

HE Student Protection Plan

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| Policy Author | Assistant Principal for HE & Academic Standards |
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1. Purpose

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 requires higher education providers to maintain and publish a Student Protection Plan (SPP). This plan aims to protect students' interests in the event of material changes such as programme closures or changes.

The plan sets out how the College will mitigate against potential risks to the quality and continuation of programmes. The Student Protection Plan (SPP) describes how continuation and quality of study will be preserved for current and potential students if a risk to their study occurs. As a well-established institution, the college has significant experience in preserving continuation and quality of study for any potentially affected students on those occasions when we have either ceased to offer a particular area of curriculum.

The intent is that in the event of a decision to close a programme the college will always protect the student interest by 'teaching out' the programme. This is not an anticipation of a situation where this would not be the case. This plan assures current and future students that there are appropriate arrangements in place to protect continuation of study.

2. Scope

The policy relates to all applicants and students on the college HNC/D courses and those on any externally validated programmes that can be described as meeting the level descriptors of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications Framework to meet and demonstrate expected base line regulatory requirements as an HE provider.

It outlines the types of risks, gives examples of events that might trigger action and explains what might be done to minimise the impact of these events if they happen.

The Plan is also designed to consider the differing needs, characteristics and circumstances of our actual and intended student community. This policy is to clarify what an applicant or student can expect where an unexpected situation or problem occurs. This includes where their course were to close. It highlights the arrangements for informing and consulting with students so that their rights and the responsibility of the college. It is important that the college has robust plans in place which protect higher education students if their course cannot be fully delivered or if it is necessary to change the content of their course. The Student Protection Policy is triggered by material changes which could affect students' continued participation in their chosen course or at a campus where they are studying.

3. Principles

This document describes:

- The obligations of the college to applicants and current students in relation to the units/modules that are offered on its higher education programmes and the arrangements that will be made if changes to the course content and delivery are required.
- The arrangements to be put in place in the event of changes to the Awarding Body or validation arrangements for a course.
- The exceptional circumstances that will give rise to closure of a course and the arrangements that will be put in place in such an eventuality.

It involves any member of staff involved in offering Information, Advice and Guidance to prospective and current students. This therefore includes: administrative (e.g. finance, reception), support (e.g. admissions), academic (e.g. course leaders and academic staff and marketing and management staff).

4. Risk Assessment

The college maintains a Risk Register, reviewing the potential major factors that could affect the college operations. The Risk Register is reviewed by the Senior Leadership Team and the Corporation. This is a RAG rated document and is able to provide a framework about how the Group will test, review, adjust and update performance and risks.

The risk to students is considered **low** overall.

The risk that as a provider we are unable to operate is low because our financial performance is currently rated as 'Good' and our external auditors reconfirm the college as a going concern annually.

The risk that we decide to close the location (building or campus) in which the programme is taught and cannot find suitable premises at a nearby location is **low**. The college has one site of operations as a general FE College on a large campus with suitable alternative accommodation across the campus which can be found to mitigate any risk of HE course delivery.

The risk that the college will no longer able to deliver significant components of our courses is **low**. All our courses are 'mainstream' courses delivered in line with local and regional employer needs aligned to the college strategic plan and accredited via Pearson. The College has annual centre visits and external exam visits from Pearson Higher National leads along with annual business contracting meetings, this is intended to minimise the risk of loss of awarding body approval. Pearson itself has its own "in extremis" policy for centre termination which re-iterates their own approach as to allow "teach out" for qualifications so as not to jeopardise student success. ([Policy on the removal of programme and centre approval \(pearson.com\)](#)) The college would seek to follow this policy and would also to use its Student Transfer Policy to an alternative provider if necessary.

Programmes are designed to be taught by cross-curricular staff teams in HND specialisms and pathways to teach on aspects of education programmes and modules.

