

# Review of College Higher Education of The Isle of Wight 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 The Isle of Wight College. The review took place on 15-17 May 2013 and was conducted by a team of three reviewers, as follows:

- Dr Elaine Crosthwaite
- Mr James Freeman (student reviewer)
- Professor Daniel Saunders.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by The Isle of Wight 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
  - threshold academic standards<sup>1</sup>
  - 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 The Isle of Wight 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.<sup>2</sup> Background information about The Isle of Wight 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.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports/types-of-review/rche/pages/default.aspx](http://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 The Isle of Wight College (the College).

### QAA's judgements about The Isle of Wight College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at The Isle of Wight College.

- Academic standards at the College **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.
- The quality of information produced for students and applicants **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the College **meets UK expectations**.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at The Isle of Wight College.

- The Observation of Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Support policy, which uses peer support and critical friends in order to generate personal and professional development plans for higher education tutors (paragraph 2.4).
- The high-quality student support provided by the Learning Resources Centre, Careers Service and Student Services, which enriches the student experience (paragraphs 2.8 and 5.1).
- The widespread and frequent consideration of management information by managers and tutors at appropriate intervals in order to facilitate early intervention and support for students (paragraph 2.17).
- The detailed, rigorous support for disabled students, which is underpinned by extensive staff development (paragraph 2.30).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations** to The Isle of Wight College. For completion by the commencement of the academic year 2013-14, the team recommends the College:

- monitor assessment processes to ensure that students have clear information on assignment schedules and receive prompt and informative feedback, in accordance with the College's own policy (paragraph 1.10 and 5.10)
- develop contingency plans that anticipate acute staffing problems in order to ensure that there is a sustainable approach to the maintenance of learning opportunities (paragraph 2.9)
- introduce a formal system for the training and ongoing support of higher education student representatives in order to help them contribute to College decision-making bodies (paragraph 2.12)
- revise the Complaints Policy to facilitate the prompt identification and resolution of issues in a way that fully protects the student learning experience, to include setting a time limit for the first informal stage of negotiations (paragraph 2.23)

- further develop procedures for arranging and monitoring work-based and placement learning, including the provision of written guidance for tutors, mentors and employers to ensure that learning outcomes can be effectively achieved (paragraph 2.36).

For completion by the end of the academic year 2013-14, the review team recommends the College:

- produce and reflect on an overview for scholarship activity (paragraph 2.2)
- review the College's definition of enhancement as applied to higher education, in order to raise the profile of proactive developments and further ensure that existing processes for sharing good practice are consistently implemented (paragraph 4.7).

## Affirmation of action being taken

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

- the College's plans to develop an overview of National Student Survey data alongside feedback from internal surveys (paragraph 2.15)
- recent actions taken by the College to audit information and handbooks, publish Wider Information Set documents, and ensure that arrivals information is always sent in a timely manner (paragraph 3.6).

## The First Year Student Experience

The College provides pre-entry information and support aimed mainly at school-leavers. This could be expanded to provide pre-entry support for higher education students who are from more diverse academic backgrounds. Induction programmes are provided for all students, but the opinion of students about the effectiveness of these programmes is variable. High-quality support is available from centrally provided services, including the Learning Resources Centre. The quality of information to support learning is variable and the College has recently taken action to audit the quality of information and to ensure it is provided promptly. The approach to providing support for assessment is not consistent and is being addressed through the development of a specific study skills module to be undertaken by all students early in their course.

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

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<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/rche-handbook.aspx)

## About The Isle of Wight College

The Isle of Wight College was established as a local education authority-funded technical college in 1951, initially offering courses in construction and engineering. The College is defined as a general further education college and, for its size, has one of the broadest curriculum offerings of any further education institution in England and Wales. The breadth of the curriculum offering reflects the needs of the island community to have ready access to a broad range of education and training opportunities. During 2011-12, the College enrolled 1,882 full-time students and 5,413 part-time students; of these 29 were full-time and 144 part-time higher education students. The cohort for the academic year 2012-13 has 27 full-time higher education students and 121 part-time higher education students.

The College's main campus is situated in a central island location on the outskirts of Newport, the county town of the Isle of Wight and the island's principal retail centre. The College was graded 'outstanding' at its last Ofsted inspection in 2007. It is the island's major provider of further education and training.

The College commenced delivery of higher education programmes in partnership with the University of Bournemouth during the 1990s, and currently delivers seven Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)-funded higher education courses in partnership with the Universities of Chichester, Portsmouth and Southampton.

Following recent reorganisation, all teaching and learning activity at The Isle of Wight College is overseen by the Assistant Principal (Curriculum and Quality Improvement). The Assistant Principal is supported at the strategic level by nine heads of department or equivalent.

