examiner. The external examiners' reports are included in the discussions of a Quality Panel for each programme which meets in September as part of the process for preparing the annual programme review report. The recommendations for action are also discussed at the first programme committee of the year and incorporated into the quality enhancement plan. The Higher Education Academic Board receives a summary analysis of external examiners' reports. The Group's procedures, and its adherence to those of its awarding partners, would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.40 The review team examined the effectiveness of these procedures in practice by examining a range of documentation including external examiners' reports and associated responses, external examiners' handbooks, minutes of relevant meetings where reports are considered, annual programme review reports, and information on the VLE. The team also held meetings with students, teaching staff and senior staff.

2.41 Overall, the evidence reviewed showed the procedures to be effective in practice. The awarding bodies' external examiner handbooks provide a clear basis for their use by the Group. The report templates for programmes validated by the awarding bodies are comprehensive and enable external examiners to confirm that academic standards are being met, to make recommendations for improvement and to identify areas of good practice. They also require external examiners to confirm that assessment processes have been conducted in accordance with policy and that they have been enabled to undertake their duties appropriately. The external examiners' reports for Higher National awards are submitted on the Pearson template and are effective at identifying instances in which the expectations of Pearson have not been met, at which point there is the potential for the award to be 'blocked' until any issues have been addressed.

2.42 External examiners' reports are generally thorough and some confirm that actions have been taken in response to earlier recommendations. They also confirm that external examiners carry out their duties in accordance with policy apart from the consistency with which draft assessments are approved. The operations manuals stipulate that 'draft assignment briefs and examination papers must be sent to the Liaison Manager and to the external examiner for agreement and formal approval prior to being issued to students'. However, the evidence provided to the team suggests that this is 'often' but not always the case, and staff whom the team met stated that there had been some confusion as to whether the Group was responsible for sending drafts directly to the external examiner or whether they had to go via OBU's Liaison Manager. Senior staff whom the team met stated

that, following discussions with OBU, the procedure was being clarified in the latest version of the operations manuals. In practice, three of the reports seen by the team, from two external examiners, reported that draft assignment briefs had not been seen, with one report containing a request that they be made available in future. The review team therefore **recommends** that, by January 2016, the Group works with OBU to clarify the process for providing external examiners with draft assessments and ensure the procedure is rigorously monitored.

2.43 The team saw evidence of the attendance of external examiners at Examination Committees and of programme committees considering external examiners' reports and incorporating their recommendations into programme enhancement plans. The team also saw examples of the detailed and thorough written responses sent to external examiners in response to their reports by the Liaison Manager, in conjunction with the Programme Coordinator, or, in the case of Pearson awards, directly from the Programme Coordinator.

2.44 Students and their representatives reported good awareness of the role played by external examiners and many reported that they had met them. They were also clear where they could access external examiners' reports.

2.45 Overall, the role of external examiners is clear and well embedded in the quality assurance systems, and the Group makes effective use of reports. The team made one recommendation to clarify the process for providing external examiners with draft assessments. Despite this recommendation, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the 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

2.46 The Group follows the awarding partners' processes for programme monitoring and review and also has its own effective internal processes (see paragraph 1.26). These processes would allow the Group to meet the Expectation.

2.47 The effectiveness of the Group's practices was tested by examining relevant documentation including annual programme review and periodic review reports, programme committee terms of reference and minutes, and minutes of Academic Board meetings at which the reports are discussed. The team also held meetings with senior staff, teaching staff and professional support staff, students, and employers.

2.48 The evidence reviewed showed the policies and procedures to be effective in practice (see also paragraph 1.28). The annual programme monitoring process is robust and effective, with strategic oversight being maintained through the Academic Board which reports to the Group Board that includes governance representation. Overarching themes from the annual monitoring process, in particular from annual programme review reports, external examiners' reports and student data, are fed into the comprehensive annual Group self-evaluation document and enhancement plan. The Group's and awarding partners' processes for programme monitoring and review incorporate academic externality and input from students. While there is currently no formal employer involvement in the Group's programme monitoring and review procedures, there is evidence that feedback from key employers does inform reviews of those programmes designed with specific employers, for example the annual programme review of the Foundation Degree in Policing and a curriculum review meeting with employers on the Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care. The review team also heard from staff that the Group wishes to embed employability values and data into the process in future iterations.

