

Review of College Higher Education of Blackpool and The Fylde College

May 2013

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About this review

This is a report of a Review of College Higher Education conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Blackpool and The Fylde College. The review took place on 29 April-2 May 2013 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Mrs Elizabeth Bosley-Sharpe (student reviewer)
- Mr Paul Chamberlain
- Professor Derrick Ferney
- Mrs Sally Powell.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Blackpool and The Fylde College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report, the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
 - whether the college fulfils its responsibilities for maintaining the threshold academic standards set by its awarding bodies¹
 - the quality of learning opportunities
 - the quality of information
 - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

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

In reviewing Blackpool and The Fylde College, the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [themes](#) for the academic year 2012-13 are the First Year Student Experience and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.² Background information about Blackpool and The Fylde College is given on page 4 of this report. A dedicated [page of the website](#) explains more about this review method and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.³

¹ For an explanation of terms see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

² www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/rche/pages/default.aspx

Key findings

This section summarises the QAA review team's key findings about Blackpool and The Fylde College (the College).

QAA's judgements about Blackpool and The Fylde College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Blackpool and The Fylde College.

- The academic standards that the College offers on behalf of its awarding bodies **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.
- The quality of information produced by the College about its learning opportunities **is commended**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **is commended**.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at Blackpool and The Fylde College:

- the clear link between the College's commitment to inclusivity and employability, and the resulting innovative assessment tasks (paragraph 1.16)
- the variety of assessment tasks and their relevance to the world of work, which was valued by students and employers (paragraph 1.17)
- the College's anticipatory approach to the consideration of and investment in learning resources (paragraph 2.15)
- the extensive and valuable contribution of students to the quality assurance and enhancement activities of the College (paragraph 2.19)
- the integrated approach to the provision of learning opportunities to enable the entitlements of disabled students to be met in the wider context of a College ethos of inclusivity (paragraph 2.40)
- the integrated and innovative approach to the provision of blended learning opportunities and e-resources using the virtual learning environment, which is both comprehensive and reliable (paragraph 2.55)
- the high-quality website, which provides a user-friendly point of contact for the College's intended audiences (paragraph 3.2)
- the positive contribution made by the role of the Higher Education Development Manager to the development and production of high-quality and accessible course data and management information (paragraph 3.3)
- the comprehensive and continuing development of the virtual learning environment that facilitates effective dissemination of information, providing a 'one-stop shop' for students and staff (paragraph 3.6)
- the positive contribution of the College's equality and diversity agenda to the enhancement of learning opportunities across its higher education provision (paragraph 4.3)
- the embedded culture of enhancement, as exemplified by the strategic leadership provided by the Higher Education Directorate and the complementary high levels of awareness among, and involvement of, staff and students across the College (paragraph 4.8).

Affirmations of action being taken

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

- the College's use of the periodic review cycle to further develop its inclusive approach to assessment (paragraph 1.16)
- the College's ongoing review of feedback to students on assessed work (paragraph 1.20)
- the College's proposed developments of the virtual learning environment as a single integrated platform to strengthen further its management information (paragraph 2.25)
- the College's innovative approach to develop the Student Charter further as part of the Learner Involvement and Inclusivity agendas and to make it more accessible to students (paragraph 2.62)
- the College's plans to develop further the data collection system at the level of the module and from the point of validation (paragraph 3.4).

The First Year Student Experience

The College is committed to supporting students throughout their first year as they develop the key skills of independent learning and employability. The College provides targeted and valuable pre-entry information and support. Academic and pastoral support provided throughout the first year is flexible and meets individual student needs, and aligns with the College's overall commitment to the equality and diversity agenda of inclusivity from pre-entry through to graduation.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the [handbook for Review of College Higher Education](#), available on the QAA website.⁴

⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx

About Blackpool and The Fylde College

Blackpool and The Fylde College operates from four major campuses and three learning centres located along the Fylde coastline. The College also has a significant number of training courses delivered in nearly 40 other venues that have been developed to meet the needs of employers.

The College has been involved in the delivery of higher education since 1988, and in partnership with its awarding bodies - the University of Lancaster and Liverpool John Moores University - it offers a total of 11 full honours degrees, 28 Foundation Degrees, 21 associated top-up degrees, nine Higher Nationals and two professional courses.

The College has achieved significant growth in the number of higher education students over the last six years; current numbers are 2,578 in 2011-12 and, as of July 2012, 1,308 staff, 260 of whom are involved in the delivery and support of higher education. The majority of higher education is delivered at the central University Centre Campus, with Engineering and Computing courses being delivered at Bispham Campus and the Maritime course at the Fleetwood site. The College has recently signed a strategic partnership agreement with the University of Salford with a view both to moving some of its existing programmes to and developing new programmes with this awarding body with effect from 2013-14.

The College was part of the pilot for Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) in 2007 and underwent a successful review. Since then, the College has made significant progress against all its recommendations. It has made major investments in its estates, developed a dedicated University Centre and introduced specialist higher education learning mentors to provide academic support, student skills, mental health and well-being support. The Higher Education Directorate has been expanded to include a Higher Education Development Manager and an academic member of staff with a specific focus on teaching, learning and scholarship. The College has made enhancements to student engagement and representation, including dedicated support for the Students' Union. At the time of the review visit there was a changeover in the Principalship of the College due to retirement. The review team saw evidence of careful succession planning and the underpinning of the higher education leadership and commitment within the Directorate and also across the academic and support services in the College.

Explanation of the findings about Blackpool and The Fylde College

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.⁵

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](#)⁶ is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the [handbook](#) for the review method, also on the QAA website.⁷

1 Academic standards

Outcome

The academic standards of the awards the College offers on behalf of its awarding bodies **meet UK expectations**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 It is the ultimate responsibility of the College's awarding bodies to allocate the qualifications they award to the appropriate benchmarks. The College adheres to the guidance provided by its awarding bodies and makes effective use of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) in defining the structure, learning outcomes and assessment strategies of its programme specifications at both the internal and external stages of the (re)approval process.

1.2 Continuing alignment with the FHEQ is verified annually by external examiners who are required to confirm that the standards set for programmes and modules address relevant subject benchmark statements, the FHEQ and the requirements of the appropriate professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

1.3 Validation procedures employ assessment workload equivalences to define the volume of teaching and learning activity required to achieve intended learning outcomes at module and programme levels. The reports of revalidation and periodic review events confirm that considerable care is taken to ensure parity between assessment tasks and the level and volume of credit awarded. The College's Quality Manual specifies that course teams are responsible for identifying the assessment instruments to be used, their appropriateness, completeness and ability to measure different levels of student achievement.

