



# Quality Review Visit of North West Regional College

March 2018

## Key findings

### QAA's rounded judgements about North West Regional College

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at North West Regional College.

- **There can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.**
- **There can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.**

### Areas for development

The review team identified the following **area for development** that has the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at North West Regional College. The review team advises North West Regional College to:

- clarify where responsibility lies for ensuring that all public information is accurate and up-to-date (Consumer Protection Measures).

### Specified improvements

The review team did not identify any **specified improvements**.

## About this review

The review visit took place from 20 to 21 March 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Diane Meehan
- Dr Jenny Gilbert
- Mr Conor Murray-Gauld (student reviewer).

The overall aim of Quality Review Visit is to:

- provide the relevant funding body with an expert judgement about the readiness of a provider to enter, or continue to operate within, the higher education sector.

Quality Review Visit is designed to:

- ensure that the student interest is protected
- provide expert advice to ensure that the reputation of the UK higher education system is protected, including the protection of degree standards
- identify development areas that will help a provider to progress through a developmental period and be considered 'established'.

Each review visit considers a provider's arrangements against relevant aspects of the baseline regulatory requirements, and in particular:

- the reliability of degree standards and their reasonable comparability with standards set and achieved by other providers
- the quality of the student academic experience, including student outcomes where the provider has a track record of delivery of higher education.

## About North West Regional College

North West Regional College (the College) was established in 2007 following the merger of the North West Institute of Further and Higher Education and Limavady College of Further and Higher Education. The College has campuses in Londonderry, Limavady and Strabane and attracts 11 per cent of its students from the Republic of Ireland.

At the time of the review the College had 627 part-time and 633 full-time higher education students enrolled at the College. The College delivers higher education across more than 30 subject areas in partnership with two universities, Ulster University and Queen's University, Belfast; and delivers higher national certificates and diplomas in conjunction with Pearson. In addition, the College delivers higher level apprenticeships and higher level professional courses accredited by five professional bodies; one vocational training body; City and Guilds and OCR.

The strategic objectives for the College's curriculum are to provide high quality, economically relevant focused provision that promotes social inclusion, higher education in further education, data management, technologically enhanced learning and employability, including widening access. The College seeks to promote outstanding quality of teaching and learning; work in collaboration with students to enable them to fulfil their potential; encourage innovation; and promote a culture of continuous improvement for service excellence.

## Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

### The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)

1 The College does not have degree awarding powers. It offers foundation degrees (FDs) and HNC/D programmes in collaboration with three main partners, Ulster University, Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) and Pearson alongside higher education provision validated by a number of professional bodies and organisations. Several higher level apprenticeships (HLAs) based on existing FDs are offered by the College. Nine FDs, eight awarded by Ulster University and the other by QUB, operate through consortium arrangements.

2 The responsibilities of the College and its partners in relation to the setting and maintenance of academic standards are clearly set out in responsibilities checklists. Partnerships are governed by up-to-date Memoranda of Agreement (or equivalent). The College operates under its awarding bodies' and organisations' regulations, which in all cases retain responsibility for academic standards and ensure that awards align with national standards including the FHEQ. The College is responsible to its awarding bodies and organisations for the delivery and maintenance of these standards.

3 In relation to the setting of standards, the College applies the programme approval requirements of its awarding bodies and organisations and has developed its own approval process to consider the appropriateness of programmes prior to submission to partners. Together these processes ensure that programmes are aligned with the FHEQ, relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, qualification characteristics statements and that any professional body requirements have been considered. An appropriate range of other external reference points are used in the development of programmes including input from employers, external agencies, public sector organisations, external subject specialists and students. Programme specifications and course handbooks clearly articulate programme learning outcomes and the modules in which these will be developed and assessed.

4 Adherence to awarding body and awarding organisation requirements for the maintenance of standards are confirmed through a number of mechanisms including external examiner reports, collaborative partnership meetings, consortium meetings, examination boards, periodic reviews, self-evaluation reports and student feedback. Minutes and reports confirm that these mechanisms are operating effectively. External examiners' reports confirm standards are being maintained and are comparable to those of other UK providers.