The risk that the college discontinues or does not offer programmes due to insufficient enrolment and programme take-up or continuation is **low**. This is mitigated by reviewing the suite of programmes on offer annually to ensure that the college keeps pace with student demand and LMI and employer demand. College annual business planning and recruitment processes supporting decision making on course viability. During the main admission process potential candidates will be informed ahead of final enrolment if the College were to close a programme ahead of start of delivery due to low number of applicants accepting offers. This would enable students to seek alternative options for study in time for start of the academic year to enable them to find an alternative option. The risk to students would be minimised through the use of the **HE Communications Plan and HE Admission Policy**. The college will inform every registered student of any editorial, minor or major changes or variations no later than six weeks in which the change or variation shall take place.

The college may choose to close a programme to future cohorts where demand is low or as part of a refresh of our wider portfolio. The risk that there is a cessation of a discipline is **low** for the college's HE provision. This is fully outlined in the **College HE Course Closure, Suspension and Changes Policy**.

The college retains the right to make minor adjustments and improvements to programmes and module content year on year, as part of quality enhancement and in response to student and employer feedback. Where material changes (such as, a few changes to the structure or content of

the programme) are made the college will draw these changes to the attention of students and prospective students as soon as possible, in line with the **HE Closure, Suspension or Changing HE Provision Policy**. Changes to policies and regulations that affect students will normally come into effect at the start of an academic year and following the conclusion of approval processes. In normal circumstances, material changes will not be made to a programme after enrolment, but if this is necessary students will be informed at the earliest opportunity of the changes and wherever possible their views will be taken into account.

These minor amendments in themselves do not warrant the triggering of student protection measures.

The college is a medium-sized FE institution with strong management and robust governance arrangements in place for managing our business with ESFA Excellence scores in financial accountability and governance. There are business continuity plans in place which are regularly reviewed. There is independent scrutiny of college activities through our independent external auditors. The financial risk is low.

External Risk

The risk of termination of validation arrangements with validating partners is moderate because the college does not have control over the plans of awarding bodies who may wish to exit validation arrangements due to external factors such as funding or regulation from OfS/Ofqual/IfATE. The college seeks to reduce this risk by ensuring its business planning and communications with Awarding Bodies is up-to-date and current enabling long-term decision making reducing this risk to future students. The College Executive Leadership keeps abreast of regulatory changes and has membership of sector bodies, including on DfE panels, to ensure that external factors are considered in its curriculum planning and offer as part of the annual/bi-annual cycle.

5. Fees and refunds

The college **HE Fees Policy** sets out the provision for refund of fees (and compensation) in the event of the Student Protection Plan being triggered. The college financial strategy is to ensure that there are sufficient day cash reserves of a minimum of 25 days (ESFA minimum requirement) and working capital at any one time to meet its obligations as they fall due and to be able to provide refunds and compensation should the need arise.

The refund policy is applied in a fair and proportionate way ensuring students are not disadvantaged. The college complies with OIAHE and CMA guidance on this matter.

6. Communicating with Students

The college has a specific policy for communications with HE Students. In addition, the college will publish links to the SPP on its websites within the dedicated Higher Education pages and the student portal.

The college will keep HE students informed through digital channels, by formal letters and where possible, through face-to-face meetings designed to assist affected students with understanding the nature and implications of such events and the college's responses regarding the Student Protection Plan. The college will ensure that affected students are either provided with, or signposted to, independent advice as appropriate to the given situation.

The college will continue to ensure that all academic and support staff involved in HE provision are aware of the implications of the consumer protection compliance in general and also the Student Protection Plan (SPP) in particular through the deliberative committee structure (Board of Governors

HE Oversight, the HE Strategy Board, the College HE Academic Curriculum & Quality Committee and the college-based curriculum and assessment boards). Staff training events and the College's curriculum planning, course modification and closure of programmes and courses processes also make reference to the SPP. Student feedback into all college HE policies, including this one, are facilitated through the designated HE Student Engagement Committee. This allows for a formal feedback mechanism for students to provide input on the effectiveness of the SPP. This is captured through surveys or focus groups, ensuring continuous improvement based on student experience.

HE Course handbooks contain information on key information and the SPP where to access it. These are updated annually and provided to students for each year of their course and explained during induction.

Adherence to the Competition and Markets Authority guidance on consumer law for UK HE providers (2015) also ensures that the guidance given is accurate, clear, unambiguous and timely.

7. Changes in course delivery

In certain circumstances, the college may need to make changes to the previously advertised course content, structure and/or method of delivery of a course or individual modules offered after an applicant has accepted their offer, or as an enrolled student progresses.

