Riverside College
Widnes & Runcorn

MINUTES OF QUALITY & STANDARDS COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 2ND MARCH 2021 VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Present:	Michele Bacon	External Governor (Chair)
	Karen Banks	External Governor
	Jayne Edwards	External Governor
	Tom McInerney	External Governor
	Jessy Sodimu	Student Governor
	Ryan Turner	Staff Governor
In attendance:	Thalia Bell	Deputy Principal
	Alan Brown	Assistant Principal (Quality)
	Simon Ellershaw	Digital Manager (minutes 83 to 106)
	Jacqui Scott	Head of Teaching, Learning & Standards (minutes 83 to 106)
	Lesley Venables	Clerk to the Governors

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

83 Apologies for absence were received from Sherroll Martin (Student Governor).

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

84 No declarations of interest were received.

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 1ST DECEMBER 2020

85 **Resolved** - That the minutes of the meeting held on 1st December 2020 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

MATTERS ARISING

86 The Committee received a list of actions resulting from the previous meeting and noted that the majority of items were either on the agenda or had been completed.

87 Under minute 36 governors were reminded that the currently household income threshold to enable students to qualify for bursaries was £17K, however, there was a high level amongst the cohort and the Real Living Wage was set at £18.6K, which meant that some learners were unable to claim funding. It was noted that learners whose household income was only just over the threshold were susceptible to withdrawal from their courses due to external financial and social/economic pressures.

88   Management felt that this would provide high level of support for this cohort of learners and was affordable within the agreed budget for 2020/2021. In response to a question about such a commitment for future years, the Deputy Principal reported that a contingency had been included in the budgets for 2021/2022 and beyond to ensure that this could be met.

89   In relation to minute 44, governors would be provided with a breakdown of the 'other' category within the destinations data.

90   The Assistant Principal reported that further consideration had been given to the most appropriate measure to use as a comparator of performance, as the national Qualification Achievement Rates tables would not be published for 2020/2021 or 2019/2020. A range of other standards were used by management to assess performance, including Ofsted gradings, the Teaching Excellence Framework for higher education provision and the FE Choices survey of students.

91   Governors noted that the College's English and maths programmes had performed in line with the national average, but that this was not necessarily a reliable measure as it was dependent on the approaches of different organisations and student cohorts.

92   Government guidance on the use of Teacher Assessed Grades (TAG) were being reviewed by the College for 2020/2021, in place of formal examinations. This included how the grading process and structure could be communicated to learners, the evidence base to be used and the timescales. A further update on this area would be circulated to the Committee.

93   **Resolved -**   That the Board **be RECOMMENDED** to approve an increase in the household income threshold for the bursary fund from £17K to £18.6K per annum

PRESENTATION – REMOTE LEARNING

94   The Head of Teaching, Learning & Standards and the Digital Manager gave a presentation on the College's remote learning provision, which had been providing support to learners during each of the lockdown periods. Governors were advised that since January 2021 the College was required to publish its remote learning strategy. This included expectations of what it would deliver and how it was structured, together with a parental guide and a list of frequently-asked questions.

95   A whole-staff Microsoft Teams group had been created to enable staff to share good teaching practice, tips on IT techniques and interactive content (which would be retained for future use). A link to the College's Great Teaching Programme was also included, together with technical support options and a section for promoting 'success stories' in the delivery of remote learning.

96   Staff had benefitted from guidance on digital support and had been encouraged to reflect on their own IT ability, seeking further training where appropriate. A system of 'peer pop-ins' had been developed which encouraged innovation and collaboration between departments and teams, whilst providing a safe environment in which to trial new ideas. Feedback from staff on all these initiatives had been extremely positive and was reflected in the comments received from learners.

97   Each department had its own digital 'guru' who could provide more specialist training and cascade new techniques and content. A number of areas had introduced breakfast good practice meetings, which had provided a much-needed social interaction, particularly whilst the majority of lessons were being delivered online.

98   College-wide continuing professional development had taken place for all teaching staff on 22nd February. Part of the programme had reviewed the feedback on teaching and learning that had resulted from the recent student survey on remote curriculum delivery. The response rate to the survey had been extremely high (1700 overall), with an average score of 3.5 out of a maximum of 5. The comments from the survey underlined the difficulty of online learning for some students and it was recognised that staff are not always able to anticipate problems and provide support in the same way that they would in a classroom-setting. Students felt that the amount and quality of support provided by the College was appropriate to their needs.