1.4 Programme handbooks provide a clear explanation of programme articulation within the FHEQ, and the students met by the review team were conversant with the levels at which they were studying. Students are satisfied with the College's use of the FHEQ to determine the academic standard of education, which they believed to be high, and to set appropriate and progressive levels of challenge in each year of the course.

1.5 On the basis of its meetings with students and its examination of validation and revalidation guidance, the reports of validation events, programme specifications,

⁵ The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However, it is available on request for inspection: please contact QAA's Reviews Group.

⁶ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx

⁷ See note 4.

programme handbooks and external examiners' reports, the review team concluded that the higher education qualifications are allocated to the appropriate level in the FHEQ.

Use of external examiners

1.6 External examiners for the College's programmes are appointed by its awarding bodies, with the College taking a more active role in the nomination in the case of the University of Lancaster, and a similar approach is anticipated in its relationship with the University of Salford. The awarding bodies provide clear guidance on the role of external examiners in providing an impartial and independent view on standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards. External examiners are also asked to identify good practice and/or enhancement opportunities. Details of external examiners and their period of appointment are monitored by the Higher Education Academic Development Committee, and annual School self-evaluation documents (SEDs) identify the need for new/replacement external examiners in their Quality Improvement Action Plans.

1.7 Once appointed, external examiners are prepared for their role by the awarding university and also briefed subsequently by the relevant Programme Leader at the College. This briefing results in an action plan identifying expectations and key dates in the assessment process. New and less experienced external examiners are mentored by the accrediting university.

1.8 The College recognises the value of the work of external examiners and a number of its own academic staff also act as external examiners for universities, colleges and professional bodies.

1.9 The reporting forms are sufficiently disaggregated to provide informative comments on the operation of programmes delivered by the College. The review team saw evidence of appropriate action being taken in respect of issues raised in external examiners' reports. At programme and School level, external examiners' reports are used to inform Improvement Plans in the Annual Programme Reviews. These reviews are shared with the relevant external examiners and progress is discussed in School quality meetings held three times per year, and at an annual Quality Review Meeting chaired by the Principal. At School level, external examiners' reports are also summarised and subject to action planning in Annual School Strategic Reports, commonly referred to as School SEDs. The College has established a peer review process to enhance the quality of Annual Programme Reviews which pairs up schools to examine each other's programmes. The review team learned from staff that this cross-membership contributes to the enhancement of learning opportunities by facilitating the dissemination of good practice identified in external examiners' reports and other processes. Similarly, Annual Programme Reviews are considered annually by the Higher Education Academic Development Committee, which is attended by programme leaders and a representative from the University of Lancaster. The University receives all finalised Annual Programme Reviews.

1.10 At College level, all external examiners' reports are scrutinised by the College's Quality and Standards Team and, if necessary, by the Director of Quality and Standards. The College's Higher Education Strategy Group receives an annual overview of external examiners' reports, which is shared with the University of Lancaster. External examiners' reports also play a significant role in revalidation/periodic review events at which issues arising from them on a more longitudinal basis are identified and addressed.

1.11 Students are made aware of the role of external examiners in programme handbooks, and the students whom the reviewers met understood the assessment and moderation processes, both internal and external. Student representatives also confirmed

that, with effect from 2012-13, students have had access to external examiners' reports on the College's virtual learning environment.

1.12 On the basis of its scrutiny of the appointment and role of external examiners and the extensive use made of their reports in the deliberative committees of the College and its awarding bodies, the review team confirms that scrupulous use is made of external examiners and their reports in assuring standards.

Assessment and standards

1.13 The College's Quality Manual and its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy provide guidance on the design of assessment materials within the relevant awarding bodies' regulatory frameworks. Course teams have responsibility for ensuring that module and programme-level outcomes can be achieved through the assessment tasks they set.

1.14 Programme specifications provide a rationale for using the range of assessment instruments and this is complemented by an assessment overview that provides a breakdown of the assessment strategies used in each module. The College's Higher Education Curriculum Strategy states that the assessment process should foster active learning and identifies generic types of assessment, both formative and summative. Preference is given to inclusive formative and summative assessment tasks that can be undertaken by as many students as possible without modification for disabilities or learning difficulties.

1.15 Assessment schedules are monitored at School level in order to ensure that students are not overloaded with assessments, and the review team saw evidence of the individual assessment schedules developed on the College's virtual learning environment for the benefit of students.

1.16 The review team identified a feature of **good practice** in the clear connections between the College's values and commitment to equality and diversity, employability and inclusivity, its assessment strategy, and the translation of that strategy through programme specifications into innovative assessment instruments designed to boost the self-confidence of students in the achievement of their learning outcomes, particularly in their first year of study. The review team also **affirms** the College's stated plans to use the periodic review cycle to extend to all courses its inclusive approach to assessment. Staff commented enthusiastically about the range and relevance of activities intended to support them in areas ranging from quality assurance to writing assessment strategies and tasks, and the College anticipates growth in these areas over 2013-14 consequent upon planned changes to assessment regulations by the University of Lancaster.

1.17 The review team identified a related feature of **good practice** in the College's development of a variety of assessment tasks and their relevance to the world of work, which was valued by students and employers met by the review team.

1.18 There are appropriate processes in place for external examiners to approve assessments, and marking and moderation procedures are outlined in the Quality Manual. Students are provided with assessment criteria for each assessment task and evidenced a clear understanding of internal and external moderation. The student submission expressed satisfaction with 'a clear scoring regime' and external examiners commented on the 'rigour and probity' of assessment. The review team noted that examination scripts are marked anonymously but coursework is not. Staff explained that a combination of generally small teaching groups, the nature of the assessment tasks used and the personalised approach to in-course assessment feedback served to limit the feasibility of anonymous marking. Students were fully aware of and expressed satisfaction with the current arrangements.

1.19 Assessment and Progression Boards operate at subject, School and College level, and award recommendations are confirmed by the awarding bodies. Staff explained that recently introduced standard classification software had enabled the more systematic production of range of reports providing additional information to assure standards, and the reviewers saw continual professional development and additional guidance materials relating to its use.

1.20 The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy underlines the importance of assessment feedback and prescribes the timescale within which it must be returned to students. The most recent analysis of National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes identified the promptness of feedback on student assessed work as a continuing concern and this has prompted the College to engage in a college-wide review of feedback to students. The review team heard from students that feedback was now being returned in a timely manner and only one instance of late feedback was reported in meetings with students. The review team saw evidence that assessment feedback had been discussed at recent staff and student forums and **affirms** the College's ongoing review of feedback to students on assessed work.

Setting and maintaining programme standards

1.21 Authority for setting and maintaining academic standards is defined by means of a series of agreements between the College and each of its validating partner universities, which make it clear that responsibility for academic standards lies with the awarding bodies. The agreements are complemented by cross-membership of relevant committees with, for example, the University of Lancaster being represented on the College's Higher Education Academic Development Committee and the College on the University's Collaborative Provision Teaching Committee. In the case of Liverpool John Moores University, a University Link Tutor attends College Board of Study meetings.