The College delivers four courses in partnership with the University of Chichester:

- FD Early Childhood Studies (full and part-time course)
- FD Graphic Design (part-time course)
- HNC/D in Engineering (part-time courses)
- HNC/D in Computing and Software Development (full and part-time courses).

The Certificate in Education (Post-compulsory Education) (part-time course) has been delivered in partnership with the University of Southampton. However, the University is discontinuing delivery of the Certificate in Education, and the College is supporting year two students on this out-going programme. The Isle of Wight College is working with the University of Portsmouth to develop a new Certificate in Education (Post-compulsory Education) programme for a September 2013 start.

Through its partnership with the University of Portsmouth, The Isle of Wight College delivers the FD Business and Management (part-time), but has not yet recruited a viable year one cohort onto the full-time HND in Business for the current academic year.

The key challenges faced by the College are those associated with providing for an island community where travel to and from the island is expensive and not always convenient. This situation requires the College to provide a wide-ranging curriculum for a relatively restricted recruitment pool.

## Explanation of the findings about The Isle of Wight College

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.<sup>5</sup>

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](#)<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

### 1 Academic standards

#### Outcome

The academic standards at The Isle of Wight College **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

#### Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 All higher education programmes within the scope of the review have been allocated to the appropriate level of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The outcomes of programmes match the qualifications descriptors, and there is sufficient volume of study to demonstrate that learning outcomes can be achieved.

1.2 External examiners' reports comment on and confirm that qualifications are allocated to the appropriate level of the FHEQ.

#### Use of external examiners

1.3 The College is making effective use of external examiners' reports in maintaining academic standards. The nomination, appointment, briefing and induction of external examiners is carried out by the awarding bodies. In the case of three University of Chichester programmes that are provided only by the College, and are not part of a wider franchise, the College provides an additional induction programme for examiners.

1.4 The College recognises the importance of the work of external examiners, engages with external examiners through their visits to the College, and gives detailed consideration to external examiners' reports. There is an effective system of risk assessment of issues arising from reports, and progress with action plans is reviewed on a termly basis.

1.5 There are two separate systems for considering external examiner reports: firstly, review and action planning within the College, and secondly, College responses made to the awarding body. The review team was informed that external examiner reports are 'reviewed, discussed and action planned at programme team meetings'. However, the team was unable to find evidence, in the form of minutes, that programme team meetings had in fact considered external examiner reports. The College may wish to consider formalising the process for recording the internal consideration of external examiners reports and the official

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

<sup>6</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>7</sup> See note 4.

responses made to the awarding bodies. The College does not produce an overview of key themes arising from external examiner reports for strategic oversight and it may wish to consider the value of doing so.

### **Assessment and standards**

1.6 The College agreements with awarding bodies set down procedures for the design, approval, monitoring and review of assessment for their awards. These include regulations for the conduct of assessment, feedback to students, and approval of mitigating circumstances. The validation process ensures that assessment strategies are appropriate through consideration of course documentation prepared by the College.

1.7 The College has an Assessment and Internal Verification/Second-Marking Policy that complements the awarding bodies' policies and procedures. The assignment briefs for franchised courses are provided by awarding bodies, although the College can adapt these to local learning contexts. The College designs assignments for the three University of Chichester programmes that are not part of a wider franchise.

1.8 Assessment strategies and practices enable students to demonstrate the learning outcomes for their awards. These are confirmed by awarding bodies in annual monitoring reviews and meetings. External examiners' reports confirm that across the provision, a range of assessment practices is used and feedback on assessment enhances the student experience.

1.9 The College effectively monitors student achievement of learning outcomes. This is undertaken through annual course reviews and in internal assessment boards held prior to the relevant awarding body's formal examination board, which include identification of students at risk or in need of additional support.

1.10 The College provides information on assessment to students to assist them to achieve learning outcomes. This includes a briefing during induction and student handbooks, which contain information on assessment regulations, including mitigating circumstances and appeals processes. Some students reported a lack of understanding of assessment schedules and grading criteria, and a delay in receiving summative feedback, which impacts on their opportunities to achieve learning outcomes. The team concluded that there was a need for the College to pursue more robust monitoring of assessment practices. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College monitor assessment processes to ensure that students have clear information on assignment schedules and receive prompt and informative feedback, in accordance with the College's own policy.