99   Governors were reminded that the College had distributed 370 laptops to students without their own IT equipment at home. A further 435 had been received directly from the Department for Education under a national scheme, which had made it possible to provide laptops or IT access to all students on the waiting list. A dedicated internet line had been leased for the Cronton Campus to improve connectivity and each department had been asked to submit bids for the purchase of IT hardware.

100   The Committee asked whether the online materials created during the lockdown periods would be used by staff to support learners who required 'catch-up' programmes in the current and future academic years. The Assistant Principal responded that the College was starting to shape its future curriculum plan, for example, the use that could be made of over 800 laptops that had been purchased for remote delivery.

101   In terms of A Levels and English and maths it was important that students had a continuation of knowledge between finishing their studies at secondary school and enrolling at the College, against the background of the 3 lockdown periods. The additional IT equipment would enable a higher level of support to be provided outside of the classroom.

102   The Head of Teaching, Learning & Standards reported that digital content had been created in particular formats to enable its re-use in the future and staff would benefit from this activity in 2021/2022.

103   The student governor commented that he had undertaken his own mini-survey of reactions to the College's online delivery methods and would feed this information to the Assistant Principal (Cronton). Learners understood the difficulty of delivering in a different environment and it was recognised that, for some students, learning at home was challenging, both mentally and in terms of their physical surroundings.

104   Governors felt that the teaching staff should be congratulated on their level of adaptability to different teaching and delivery methods during the pandemic. The survey of staff IT proficiency that highlighted any gaps and resulting actions was a good model to apply to learners to support their studies. The Assistant Principal reported that one of the questions on the recent student survey had been on the level of support provided for online learning. It was noted that many students were proficient at using applications on their mobile phones, but this skill level was not necessarily replicated for items such as spreadsheets.

105   As yet, there was no plan to undertake a digital capability assessment for students, but staff were considering how the IT needs of each cohort could be accommodated and their skills improved. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the College had been establishing a framework for more remote delivery and this had continued throughout the year. Some adult learners needed a high level of support with even basic IT tasks and the College felt it was important to equip these individuals with the appropriate level of skills for their chosen qualification level and future employment.

106   On behalf of the Board the Chair thanked the students and staff for adapting to the 'new normal' in such an enthusiastic manner.

Jacqui Scott and Simon Ellershaw left the meeting.

COVID-19 UPDATE

107   Governors received for information an update on COVID-19 issues since December 2020.

108   The Deputy Principal reported that the total number of positive cases since September 2020 was 366, 60 of which related to staff and 300 to students, with the remainder classified as 'false positives'. A significant proportion of these cases had occurred immediately following the Christmas break. In response to questions about the seriousness of the cases the Deputy Principal reported that a small number of staff had been hospitalised but were now in recovery and most had returned to work. There had been no cases of 'long-COVID'.

109   In line with the latest Government guidance, the College had established COVID-19 testing centres at both main campuses, which were now fully operational. A total of 82 learners and 40 staff had been tested in the last week, with almost all leading to negative results and one re-test which was subsequently graded as negative.

110   Originally, colleges were to be required to test all students before they could return to onsite lessons, however, after lobbying nationally by the Association of Colleges and other bodies, there was now a greater degree of flexibility. Students would undertake 3 supervised lateral flow tests in College within the first two weeks and would then self-test at home on a regular basis. The results of these activities would be meticulously collected by the College and reported to Public Health England. Further testing capacity would be available (if required) at the Kingsway Leisure Centre.

111   It was noted that there had been a positive response to being tested and the College had been able to use existing employees and volunteer students rather than employing agency workers (as was the case in some colleges and schools). The Committee asked whether this had had a negative impact on normal duties for staff. The Deputy Principal advised that the level of effort was similar to that experienced during the annual enrolment period. Staff brought their students to the testing centre in small groups and the College had the capacity to test approximately 60 people each hour. Where evening classes were in operation, the testing station remained open. Social distancing measures were also rigorously applied both on site and on public transport to each campus.

112   After the Easter holiday as many students as possible would be invited back onto site, depending on the current number of positive cases in the locality.

113   Governors expressed their appreciation of the hard work that had occurred to establish and operate the testing centres in addition to core activities.

CURRICULUM REPORT

114   The Deputy Principal presented a report on performance against key curriculum indicators.

Retention & Attendance 2020/2021

115   Attendance across the College was 93%, compared to 88% at the same point in 2019/2020. However, the current circumstances needed to be taken into account and it was acknowledged that levels of actual engagement varied considerably.

