



Quality Review Visit of The Trafford College Group

June 2018

Key findings

QAA's rounded judgements about The Trafford College Group

The QAA review team formed the following rounded judgements about the higher education provision at The Trafford College Group.

- **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 **areas for development** that have the potential to enhance quality and/or further secure the reliability and/or comparability of academic standards at The Trafford College Group. The review team advises The Trafford College Group to:

- ensure that terms and conditions are accessible to all current and prospective students (Consumer Protection)
- accurately detail the role of the awarding bodies in its complaints procedure (Student Protection).

Specified improvements

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

About this review

The review visit took place from 5 to 7 June 2018 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Mrs Catherine Fairhurst
- Mr Matthew Kitching (student reviewer)
- Professor Ian Robinson.

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 The Trafford College Group

The Trafford College Group (the College) was formed on 5 April 2018 as a result of a merger between Stockport College and Trafford College. The College delivers higher education provision across three sites south of Manchester. The College has 702 higher education students, of whom 369 are full-time and 333 are part-time. The College also has a small number of students studying higher level apprenticeships.

The College's higher education provision is delivered on behalf of four awarding bodies; the University of Bolton, Sheffield Hallam University, the University of Chester and Manchester Metropolitan University, the latter two are on teach-out arrangements. There are 33 higher education programmes which cover such subjects including engineering, childhood studies, computing, graphic design, illustration and sports coaching. Provision includes full honours undergraduate degrees, foundation degrees, higher apprenticeships and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas.

The College's vision is that learners will secure employment and progress in their careers as a result of the knowledge, skills and the work ethic they have developed at the College. Its mission is to provide 'learners with an outstanding education experience with excellent qualification outcomes, the acquisition of industry standard skills and the development of the personal attributes and resilience to enable them to achieve their potential and fulfil their career aims.'

Judgement area: Reliability and comparability of academic standards

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

1 The College delivers programmes validated by its awarding organisation and bodies who retain ultimate responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards. The College outlined a thorough understanding of the FHEQ and the means by which alignment is assured. The College demonstrated clear understanding of Subject Benchmark Statements and qualification descriptors. Information is provided to students concerning level descriptors, embedded in programme handbooks, provided during induction and available on the College's virtual learning environment (VLE).

2 The College has a Higher Level Skills Development Strategy and has considered external reference points and in particular the skills needs for Greater Manchester. The College operates a Programme Approval Committee (PAC) bringing a College-based deliberative scrutiny to programme design, drawing upon local external membership from academe, business, commerce and industry to ensure the inclusion of the most appropriate optional or locally-designed modules and the proper contextualisation of the curriculum. The PAC adds a local enhancement to Pearson's process of approving an award for delivery by a Centre. The review team found that the College's internal approval processes are comprehensive and appropriate.

3 The award of credit is governed by the awarding organisation and bodies, and their regulations, and the College recognises its responsibility to maintain standards through assessment. The Dean of Higher Education chairs the College assessment boards and curriculum maps, approved by the awarding bodies, detail the schedule of modules and units and assigned credit value. Robust internal and external moderation processes are in place for assessment. External examiner reports confirm that standards are comparable with other UK higher education institutions and relevant to subject and qualification benchmarks.

4 Monitoring and review processes, including periodic review, are also used to examine alignment with the FHEQ and external benchmarks. Staff cited a recent major modification process on one programme as having provided an effective opportunity to scrutinise module and programme learning outcomes, along with the levelness of curriculum content.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

5 The College's governance arrangements, through the Board of Governors (the Board), the management and committee structures, maintain effective oversight of academic governance. There is a clear demarcation of responsibilities between governance and management of academic standards. The Board provides overall strategic leadership in line with the Code of Good Governance for English Colleges. A Transition Board with members from each college ensured appropriate oversight during the merger.