1.22 The College's longest partnership relationship is with the University of Lancaster. Following a successful quinquennial review in 2008, the University of Lancaster devolved a degree of responsibility for quality assurance to the College which the College exercises through its quality assurance policies and procedures, its deliberative committees and its Board of Governors. Examples of this devolution include the processing of Annual Programme Reports, responsibility for the early stages of the programme approval process and devolved awards boards. The College anticipates working to similarly devolved responsibilities from its new validation partner, the University of Salford.

1.23 Notwithstanding this operational devolution, programme approval and review processes are determined and overseen by the awarding bodies. For programmes validated by the University of Lancaster, the College provides advanced notice of the programmes it intends to validate/revalidate in the following academic year. Approval of these intentions triggers a four-stage procedure for each programme to be validated: business planning, outline planning permission, validation and final approval by the University. Throughout the approval/review process, the College works with a course or School consultant based at the University. These consultants are subject specialists who support programme teams across a range of activities. College staff spoke highly of their support and regarded them as 'critical friends'.

1.24 Programme design, approval, monitoring and review make appropriate use of externality, though the review team noted that the procedures operated by the University of Lancaster permit as optional the attendance of an approval adviser external to the University, while at Liverpool John Moores University and the University of Salford it is a requirement. The review team saw several examples of additional externality through inputs

from employers and the relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs), as well as from students.

1.25 On the basis of the College's agreements with its awarding bodies, the College's robust approach to operation of the quality assurance processes delegated to it, and in particular the regular contact between the College and the University of Lancaster through cross-membership of relevant committees and panels and the work of the course consultants, the review team concluded that the design, approval, monitoring and review of programmes promoted the setting and maintaining of appropriate academic standards.

Subject benchmarks

1.26 Guidance from the College's awarding bodies specifies that subject benchmark statements and, in the case of Foundation Degrees, the *Foundation Degree benchmark statement*, should inform curriculum design and the initial approval and periodic review process. The review team examined validation documentation and found evidence that this guidance was being fully implemented.

1.27 In addition to subject benchmark statements, PSRB requirements and Sector Skills Council frameworks and competency requirements are also considered where relevant to the programme, and this was evident in the comprehensive mapping of learning outcomes for programmes accredited by the Institution of Engineering and Technology and the referencing of the Sector Skills Council for Care in Healthcare programmes.

1.28 The student submission commented positively on the opportunities available to students to comment on subject benchmark statements. On the basis of this and its consideration of relevant documentation and associated guidance from both the awarding bodies and the College, the review team concluded that programme design, delivery and review made appropriate use of external reference points.

Conclusion

1.29 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified. All of the expectations for this judgement area were met and the College was already taking appropriate action in areas where it was recognised that further work would enhance practice and contribute positively to the student experience: the ongoing development of the periodic review cycle and the ongoing and active discussions about improving feedback to students on assessment.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at Blackpool and The Fylde College **meets UK expectations**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 There is a robust and well defined Recruitment and Selection Policy for all new teaching staff. All members of staff without a formal teaching qualification are required to successfully acquire either a Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) or equivalent within two years of appointment. Staff are granted remission from teaching duties or given financial support for their studies, most of which are undertaken through the partnership arrangement with the University of Lancaster.

2.2 There is an acknowledgement that staff with an industrial or professional background bring a wealth of cutting edge knowledge to the curriculum. Around 20 per cent of staff have flexible hourly paid contracts, allowing them to continue working within industry. This is seen as a positive arrangement as it broadens the students' learning exposure to the world of work through many different approaches to teaching. The subject expertise of staff, their knowledge of industry and the level of support they provide is also seen by students as a positive benefit to the learning experience. There is a rigorous approach taken to staff recruitment, involving significant student interaction, which is seen as an integral part of the recruitment process.

2.3 Development activities for newly appointed teaching staff include an in-depth 'welcome to College' induction and a two-day 'teaching essentials' programme. This ensures that all new teaching staff are introduced to the College's culture, values and systems. These programmes run on a monthly basis throughout the year. Further guidance and support for new staff is also embedded within the Staff Guide.

2.4 All new teaching members of staff are allocated a mentor. There is a strong emphasis on the mentorship programme and an ethos of mutual support and collegiality among staff met by the review team. There is training and guidance for staff acting in the role of mentors. The system is valued by staff, particularly as it underpins good working relations beyond the end of the formal arrangement. During the probationary period, mentors and the new members of staff work closely together on schemes of work and standardisation as well as the use of assessment criteria and marking. A new member of staff is reviewed every three months until the end of their probationary period.

2.5 Teaching staff are allocated 50 'scholarly activity hours' to undertake research and/or training sessions looking at the wider role of higher education practitioners and to attend and present at relevant conferences. There is an annual review of scholarly activity. The College highlights the breadth of scholarly activity through its own Scholarship Review Publication and also promotes these activities through ScholarNet. Staff value the support the College provides, which enables them to engage fully in a range of staff development activities.

2.6 The College actively maintains and enhances its higher education provision through the annual Staff Development Review process. This supports continuing professional development activity, enabling staff to meet agreed national professional teaching standards, engage with the Higher Education Academy and ensure that teaching is informed and enriched by applied research. Members of staff are asked to comment on the impact of their research, scholarship or professional practice within the annual SED process. This is valued as enabling academic staff to present research to students as well as human resources and managerial practitioners. The impact of contemporary knowledge and understanding gained by continuous professional development is critical in informing the subjects that are taught within the College.

2.7 There are a number of staff development activities which focus on developing pedagogy across the College and on aspects of working with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). There is also an option to take a day or half-day session designated for higher education, provided via short accessible sessions. The Scholarship and Research Development Scheme enables teaching staff to undertake further research projects and is widely understood and appreciated by staff, who are encouraged to bid for the time accordingly.

2.8 There is a robust process for the observation of teaching. Line managers and heads of school carry out the College's graded observations and these are seen as an essential mechanism for quality assurance. These are used within the Schools' SEDs as well as being

a tool for individual and group staff development activities. The quality of teaching and learning is reviewed on a regular basis through annual review and reporting arrangements.

2.9 Students' views about learning and teaching are sought, monitored and evaluated through a number of processes, such as obtaining their views during the course of a formal observation and their completion of module evaluations at the end of each module. Feedback from students is generally positive and attests to a high quality of teaching. Overall, the outcomes of the NSS in 2012 also indicated that students were increasingly satisfied with the quality of teaching, assessment and feedback, learning resources and other categories. Staff operate an 'open door policy' so that students' issues, concerns and worries can be addressed and dealt with efficiently. Students met by the review team confirmed that this approach was firmly embedded in the College's ethos and that this was well understood and greatly appreciated.