### **Setting and maintaining programme standards**

1.11 The setting of programme standards is the responsibility of the awarding bodies through the processes of validation and revalidation. The team saw evidence that the College made use of external expertise in designing programmes and obtained approval for programmes from its awarding bodies. The College prepares the documentation for the three non-franchised courses validated by the University of Chichester, which is submitted to the University for validation. The College is assisted in meeting University of Chichester regulations by the University's appointment of an external adviser with expertise in the subject area. All other courses are designed by the relevant awarding body staff.

1.12 Monitoring and review of programmes is undertaken in conjunction with awarding bodies. College staff have a sound understanding of the requirements and procedures of the

three awarding bodies. The review team is confident that measures are in place to meet the requirements of awarding bodies for the maintenance of standards.

1.13 Course reviews provide the means for annual review, with updating on a termly basis. Self-assessment reports at departmental and College level enable themes to be identified, and Quality Improvement Plans provide the means for monitoring action plans. The team noted that college-wide monitoring and review processes covered both further and higher education. However, Higher Education Team meetings and programme boards enable a specific focus on monitoring and review of higher education provision.

1.14 Subject benchmark statements and qualification statements are used effectively in programme design, approval, delivery and review to inform the standards of awards. Validation documentation for the three non-franchise University of Chichester programmes is required to show how the subject benchmark statements have guided content and learning outcomes. External examiners' reports confirm that subject benchmark statements are addressed in the delivery of the curriculum.

## 2 Quality of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at The Isle of Wight College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

### Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 Delivery staff have a clear and consistent understanding of higher education student learning environments. The College defines learning environments through criteria and objectives set out in its Higher Education Strategic Plan.

2.2 The College's Higher Education Strategic Plan expects all staff teaching on higher education programmes to engage in scholarship. Samples of annual monitoring and review action plans included some application of research and scholarship, although this was not a consistent feature for all programmes. Lecturers and managers met by the team provided examples of scholarship within teaching activity. Such application of research and scholarship to teaching is not, however, recorded in any systematic way at subject/section, department or College levels. It is therefore difficult to identify an overall evidence base for guiding future staff development strategies that support scholarship activity. Staff are, however, encouraged to include details within their individual continuing professional development plans, and the team therefore **recommends** that the College produce and reflect on a review of scholarship activity.

2.3 Staff and others involved in delivering or supporting programmes are appropriately qualified, as emphasised within the Higher Education Strategic Plan and through student feedback. The Staff Development Policy states that all new lecturers must obtain the Certificate in Education at level 5 within three years of the first suitable course start date. There is further evidence of staff enrolment on higher education programmes in a range of subject areas in order to allow future delivery by suitably qualified lecturers. The team reviewed relevant CVs and concluded that the College complies with expectations for minimum qualifications, as defined by respective higher education awarding bodies. The qualifications profile is being monitored regularly by the Teaching and Learning Group, and awarding bodies receive and approve staff CVs.



2.4 Systems and procedures are in place for supporting less experienced staff through mentoring. The College has an established Observation of Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Support (OTLAS) policy covering all further and higher education delivery. There is evidence that OTLAS is being used and documented in course reviews and strategic planning. The Observation of Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Support policy, which uses peer support and critical friends in order to generate personal and professional development plans for higher education tutors is a feature of **good practice**.

### **Learning resources**

2.5 Student survey data, the College's self-evaluation documentation, the student submission and revalidation minutes from awarding bodies confirm that the collective expertise of staff is suitable and available for effective higher education delivery.

2.6 The College has put in place the Higher Education Strategic Plan which expects all staff to participate in at least one continuing professional development or scholarly activity per year. Participation in continuing professional development is included within a personal development plan, with the delivery of support activity being planned and monitored through the Teaching and Learning Group, appraisal, and the departmental quality cycle. The review team agreed that appropriate development opportunities are available, and encourages the College's plans to include a schedule of workshops and conferences within a staff higher education handbook.

2.7 There is an overall strategy for the deployment of learning resources, with higher education provision being embedded into relevant departmental, library and staff development budgets. Learning resources are planned on an annual basis at subject, department and College levels before consideration by senior management, with appropriate technical and administrative support, including the higher education librarian. Planning includes consideration of student feedback via the First Impressions Survey and the Teaching and Learning Survey.

2.8 Student survey data and feedback in meetings confirmed overall satisfaction with the quality of support and facilities, including the use of the Learning Resource Centre (a dedicated higher education site) and links to online learning resources in partner universities. The College also supports higher education students through the development of study skills during induction and throughout the year. In 2013-14, it is proposed that a study skills module be completed by all higher education students in their first six weeks at the College. Some students have expressed difficulties in accessing some resources on occasions, including use of facilities and expertise in the evenings and the availability of appropriate technologies. The College and partner universities have been responsive to this feedback, especially through the Learning Resource Centre. Further evidence from student survey data and meetings with students and staff confirmed high levels of satisfaction with student support services. The team concludes that the high-quality student support provided by the Learning Resource Centre, Student Services and the Careers Service enriches the student experience and is a feature of **good practice**.