2.49 Staff whom the team met displayed a sound understanding of the procedures for programme monitoring and review and their respective roles. The team also heard evidence that the annual programme review report is shared with students at the draft stage, but that student representatives are not always able to attend the programme committee meetings at which the reports are formally discussed (see paragraph 2.30).

2.50 The Group has robust processes for programme monitoring and review, including oversight through the deliberative structures, and procedures are clearly understood by relevant members of staff. Therefore, the 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

2.51 The Group has a Comments, Suggestions and Complaints Policy which is used for all formal student complaints. The Group has an appeals procedure for academic appeals relating to Pearson provision, with appeals relating to other provision being managed by the relevant awarding body. All complaints for the Group are overseen by the Clerk to the Corporation. The Comments, Suggestions and Complaints Policy and the appeals procedure are published on the VLE and referred to in the Student Handbook. Both documents include consideration of additional support needs during the complaints process and, in the case of the Comments, Suggestions and Complaints Policy, states a clear deadline for when the policy is set to be reviewed. There is also a Complaints and Appeals Procedure available for students who are dissatisfied with the admissions process and is included in the Higher Education Admissions Policy. This policy is sent out routinely to all unsuccessful applicants. A complaints log is kept by the Group that monitors response times and outcomes and these are subsequently discussed as part of a standing agenda item at Higher Education Academic Board. These processes would enable the Group to meet the Expectation.

2.52 The team tested the effectiveness of the Group's policies and procedures by examining a range of documentation including the Comments, Suggestions and Complaints Policy, the appeals procedure, Higher Education Admissions Policy, the complaints log and responses to complaints and appeals, and the student handbook. The team also held meetings with staff and students.

2.53 Overall, the team found that the processes for academic appeals and student complaints work effectively in practice. Many concerns raised by students with tutors and programme leaders are discussed informally and resolved at a local level. Students whom the team met were satisfied with the ability of staff to resolve these issues and, if necessary, provide advice and assistance should they need to make a formal complaint. The team did, however, note that the Comments, Suggestions and Complaints Policy identified room for informal complaints but none had been officially logged. Staff whom the team met confirmed that students can raise informal issues either directly with programme coordinators or anonymously through student representatives. Once resolved at a local level, issues are then discussed either by staff or anonymously through student representatives at programme committees. The Higher Education Manager is then the means by which any common themes would be fed through the deliberative structure and fed into programme monitoring reports and enhancement plans. The anonymous feedback feature 'My View' also enables students to submit informal comments and complaints which can then be discussed at programme committees. The team saw evidence that the complaints log is monitored by the Higher Education Academic Board.

2.54 Of the three formal complaints which had been recorded in the complaints log, two had been resolved within an appropriate timeframe. However, the third referred to a lack of clarity in the complaints process and also a late response from the Group. A further appeal to OBU by the complainant was partially upheld and included information on the right to appeal not being provided and the Completion of Procedure letter not being sent. The Group acknowledged these shortcomings and the intention to resolve them when dealing with future complaints. Although the review team could not test this out, it did note that the inadequate time for providing the Completion of Procedure letter to a complainant could

have been avoided had an appropriate timeframe been clearly stipulated for every stage in the complaints procedure. Therefore, the team **recommends** that, by January 2016, the Group reviews the Comments, Suggestions and Complaints Procedure to ensure a clear timeline is specified for all stages of the complaints process.

2.55 Overall, the team concludes that the Expectation is met, due to the appropriate policies and procedures in place at the Group and, in general, their successful implementation. The level of risk is moderate because while the procedures are broadly adequate, there have been some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they have been applied.