6 The new Board is composed of independent members, two staff members and two student representatives. The members attend training days and serve a four-year term after which they are not re-appointed unless their skill set matches the College's needs. The Chair of the Board and the Clerk to the Governors undertake an annual skills audit to determine need. The Board reviews its own performance annually and receives reports, data, strategic

and policy documents specifically relating to higher education for approval and monitoring. Examples include the Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), student outcomes, key performance indicators (KPIs), outcomes of the National Student Survey (NSS) and DLHE. Two experienced link governors have specific responsibility for oversight of the higher education provision.

7 The College has robust arrangements in place for maintaining oversight of academic risk, with an effective risk management process covering higher education. The College has a comprehensive risk matrix, which the Audit Committee considers and reviews all key compliance and performance indices termly. The Audit Committee reports to the Board. The Governors have access to a data visualisation tool (dashboard) that displays the current status of metrics and KPIs for the College which they regularly consider through the QIP. Each agenda item at Board meetings has a rubric which determines risk as red, amber or green.

8 The College and the Board, as an equal opportunity employer, enable academic staff and students to have academic freedom to put forward new ideas and opinions. College staff confirm that the College has a Scholarship focus. This is demonstrated by the encouragement and funding of discipline-related staff development, such as conference attendance, higher degree registration, the curriculum groups which encourage open debate, the AoC funded Scholarship project and the newly developed Learning Teaching and Scholarship Strategy.

9 The College and Governing Body respect the principle of collegiality by enabling members of staff to input their views directly or indirectly. Staff confirmed that they are consulted on the development, monitoring and decision making in relation to the College's higher education provision and especially during the merger process. This is achieved through staff representation on the Board and other deliberative committees, as well as regular meetings with partner institutions.

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

10 Prior to the merger to form The Trafford College Group, transitional joint college structures, committees and working groups were established to prepare for the merger. The Transition Board took a number of decisions in advance of the merger, and the regulatory framework for higher education within the merged College was established and developed early in the 2018, and was fully operational by the date of the merger in April 2018. New procedures broadly align with those of Stockport College. Where there are differences between previous Trafford College process and the new frameworks, the new arrangements will apply for Trafford students from 2018-19.

11 The College is contractually obliged to adhere to the quality assurance frameworks and procedures of its awarding bodies and organisation, and maintains its own student records from which data is provided for both partners' definitive records and internal monitoring. The College has developed its own internal structures and procedures in order to ensure that it is able to discharge its deliberative responsibilities, and these are equally applied for internal scrutiny before formal engagement with its validating universities or within the Pearson frameworks.

12 Programme and module specifications in use for the College's Higher Education provision demonstrate an outcomes-based approach, staff emphasised that internal verification and moderation processes tested achievement of the learning outcomes, and external verifiers and examiners agreed that assessment processes were appropriately rigorous. The externals also confirmed that the appropriate academic standards were being

achieved and were comparable to elsewhere in the sector. Students understood the role of external examiners and were aware that their reports were available to students.

13 The College's assessment policy and procedures are well-defined and understood by students and staff. Assessment processes are additionally detailed in student and module handbooks and on the VLE. The College's own departmental and higher education assessment boards provide the mechanism for considering Pearson student achievement, and the departmental boards also operate as a preliminary board in advance of those conducted by the validating universities. External examiners contribute fully at assessment boards and their annual reports are actively considered within the annual monitoring process and formal responses made. Procedures for recognition of prior credit are available, and are managed within the admissions process.

14 Stockport and Trafford provision currently follow different, albeit effective, annual monitoring processes. These inform firstly the Higher Education Quality Improvement Plan (HEQIP), and thence the College QIP. The Higher Education Team are currently managing the implementation of a combined HEQIP, derived from the previous two Colleges. The HEQIP contains detailed action plans and targets and its implementation is effectively managed by the Higher Education Committee and the Board. The review team noted the high quality and clarity of the monitoring data presented to the Board. A unified monitoring process is being developed at present, and will be confirmed by the Board in advance of the 2018-19 academic year.

15 The College currently conducts periodic review of its validated provision under the auspices of the validating universities. Hitherto Pearson has not required delivery centres to conduct an internal periodic review, but the College has decided that this would be good practice. A procedure and schedule have been considered by the Higher Education Committee, and will be approved by the Board before implementation in 2019-20.