2.9 There have been long-standing staffing difficulties for specific modules, in particular on Engineering programmes. The College has been engaged in prolonged dialogue with students about these issues, in one case spanning an 18-month period. The team formed the view that there is a need for further strategic planning by senior management through a more proactive anticipation of resourcing difficulties, especially in relation to reliance on a small number of teaching staff. The team **recommends** the development of contingency planning in anticipation of acute staffing problems in order to ensure that there is a sustainable approach to the maintenance of learning opportunities. The team further

recognises the College's intention to ensure that, where practicable, staffing is spread across the entire provision with appropriate units being delivered by specialists from other curriculum areas.

## **Student voice**

2.10 Formal mechanisms are in operation for the involvement of higher education student representatives in decision-making. The Academic Standards Panel - the major forum for higher education decision-making - includes a student member within its terms of reference, and an invitation has been sent to the appropriate representative. The terms of reference for the Teaching and Learning Group and the Quality and Standards Committee do not include student members, although discussions with quality and standards managers noted that students are invited on a regular basis to attend specific boards and committees and are also encouraged to submit comments either in writing or via tutors.

2.11 The Learner Involvement Strategy states clearly that all courses at all levels are to have student representatives. Discussions with students and staff confirmed that students are offered opportunities to elect representatives, and in the majority of cases this is successfully implemented. In a small number of instances, students have made a deliberate choice not to have representatives or involvement in formal course boards.

2.12 The Learner Involvement Strategy states that all representatives are to have training in communication and advocacy skills. However, the student submission indicates that the College could provide more support to student representatives to help them undertake their role. Subsequent meetings with staff and students indicated that lecturers provide students with encouragement and advice, although this operates at informal levels. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College introduce a formal system for the training and ongoing support of higher education student representatives in order to help them contribute to College decision-making bodies.

2.13 Student Voice meetings, whereby the Principal and Assistant Principal participate in a minimum of six student forums per annum, are rarely attended by higher education representatives, and none of the three Corporation Board student representatives are from higher education programmes. The College's senior managers liaise with student representative bodies through the use of focus groups in order to explore specific difficulties, issues or developments.

2.14 Systematic student feedback is gathered and analysed for all higher education programmes at all levels. The collection and interpretation of student feedback is a formal responsibility of programme annual monitoring, with students confirming that they have an opportunity to express their views in surveys and focus groups as well as through discussions with their tutors. The Learner Involvement Strategy states that students are to receive feedback about their feedback, and discussions with staff confirmed that summary data is available via College notice boards, briefings for student representatives and online communications.

2.15 The results of the National Student Survey (NSS) are analysed by awarding bodies and discussed at course level, although there is no evidence of NSS feedback influencing action planning by the College. Although student numbers are small, the review team **affirms** the College's plans to develop an overview of NSS data alongside feedback from internal surveys.

2.16 The effectiveness of the College's policies and procedures for promoting the contribution of students to quality assurance and enhancement is regularly reviewed in

accordance with the Learner Involvement Strategy. There is also evidence of review demonstrated through updating of the content of student surveys and the use of student focus groups when difficulties or issues require more detailed exploration. The College is also in the process of introducing a consistent and universal student feedback system at module level.

## **Management information**

2.17 The College has centrally-administered policies and systems to allow the collection of relevant management information. Quality and standards managers monitor performance indicators for higher education programmes, including attendance, retention, progression, outcomes and destinations. The collation and monitoring of information also includes resource planning and progress towards targets at various stages within the academic year. The senior management team referred to and demonstrated their regular use of a data dashboard in order to identify difficulties and initiate action planning. Furthermore, for higher education in particular, the Academic Standards Panel's terms of reference include oversight of retention and achievement data. The team concluded that the widespread and frequent consideration of management information by managers and tutors at appropriate intervals in order to facilitate early intervention and support for students is **good practice**.

2.18 The College uses equality and diversity policies and procedures in order to collect information on applications, admissions, disclosure of impairments, and academic progress of disabled students. Each section and department produces a self-assessment report aligned to equality and diversity, although higher education students are not identified specifically. The review team noted that overall systems are in place for monitoring the effectiveness of provision for disabled students and evaluating progress.

2.19 Procedures are used for the collation and analysis of labour market information in order to plan progression pathways and destinations, including from further to higher education. Course and subject teams use employer networks and external information sources in order to inform career education, information, advice and guidance provision.