Expectation: Met

Level of risk: Moderate

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

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

Findings

2.56 The Group's Strategic Plan includes a commitment to developing student employability which necessitates working closely with employers and industry in the provision of work-based, work-related or placement learning. Guidance for those staff responsible for the management of this provision is contained in the Work-based, Work-related and Placement Learning Policy. Operations Manuals, and/or the programme specifications that form an appendix to them, provide details of the arrangements for work-based, work-related and placement learning within programmes, depending on whether students need to be in work in order to be admitted to the course or if the learning is part of a module within the course. Programme Handbooks and module descriptors further define the requirements for this learning. Programme coordinators are responsible for making employers aware of their responsibilities in relation to providing students with learning opportunities in the workplace in accordance with the requirements in the Work-based, Work-related and Placement Learning Policy. The Group's stated approach would allow it to meet the Expectation.

2.57 The team tested the Group's arrangements for implementing and managing work-based, work-related and placement learning by scrutinising a range of documents including the Strategic Plan, Work-based, Work-related and Placement Learning Policy, operations manuals, programme specifications, programme handbooks and module descriptors. The team also held meetings with staff, students and employers.

2.58 The team found that the processes for managing higher education provision with others work effectively. The team saw evidence from operations manuals, programme specifications, programme handbooks and module descriptors of the necessary information being provided to students regarding the operation and assessment of their work-based and placement learning. Evidence from students confirmed their satisfaction with arrangements for their work-based and placement learning. The team saw examples of employers being involved in reviewing programmes, most notably in Policing and Health and Social Care. The role and responsibilities of employers in the provision of learning opportunities in the workplace vary according to the nature and extent of their engagement. Those employers whom the team met were clear about their responsibilities in the support of work-based and placement learning.

2.59 The Group has effective procedures in place to manage the work-based and placement learning provision in collaboration with employers. Students commented positively on the information and support they receive from the Group. The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

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

Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees*

Findings

2.60 The Group does not offer research degrees, therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.61 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. All of the applicable Expectations are met, although Expectations B1, B5 and B9 are associated with moderate levels of risk.

2.62 The review team makes six new recommendations in quality of student learning opportunities which relate to the following:

- strengthen the process for the internal approval of new Higher National programmes to enable consideration of the academic case through formal committee structures (Expectation B1)
- further develop the VLE to enable its use as an effective pedagogic tool (Expectation B3)
- provide clarity at programme level on the student entitlement to tutorials and how they are managed and monitored in accordance with the Tutorial and Progress Review Policy (Expectation B4)
- strengthen the student representation system to further engage students as partners in quality assurance and enhancement, and to introduce a system to monitor its effectiveness (Expectation B5)
- work with its awarding body to clarify the process for providing external examiners with draft assessments and ensure the procedure is rigorously monitored (Expectation B7)
- review the Comments, Suggestions and Complaints Procedure to ensure a clear timeline is specified for all stages of the complaints process (Expectation B9).

2.63 The team repeats the recommendation from Part A about ensuring that programme specifications for the Pearson awards include contextualised programme-level learning outcomes that clearly articulate to outcomes at unit level (Expectation B1). The team also highlighted a feature of good practice which is the effective strategic commitment to develop and enhance student employability which is linked to learning opportunities (Expectation B4).

2.64 The moderate risks in Part B indicate some weaknesses in the operation of part of the Group's governance structure and shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which quality assurance procedures have been applied.

2.65 The review team concludes that, overall, the quality of student learning opportunities **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 Group has a Higher Education Information Policy which is used to ensure that all information provided to existing and potential students is 'accurate, complete, accessible and timely'. The policy outlines the responsibilities where these are shared between the Group and the awarding partner, as well as the processes for producing, approving and publishing information within the Group. Processes for the production and approval of information for individual programmes are also covered in the operations manuals. The Group has social media policies to ensure that any social networking sites used to provide information are used appropriately.