16 The College does not manage the delivery of any provision in partner institutions, apart from a small number of assessed work placement modules on one foundation degree. The procedures are comprehensive and implemented with care.

Rounded judgement

17 The academic standards of higher education courses are set by the awarding bodies and awarding organisation and managed through appropriate mechanisms. Due to the merger the academic governance framework has only recently been introduced and new structures have yet to be embedded. Notwithstanding, 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 its awarding bodies and organisation and engagement with the FHEQ.

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 Admissions are governed by the Higher Education Admissions Policy which has been adapted to meet the needs of the whole College post-merger. The Dean of Higher Education Chairs the Admissions Recruitment and Marketing Group (ARM), which has been responsible for overseeing policy and process developments. A common approach to admissions is now in operation with staff training also in place, led jointly by HE Registrar and Head of Admissions. Interviews are conducted using a standard template which is signed by the interviewer and interviewee. An audit has been scheduled for June 2018 to ensure arrangements in the merged College are operating effectively and consistently.

20 Stockport College adopted a new Learning and Teaching Strategy in 2016-17, which was mapped to the Quality Code and UK Professional Standards Framework. Since the merger, work has been carried out to develop a new Learning, Teaching and Scholarship Strategy that was approved by the College in May 2018. The appointment of a Scholarly Lead has helped to progress this work and to instil values of partnership and scholarship in the College's learning and teaching.

21 The review team found that an effective peer observation process in place at Stockport College had been implemented at Trafford College. Staff confirmed that the process was both supportive and developmental. Observations take place twice a year and more frequently for new teaching staff. The College attempts to pair staff with particular areas of strength with colleagues who have identified development needs in a similar area. Similarly, staff reported that appraisal was developmental and several staff reported that they were supported to undertake higher level qualifications.

22 A range of continuing professional development activity is in place which includes the development of a postgraduate certificate for teaching staff to help the College reach its target for all staff to hold a teaching qualification by 2020. The College are part of an Association of Colleges Scholarship project, hold higher education staff conferences and are developing an internal journal to be launched at a research symposium in summer 2018.

23 Students were satisfied with the range of teaching methods employed through their programmes but specifically with the support arrangements available to them. A more formalised approach to tutorials was adopted at Stockport College prior to the merger, including for part-time students and is being embedded in the merged college. Students confirmed that group tutorials are supplemented by individual tutorials and an open-door policy. Students also confirmed that module handbooks clearly detail assessment criteria and the required learning outcomes. Feedback is provided in a timely fashion and indicators demonstrate student satisfaction with assessment and feedback. The review team also found examples of assessment being revised based on student feedback including the award of marks for group assessment.

24 Disability support was enhanced at Stockport College prior to the merger through the appointment of additional staff resource and an on-campus DSA assessment centre. Additional drop-in study support sessions are also available for non DSA learners. The College is currently working to ensure all students, irrespective of site and mode of study, are able to access this support. Students spoke highly about disability and careers support across the College.

25 Learning resources are agreed at validation and the PACs enable staff delivering Pearson programmes to detail resource needs. This approach is supported by a capital bid process and the curriculum meetings and the introduction of Heads of School mean that staff are able to discuss resource needs effectively at a local level. Students reported that there have been occasional issues with the currency of texts and physical resources such as teaching rooms but praised the responsive nature of the College and in particular the librarian in addressing their needs. A new library enhancement project is considering access and use of digital resources among students and the appointment of a higher education Library Resource and Enhancement Officer is being considered to help ensure consistency.

26 Different student engagement practices were in operation at Stockport and Trafford Colleges prior to the merger. New arrangements for student engagement are being developed but are not yet fully embedded. A new detailed Student Engagement Policy has been written, centred on 10 strategic aims and a calendar of meetings is being developed to combat inconsistent attendance at formal meetings by student representatives. Although the team saw evidence of a role description for student representatives at Stockport College no representatives the review team met reported having received any formal training. Module evaluations are in place but students reported that the use of feedback they provide on these forms is not always clearly communicated to them. Despite this, staff provided examples of changes being made in response to module evaluations which included increased safeguarding content at Level 5 of the BA Childhood Studies programme, and changes to the year and semester of delivery for other curriculum content. Students did, however, praise the responsiveness of the College to their feedback and the ability to share instantaneous feedback due to small cohort sizes.