## **Admission to the College**

2.20 The general principles underlying admissions are clearly stated and consistently applied. The College has an Applications and Admissions Procedure for higher education programmes to ensure that it implements the procedures of its awarding bodies who approve all offers. The College's self-evaluation document emphasises transparency, with feedback being provided to applicants.

2.21 Admissions systems and procedures are applied successfully for higher education recruitment. All students are selected using clear entry criteria defined by awarding bodies. Admissions decisions are devolved to course leaders and tutors for the recognition of prior learning and experience, and ratified by respective awarding bodies.

2.22 Appropriate and effective policies and procedures are in place for monitoring admissions and induction of higher education students. The College provides appropriate information for applicants, including criteria to be used for admissions. Following enrolment, induction programmes and handbooks provide students and staff with written guidelines. The College regularly reviews enrolments and induction over a three-year period and makes comparisons with university and department norms, including entry qualifications.

## Complaints and appeals

2.23 The review team concurs that general principles for complaints and appeals are in operation, with consistent implementation of relevant regulations and procedures expected by awarding bodies, as well as the Corporation Board. The College has a staged process for the potential escalation of complaints and appeals, with the final stage involving an external agency. Appeals on academic matters are considered as part of the College Assessment and Internal Verification/Second-Marking Policy, and follow the guidelines set out by the respective awarding body. The team noted protracted discussions with some student groups about recurring staffing issues. These discussions were not at any point dealt with under the College's complaints procedure. However, the nature of the matters raised by students with the College in effect meant that the students were making a significant complaint and the College would have been advised to proactively direct them to the Complaints Policy. The review team **recommends** that the College revise the Complaints Policy to facilitate the prompt identification and resolution of issues in a way that fully protects the student learning experience, to include setting a time limit for the first informal stage of negotiations.

2.24 The College reviews and monitors complaints and appeals procedures on an annual basis for all provision, with an overall analysis being presented to the Corporation Board. Appeals procedures are reviewed and updated annually, following the guidelines of awarding bodies. Annual monitoring and revalidation procedures allow for the periodic consideration of complaints and appeals at departmental and course levels. The Academic Standards Panel includes a standing agenda item for complaints and appeals, thereby addressing higher education specifically.

## Career advice and guidance

2.25 The College is successful in addressing the general principles of career education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG). Meetings with delivery staff confirmed detailed involvement in course planning in order to provide progression pathways from further to higher education and onwards into employment. The team further notes the College's plans for growing new curriculum areas alongside the provision of CEIAG, based on future career opportunities on the island.

2.26 The College employs a careers adviser and also benefits from support from other external careers agencies, including experts in the guidance of adult learners. All higher education students have opportunities to access CEIAG. The team noted positive feedback from revalidation panels, students and delivery staff for the quality of careers advice provided via Student Services. Delivery staff recognise that most part-time students require less CEIAG support because they are already in employment.

2.27 Measures are in place for CEIAG monitoring and feedback. The College has established strong employer networks through implementing objectives in the Higher Education Strategic Plan for using the Local Economic Partnerships and Employment Skills Boards, as well as industry forums and community groups. The team concluded that there is a strategic establishment of stakeholder relations by course teams with a wide range of local employers. The College includes the regular review of employer involvement and career opportunities within its Higher Education Strategic Plan, and includes careers support in its annual Teaching and Learning Survey.

## Supporting disabled students

2.28 Institutional and strategic management of learning opportunities for disabled students enables entitlement to learning opportunities to be met. The College has a well

established Additional Learning Support Policy and a dedicated Learning Support Department with trained specialists who also provide continuing professional development opportunities for all staff. The policy integrates the monitoring and evaluation of opportunities for disabled students within its self-assessment reporting system for equality and diversity. The First Impressions Survey includes categories for disability, although no analysis is evident for responses to specific questions.

2.29 Information about disability entitlement and support is provided to prospective and current students and staff. Enrolment and admissions processes and policies are clearly defined at College as well as awarding body levels.

2.30 The College monitors students' use of specialist assistive technology, and provides access to Disabled Students' Allowance support through assessments carried out by specialist staff in partnership with awarding bodies. A detailed access audit by an external consultant has been updated during the 2012-13 session by a College team, including participation by a disabled student representative. Annual departmental and equality and diversity reports track the success of students with disabilities over the last six years, and additional evidence noted recent increases in numbers of higher education disabled students. The team noted further evidence of successful disability access, support and staff development based on the student submission and on equality and diversity reports. The College's detailed and rigorous support for disabled students, underpinned by extensive staff development, is a feature of **good practice**.