Learning resources

2.10 The College's approach to the provision of learning resources is effective in ensuring that these resources are appropriate to allow students to achieve the learning outcomes of their programmes.

2.11 The facilities and the University Centre itself provide a dedicated up to date focal point for higher education students. It is an inclusive environment allowing students and staff to interact. The concept and creation of the University Centre was carefully planned with the principle focus of providing for a dedicated and improved student learning experience. The College has a well developed 10-year estates development strategy which is flexible enough to accommodate potential expansion and further developments. The strategy seeks to ensure the preservation and enhancement of an attractive and functional working and learning environment for staff, students and visitors to the College over the next 10 years. Careful consideration was given to the development of the University Centre, and in particular to its accessibility in line with the College's equality and diversity commitment. The first phase of the 10-year strategy was a complete refurbishment of the Fleetwood Campus to install a full mission engine room simulator, and specialist lab facilities and classrooms for Marine Biology and Coastal Zone Management students which are utilised fully in assessment tasks and appreciated by students.

2.12 Students clearly value the virtual learning environment (VLE), and the electronic resources, information and guidance it provides. This medium contains a wide range of student-focused information including student handbooks, programme aims, assessment requirements and intended outcomes. Additional support and extensive links to resources are provided through the College portal. The VLE facilitates access to bespoke electronic resources for each module, and where some discipline areas do not lend themselves easily to development on the chosen VLE platform, other electronic means of access have been provided.

2.13 Outcomes from the NSS in 2011 indicated some dissatisfaction with the adequacy of library resources in some discipline areas; however, since then the College has responded to this and invested in the library stock, has extended e-book and e-journal resources and has purchased additional copies of core texts. There is also a service that allows students to order specific journals. The Stock Purchasing Policy was revisited in September 2012 to ensure that the library contained at least one copy of every book that is on the reading lists and, where possible, an e-book is available of the same publication. There has been a further investment in the student record system, known as the Electronic Business System resource, which now contains 18 cross-searchable resources. In response to requests from students raised through the Learner Voice mechanism, the library opening times have been extended to include Saturdays during term time. Students have

comprehensive access to the VLE and other electronic resources, such as e-books, wherever they are located.

2.14 Students can access lecture notes and handouts, and communicate with the academic staff outside of College hours via the VLE. The College is currently working through a pilot for the electronic submission of assignments with a view to implementing this system across the College. Students met by the team were happy with this process, especially the easy accessibility of their electronic feedback. On the whole, students expressed significant satisfaction with the College's learning resources, although not all were aware that they were able to access the University of Lancaster's learning resources on a physical basis as well as electronically. Some of the students met by the review team commented that the distance was too great to facilitate easy access, although those who had taken the opportunity to visit the awarding body facilities found them to be of great benefit.

2.15 The College responds quickly and appropriately to students' comments on the quality and enhancement of learning resources. Overall, the review team found the College's anticipatory approach to the consideration of and investment in learning resources to be a feature of **good practice**.

Student voice

2.16 There is an extensive and valuable contribution from higher education students to the College's quality assurance and enhancement activities. The College takes full account of students' views and provides numerous opportunities for students to be involved in discussion and decision-making. There is a pyramid of student representation within each School and within departments and programme areas; all students are invited to collaborate with staff through both formal and informal communications and committees.

2.17 Significant numbers of both staff and students attend the University Centre Student Forums. Students commented that this has afforded them the capacity and opportunity to affect change within the College regarding higher education issues. The minutes of these meetings are accessible to all students via the VLE. There is also a high level of representation from the Students' Union on College committees, including on the Equality and Diversity Committee which meets twice a term. Students have taken an active lead in the business of this committee, including the monitoring of College compliance with relevant legislation. The review team also heard that students had worked closely with the Principal on resolving barriers to learning.

2.18 Students have been actively involved in developing and updating the Learner Involvement strategy as well as the Learner Voice action plan. There are class, course, deputy and head representatives from each School. School Forums are held once a term. There is extensive information available to the representatives on the VLE under the Students' Union area, as well as in the Student Representative Handbook. The recently introduced Learner Voice role underpins the engagement of students at every level across the College and involvement with a number of quality assurance activities. Students met by the review team commented that they are listened to, their requirements are taken seriously and measures are put in place accordingly to resolve issues. Considerable efforts are made to ensure that students are able to engage with institutional quality assurance mechanisms and processes, with an emphasis on students as co-creators of their learning experience. Student representatives can access training offered by the Student Enrichment Office, and there was a 90 per cent uptake in the training at the beginning of the 2012-13.

2.19 The College has taken an innovative approach to the development and implementation of the Student Charter, more detail of which can be found in paragraphs 2.61

to 2.62. Students have also been involved in the recruitment of the new Principal and Chief Executive of the College and provided valuable input to the recruitment process at all levels. Overall, the review team found the extensive and valuable contribution of students to the quality assurance and enhancement activities of the College to be a feature of **good practice**.

Management information

2.20 The review team found that there is effective use of management information to safeguard quality and standards and to promote enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College.

2.21 The review team saw evidence of the comprehensive and continuing development of data to which staff have access. Monthly data on attendance, registers and retention are available through the staff VLE. Academic staff are able to access relevant information that is easy to interrogate and to produce reports from at any time. Staff were enthusiastic about the quality and accuracy of the data produced on student cohort analysis, progression, withdrawal and achievement. Termly quality assurance meetings in each School use management information effectively to monitor the progress of the students as well as progress against actions within the Quality Improvement Plans.

2.22 The VLE is developing into a 'one-stop shop' for staff in terms of access to management information, as well as a learning and teaching tool. It provides a rapid overview of key management information across the College and also particular to the School, down to the level of individual programmes. Tutors are also able to use the VLE to record information for tutorials, enabling students to access the information if they were unable to attend the session. The College conducts termly 'VLE audits' to ascertain its deployment as a teaching tool. The College applies a bronze to gold medal award system for users to recognise those who use the system comprehensively and innovatively and to encourage further developments across the College. Staff are able to look across other discipline areas where usage is found to be particularly effective, and this has been a useful tool in the promotion and dissemination of good practice.

2.23 There is a comprehensive student learner profile which is obtained through the student record system (Electronic Business System) and enables tutors to see all relevant information about a student, including attendance registers, details of the higher education learner managers' workshops attended, as well as details with regards to any additional learning support that the student may have accessed.

2.24 The Annual Programme Review data pack provides the programme leaders with up to date information on a wide range of key performance indicators such as gender, disability, ethnicity, diversity, highest grade on entry, cohort analysis, and full-time offers and enrolments data. Staff were enthusiastic about the ready accessibility and intelligibility of this information.