### The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)

5 The College has appropriate mechanisms in place to ensure and maintain effective academic governance and adheres to the relevant guidance published by DfENI. This is demonstrated in documents and was discussed in meetings with staff and students during the review visit. The College, through its Leadership Management Team (LMT) and Governing Body, takes oversight of academic governance very seriously and has developed robust processes that are thorough and rigorous in both their scope and remit.

6 The College's corporate risk register, which includes items relating to the maintenance of academic standards, is regularly updated and scrutinised by the Board of Governors. Further scrutiny of risks related to academic standards is undertaken by the Academic Standards Committee (ASC). This is the senior College committee that is responsible for ensuring higher education provision adheres to awarding body and awarding organisation policies and regulations.

7 The Vice Principal Curriculum and Information Services is responsible for curriculum development and chairs the College's ASC. ASC minutes demonstrate that this committee discharges its responsibilities appropriately in respect of maintaining standards and in accordance with its terms of reference.

8 Oversight of higher education provision is discharged effectively through the Head of Quality Enhancement and this role, along with the Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU), is independent of curriculum teams. In addition, they drive forward a quality improvement agenda and support the LMT.

9 There is a quality cycle that sets out a process for all staff to follow and this demonstrates clearly how academic oversight is ensured through rigorous processes. Staff met by the review team talked positively and clearly about their role in securing academic standards. They highlighted how relevant processes and documents feed into the College's quality assurance mechanisms, such as periodic review, internal verification and the College's self-evaluation processes.

10 The College highlighted that it respects academic freedom and collegiality through the freedom it gives staff to design and develop specific teaching on courses that have been approved by awarding bodies and awarding organisations and the number of academic staff who have been encouraged to undertake higher level degrees within their fields of expertise.

### **The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)**

11 The College's Higher Education Strategy has been developed to respond to the local economy and address the high level of deprivation in the area. Informed by this strategy, the curriculum plan takes into account the needs of local employers and involves them in approval and review. The terms of reference of the ASC have recently been revised to confirm its role as the approval committee for the curriculum. The committee includes two student representatives from each department. Student representatives are consulted during revalidation of programmes and are present on programme approval and periodic review panels.

12 Each awarding body or organisation holds the definitive record of the programme in the form of a programme specification. The College has a set of guidelines that outline the process for proposing a new programme and these differentiate between the business case and the academic rationale for a new programme. New proposals are discussed by the LMT and approved by ASC prior to validation by the relevant university or awarding organisation.

13 The College's Assessment and Progression Procedure describes common processes and directs staff and students to the regulations of the various awarding bodies or organisations. Students are informed of assessment details in course handbooks or module/unit guides. External examiners' reports confirm that academic staff comply with marking and moderation regulations and useful advice from external examiners is put into practice in subsequent years. The Internal Quality Assurance (Moderation) Guidelines contain links to the regulations of all awarding bodies and organisations, and Subject Partnership Managers from Ulster University ensure that changes to assessment regulations are disseminated to the College. In order to develop an understanding of the requirements of

the various awarding bodies and organisations, new assessors are mentored within their department and team meetings and quality checks take place during assessment. Consortium meetings are held for those programmes operating across a consortium of colleges in Northern Ireland, marking rubrics are agreed and cross-moderation occurs.

14 External examiners are appointed, supported and monitored by the relevant awarding body or organisation. Heads of Department consider external examiners' reports and the QEU provides departmental summaries of the reports, highlighting areas for action, good practice and staff development. External examiners confirm that the College's systems ensure rigorous internal verification.

15 The QEU leads on, and provides support for, the College-wide self-evaluation process. An annual course self-evaluation report (SER) is produced by the course team, submitted to the awarding body or organisation and to the Head of Department, to inform the departmental SER and contribute to the College-wide Self Evaluation and Quality Improvement Plan. The College Quality Enhancement Working Group meets bi-monthly to receive a range of reports and generate ideas for quality improvement. Awarding bodies and organisations produce regular reports and Ulster University has recently introduced a traffic light system (RAG) to flag problems. Course SERs are informed by student feedback and contribute to the three-yearly internal periodic course review. The QEU offers quality improvement workshops to ensure that SERs are evaluative. Data-sets are available through a College dashboard, providing information on year-by-year retention and progression and enabling comparison against sector figures. The review team is satisfied that data is used effectively to monitor academic standards.