This may include discontinuing some units/modules. Reasons for a change in a course structure or content could include:

- to meet the requirements of an accrediting, professional, statutory and/or regulatory body
- to comply with legal, regulatory or governmental requirements
- to respond to sector good practice or quality enhancement processes, such as in response to student /employer feedback
- to keep programmes contemporaneous by updating practises or areas of study
- to safeguard academic standards for example, in response to external examiner feedback
- where insufficient numbers of students have chosen an optional module/unit making it unviable to run
- to abide by the revisions made by an Awarding Body.

Changes in the methods of delivery of a course, such as the timetable, location, number of classes, methods and timings of assessments is required may be required from time to time. The college will make all reasonable efforts to minimise any adverse effect the change may have on students and will endeavour to consult with potentially affected students as early as possible where it is able to do so.

Students' opinions are formally sought through HE Boards and Committees and the Student Governors as appropriate. If the college makes a change after a student has enrolled, or an applicant has accepted an offer of study, the student/applicant will be informed by the Academic Lead for the course, by email, or in tutorials as soon as it is reasonably practicable to do so.

8. Action Plan

An action plan should be implemented to ensure existing students can complete their course even if their specific qualification has changed or been withdrawn and will not run in subsequent years.

The action plan should include:

1. assessing the impact on course management and delivery

2. formal communication to students, staff and notification to other stakeholders (e.g. external examiners, students' employers and/or placement providers) to include the reasons for the decision
3. managing the implications for progressing students who require to retake units/modules
4. taking into account the needs of students who have intermittent their studies where this is permitted. Although the college is unable to guarantee to students that the pathway for which they originally registered will still be available when they resume their studies
5. ensure compliance with the policies and procedures of the Awarding Body
6. Consider mechanism and options for compensation as outlined in section 10 of this policy.

Notwithstanding the measures taken to maintain 'teach out' provision, if it became completely impossible for the college to continue provision the college will make arrangements for affected students to switch to a different provider without having to start their course from the beginning.

This will include help to transfer credits where possible and the issuing of a formal unit transcript. In the truly exceptional circumstance, the college had to close as an educational provider, and the curriculum offer ceased, key measures as stated in the college Business Continuity Plan would be invoked alongside this plan.

Clear and timely updates to students about any changes and the reasons behind them would maintain the trust between the college and any HE students affected and ensure students feel supported as any transfer is undertaken.

9. Measures to protect students

The college has plans to protect students and minimise disruption to their studies when material changes occur.

These may include any one of the following, depending on what is appropriate for the circumstances:

1. Provision to 'teach out' a course for existing students, this will always be the preferred option and any deviation from this must be ratified at the HE Steering Board
2. Offering students an alternative course, facilities or venue at the college
3. Making arrangements for affected students to switch to a different provider without having to start their course from the beginning
4. Full or partial refunds will only be considered in special cases where the college is unable to support students with continuation of studies

10. Maintenance and implementation of the Plan

10.1 The plan will be reviewed annually to ensure its currency and appropriateness. This will involve both staff and student consultation.

10.2 The College has a Higher Education Fees Policy which details the circumstances in which refunds and compensation will be given in the event of a programme being discontinued.

10.3 Refunds and compensation are considered as a last resort, and we will do everything possible to ensure that these are not necessary.

10.4 In the highly unlikely event of the course closing in-year and seeking to transfer the students to alternative providers, the college would seek to cover travel costs from the college to the nearest provider and take on any additional tuition fee difference from the fee charged by Waltham Forest College at enrolment.

10.5 Process for Claiming Compensation as part of the SPP implementation

- (i) Notification: Students are informed of the disruption and the mitigations in place and if necessary available compensation options.
- (ii) Application: Students submit a compensation claim form, detailing the disruption and any costs incurred and the compensation. Form and information published on HE Learner Hub at time of notification.
- (iii) Review: The college reviews the claim, considering the severity of the impact and the evidence provided via relevant Curriculum Director prior to formal decision at DRFC.
- (iv) Decision: A decision is made by the DRFC (Data, Registry and Finance Committee) and students are informed of the outcome. If approved, compensation is provided within 28 working days via College Finance Team. Any appeals against the decision of the DRFC should be via the formal College Complaints Process.