27 External examiners are in place for all programmes and reports are comprehensive. External examiner reports are made available to students through the VLE, although students were largely unaware of the fact they were available. Students did however report that they had met with external examiners. Currently, programme teams are responsible for responding to external examiner reports and actions are captured in quality improvement plans. The College is currently working to develop a more centralised approach whereby the Dean of Higher Education will routinely respond to external examiners.

28 The College has worked to develop a new higher education (HE) quality cycle. Course leaders will develop quality improvement plans which are submitted to Heads of School and inform curriculum quality improvement plans. The Dean of Higher Education then compiles a HE quality improvement plan which is considered by the HE Committee before consideration by the senior leadership team and subsequently the Board of Governors. This approach is underpinned by a range of student engagement mechanisms and supplemented by a series of audits. The College is also bolstering its use of data for monitoring and review through the development of an HE data dashboard that will be available to governors, managers and teaching staff and include information on attendance, achievement and retention among others.

29 Students informed the team that where a placement is an integral part of their programme the College supports them to source a suitable opportunity. A Placements Officer is in place to advise students and discuss preferences with groups and individuals. A handbook is in place for students and for workplace mentors and the Placements Officer meets with the employer and the student to ensure expectations are clear. Students are visited twice in situ and records of this interaction are logged on an electronic system. Students were clear they could seek advice from the Placements Officer or their tutors if they had a problem on placement. Appropriate arrangements are in place to consider health and safety issues and to ensure students possess a DBS record.

The relevant code of governance: such as the Higher Education Code of Governance published by the Committee of University Chairs (CUC) or the Association of Colleges' (AoC) Code of Good Governance for English Colleges

30 The College encourages full student involvement in its newly established academic governance arrangements. The composition of the Board includes two student governors, one of whom represents higher education and is a member of the Quality and Standards Committee. The Governors acknowledge that the students are full contributing members of the Board. The student governor confirms this and gave an example of how a proposal presented by them had been acted upon. The student governors are mentored by the Clerk to the Governors and participate in the regular governor training sessions.

31 The College's governance arrangements ensure that student complaints are effectively addressed. The College has a central complaints database which allows staff engaged in the management of complaints to review previous outcomes to enable a fair and equitable approach. Outcomes of complaints and appeals are reported to the Higher Education Committee. The Board receives a report on student complaints at each meeting within the standard higher education agenda item where discussion takes place about required improvements in the processes. Any recommendations for further action are returned to the higher education Committee for further consideration.

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

32 Higher education admissions, recruiting and marketing are coordinated by a subcommittee of the College's Higher Education Committee (the senior higher education deliberative committee), known as the ARM Group. It brings together both academic and support staff from all campuses, and has managed the transition through merger as well as the day-to-day admissions activities. The College, together with one of its validating universities, is currently seeking approval from the Department of Education (DfE) to adopt the title of University Centre for its Stockport campus to better reflect the volume of higher education delivered there.

33 The College Higher Education Admissions Policy draws from national good practice guidelines, aligns with the General Data Protection Regulations, and is robust and is readily available online. Higher education admissions are managed centrally, ensuring a consistent approach to the handling of all applications. Academic staff are involved in student interviews and if cases are not straightforward, decisions whether or not to make an offer. The College has committed to an audit of admissions procedures at the end of the first cycle of merged operation to confirm consistency of operation on all campuses.

34 The admissions complaint handling processes are clearly articulated within the Admissions Policy, and complaints that cannot be resolved within the admissions team escalate to be considered within the formal Higher Education Student Complaints Policy. The review team found that the admissions procedures worked well, and the admissions complaints process was only very rarely used. Complaints are properly overseen, both by College Managers and the Board.