16 Work-based learning opportunities are available on the HLAs, on FDs and on some HNDs. There is a tripartite agreement in place for each HLA and an HLA working group meets regularly. The QEU recently undertook a review of HLAs and identified some weaknesses related to recruitment and mentoring, which are being addressed.

## **Rounded judgement**

17 The academic standards of higher education courses are set by the awarding bodies and awarding organisations and managed through appropriate mechanisms. The College has demonstrated its effectiveness in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements for academic standards through its governance structures; internal processes and procedures; adherence to the regulations of the awarding bodies and awarding organisations; and engagement with the FHEQ. There are no specified improvements or areas for development in this area.

18 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that academic standards are reliable, meet UK requirements, and are reasonably comparable with standards set and achieved in other providers in the UK.

## Judgement area: Quality of the student academic experience

### The Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)

19 The College has a robust Quality Cycle, incorporating appropriate monitoring and review processes, which ensure awarding body and organisation requirements in relation to the student academic experience are met. The College routinely uses data to improve the student experience. Staff have access to a range of data from the Management Information System, staff portal and dashboard including sector benchmarking data.

20 Course Directors produce an annual SER which feeds into departmental SERs produced by the Heads of Department; departmental reports together with the SERs for support areas inform the College Self Evaluation and Quality Improvement Plan. Course teams have targets for recruitment, retention, achievement and success and these, together with actions to be taken to address issues, are reported on in SERs.

21 Academic departments undergo an annual system of performance review with senior managers that involves the review of data for each curriculum area with areas for development identified. The College also operates a three-year cycle for periodic review of its higher education programmes, which involves reflection on, and action in relation to, a range of performance data. The College implements awarding body and awarding organisation requirements in respect of monitoring and review.

22 The College's Admissions and Enrolments Policy, reviewed annually, adheres to the principles of fair admission. With the exception of the QUB programme, applications are made directly to the College. The Administration Department and Heads of Department oversee the admissions process to ensure a consistent approach. The majority of the College's courses require students to have an information session or an interview, and students expressed satisfaction with the admissions process. Students also confirmed that induction is effective in supporting student transition. Feedback from the College's 2016-17 higher education survey showed that 92 per cent of students were satisfied with their course and 89 per cent agreed that the course content had met their expectations.

23 The College is committed to student engagement and students commented that they feel valued and listened to. Each course has a nominated student representative for whom training is currently provided through their Course Director. The College confirmed that formalised training is being implemented from summer 2018 in conjunction with the Union of Students Ireland.

24 The College gathers student feedback in a number of ways including through focus groups, staff student consultative and course committees, surveys and tutorials. Ulster University Subject Partnership Managers meet students at least once a year. External examiners also meet with students during their visits and student feedback is reported on in their respective reports. Student feedback is used effectively to improve the student experience and both staff and students were able to give examples of action taken as a result of student feedback.

25 The College ensures that there are adequate learning resources available to all students. The adequacy of resources is considered through Departmental SERs and the College responds to student feedback regarding resources.

26 External examiners comment positively on resources and students are satisfied overall with the resources available. A range of appropriate student support services is also

in place and professional support services work closely with course teams to support the student experience. Pastoral support is delivered through academic tutorials and where appropriate is augmented with learning support identified at enrolment. Effective careers support is in place through the Careers Academy. Migration to a new version of the College virtual learning environment (VLE) is ongoing during 2017-18 and programme materials, course handbooks and other documents are made available to students through the VLE and student portal, which is available both on and off campus. Students spoke positively about the VLE and the materials made available to support their learning.

27 The College engages with a wide range of employers and external agencies. Students on FDs complete a work-based learning module, and placement is also mandatory for some HNDs. Appropriate arrangements are in place to support students to find and undertake placements. Placement Officers provide effective support to students and facilitate communication with employers.