116   Overall retention overall was 98% or 96.5% when 2-year programmes and external modelling were included. This was a reduction compared to the same period in 2019/2020 (98.7%). Retention for learners with educational health and care plans was 93%, whilst the figure for the 19+ cohort was 97.8% and for 98.6% for 16-18s. Attendance was above 90% for all curriculum areas. It was noted that the Cronton campus had a slightly higher attendance and retention rate than Kingsway, but that these figures had been impacted by remote teaching. Vocational that had a large practical element found that some learners struggled to remain engaged on-line when they could not complete practical tasks in the same way.

117   The Committee asked about the lower level of satisfaction on the survey of remote learning for students on Year 1 A Level courses at the Cronton Campus. The Deputy Principal explained that this was due to the amount of remote learning, particularly given that these students would also have been affected by the lockdown during their final year of secondary school. It was not a reflection of the quality of provision, but due to the difficulties for some learners of undertaking their qualifications remotely.

118   Following a question from a governor on the lower satisfaction levels for Health & Social Care, the Assistant Principal reported that this was due to the area Counselling where students had found the programme difficult. Appropriate support had been provided for this group of learners and it was noted that the situation appeared to have been resolved.

Curriculum Planning

119   The Deputy Principal advised that curriculum planning for 2021/2022 had commenced and that the offer would be broadly similar. A few additions had been made which included restructuring the Foundation Programme to link more strongly with vocational job opportunities and provide a Level 1 course in some areas, the introduction of adult courses in Health & Social Care and Engineering (funded by the Liverpool City Region) and a new HND in Media Makeup.

120   Colleges had recently been consulted by the Department for Education on Post 16 Education and Applied General Courses and Post 16 Education Level 2 Qualifications and Below. A submission had been made to both documents, the outcomes of which could have significant implications on the way in which the curriculum is managed and delivered.

121   The College would be part of the pilot project for the next wave of T Levels in 2022/2023 for Early Years. Management and staff continued to have some reservations about T Levels and was working with the LCR and the DfE to ensure that they recognised the potential complications.

122   A Level 3 Lifetime Guarantee had been introduced by the Government, which involved a number of Level 3 courses that should be fully funded for most adults in a range of qualifications. The scheme was due to commence in April 2021, however, this was difficult as the majority of the qualifications were 1-year courses that could not be completed in the 1 term remaining before the end of the academic year.

123   Governors asked about the rationale underpinning the planned internal audit of curriculum efficiency and were informed that this was part of the usual audit cycle. There was a significant amount of reform due to take place nationally and the College was keen to ensure that this was implemented where possible, whilst also providing some capacity to make changes where necessary.

Work Placements/Experience

124   The ability to undertake Industry Placements as part of the ESFA's Capacity for Development Fund (CDF) had been severely disrupted due to the pandemic and associated lockdowns. The additional resources that had been secured had been transferred to supporting bursary applications in the interim and the DfE had agreed that there would be no clawback of funds for 2020/2021.

High Needs & Additional Support

125   A total of 129 learners had enrolled with an Education & Health Care Plan (compared to 132 in 2019/2020) and the upward trend was set to continue in 2021/2022 (estimated at 142).

126   Information sharing with feeder high schools had improved significantly but some transfer of exam access arrangements remained difficult to fulfil by the College. There were higher numbers of new learners (801) who had been referred for additional learning support due to the impact of the lockdown and this was being dealt with through the COVID Tutorial Catch Up programme. The lengthy application process was required to ensure that the College was compliant with JCQ (Joint Council of Qualifications) and GDPR guidelines, with many students declaring undiagnosed learning difficulties during or after enrolment. This cohort was in addition to the needs of returning students, for their new programme of study and there were currently 246 awaiting assessment for access arrangements for examinations.

Adult Enrolments

127   The Deputy Principal reported that the Adult Education Budget was being closely monitored to ensure that the College achieved the targets for both the devolved and non-devolved elements. Additional programmes had been introduced recently to improve the number of students enrolled and to try and mitigate the lack of January starts due to the lockdown, which included on-line and distance learning and new shorter courses with a blended approach. Achievement of the non-devolved budget (ie that funded by the ESFA) was proving to be more challenging than the element administered by the LCR, despite being smaller in size.

128   The adult curriculum plan for 2021/2022 was in line with the current offer, with potential changes resulting from the new Level 3 entitlement. The current Test and Learn pilots in ESOL and Health & Social Care had been impacted by the lockdown measures, however, the Engineering course had been successful and would be offered again after the restrictions were lifted.

