

## Higher Education Student protection plan

**Provider's name:** Lakes College West Cumbria

**Provider's UKPRN:** 10003753

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### Student protection plan for the period 2024-25

#### Assessing risks to the continuation of Higher Education programmes at Lakes College

This plan sets out the Lakes College arrangements for closing, suspending or changing any Higher Education programme of study. It is intended to highlight current or future risks and provide protections for students considering or currently studying on a Higher Education programme at the college in line with the requirements of consumer protection requirements (CMA).

#### Risks to the continuation of Higher Education courses at Lakes College

Based on an evaluation of the College's current Higher Education provision, there are a range of risks identified as follows:

- **Student Recruitment:** in some cases, Higher Education programmes may not recruit sufficient numbers of learners to sustain the financial viability of the provision. For example, student recruitment may not reach the numbers required to adequately fund the programme. At the present time, all Lakes College Higher Education courses have sufficient student recruitment to make them viable. In rare cases, such as with Higher Apprenticeships, this could be due to students losing their employment. However, only a small minority of programmes show a declining student recruitment history that indicates there is a moderate risk they will be unviable in the coming years.
- **Staff recruitment and/or availability:** a key feature of Higher Education provision is that it requires highly qualified, competent and preferably experienced teachers to ensure that Students are well prepared to meet demanding academic standards. In some cases, recruiting or securing the availability of appropriate teaching staff for Higher Education courses can be problematic particularly within a college of Further Education. For example, staff recruitment into specialised areas, such as Engineering, Nuclear Engineering, Civil Engineering and Chemistry, can be difficult particularly in a rural area such as West Cumbria. These factors could impact on the ability of the college to deliver Higher Education provision to the required standards. At the present time, all Higher Education courses have sufficient staffing and expertise to ensure that students achieve to the required standards. In this respect, there is a moderate risk in only a relatively small area of provision.

**Material resources:** the availability and access to high quality material resources is a key aspect of all Higher Education programmes at Lakes college. In some cases, for example

Nuclear Engineering, resources are not only expensive but also relatively unique and so much depends on their availability for Students and staff. At the present time, all Higher Education programmes are well resourced with appropriate industry standard materials including where these are specialist. In this respect, there is a low risk that student continuation would be impacted on by a lack of specialist resources.

- **Quality of the Provision:** Lakes College is committed to providing the best possible quality of experience and outcomes for Higher Education Students. Where this falls short of these standards, there may be reason to change or discontinue the provision. For example, where a programme has poor student outcomes over a sustained period of time and, despite intervention, the College may decide to either change, close or suspend the qualification. For example, where a programme has a sustained drop in pass rates, retention, high grades, student satisfaction or there are significant quality issues related to meeting academic standards, the College senior management working with Governors, may decide that the provision is not providing students with what they need to make progress and so may change or close it. At the present time, Lakes College provision secures good or better outcomes for Higher Education students with all courses performing either in line with or above quality indicators as determined through the college Higher Education Self-Assessment Process.
- **Balancing the Needs of Students and Stakeholders:** In all cases, the college is committed to ensuring that it's Higher Education provision meets the needs of learners and, where appropriate, other stakeholders such as employer sponsors. The majority of Higher Education learners at the college are 'sponsored' by local employers particularly within the Engineering, Civil Engineering, Science, Business and Early Years sectors. In this respect, the college works closely with individual students and their employers to ensure that the programmes meet all stakeholder needs but also that where students are not sponsored by an employer there is a balance in the provision to meet their individual requirements. At the present time, there is no evidence that indicates that there is an imbalance between the needs of individual students and employers within Higher Education programmes and, as such, this is a low risk factor.
- **Lakes College Higher Education Strategic Direction:** The college has a well-defined Strategic Plan for development and this includes the provision of Higher Education working with partner organisations such as The University of Cumbria and Lancaster and Morecambe College. In this respect, the college may make strategic decisions that could lead to the discontinuation of Higher Education provision mostly for the reasons stated above but also potentially as part of an intended change of direction in line with local and national priorities. The college is a founder member of the National College for Nuclear which may influence the continuation of existing Higher Education provision by the college. At the present time, this risk factor is low as the strategic direction is to increase Higher Education provision without discontinuation of existing programmes or subject areas.