28 The College's approach to learning and teaching is articulated in the Higher Education Strategy and Curriculum Policy and the effectiveness of teaching and learning is reviewed through the College-level SER. The College Staff Development Policy sets out procedures for managing staff development activity. New staff are supported through a formal induction programme, a mentoring process and undertake a PGCE within three years of taking up post as required by the DfENI. Staff maintain currency of teaching practice through participation in staff development events including those of validating partners. The College's 'Academy of Excellence' promotes excellence, innovation and scholarship in learning and teaching and the College's Learning and Teaching Forum identifies areas for improvement in the quality of teaching and learning and agrees action plans. All staff are encouraged to become Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. Staff appraisal, which includes classroom observation and developmental peer observation, routinely takes place. Students spoke very highly of their learning experience and of their tutors.

29 The responsibilities checklist for each awarding body sets out responsibilities for setting assessment, marking, moderating and feedback. The College's Internal Quality Assurance Moderation Guidelines set out the assessment process. Cross-marking and moderation is in place within the College and cross-College moderation occurs within consortium arrangements ensuring consistency. The College has an Assessment Malpractice, Maladministration and Plagiarism Policy that covers both staff and students. Staff are responsible for ensuring that students understand good academic practice and penalties are set out in course handbooks. Assessment is an agenda item on all staff student consultative committees and is reported on in the Ulster Subject Partnership Manager's annual report and College SER. Student feedback on assessment is positive and students report timely and helpful feedback. While plagiarism-detection software is currently not used in all courses the College is addressing this and developing a more consistent approach through its revised Technology Enhanced Learning Strategy.

30 The College offers an HNC/D in Advanced Practice in Work with Children and Families. This is a legacy programme that confers practitioner status on those students who complete the qualification in Northern Ireland. In 2015, following a recommendation from a previous external examiner, and in response to poor student attendance, the College contextualised its merit criteria to include a 75 per cent attendance requirement. Justification for this approach, which has been endorsed by the awarding organisation, includes the high number of placement hours undertaken by students and the emphasis on preparing students for employment. This requirement is clearly communicated to students both pre and post-enrolment. Personal mitigating circumstances are considered if they affect student attendance. Student attendance and achievement have improved since this requirement was introduced and the College confirmed that no students have been disadvantaged by this approach. Overall, the review team was satisfied with these arrangements.

**The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Code of Governance published by the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI)**

31 The College has in place effective arrangements to ensure student engagement in academic governance. The College has a Students' Union, and a higher education student governor attends Governing Body meetings and meetings of the Education Sub-Committee. This enables the student body to work in partnership with the College. The student governor has undertaken the National Union of Students governor training and this has led to increased activity within the context of the Students' Union at the College. The review team noted the effective use of external training for the student governor, along with support to undertake their role.

32 Staff at course level facilitate the election of student representatives who are supported in their role through meetings with their Course Director and encouraged to work with staff to raise issues through correct channels, attending relevant College meetings, such as staff student consultative committees. Student representatives are included in validation events, external examiner visits and involved in consultation ahead of significant course changes.

33 The student voice came through very strongly at the review visit, as the College demonstrated the various ways they gather a broad range of student opinion across the College. Opportunities for all students to feed back on aspects of the student experience include focus groups, course reviews, surveys and course/module feedback. Staff highlighted the importance of student feedback and its role in shaping the development of courses.

34 The College identified that student attendance at the ASC remains inconsistent and has demonstrated a commitment to improving this. In order to facilitate attendance, the LMT has introduced a rotational method for student representation and is discussing scheduling. Action to improve attendance is an organisational priority and will be discussed at the next Education Sub-Committee.

**Policies and procedures are in place to ensure consumer protection obligations are met (Competition and Markets Authority guidance)**

35 The higher education prospectus is available on the website. Course descriptions contain information on entry criteria, module/unit structure, prospective employment destinations, progression routes, financial costs, College-wide support available and the application process.

36 The College Admissions and Enrolment Policy is reviewed annually and ensures fair and consistent selection of applicants. Students not offered a place are informed in writing of their right to appeal and are referred to the Careers Academy for advice on alternative courses. Most courses interview applicants or provide them with an information session to brief them on the course. Students confirmed that this enabled them to make an informed decision when selecting a course of study. Heads of Department ensure that interview processes are transparent and consistent across each course. Guidelines on Accreditation of Prior Experiential or Certificated Learning (APEL/APCL) can be downloaded from the College website. Students may claim APEL/APCL at application or a later date and a student whose claim is not accepted is informed in the decision letter of how to appeal.