### **Supporting international students**

2.31 The College has achieved Highly Trusted Sponsor status from the UK Border Agency, but at present there are no international higher education students. Recent involvement with the Association of Colleges India consortium includes plans to promote higher education courses using quality assurance procedures of both the College and awarding bodies.

### **Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements**

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

2.33 The College clearly understands, and is compliant with, the requirements of its validating universities. Relationships with its awarding universities appear to be strong at both institutional and subject level.

### **Flexible, distributed and e-learning**

2.34 The College does not offer any programmes by flexible or distributed learning.

### **Work-based and placement learning**

2.35 The College has a sound approach to the incorporation of work-based learning (WBL) in its programmes. The College states that it has good links with employers. The majority of courses require students to be in work or have secured a placement before starting, although there are limited examples of the College arranging work placements/experience. The majority of assignment briefs contain work-related or work-based activities set within an academic framework. The team is satisfied that WBL intended learning outcomes are well defined. The majority of course handbooks clearly link WBL to learning outcomes. Module-level handbooks also outline WBL outcomes and contain

assessments and tasks designed for workplace environments. External examiners report that such assessments and placements are appropriate. Assignment briefs confirm that assignments reflect workplace scenarios, or relate the task to workplace environments. Students were generally positive about their WBL and placements, and were able to list a number of ways the College helped them make the most of these experiences. Assessments are often linked to WBL tasks and most courses offer 'live briefs' or work experience units.

2.36 There was less convincing evidence to demonstrate how the College ensures employers are aware of their role and responsibilities regarding WBL. The team heard that there was no written guidance for employers, and that advice would vary by programme. The team was not provided with any examples of guidance aimed at employers, apart from a brief checklist for Early Childhood Studies programmes which asks for confirmation that students will have relevant opportunities and a mentor. The review team therefore **recommends** that the College further develop procedures for arranging and monitoring work-based and placement learning, including the provision of written guidance for tutors, mentors and employers to ensure that learning outcomes can be effectively achieved.

2.37 Monitoring and evaluation of WBL arrangements is limited. In the absence of module evaluations, there is no formal route by which students could give detailed feedback on the appropriateness of their placement, mentor or WBL arrangements. This detailed feedback would be helpful when the College arranges placements and 'live briefs' or when redesigning WBL assessments, and the College may wish to consider ways to get more targeted feedback from students and employers.

### Student charter

2.38 The College has a College Charter that broadly fulfils the UK Quality Code for Higher Education's expectations. The Charter signposts the Complaints Policy, and details what students can expect from the College and what the College expects in return. The First Impressions Survey revealed that 75 per cent of students knew about the College Charter.

2.39 The team was informed that the Charter would be reviewed as part of Student Voice processes, but this had not yet taken place because the document was reasonably new.

## 3 Public information

### Outcome

The Isle of Wight College makes information about academic standards and quality publicly available via its website. The information is clear, accessible, accurate and up to date. Students find the information useful both in helping them make an informed choice when applying to the College, and in preparing for what they might expect when they join. The quality of information produced for applicants and students at the College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

3.1 The College marketing team facilitates publication on websites and print materials. Heads of department are responsible for the accuracy of content.

3.2 Information available online is for the most part comprehensive and accessible. Links to the university programme specifications are a helpful feature, but links are missing for the HNC/D in Engineering. Most course information states the name of the awarding body. There was, however, no mention of the University of Chichester on the Engineering

HNC/D or FD Graphics Design pages. The team had evidence that these were updated during the review visit, but was concerned that this indicated that some accuracy checks had not picked up the omission beforehand.

3.3 The College has worked with its higher education partners to produce and publish Key Information Set (KIS) data, although some small sample sizes meant UniStats does not publish all of this. Regarding the Wider Information Set (WIS) required by HEFCE, the College made some required key strategic documents available online during the review visit. The team had evidence that the Strategic Plan and Higher Education Strategic Plan were not previously available online, but understood that the website was relatively new.

3.4 Current students were broadly confident they could find information about services and processes if they required it. Often they would be signposted to this information via their tutor, and the student submission confirmed that the vast majority knew where to seek advice. Staff told the team that the Learning Resources Centre produces guides on e-resources and runs plagiarism awareness training. Students have access to a range of course information via the virtual learning environment. Although the student submission highlighted that external examiner reports had previously only been available on request, and students said they had not been told how to access reports, the team saw evidence that these were now available via the virtual learning environment.