3.2 The Group produces information for prospective students through its website and includes information about programmes, fees and funding, the application process including Admissions Policy, and the higher education prospectus. Prospective students can also attend information days for more information on the application process and individual programmes. Successful applicants are sent a range of information, listed in the Admissions Policy, to assist with their preparation for higher education. Information for current students is provided primarily through the VLE, including programme information and handbooks, programme committee minutes, and external examiners' reports. These practices and procedures would allow the Group to meet the Expectation.

3.3 The review team tested the effectiveness of the policies and procedures by reviewing the Information Policy, website, VLE, handbooks, and documentation referred to in paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2. The team also held meetings with staff and students.

3.4 Overall, the team found the policies and procedures for checking and producing information about higher education provision to be effective in practice. Staff whom the team met confirmed the arrangements and responsibilities for producing and checking information. Staff with responsibility for quality and standards can also access information through an online version of the Quality and Standards Handbook which presents a user-friendly and accessible guide with links to the relevant awarding partner as well as relevant QAA information.

3.5 The Group website provides comprehensive information for prospective students, including a guide to applications, entry criteria, timelines, Admissions Policy, and fees and funding. Evidence from internal surveys and from meetings confirmed that current students are satisfied with the information they had received both before applying and while on their course. Students whom the review team met also recognised that the VLE had become easier to use after improvements had been made by the Group during the preceding summer break in terms of quality and accessibility.

3.6 The issues regarding programme-level learning outcomes for Pearson provision are covered in paragraph 1.24. The team **recommends** that, by January 2016, the Group ensures that all programme specifications for the Pearson awards include contextualised

programme-level learning outcomes that clearly articulate to outcomes at unit level (see also Expectations A2.2, A3.2 and B1).

3.7 Despite the recommendation, the team concludes that, overall, the Group has robust procedures for checking that information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy and therefore 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

3.8 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published Handbook. The Expectation for this judgement area is met and the associated level of risk is low. The team repeats one recommendation from Parts A and B with regard to all programme specifications for the Pearson awards to include contextualised programme-level learning outcomes that clearly articulate to outcomes at unit level.

3.9 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the Group **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 Group's Higher Education Strategy 2014-17 sets out the 'commitment to continuing to deliver higher education and to enhance the higher level skills in the communities it serves' and to 'establish a reputation for providing high quality, vocationally relevant higher education which significantly enhances students learning and progression opportunities'. Objectives of the Strategy include the systematic development and monitoring of improvement plans at programme, college and Group level and the development of greater student involvement with quality enhancement. The Strategy also includes the compilation of a detailed annual enhancement plan to accompany the higher education Group's self-evaluation document, which includes work with employers and work-based learning opportunities across the provision, and using guest speakers, visits, exhibitions, live projects, master classes and e-learning technologies. The Group-level enhancement plan builds on those detailed in each annual programme review report and forms an effective self-evaluation process enabling the identification and dissemination of good practice. These quality assurance and enhancement processes sit within the higher education quality assurance cycle. The Group's strategies and procedures would allow this Expectation to be met.

4.2 The review team evaluated the effectiveness of the strategies and procedures by examining the Higher Education Strategy, examples of work-based, work-related and placement learning, annual programme review reports and enhancement plans, the Higher Education Group self-evaluation document, and the higher education quality assurance cycle. The team also held meetings with students, student representatives, and senior management, professional support staff and teaching staff.

4.3 The team found that the Group's strategies and procedures for enhancement work effectively. The impact of enhancement activity is measured through programme committees, impact reviews and Quality and Standards Group meetings, based on monitoring of the annual programme review reports and enhancement plans. This also enables the identification and dissemination of good practice, with further discussion at Academic Board. The team saw and heard several examples of strategic initiatives being implemented, including the development of the City of Oxford College campus to provide a Higher Education Student Centre, the establishment of the Higher Education Learning Partnerships office at a single location, and the appointment of three higher education study support tutors. The 2013-14 Higher Education Study Support annual report and the 2014-15 Higher Education Study Support Services Impact report demonstrate the range of support methods in place and the positive effect on student progress and achievement.