10.6 TABLE: Possible compensation arrangements:

| Decision | Level of risk/ likelihood | Scenario | Mitigation of risk | Compensation |
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| Programme closure in year | LOW | The college decides to close an HND programme due to low re-enrolment in year 2 | College continues to offer delivery at cost to teach out programme for final year. See also Transfer Plan | If scenario is implemented. Refund of tuition fees for the remaining part of the academic year, reimbursement of any additional costs incurred by the student to transfer to another institution (e.g., application fees, travel expenses for campus visits) if HE Transfer Plan is implemented. |
| Change of campus | LOW | The college decides to move the HN programme to an alternative site | College continues to offer at main campus in alternative rooming as best able rather than switch to an alternative site | If scenario is implemented Reimbursement of additional travel expenses from college to new venue for up to one academic year or for duration of disruption to delivery on main college campus. |
| Major and Significant Changes to Course Content that impacts on final Learning Outcome | LOW | Major changes are made to the course content or structure after students have enrolled, which affects their learning outcomes as outlined in the Course Handbook and the Definitive Record | College Internal Validation of course programmes which produce the Definite Record 9 months of intended delivery. | Provision of additional learning resources and/or support to help students adapt to the new course content. Partial refund of fees up to 20%. |

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| Loss of Validation or Accreditation from Awarding Body | LOW | Breach of awarding body standards. The college loses validation or accreditation for a programme, meaning students cannot complete their qualification as planned. | Annual Centre Visit from awarding body and frequent External Exam visits (x2 per year), reduce this risk, but mitigation in year to follow Pearson process of rectification and Teach Out the qualification and secure student accreditation on award they are registered for in year, | If scenario arises: Assistance with transferring to another validated programme, reimbursement of any costs associated with the transfer, and potential compensation for any delay in timely completion for the HN award being undertaken. See HE Transfer Plan |
| Inability to Provide Specific Modules | LOW | The college is unable to deliver specific modules that are critical for the full completion of a programme. | College Internal Validation ahead of planned delivery. College staffing levels and new recruitment in place to offset loss of staff or specialists | If scenario arises: look to implement Pearson compensation for missing unit credits as outlined in its HN conditions of certification. Seek online remote learning with another institution for specific unit. Arrangements for students to take equivalent modules at another institution, reimbursement of any associated travel/tuition costs, and potential partial refund of tuition fees for missing unit if not delivered by college. See HE Transfer Plan |
| External factors such as natural disasters or significant infrastructure failures disrupt the delivery of a programme | LOW | The college is unable to undertake planned delivery in line with published course information | The College has a Business Continuity Plan in place to mitigate and minimise this risk | Provision of alternative study arrangements (e.g., online learning), reimbursement of any additional costs incurred by students due to the disruption, and potential partial refund of tuition fees if the quality of education is significantly affected. |

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11. General Business Contingency Planning

11.1 To ensure the resilience and continuity of operations, the college maintains a comprehensive Business Continuity Plan (BCP). This plan outlines the procedures and strategies to be implemented in the event of unforeseen disruptions, such as natural disasters, significant infrastructure failures, or other emergencies.

11.2 The BCP includes detailed protocols for safeguarding critical functions, maintaining communication with stakeholders, and ensuring the continuation of educational delivery. Regular reviews and updates of the BCP are conducted to adapt to evolving risks and ensure preparedness. Training sessions for staff are integral to the plan, fostering a culture of readiness and resilience across the college. By proactively addressing potential disruptions, the college aims to minimise impact on students and uphold the quality and continuity of education.

This policy should be read and considered in conjunction with the following:

- **College Business Contingency Planning**
- **Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Policy**
- **HE Break in Learning Policy**
- **HE Course Closures Policy**
- **HE Fees Policy**
- **HE Student Communications Plan**
- **HE Student Transfer Plan**
- **Safeguarding & Prevent Policy**
- **Student Complaints**

Document Change Record

| Version | Description of Change | Changes Made By | Date | SLT App Date |
|---------|----------------------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------|
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