3.5 There is variation in the quality of course, module and unit handbooks. The College produces a range of handbooks at cross-college, course, module and unit/assignment level. All course handbooks are approved by the relevant awarding body. Some of the course handbooks provided to the team were thorough and contained information on the course itself, link tutors and the higher education awarding body, appeals/complaints, plagiarism, student support, services and resources. However, the student submission presented evidence of variation across courses, particularly in relation to 'topic plans'. The team also noted some differences in the level of detail, especially with indicative reading lists. When asked by the team, students were generally content with handbook content, but some highlighted outdated information. Engineering section minutes suggested that there was a delay in making the handbook available to students. Some students reported that they had only recently been made aware of awarding body handbooks, and other students reported that they did not feel they had been given sufficient information on hand-in dates/assignment requirements.

3.6 The College is aware of this inconsistency and is taking action. The recent revalidation of the Engineering programmes made extensive improvements to the handbook, including alignment with higher education policies. Higher Education Team meeting minutes show that programme sheets were recently audited and updated. A similar audit of virtual learning environment pages has taken place. The team heard that Business programme handbooks had been shared as good practice. The team was assured these audits would be regularly scheduled in the future. The team **affirms** the recent actions taken by the College to audit information and handbooks, publish Wider Information Set documents, and ensure that arrivals information is always sent in a timely manner.

## 4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at The Isle of Wight College **meets UK expectations**. The team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 The College directed the team to several documents to evidence its enhancement strategy. These contained examples of enhancement processes, aims and commitments, but the team found it difficult to identify a clearly articulated, overarching approach to enhancement. However, through discussions with staff, the team was able to identify a developing strategic approach. The College primarily views enhancement as one possible outcome of quality assurance processes. Staff stated that enhancement was led both from the centre and at course level.

4.2 A statement on quality assurance-led enhancement was produced during the review visit. This put forward the view that enhancement could be achieved through critical evaluation processes, Quality Improvement Plans, and various mechanisms for sharing good practice. However, the team formed the view that there was a risk that this approach could potentially limit opportunities for proactive enhancement in areas not identified as risks or good practice in quality assurance processes. Therefore, the College may benefit by supplementing its approach with proactive enhancement initiatives not necessarily linked to quality assurance activities. The College's approach could also seek to involve students more directly in enhancement initiatives than it does at present.

4.3 The structures used to manage enhancement mirror quality assurance processes, and as such responsibility is spread across Deputy and Assistant Principal roles. Staff told the team that all staff were involved in enhancement and that the Assistant Principal (Curriculum and Quality Improvement) and higher education Head of Department were primarily responsible. The College's self-evaluation document states that the Quality and Standards Committee has an impact on enhancement. However, the terms of reference for this Committee do not mention enhancement beyond the receipt of Quality Improvement Plans. Neither do the minutes show detailed discussion of higher education enhancement. The team was also told that good practice is shared at meetings of the Academic Standards Panel; while the terms of reference include sharing good practice, the minutes do not show explicit consideration of good practice.

4.4 Staff told the team that Higher Education Team meetings were the forum where good practice is shared, but minutes of the meetings do not show extensive discussion of enhancement planning or good practice as a separate item. Key members of staff were also absent. The College may wish to consider how the Academic Standards Panel and Higher Education Team meetings consider, plan and record enhancement activities and how attendance at these meetings could be improved.

4.5 The College's self-evaluation document stated that: 'the Observation of Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Support (OTLAS) policy outlines the College's approach to improving the quality of the learning experience for all learners'. There are a number of forms for peer-observation - some of which could be considered enhancement opportunities on an individual level - but others involved 'grading' the observee and focused on personal development planning rather than serving as a route to college-wide enhancement. The team heard that this grading system had since been revised and that good practice arising from observation was shared with the Quality Group, followed by dissemination twice a year at a meeting of all OTLAS observers.



4.6 There are a number of other quality assurance processes that the College identifies as providing opportunity for identifying improvements. These include course reviews, self-assessment reviews, Quality Improvement Plans and Quality Monitoring Meetings. The team saw evidence that these processes do identify areas for improvement. However, although there are some examples of enhancement-like initiatives being identified, this is not consistent. In particular, it is not clear to the team how good practice is consistently identified and formally shared.

4.7 The team is assured that the College has established a general ethos of continual improvement or enhancement, and was able to identify a quality assurance-led approach to enhancement. There is evidence that quality assurance processes result in the sharing of good practice and enhancement initiatives. However, the team felt that the College may benefit from supplementing this strategy with proactive enhancement initiatives independent of quality assurance activities. The team therefore **recommends** that the College review its definition of enhancement as applied to higher education, in order to raise the profile of proactive developments and further ensure that existing processes for sharing good practice are consistently implemented.