2.25 Management information systems are well developed and there was a high level of awareness and appreciation at all levels of staff across the College, from tutors to heads of schools. The Higher Education Directorate plans to further develop the College's management information and there is evidence of a strong commitment to the future development of the VLE as a more sophisticated management information tool to drive decision-making. The review team **affirms** the College's proposed developments of the VLE as a single integrated platform to strengthen further its management information.

Admission to the College

2.26 The College's Higher Education Admissions Policy has clear aims and principles, and sets out guidance on entry processes. The Director of Marketing and Communication is responsible for ensuring that this policy and its integrated procedures for the administration of the admissions process are up to date, and that all associated procedures included in the Admissions Policy are reviewed annually.

2.27 The College produces prospectuses that contain programme descriptions together with information on welfare, guidance and support for students. Prospectuses may be downloaded from the College website. All programme information can be found within the prospectus as well as via online programme descriptions. This information is reviewed annually for accuracy by schools and programme teams. Once a prospectus is ready in draft, it is forwarded to the awarding bodies for approval or amendment and then returned to heads of schools and Corporate Services for final approval.

2.28 Students are provided with hard copies of student handbooks at induction and a new handbook on an annual basis, but they are also available via the VLE. The handbooks are thorough and provide the student with a comprehensive guide to higher education at the College, with detailed information on credits, modules, assessments, contact, workshops and advice.

2.29 The division of responsibilities between the central admissions team and the academic teams are clear. The central admissions team receives and enters the details of the student then refers the information to the relevant academic staff for their decisions. If rejecting a student, the academic member of staff will make the reasons known to the admissions team so that they are able to answer queries and suggest alternative courses to the applicant. The review team also heard that the College has recently developed a tool to enable more direct interface with UCAS, and this has greatly improved the time taken to consider applications and to issue acceptance decisions directly to applicants.

2.30 There are additional procedures for assisting applicants with disabilities. The Disabilities Team contacts all students who declare a disability and offer appropriate support through applications, admissions and induction.

Complaints and appeals

2.31 Procedures for complaints and appeals are succinct, clear and readily accessible. Formal complaints are dealt with and managed centrally within the Quality and Standards Unit. The complaints procedure is located in numerous places in both electronic and hard copy.

2.32 All parties seek to resolve matters informally at an early stage whenever possible. The Complaints Administrator, who is based in the Quality and Standards Unit, provides additional assistance in resolving matters at an early stage. More formal complaints are submitted in writing and a receipt given within two working days. The College endeavours to respond to formal complaints within nine days.

2.33 There is a formal appeals procedure in the case of assessment grades, where the responsibility for an initial response lies with a College staff member depending on the circumstances. The document outlines very clearly the procedures student must take when submitting an appeal. The review team saw evidence of a College culture of rapid response to complaints and appeals, and of early engagement with the recently revised Chapter of the Quality Code.

2.34 The Academic Management Team receives termly reports of complaints and an annual report is submitted to the Senior Management Team at the end of each academic year. The report contains comprehensive information regarding the numbers, types of complaint, departments (academic and service) against whom complaints are made, and the outcomes.

Career advice and guidance

2.35 As noted in paragraph 1.16, there is a clear link between the College's commitment to inclusivity and employability and the resulting innovative assessment tasks. The College provides well organised careers guidance and advice to its higher education students. There has been a recent 65 per cent increase in attendance at a number of dedicated career group sessions provided centrally. The College's management information system produces data and an effective analysis of first destination employment outcomes.

2.36 The College's approach to work-based learning and placements is considered later in this report (see paragraphs 2.56-2.60). The College makes extensive use of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) ambassadors to promote learning and careers opportunities that are open to current and prospective students, particularly those based in local schools. Employers work with tutors to develop work-based learning opportunities that promote employability and build on learning within the higher education programmes. Students participate in a number of different types of assessments that build up their confidence for both current and future employability. As the team has already noted in paragraph 1.17, the variety of assessment tasks and their relevance to the world of work is valued by students and employers. Employers met by the review team commented that the work placement activities build capacity within their workplaces and facilitate mutual benefits from the skills brought to the workplace by the placements students and the opportunities to learn from industry practices.

2.37 The College makes extensive use of personal development planning tools to encourage students to record their transferable skills and promote their employability.

Supporting disabled students

2.38 The entitlements of disabled students are addressed within the College's Equality and Diversity Framework, which identifies principles for an integrated approach to be embedded across the institution. These principles are clearly articulated in College documentation, communicated effectively to stakeholders, and were readily identified by staff and students met by the review team.

2.39 The management of learning opportunities in the context of these principles is led by the Principal as chair of the Equality and Diversity Committee. Academic issues regarding disabled students are managed within schools, where progress is monitored along with the whole cohort. At College level, a dedicated specialist staff team offers advice and learning support and facilitates Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) applications, the assessments for which take place in an approved Technical Assessment and Support Centre within the College. Effective monitoring and evaluation is demonstrated through an annual report, with statistical analysis provided by the Equality and Diversity Officer and received by senior management and the Board of Governors. Students receiving help from recently introduced higher education learning mentors (HELMs) and DSA-supported learners are surveyed together formally through an annual questionnaire.

2.40 Programme documents, minutes, staff and student handbooks, wider institutional literature and the design of the College learning environment all demonstrate a high level of

equality and diversity awareness throughout the institution. The staff handbook strongly foregrounds equality and diversity issues in all its sections and they feature in continuing professional development activities for all staff. The review team identified the integrated approach to the provision of learning opportunities to enable the entitlements of disabled students to be met in the wider context of a College ethos of inclusivity as a feature of **good practice**.

2.41 Appropriate infrastructure supports disabled students through admissions, registration and induction processes. Information for students with disabilities is provided on the VLE and through leaflets and induction. The College collects a range of disclosure data from UCAS applications and at enrolment, and then ongoing data is recorded on the student record system. Special student selection arrangements are employed, for example for students with Asperger's syndrome and with visual impairment. Disability Services staff use the 'Engage' recording system to log support activity for reporting on disclosure. The College disclosure protocol is congruent with the Data Protection Policy. The inclusion of learners with medical needs who are not eligible for DSA has been achieved through the 'In Case of Emergency' (ICE) procedure.

2.42 Curriculum design and learning and teaching are informed by the College's inclusive ethos, as enshrined in the Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum policy. Entitlements for students disclosing disability are clearly outlined in the Examinations Policy. Disability Services staff work closely with academic staff to support curriculum needs, and the review team saw extensive evidence of the major positive impact of the role of the HELMs on the provision of learning support. The student submission and the Equality and Diversity Annual Report note that students with disabilities reported a one per cent higher overall satisfaction than the rest of the student body in the NSS.