Apprenticeships

129   Overall apprenticeship achievement rates were 53.7% and retention was 81%. Several areas of concern were highlighted, which had been affected by the lockdown period – customer service (due to one employer), lab technician, accountancy, health & social care. The current timely achievement rate was 17.5% and the best-case was projected at 60.5%. Areas with a significant proportion of practical work had been severely impacted by COVID-19 and the furloughing of staff. Attendance levels had increased in some standards areas.

130   End point assessments had been delayed in these areas, which meant that students could not yet achieve their qualifications. In response to a question from a governor, the Deputy Principal reported that there were some areas where assessors had not been able to visit the workplaces of enrolled apprentices, however, that position should change shortly. Some learners may not achieve their courses in a timely manner due to the impact of the pandemic. The College was reviewing whether more remote learning could be undertaken in some subjects.

131   Apprenticeship recruitment remained positive, against the national trend of a 17% decrease in starts for 2019/2020. In the current year a total of 142 apprentices had been enrolled compared to the target of 210, with a further 14 vacancies and 25 prospects. Recruitment for the 19+ cohort had stalled due to the impact of COVID-19 on Health and Social Care which represented a significant number of leads. However, this situation was now becoming more positive as the local NHS trust and their partner the Bridgewater Trust were able to recruit healthcare apprentices in conjunction with the College.

132   A wide range of support mechanisms had been utilised to keep apprentices engaged in learning.

133   Governors asked whether the current employment market would limit the number of apprenticeships on offer to young people. The Deputy Principal responded that the £3K incentive for employers to take on apprentices should have a positive influence. It was recognised that the space available at the College was reaching capacity in some practical subjects such as Joinery and would need to be reviewed in future.

134   Governors asked how students on hospitality and service industry courses would be supported to complete their programmes. The Deputy Principal reported that staff had had to be highly creative in maintaining levels of learning and keeping students' skills sharp. A number of laptops had been allocated to apprentices such as the lunchtime assistants in schools. Activity levels in practical areas would be increasing dramatically over the next few months as students reached the end of their programmes.

Higher Education

135   Levels of retention and attendance for higher education programmes continued to be high, at 97% and 93% respectively.

136   The Annual Provider Monitoring Review (BTEC Pearson 2020 provision) for 2019/2020 HE performance would be submitted to the online portal shortly. An application had been made to deliver a new HND in Performing Arts (Technical Pathway) Media Make-up. This would provide a local and most cost-effective alternative progression route for Level 3 Media Make-up students.

137   The pass rates for all part-time courses for 2019/2020 could not yet be confirmed as there were three qualifications where achievements were pending. The Committee was advised that this related mainly to the Counselling provision where timely completion of the requisite work placement had been impacted by the pandemic.

138   The National Student Survey for 2020/2021 was currently being undertaken and would be open until 30 April 2021. The response rate was 58.93% to date and reminders would be sent to all eligible students to complete the survey.

139   The College had recently received £7,401 from the Government's HE Hardship Fund, with a further allocation of £13,888 now confirmed. Eligible students were required to apply by 19th February and must have a declared household income of less than £22,000.

140   High levels of satisfaction on teaching, learning, assessment and course organisation had been recorded during end of module surveys in 2020/2021. This reinforced the outcomes of the HE learner voice survey in the Autumn Term 2020.

141   The Deputy Principal reported that no requests had been received from HE learners to reduce their fees due to the impact of COVID-19.

142   All HE providers were now required to undertake a review during the first half of the spring term of their compliance with consumer law and to report to the governing body on the level of compliance with ongoing condition C1 within the funding agreement (guidance on consumer protection law).   The Committee was advised that the College was compliance in the following ways:

   a.   Clear communication to new and continuing students on the delivery of teaching and assessment in 2020-21, the circumstances in which any changes were or might be made and, what the changes might entail.

   b.   The promised offer and details of what students would reasonably expect to receive during the Autumn Term on teaching and assessment.

   c.   The College had plans in place for the spring and summer term that will ensure that the teaching and assessment met its obligations to students and what they might be reasonably expected to receive, which would be delivered.

143   The 2019/2020 Access & Participation Plan monitoring return was currently being completed and would be submitted to the Office for Students before 16 April 2021. This document set out how the College had used those funds generated as a result of charging fees above the basic fee level to promote widening participation.

144   Although applications for 2021/2022 were lower than at the same point last year management anticipated that this would increase in late Spring/early Summer once the planned open evenings had been held and the national position in relation to COVID-19 changed.

GCSE Re-sits

145   A total of 70 students achieved a grade 4 or above in English and 62 in maths. This was the equivalent of 30% of the cohort, compared to 19% in January 2020. Governors commented that this was a significant improvement, despite the disruption caused by COVID-19.