35 The College's Public Information Policy has received deliberative scrutiny by the Higher Education Committee and is awaiting Board approval. It is comprehensive in regard to responsibilities for the generation, proofing and sign-off for external-facing public information.

36 The public information for prospective students includes detailed prospectuses, online course outlines, admissions policy and procedures, terms and conditions and fees.

Programme specifications are not made available externally, although the team heard from both staff and students that further details are made available whenever requested. Students commended the availability, quality and accuracy of the information, and believed the College had provided everything necessary to make informed choices regarding their study.

37 All students from both Stockport and Trafford Colleges have been given terms and conditions about their studies which includes fee information, details of course closure and changes and cancellation rights. Students confirmed that they were aware of the terms and conditions at each stage of the admissions and enrolment process. Pre-merger Trafford College students received their terms and conditions through the enrolment process and can be found on the College website. Since the merger, the College has developed new terms and conditions which will apply to students commencing their studies in 2018-19 and these have been made available to students through their offer letter. There are inconsistencies of where both versions of the College's terms and conditions are presently made available on the College website for current students, and where prospective students can access the new terms and conditions. The team advises as an **area for development** that the College ensures that terms and conditions are accessible to all current and prospective students.

38 The two separate College websites currently exhibit some legacy inconsistencies following the merger in April, for example the previous student terms and conditions, strategies for higher education and constitutions of Governing Bodies, as well as some inconsistent fee levels. The College has decided to retain the separate brand associated with Stockport and Trafford, but at the merger launched a development project which will, by the summer of 2018, have integrated all public-facing information within a single source, from which the two separate College sites will draw information. This, together with implementation of the Public Information Policy the continuation of the work of the ARM Group, and oversight from the College senior leadership team will resolve the inconsistencies between the two current College sites, and ensure the accuracy of public information for the future.

39 Information for current students is accessible and comprehensive, and all available through the College VLE. This contains the programme specification, programme and module guides or handbooks, and assessment briefs with grading criteria. In addition, the VLE forms a rich source of learning materials. General information relating to higher education programmes, and including a course-specific assessment schedule is provided in the Student Handbook. Students were complimentary regarding the quality and value of student, course and module information.

Student protection measures as expressed through the Office of the Independent Adjudicator's (OIA) Good Practice Framework, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's (PHSO) Principles of Good Administration, and HEFCE's Statement of Good Practice on Higher Education Course Changes and Closures

40 The College's arrangements for course closures are comprehensive and ensure continuity of provision for students when a course is closed. The College has based the arrangements for course change, closure and teach out on the 2015 HEFCE good practice guidelines. These arrangements are detailed in the students' higher education terms and conditions document. This document is available to all new students with their letter of acceptance. It is also available to current students on the Stockport College website.

41 The College has specific policies and procedures in place for higher education student complaints and academic appeals. The Complaints Procedure and Appeals Policy can be located easily on the College's VLE. Students comment that complaints are often dealt with informally and are handled appropriately. The appeals procedure for students on

the College's higher education programmes has a clear hyperlink to the procedure of each awarding body. The College's own higher education student's complaints procedure is based on the Quality Code with opportunities for early and informal resolution and a process for escalation internally up to the Vice Principal. The Complaints Procedure explains how, if a student's complaint remains unresolved, they can refer it to the OIA. However, each of the awarding bodies have a different approach for its partners at this final stage and the College's policy does not refer to these, therefore, the review team advises as an **area for development** that the College accurately details the role of the awarding bodies in its complaints procedure.

Rounded judgement

42 The recent merger has meant that the College has implemented a series of new structures and practices either by adoption or new development which are not fully embedded. However, the effective transitioning process has meant that the College has demonstrated its awareness in carrying out its responsibilities in the quality of student academic experience and in meeting the baseline regulatory requirements.

43 There are two areas for development in this judgement area in consumer protection and student protection. The first focuses on the inconsistency of accessibility for students to the College's current and new terms and conditions, and the second is around the inclusion of differentiation between awarding bodies' approaches to complaints.

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

QAA2210 - R9971 - July 18

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2018
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557050
Website: www.qaa.ac.uk