2.43 Accessibility audits illustrate how design and management of the College estate strongly supports the Equality and Diversity Framework, and the 'Disabled Go' website outlines the College building accessibility. Students confirmed their active partnership in the extension of access and noted the recent introduction of 'listening posts' throughout the College following one of their own initiatives.

2.44 Entitlements for students with disabilities are effectively addressed in response to principles of equality and diversity, which are clearly defined and embedded across the institution. The College adopts an integrated approach to the provision of learning opportunities for all students which offers specialist support where necessary in determining learning agreements, enabling admissions, offering tutorial assistance and providing an appropriate learning environment. The approach is consistently adopted across all schools and is effectively monitored.

Supporting international students

2.45 Although international student numbers are small and largely confined to one specific programme, the review team was able to verify that the quality of learning opportunities for international students is appropriate.

2.46 Procedures for supporting the small number of international students are clearly defined. The majority of these are enrolled on a single programme developed in close partnership with the maritime sector and are supported through specific policies, structures and procedures.

2.47 This distinctive programme is delivered at a highly specialised College centre. The College ensures that students, who spend the majority of their time at sea, maintain tutor contact throughout their work-based studies and flexible teaching, learning and

assessment arrangements while ashore. Programme documents, details of accreditation by professional bodies, and meetings with staff, students and employers confirmed that robust and appropriate arrangements are in place for the support and management of international students on this programme.

2.48 Students and staff spoke enthusiastically about the advantages of the flexibility of programme delivery which, for example, enables optimum coordination of on-board professional work and on-shore formal assessment. This flexibility will also enable these students to contribute to the NSS in 2013. A relatively small number of other international students is effectively managed within the structure of the schools, for example in the School of Creative Arts, where appropriate additional provision is made.

Supporting postgraduate research students

2.49 The College has no provision at this level.

Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements

2.50 The College is not responsible for the management of any collaborative arrangements as they are currently defined by the Quality Code.

2.51 The College collaborates as a validated partner both in the context of its established relationships with the University of Lancaster and its associated colleges, and Liverpool John Moores University, and through its new relationship with the University of Salford. The College is proactive in these collaborations, seeking partnerships that are appropriate in terms of subject expertise and that provide scope for the wider strategic and more particular curriculum developments of the institution. Shared staff development activities within quality assurance-themed events are a feature of collaboration with the University of Lancaster and Blackburn College. Students who had been involved spoke enthusiastically about their participation in consultations anticipating the new arrangements with the University of Salford.

Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.52 Although the requirement for distributed arrangements is limited, the College is effectively managing learning opportunities to support flexible study and an ever-increasing use of e-learning resources. There is only one programme where students do not have to be physically located at the institution; however, the majority of programmes employ a blended learning approach to delivery. This is informed by the policy of the leading university partner. VLE resources are monitored by schools. The College is seeking to enhance all of its provision - however it is currently delivered - to include interactive multimedia and open source web conferencing for distance and blended learning.

2.53 Meetings with students, staff and employers provided evidence of ways in which the VLE provides scope to respond to the evolving needs of students and employers, and is used to encourage an increasing flexibility in the delivery of existing programmes and support for accessing learning materials from a distance.

2.54 The provision of learning opportunities is flexible and responsive to staff and student needs. At the same time, virtual learning capacity is provided within a well structured development plan offering clear objectives and timelines for implementation. As noted in paragraph 2.22, staff participation is encouraged through an award-bearing incentive scheme. Where specialist e-learning software is required, this is provided outside of the VLE.

2.55 Students value the facilities offered by the VLE for them to manage their own learning and assessment schedules, and this was vividly demonstrated by a student-led presentation for the review team. The review team identified the integrated and innovative approach to the provision of blended learning opportunities and e-resources using the VLE, which is both comprehensive and reliable, as a feature of **good practice**.

Work-based and placement learning

2.56 The quality of learning opportunities delivered through work-based and placement learning is effective. Work-based and placement learning is central to a large part of the College provision and is considered a long-standing strength. The College adopts a school-based approach, although a standardised template is provided for work-based learning handbooks. Documents clearly illustrate the procedures employed by schools and programmes for the administration of placement learning.

2.57 Responsibilities of partners and entitlement of students are clearly stated in agreements. Students, mentors and employers met by the review team confirmed the effectiveness of mutual agreements. The management of work-based learning continues to be enhanced in schools through the deployment of both academic and administrative staff in roles customised to support the provision appropriately.

2.58 Successes in this area for the College were reflected in the outcomes of a recent University of Lancaster thematic review. There was solid support from a wide range of local employers - ranging from large multinational companies to small and medium-sized enterprises - for the College's claim that it is 'responding innovatively and dynamically at local level'. A particularly strong example is the College's provision in Project Management with BAE Systems, which has received national recognition and offers scope for further development. This course is tailored for the particular local needs of the employer. In this case, the procedures for work placements are designed to enhance the students' future employability and career by giving them work experience on a full-time basis, increasing their self-confidence and skills and thus providing a sound basis to their theoretical education.

2.59 Although some elements of recent NSS responses indicate a lower degree of satisfaction with work placements, students met by the review team confirmed their satisfaction with the organisation and management of placements. Staff also commented enthusiastically about the College's strong reputation for the quality of its placement students and the associated support arrangements, making the sourcing of placement opportunities a relatively straightforward process. While the College expects students to find their own placements, support is provided through dedicated placement officers should the student be unable to find suitable work experience. The efficient methods for obtaining placements are appreciated by students.

2.60 The review team saw evidence of the sharing of practice in work-based learning across the institution, through the thematic review process and the emerging online ScholarNet facility. Staff commented on the sharing of good practice within programmes and schools, although the institution-wide staff development events programme has not recently addressed work-based learning as a specific topic.

Student charter

2.61 As mentioned in paragraph 2.19, the College has taken an inclusive approach to the further development of the Student Charter. The Charter is set in the wider context of the Learner Involvement and Inclusivity agendas in order to make it more accessible to students.

The current Charter is widely available and takes the form of a concise and generic document applicable to all students in the College, setting out the mutual expectations of the institution and its students. Students confirm that it is available to all in print and on the VLE. Students and staff are currently involved in an extensive consultation exercise to review this document in order to provide a new version that is both comprehensive and accessible. Focus groups are currently being held to discuss the construction of the Charter, and students met by the review team were fully aware of these developments. Students had commented that the current Charter was in need of review, particularly in terms of the language in which it is currently expressed, so that it is more inclusive. The review team was informed about the partnership approach to projects undertaken by the Director of Higher Education, President of the Students' Union and the Student Liaison Officer in order to broaden opportunities to engage all students across the campuses in an evaluation of the Student Charter.