EQUALITY & DIVERSITY

146   The Committee received a report on Equality and Diversity for 2020/2021. The College's profile indicated a positive trend of improvement impacting on all areas of the protected characteristics. A variety of strategies had been implemented to support the achievement of all learners, especially those from Widening Participation postcodes, which was evidenced in the data.

147   The gap between students from WP and non-WP postcodes had widened to 9% for males and 3.5 % for females. There was still a gap in achievement for 16-18s, which had increased from 5.4% to 6.4%. This was most significant in Childcare, ICT and KW Engineering courses.

148   Although management felt that this could partly be explained by COVID-19 issues (particularly online access to learning and lack of IT equipment), further investigation indicated that WP learners had found it difficult to remain in College due to a significant increase in the number of families on benefits which had forced many learners to gain employment. The Government Catch-Up Fund and the increase in the threshold for bursary applications would assist in reducing the retention gap.

149   In-year retention for female 16-18 students was slightly lower than that for males (95.5% compared to 97.2%). However, it was higher for the 19+ female cohort.

149   The retention rate for BAME learners for both age groups had increased to 96.8% (16-18) and 99.4% (19+).

150   Learners with Additional Learning Support continued to have lower levels of retention compared to non-ALS students in 2020/2021. This was due to the interruption of learning caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the fact that many had underlying health conditions and had requested different patterns of learning.

SAFEGUARDING

151   The Deputy Principal presented a report on Safeguarding for 2020/2021.

152   It was noted that there had been a substantial reduction in the number of safeguarding cases in the current academic year, with a total of 130 compared to 260 at the same point in 2019/2020. Management felt that this highlighted the number of concerns that were identified by staff on site and reported to the College's welfare officers, as opposed to students self-referring remotely. Robust tracking of vulnerable students and ongoing cases continued. Home visits had been initiated in some cases to check on particular learners.

153   The Committee asked about progress on previous concerns about neglect of students and how this was being dealt with in partnership with external agencies. The Deputy Principal responded that weekly reports were provided to Halton Borough Council safeguarding staff on any concerns, but there were a number of students that fell into this category. Many students were attending College in person to enable them to access support mechanisms more easily.

154   A wide range of training programmes were in place and provided effective support for dealing with safeguarding cases, including supervision for dedicated student welfare staff, which was commended by governors. The College was a key partner in local networks and worked in partnership with the local authority and other agencies.

QUALITY UPDATE - STUDENT SURVEY ON REMOTE LEARNING

155   Governors received a summary of the outcomes of a recent student survey on remote teaching and learning. A total of 1700 responses had been submitted (which was considerably higher than for similar surveys in previous years) with an average score of 3.5 out of 5.

156   The Assistant Principal reported that access to IT equipment and connectivity to wi-fi had been graded lowest by students. The reasons for this rating included not having appropriate IT facilities, time pressures (particularly for adult students) and dealing with home-schooling and caring responsibilities.

157   As noted earlier, some staff had required upskilling to enable them to deliver successfully online.

158   All negative comments in the survey had been followed up by staff and all curriculum heads of department had discussed the outcomes with their teams so that any response could be tailored specifically for the needs of learners.

159   Governors noted the significant mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of the issues raised by students were at a relatively low level, such as missing their peer group. However, all learners raising mental health concerns had been spoken to by a member of staff and would be supported as appropriate.

160   The Committee thanked the staff for the outstanding response rate and the high quality of the outcomes of the survey. In response to questions about the staff views on returning to classroom delivery the Deputy Principal advised that many were enthusiastic and keen to be back on College premises. However, it was acknowledged that another group of individuals were more cautious and had grown used to working from home, which would require a period of adjustment and support.

ITEMS TO BE REPORTED TO THE BOARD

161   The Committee identified a series of points that the Chair would report back to the December Board meeting:
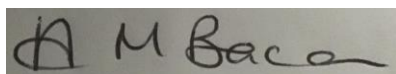
● Presentation on the Remoted Teaching & Learning
● COVID-19 Update

- Increase in household income threshold for bursary applications recommended for approval by the Board
- Comprehensive Curriculum Report, which identified high levels of retention and attendance and apprenticeship engagement (against the national trend)
- Reports received on Safeguarding and Equality & Diversity issues
- Details of outcomes of student survey on remote learning received for information

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

22nd June 2021 5.00 p.m.

Signed: A M Bacon

Chair of Quality & Standards Committee

Date: 06/03/2022