## 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 especial 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 First Year Student Experience at The Isle of Wight College. The College provides pre-entry information and support aimed mainly at school-leavers. This could be expanded to provide pre-entry support for higher education students who are from more diverse academic backgrounds. Induction programmes are provided for all students, but the opinion of students about the effectiveness of these programmes is variable. High-quality support is available from centrally provided services, including the Learning Resources Centre. The quality of information to support learning is variable and the College has recently taken action to audit the quality of information and to ensure it is provided promptly. The approach to providing support for assessment is not consistent and is being addressed through the development of a specific study skills module to be undertaken by all students early in their course.

### Supporting students' transition

5.1 The College provides an induction for all students that includes a number of activities to aid their transition over the initial weeks. Most of the students' initial contact is with the course coordinator; however, the Admissions Team refer students to the Careers Officer for initial guidance if there is any doubt about their choice of study. Student Services assist students with information on financing their studies. The Learning Resource Centre (LRC) provides learning support either on referral from the course tutor, or in response to individual student requests. The team noted the high-quality support provided by the LRC, Careers Service and Student Services (see feature of good practice in paragraph 2.8).

5.2 HNC Engineering students have access to a self-study maths course prior to the programme, but the team was not able to identify any other means of pre-entry academic support for students on other programmes.

5.3 The College reviews the effectiveness of its arrangements by surveying students by course for their first impressions. The results for 2012-13 show a very positive response

overall and an improvement on the previous year. Self-assessment reviews are produced by all areas of the College, enabling support functions such as Student Services to evaluate the support they give to students.

5.4 Students confirmed they had received an induction, but reported mixed views about the effectiveness of their induction experience. Engineering and Computing students expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of the induction, such as access to University resources. This mirrors the results obtained by the College in the First Impressions Survey.

5.5 The College has produced Enrolment and Induction Staff Guidelines, but these relate more to further education than higher education students. The team found no evidence of a strategic institution-level approach to supporting transition to higher education study that takes account of students' varied academic backgrounds. Given that many students are in employment and part-time, the provision of online induction materials as indicated in the Programme Board minutes for the HND Engineering may be helpful.

### **Information for first-year students**

5.6 Students said that they obtained pre-entry information from a variety of sources, including the course tutor and the College website. Students had mixed views on the information in the student handbooks, and indicated that the College needs to ensure that these are up to date. The College has recently taken action to audit information and handbooks, and ensure that arrival information is always sent in a timely manner.

5.7 The induction checklist for higher education students indicates that students are given a course handbook, advised where to find key policy information, and shown how to access the College and university virtual learning environment. In addition, students attend an induction at the LRC which covers the resources available and how to access online resources.

5.8 All programmes have course handbooks for students. However, it was noted that handbooks were not always available to distribute at the start of courses. The course handbooks are provided both in hard copy and on the virtual learning environment. In addition, module handbooks are issued. The LRC provides a guide to e-resources, and students can access reading lists on the virtual learning environment and the College webpages, which also have links to awarding body websites.

### **Assessment and feedback**

5.9 The quality of information and support for assessment is variable. The College recognises that its higher education students need support with assessment, and it addresses this in a number of ways, beginning with induction. During induction students are given their assignment schedules for the academic year. They are also given a briefing on the assessment process, including the relative weighting of modules within programme assessment. Some students said that they were not given sufficient information on assessment requirements and hand-in dates. Engineering students in particular reported some confusion with conflicting instructions on assessments and hand-in dates. Other students were positive about the assessment information they received.

5.10 Students are supported in the development of their academic and study skills through formative feedback provided by module tutors prior to final submission of coursework. Students were generally satisfied with their formative feedback. The College's First Impressions Survey 2012-13 indicates that students were satisfied with the promptness of feedback, and information on what to do to improve. However, some students met by the

team reported that there was variation in receiving feedback on assignments within the timescales stated by the College (see recommendation in paragraph 1.10).

5.11 There is currently no college-wide provision for academic skills development that would help students in preparing for assessment at higher education level. Some students expressed a need for more help in preparing assignments. The College Higher Education Strategic Plan recognises that in many cases students need to further develop the skills associated with studying at a higher level, and there is an action point to develop a study skills module for completion during the initial weeks of a course. The team considers that this will be a positive development.

### **Monitoring retention and progression**

5.12 The College has well developed systems to monitor retention and progression rates. These include review of data on attendance at Quality Monitoring Meetings, and in course reviews and self-assessment reviews, which consider a summary of data from the First Impressions Survey. The data collected shows that retention and progression rates are very good. The College does not currently share this data with student representatives.

## 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](http://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](http://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](http://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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