37 The College's Public Information Guidelines indicate that the Marketing and PR Team has responsibility for public information and the Principal and Chief Executive has



primary overview of all public information. The College Document Review Diagram indicates that all public website documents are uploaded by the Marketing Team. While accessing student information published on the College website, the review team located the Admissions and Enrolments Policy still labelled 'draft'. Senior staff were able to describe the process for the review and approval of revised versions of policy documents and they provided a flowchart to elucidate the situation. Nevertheless, this oversight indicates a lack of adequate checking to ensure that the most recently approved version of a policy is made available to the public. The review team identifies this as an **area for development** and advises the College to clarify where responsibility lies for ensuring that all public information is accurate and up-to-date.

38 The College is committed to promoting equality and fulfilling its responsibilities under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. It has a set of terms and conditions that apply firstly to the application and enrolment of students, making reference to students with disabilities, to international students and to the disclosure of the criminal history of applicants. Secondly, the terms and conditions refer to programme changes and closures, fees, data protection, health and safety, the Compliments and Complaints Policy, the Disciplinary Procedure and the Student Charter. The Admissions Team ensures that terms and conditions are readily accessible to potential and existing students and reviews them regularly. The terms and conditions include links to signpost the College's policies and students commented that there were 'no surprises' and that they were fully aware of the College terms and conditions.

39 The College Complaints and Compliments Policy is reviewed by the LMT and approved by the Governing Body through the Education Sub-Committee. The policy details the process for complainants to follow and specifies timescales. Course and student handbooks document how to make a complaint and students are also briefed at induction. Complainants are encouraged to resolve issues informally and the College maintains a complaints log to report to the Governing Body. The policy applies to all further education colleges in Northern Ireland and is reviewed annually through the Northern Ireland Colleges Sector Working Group. Any unresolved complaints may proceed directly to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) or to the awarding body or awarding organisation if the complaint relates to an academic matter. The review team notes that complaint handling is accessible, clear and fair.

### **Student protection measures as expressed through the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's (NIPSO) Principles of Good Administration**

40 The College has robust documentation mapped against CMA guidance to ensure student protection is met. The review team found effective processes in place in relation to consulting and informing current students of any changes to their course.

41 The College demonstrated that they consult with students on significant course changes as well as course closures. There is a clear process for staff to follow if it is decided that a course has to close with the focus on ensuring that students' interests are protected. For example, in response to student and staff feedback, a change was proposed to extend the length of the FdSc Responding to Alcohol and Drug Misuse course from two and a half years to three years. There was extensive student consultation and all validating body requirements were met. The proposal was accepted, and the change came into place for 2017-18 for new students. Prospective students were informed of the change through an information sheet and this was explained to all applicants attending for interview.

42 As highlighted in the previous section, the College's inclusion in the Northern Ireland Colleges Sector Working Group ensures a consistent approach to complaints and appeals for all students. Clear documentation on the complaints and appeals process is

provided to students at the pre-enrolment stage. This documentation is signposted repeatedly throughout the students' time at the College in multiple accessible locations including the College website, student handbooks and in physical locations throughout the College's campuses.

43 Students met by the review team were able to explain clearly how to raise complaints and appeals and what was required throughout the process.

44 The College was able to demonstrate oversight of the complaints process through maintenance of a central log of all complaints. Currently this information is reported to the Governing Body verbally and there are plans to move to a formal reporting mechanism. The College demonstrated how informal complaints have been used to inform and shape the student experience.

45 The College has clear policies and processes to protect students and no cases have proceeded to NIPSO. The review team is satisfied that student protection at the College is consistent, thorough and clearly accessible to all students.

## **Rounded judgement**

46 The College has demonstrated through its governance structures and internal policies and procedures that it effectively meets all the baseline regulatory requirements in this area. There are no specified improvements in this judgement area. There is one area for development involving a need to amend and update approaches that will not require major structural, operational or procedural change. This relates to clarifying where responsibility lies for ensuring that all public information is accurate and up-to-date.

47 The review team concludes that there can be confidence that the quality of the student academic experience meets baseline regulatory requirements.

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