2.62 The Charter is also being reviewed in light of the forthcoming Quality Code *Chapter B5: Student engagement*. Attempts are being made to consult beyond existing feedback structures and to foreground the views of hard-to-reach groups. The Higher Education Directorate acknowledges the need to formalise the process for sharing the Charter and to update it to reflect partnership working. The review team **affirms** the College's innovative approach to develop the Student Charter further as part of the Learner Involvement and Inclusivity agendas and to make it more accessible to students.

Conclusion

2.63 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified. All of the expectations for this judgement area were met, with a number of examples of good practice: the anticipatory approach to the consideration of and investment in learning resources; the contribution of students to the quality assurance and enhancement activities; the provision of learning opportunities to enable the entitlements of disabled students to be met; and the provision of blended learning opportunities and e-resources using the VLE. The College is already taking appropriate action in areas where it is recognised that further work would enhance practice and contribute positively to the student experience: in the planned developments of the VLE and of the Student Charter.

3 Public information

Outcome

The quality of information produced by Blackpool and The Fylde College for students and applicants **is commended**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

3.1 There are effective mechanisms for ensuring that information for the College's intended audiences is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. Procedures are in place to ensure that all published material is regularly updated and checked for accuracy. The College's Marketing and Communication Team oversees these processes in conjunction with the relevant Head of School and Programme Leader. Awarding bodies are involved in approving content of public information in accordance with the terms of the partnership agreements.

3.2 The College's website offers an effective first point of contact for prospective students and other interested parties. Information about higher education is clearly signposted and there are effective links through to course-level information, and to information provided by the awarding bodies. A comprehensive review of the content and usability of the website took place in 2012, in which students and staff were fully involved.

Students reported positively on the resulting improvements and on their access to information via the website and the College's VLE. The Key Information Set (KIS) and the Wider Information Set (WIS) are up to date, and readily accessible to the College's stakeholders via a dedicated 'Public Information' area of the website. This area holds links to institutional and course details, quality and standards information, survey results, external examiner information and a wide range of other useful links. The review team considered the high-quality website, which provides a user-friendly point of contact for the College's intended audiences, to be a feature of **good practice**.

3.3 The Higher Education Directorate has taken a proactive approach to the collection and use of data, and actively works in partnership with the wider higher education community. In particular, the review team noted the positive contribution made by the role of the Higher Education Development Manager to the development and production of high-quality and accessible course data and management information, and considered this to be a feature of **good practice**.

3.4 The College has worked with UCAS to ensure that information relating to Higher National Certificates, top-up programmes and programmes with smaller numbers is more readily available to applicants. It has also recently undertaken a nationally funded JISC project (XCRI-CAP) to develop more detailed longitudinal data in relation to its programmes, with the aim of enhancing information available to prospective students and other intended audiences (see also comment on management information in paragraph 2.25). The review team **affirms** the College's plans to develop further the data collection system at the level of module and from the point of validation.

3.5 There is a regular cycle for review of key documents such as the College Higher Education prospectus, and this process includes engagement with student focus groups. Programme specifications are available via the VLE. Handbooks provide comprehensive and up to date programme information; additional assessment material is provided separately. A College handbook template is provided for use by schools. As noted in earlier sections of this report, students informed the team that they were usually provided with hard copy materials at the start of the course, but that they were confident that the most up to date and reliable information, including placement materials, would be found on the VLE.

3.6 The VLE is the principal route for dissemination of information within the College. Student areas provide comprehensive teaching, learning and assessment resources, as well as general College policies and procedures, including access to student support services. Staff areas include management tools and the Quality Manual. Staff are encouraged to develop their use of the VLE with technical support that facilitates attainment of bronze, silver or gold medals. As well as rewarding staff, these signal to students the level of content to be found in a given area. The College has a strategy to capitalise on the full capabilities of the VLE and continues this development. Usage is monitored to assist in the tracking of student progress and staff engagement, so that tutorial and technical support can be targeted. Staff show a high level of commitment to this role. Where the VLE does not support certain functions or materials (for example in network systems), specialist software is in use to meet specific programme needs. Students find the VLE straightforward to use both on campus and remotely, and are actively engaged in reviewing the user-centred provision. Leavers may continue to access their accounts for three years post-graduation for ongoing support. The system is also able to link into the Lancashire schools network to provide a continuity of service to students. The review team found the comprehensive and continuing development of the VLE that facilitates effective dissemination of information, providing a 'one-stop shop' for students and staff, to be a feature of **good practice**.

3.7 External examiners' reports are available via the student area of the VLE and are discussed at relevant programme meetings that include students. Most programmes also

offer an opportunity for students to meet directly with external examiners. Students met by the team had not chosen to consult the reports in detail but were aware of their accessibility and of the contributions of external examiners to their programmes.

Conclusion

3.8 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified. The expectation for this judgement area was met, with a number of examples of good practice in the development of the College website, production of accessible management information and the College's VLE. The College is already taking appropriate action in one area where it is recognised that further work would enhance practice and contribute positively to the student experience: in the planned development of the data collection system at the level of module.

4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at Blackpool and The Fylde College **is commended**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 A culture of enhancement is embedded throughout the College, and is embodied in the strategic approach to continuous quality improvement and excellence in the provision of student learning opportunities. This commitment to enhancement permeates the College infrastructure. At governing body level, representation from significant local employers enables the College to fulfil its mission of providing employability skills to drive local economic growth. There is a separate student governor for higher education. Two of the other members of the Board of Governors, including the chair, have a background in higher education. This has ensured a strong focus for the enhancement of higher education.

4.2 Longstanding and well developed partnerships with awarding bodies allow the College to take on significant responsibility in identifying quality assurance and enhancement strategies for its higher education provision. The College can thereby enhance provision by tailoring programmes to fit local needs, for example the flexible and innovative Marine provision from the Fleetwood Campus. Effective engagement with awarding body developments informs the College's own development and growth within existing partnerships and the consideration of future partnerships. The senior management team demonstrates awareness of national higher education issues, assisting the planning and decision-making processes for enhancing students' present and future learning opportunities.

4.3 The Estates Strategy has led to the creation of an appropriate higher education environment, including the dedicated University Centre at Palatine Road, which is highly valued by students and staff. Further developments for the benefit of higher education students across campuses are incorporated in the planning cycle. Estates staff demonstrated considerable understanding of the contribution of appropriate buildings, space and access to the successful achievement of the College's equality and diversity agenda. This exemplifies the sense of full commitment to and engagement with inclusivity across the College (see paragraphs 1.16 and 2.40). The review team found that the positive contribution of the College's equality and diversity agenda to the enhancement of learning opportunities across the higher education provision is a feature of **good practice**.