4.4 Staff whom the team met displayed a consistent understanding of enhancement, most notably how it links to employability and support for students. Examples include the consistent link between theory and practice provided by work-based learning opportunities and how this enhances students' learning experience and employability (see also paragraph 2.22). Employers confirmed this ethos, and the value the Group places on students being ready for work. Students whom the team met confirmed the support received from tutors and the emphasis on employability, and improvements that had been made as a result of student feedback, for example updates in software.

4.5 The team found that good practice in teaching and learning is shared across the Group, by a range of methods including open classrooms, 'Pass it On', learning walks, peer observation and internet sites. The peer observation scheme, begun at City of Oxford College, is in development across the Group and is seen to be of particular importance in the sharing of good practice, having been found to be particularly valuable for enhancing cross-college feedback and the development of staff new to higher education.

4.6 The evidence from documentation and meetings demonstrates that the Group is taking deliberate steps to enhance the quality of students' learning opportunities. The Group's quality assurance processes are central to the promotion of continuously improving higher education provision. The strategic approach to continuous quality improvement is well embedded across academic and support areas through deliberative structures, and monitored action plans. The team therefore 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

4.7 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook. The Expectation in this area is met and the level of risk is low. The team makes no recommendations in this section.

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

5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

Findings

5.1 One of the three core aims of the Group's Strategic Plan 2014-18 is to 'Develop entrepreneurially-minded and employable people by creating excellent experiences'. This is demonstrated in practice by a portfolio of vocationally focused programmes which incorporate some aspect of work-related or work-based learning that are designed to prepare students for the world of work. This commitment is embedded throughout the Group. For example, the Chief Executive Officer emphasised the importance of differentiating the Group in the higher education market by providing excellent opportunities for the development of employability skills as opposed to being a more general provider. This was strongly mirrored by teaching staff who provided examples of how their experience and links with industry shaped the student experience at programme and module level. Students reported positively on how their studies are preparing them for employment and/or further study.

5.2 Proposals for new provision must state how the programme will meet the Group's strategic goals and its requirement for improving employability. Programme development and approval processes allow the most appropriate of work-based, work-related or placement approaches to be selected and tailored to the needs of a particular subject area. The annual programme review report template now includes a section on work-based, work-related and/or placement learning that will encourage programme teams to draw upon feedback from employers and placement providers in a more systematic way.

5.3 The Group has many examples of ways in which employers are involved in curriculum delivery. These include the use of guest speakers and modules that are designed to develop employability skills through engagement in 'live' project briefs set in collaboration with external companies and organisations. Examples include work undertaken by HND Graphic Design students with the Cherwell Theatre Company and a website design project undertaken for a local company by HND Computing students. This is made possible through strong links with local employers and the involvement of these employers from the design stage of programmes. Employers whom the team met also commented that they benefited from the relationship with the Group and its students in terms of the 'talent' and 'young blood' that they had access to, the opportunity to reflect on their own skills, and the enthusiasm and new ideas generated.

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 30-33 of the [Higher Education Review handbook](#)

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

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

Academic standards

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

Award

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

Blended learning

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

Credit(s)

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

Degree-awarding body

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

Distance learning

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

See also **blended learning**.

Dual award or double award

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

e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning

Enhancement

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

Expectations

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

Flexible and distributed learning

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

See also **distance learning**.

Framework

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

Framework for higher education qualifications

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

Good practice

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

Learning opportunities

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

Learning outcomes

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

Multiple awards

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

Operational definition

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

Programme (of study)

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

Programme specifications

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

Public information

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

Quality Code

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

Reference points

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

Subject Benchmark Statement

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

Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)

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

Threshold academic standard

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

Virtual learning environment (VLE)

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

Widening participation

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

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