

About this review

The review visit took place from 13 to 15 March 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Miss Sarah Bennett (student reviewer)
- Mrs Alison Jones
- Mr Mark Cooper.

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 Belfast Metropolitan College

Belfast Metropolitan College (the College) was established in 2007 following the merger of Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education and Castlereagh College. The College has four sites across Belfast where it delivers higher education, and at the time of the review the College had 1196 part-time and 1400 full-time students enrolled at the College. The College delivers higher education across more than 30 subject areas in partnership with four universities (awarding bodies) including Queen's University, Ulster University, Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Dundee with an agreement to deliver provision from September 2018 in partnership with The Open University. The College runs a number of higher national diplomas and certificates in conjunction with Pearson and delivers a number of higher education professional and vocational courses with professional awarding organisations. The College also offers higher level apprenticeships in civil engineering, accounting, IT pathways and digital marketing.

The College's vision is *to be a world class college that nurtures the talent and ambition of the City of Belfast and beyond*. Its mission is *to make a fundamental impact on the economic and social success of the city of Belfast and beyond by equipping its people, employers and communities with the education and skills for work* and is supported by four strategic aims and four core values. The College works to meet its strategic aims through collaboration and membership of cross-sector working groups, and Northern Ireland specific, national and international college forums and groups.

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 In partnership with its awarding bodies and organisations, the College has effective arrangements in place to ensure that the academic standards of its programmes meet the standards set out by the FHEQ. Programme and course specifications clearly indicate alignment with the FHEQ, and subject benchmark statements are referenced. Ultimate responsibility for academic standards lies with the College's awarding bodies and awarding organisations. Staff confirmed they had the academic freedom to work closely with each university partner in the development of foundation degrees.

2 Programmes are assessed internally through processes outlined by the awarding bodies and awarding organisations, including internal moderation and double marking, with grades achieved by students considered at Examination Boards. The College has appropriate external input from external examiners, and External Quality Assurers, ensuring comparability with similar education providers. College staff explained how they seek comparability through a sectoral working group of up to six Northern Ireland Colleges through internal verification and cross-moderation events for cross sector collaborative provision.

3 The College also ensures comparability of academic standards through inclusion of key stakeholders and external representatives in programme design, approval and delivery, and adhering to formal university processes for programme revalidation and approval. College academic staff who deliver higher education are also active within their relevant industry, and confirmed

7 Robust arrangements are in place for maintaining oversight of academic risk. The Director of Curriculum and Learner Success holds monthly Curriculum Planning and Performance Reviews (PPRs) with each Curriculum Department that include the identification of risks. Outcomes from the PPRs are reported back to the Executive Team and the Senior Leadership Team (SLT). The Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) has oversight of the College's Corporate Risk Register which assesses each risk on basis of a colour rating of green, amber, red or black. The Centre Manager for Strategic Planning presents updates on risks to the ARC which, in turn, reports to the Board of Governors on a quarterly basis.

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

8 The setting and maintenance of academic standards is clearly defined, understood and effectively discharged by the College in relation to the delivery of awards. The College works within regulations and in accordance to agreements with its partner universities and awarding organisations. The formal agreements cover many partnership aspects but in relation to academic standards cover the securing and setting of standards through items such as admissions, assessment practice, programme monitoring and review and external examining. These agreements are supported by process and practice information detailed in associated partnership handbooks and formal agreements. For other non-university awarding organisations, many are assessed either partially or fully through formal examination and it is through these assessment methods that national standards are met.

9 The College has a strong internal verification process including standardisation activities shared across up to six Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges through a common working group for cross sector collaborative provision. They also follow the marking and moderation processes as set out by its awarding bodies and awarding organisations and staff attend associated Examination Boards. Programme assessors for these programmes initially design and draft assessment materials which then undergo internal verification and validation by other team members internally and then more widely in the other Northern Ireland colleges for cross sector collaborative provision. The strength and effectiveness of the system has been noted by their associated awarding bodies and awarding organisations. They also ensure that external examiner feedback is appropriately addressed which also confirm standards are met.

10 The College follows and participates in validation and revalidation events with its partner universities. Similarly the College has designed and is currently piloting their own system of periodic reviews for non-university higher education programmes. The rollout of this pilot coincides with a timely strategic review of its existing higher education provision to ensure the needs of student and employer are met.

11 Definitive programme records are evidenced in programme specifications which are appropriately detailed and are found as separate documents or presented in course handbooks and are also available on the College's virtual learning environment (VLE). Programme specifications indicate where each programme is aligned to the appropriate level of the FHEQ and Subject Benchmarks.

12 Data is used effectively to monitor and improve standards. Each member of staff has access to relevant course data to allow for monitoring and improvement. Higher education Data is reported to governors through the Curriculum, Quality and Engagement Committee for review and sign-off of the HE Annual Provider Review. Top level college data confirms strong levels of performance for retention and achievement. This is supported and broken-down into part and full time modes and benchmarked against regional factors. Data

is scrutinised and presented to the Governing Body with detail and outcomes published in the College Annual Report.

Rounded judgement

13 The College's quality assurance arrangements are appropriate in enabling it to fulfil its responsibilities to its awarding bodies and awarding organisations, and to align with the baseline regulatory requirements in the maintenance of academic standards.

14 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

It has links to key documents published by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) and also direct access to download the Complaints and Compliments Policy which was developed and adopted by all six Northern Ireland Further Education Colleges. This policy is clear, inclusive and details the process for submitting a complaint. The policy also covers pre-application admission complaints as well as on-programme complaints.

28 Terms and conditions are CMA compliant and outline contractual expectations of both parties and provide headline explanations of supporting policies and procedures, for example, equality & diversity, course cancellation and closure and refunds. The terms and conditions document states tha