4.4 The effective Student Engagement Strategy, operating at all levels from student representation on key committees to focus groups and student surveys (as indicated in

paragraphs 2.16 to 2.19), ensures that student views are at the centre of planned enhancements, for example the fitness for purpose of the VLE and website, and timetabling to allow managing work and caring responsibilities alongside study. Student learning opportunities are broadened by the College's enrichment programme, allowing cross-subject participation in a wide variety of learning activities, and are valued by students.

4.5 New staff are informed of their role in enhancement through the induction process, and a Staff Guide booklet promotes the ethos of quality improvement in the College. There is a scheme of staff awards for impact on the student experience and employability. The College promotes scholarship and research activities by funding learning and teaching projects, for example a bridging course for Construction programmes, and encouraging exchange of staff scholarly activities through the ScholarNet database.

4.6 Staff and students recognise where and how they can influence and share future developments both internally and externally to the College. The review team saw numerous examples of the engagement of staff and students in enhancement activities, both internal and external to the College, as well as examples of external recognition of the College's commitment to the enhancement of the experience of its students.

4.7 The College's quality assurance procedures are effective in identifying opportunities for enhancement at all levels of provision. A cycle of improvement and enhancement is created through a self-assessment process, operating from corporation level, through schools and programmes, and resulting in the production of Quality Improvement Plans. These are developed and reviewed by key committees involving both staff and students, and include opportunities to identify and share good practice, for example through cross-programme peer review of reports. The Higher Education Directorate takes an overview of issues arising. The College's proactive approach is demonstrated by the selection of areas for enhancement as the subject of thematic reviews, led by the University of Lancaster and also involving another local college. Following the thematic review of assessment procedures and practice in 2010, the College enhanced its marking procedures to improve consistency and feedback to students, and disseminated its good practice in e-moderation relating to the project management programme.

4.8 Through its proactive and sensitive leadership of higher education, the Higher Education Directorate has created a dynamic ethos of enhancement. Exemplified by this strategic leadership and the complementary high levels of awareness among, and involvement of, staff and students across the College, the review team found this embedded culture of enhancement to be a feature of **good practice**.

Conclusion

4.9 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified. The expectation for this judgement area was met, with a number of examples of good practice in the contribution of the College's equality and diversity agenda to the enhancement of learning opportunities, and the embedded culture of enhancement and high level of awareness of these activities among staff and students.

5 Theme: The First Year Student Experience

Each academic year, a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for special attention by QAA's Review of College Higher Education teams. In 2012-13, the themes are the **First Year Student Experience** or **Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement**.

The review team investigated the theme of the First Year Student Experience at the College. The College actively seeks and responds to the views of the students in order to improve the first year student experience on a continual basis. The College also works actively with its awarding bodies in keeping the experience of the first-year students under review. Information provided to students pre-arrival is targeted and comprehensive, and students comment that their expectations are met in their first year. Students are positive about their transition into higher education at the College and feel supported and valued throughout their studies. Due attention is given to assessment loading and there the higher education learning mentor (HELM) role provides a valued source of guidance and support, particularly in the first year of higher education but also beyond into further studies at the College. The College's equality and diversity agenda permeates all aspects of its provision and is equally evident in the College's inclusive approach to students in their first year of higher education studies.

Supporting students' transition

5.1 Initial information and the introduction to the College meets the needs of the College's catchment population, which represents a high proportion from low participation areas, with 14 per cent disclosing learning difficulties/disabilities, and with a high proportion of mature students and/or having significant work or caring responsibilities.

5.2 The College participated in the University of Lancaster's thematic review of the First Year Student Experience in 2012 in conjunction with another local college, with a view to enhancing student experiences of progression into higher education. The review identified action points for the College to enhance the existing effective higher education support functions, including the use of social networking sites at crucial application and admissions stages and the development of the higher education community. One of the resultant actions took the form of a summer school targeted at mature students and those with limited or interrupted experience of formal education post-16.

5.3 There is a comprehensive and flexible induction programme and late starters can take up the components of induction incrementally. The College has reviewed the impact of late enrolment but has decided to preserve a flexible approach for the present, with individual circumstances forming the basis for decisions. HELMs play a key role in supporting students through application, induction and their continuing studies.

5.4 Students value the support they receive from programme tutors, afforded through class contact, the tutorial system and the 'open door' policy. Flexible timetabling, where appropriate, enables engagement by students with family, work and other commitments.

Information for first-year students

5.5 The Matrix-accredited Student Services provide clear, accessible and comprehensive information to students through a variety of means to meet differing individual needs. This includes information about employment, careers and lifelong learning. Diagnostic testing is built into application and induction support to facilitate a sense of inclusivity and to ensure necessary reasonable adjustments are in place from the commencement of study.

5.6 The VLE acts as the main repository for student information and is a comprehensive 'one-stop' resource. Students are inducted into its use at the start of studies and may access ongoing support where necessary.

5.7 Students receive a programme handbook at the start of their course, are fully briefed by their tutors, and know where and how to access the most up to date information. Students have the opportunity to become class representatives and become involved in student engagement activities.

Assessment and feedback

5.8 The first year of study is structured to encourage development of academic writing and associated skills, with a variety of formative and summative assessment tasks; this is appreciated by students, particularly those with limited recent experience of studying. The College provides guidance on good academic practice, including avoiding plagiarism and the use of the Harvard referencing system. Guidance on submission to the plagiarism checking system is provided in contact sessions and via the VLE. Support Services offer introductory and drop-in assessment sessions on academic writing, and schools offer specific clinics and workshops to support assessment activity at key points of the programme.

5.9 Assessment schedules are reviewed by schools to ensure manageability, and during the first year students are prepared for work-based learning and assessment to take place in the second year. Timely written feedback is provided to students.

Monitoring retention and progression

5.10 Student progress is monitored through tutorial sessions and by monitoring their use of the VLE. Attendance is also closely monitored to identify potential need for support, and students who are identified as 'at risk' may be referred to HELMs for additional support, or may self-refer. The VLE facilitates tracking of the student assessment record.

5.11 Retention is a key performance indicator for the College; data is considered through quality assurance meetings three times a year and is part of the Annual Programme Review process. Retention rates at the College are rising. Withdrawals are reviewed by the Director of Quality and Standards to ensure all possible steps to guide and support students have been undertaken.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions; for example, pages 17-20 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of threshold academic standards, learning opportunities and enhancement.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx.

If you require formal definitions of other terms, please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

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

academic standards: The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

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.

enhancement: Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

feature of good practice: A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution or college manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

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*.

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

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

operational definition: A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

programme (of study): An approved course of study which 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.

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.

threshold academic standard: The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications **frameworks**. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standards**.

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

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