## The measures that Lakes College have put in place to mitigate the risks

The risks identified above have the potential to impact on student continuation with their higher education programme at Lakes College. Below are a series of measures that the college have put in place to mitigate those risks:

- Student Recruitment:** although ultimately dependent on the student application and up-take, the college will generally offer provision where there is an established demand. The college curriculum planning and approval process involves detailed analysis of the marketplace to mitigate the risk of low student recruitment and so the potential for financially unviable courses. The college has an active `Growth Strategy` in place to mitigate against areas that have low or declining recruitment and this is monitored by the college Governors as well as through curriculum Progress Review. In exceptional cases, courses with low numbers can be offered where there is the potential for combined study groups or, in some cases, where the programme falls within the strategic direction of the college. Generally, student numbers have been increasing year-on-year. However, some programmes such as Teacher Education, Sport, Art and Business have relatively low recruitment which means they have a moderate risk regarding viability. Where learner numbers drop during a Higher Education programme, the college will provide sufficient resources so that students have the opportunity to complete their qualification within the specified timeframe. In rare cases where Higher Apprenticeship students lose their employment, the college will support them to find an alternative employer, although this is not guaranteed. In all cases, students will be informed of any risks at the application stage and, where recruited, during the programme itself. Where a programme does not run because of a non-viability decision once the course has started, students will be refunded as set out in the College refund policy.
- Staff recruitment/availability:** For new Higher Education provision, the college curriculum planning and approval process includes a requirement to evaluate the sufficiency, availability and appropriateness of deliver staff to mitigate this risk. This also includes, in most cases, that staffing will have sufficient breadth to mitigate against staff absence and/or staff leaving the college. Staff will also have access to high quality CPD and skills support to develop their ability to teach on higher education programmes including higher level qualifications such as master's degrees. For existing courses and in cases where staffing is more specialist and vulnerable to this risk, the college provides a commitment to students to recruit staffing externally or to procure resource from a partner organisation to mitigate this risk. In all cases, students will be informed of this risks at the application stage and, where recruited, during the programme itself.
- Material resources:** For new Higher Education provision, the college curriculum planning and approval process includes a requirement to evaluate the sufficiency, availability and appropriateness of material resources to mitigate this risk. As well as providing course material resource budgets, the college operates a capital bid process to ensure that significant materials resources are procured where needed especially where they have a fundamental impact on students and their progress. In the case of specialist materials that cannot easily be procured through the capital bid or course resource route, the college has an excellent relationship with

local employers and would seek support and help from these where needed. In all cases, students will be informed of this risk at the application stage and, where recruited, during the programme itself.

- **Quality of the Provision:** To mitigate the risk of poor-quality Higher Education provision impacting on student continuation, Lakes College has well-established Self-Assessment and curriculum performance management process. This includes termly reviews of course/programme quality looking at a wide range of metrics including learner satisfaction but also close monitoring of academic standards particularly through the assessment and external examination process. Where performance drops, the college has a closer monitoring process where intensive support is given to ensure performance improves. Where performance does not improve, the college can ultimately remove the provision. However, in all cases and especially the latter, the college is committed to providing for current learners to ensure they have the opportunity to achieve their qualifications. Current analysis indicates that all courses are at least in-line with quality indicators if not above these.
- **Balancing the Needs of Students and Stakeholders:** To mitigate the risk of imbalance between the needs of students and other stakeholders such as employers, the college curriculum design process includes a requirement to ensure factors such as unit/module selection and assessment design provide opportunities for all students to meet the requirements. Part of this process involves discussing course design with all stakeholders both before the start and during the programme. Evaluation of meeting needs is provided through termly quality reviews and in particular by student and external examiner feedback. In all cases, students and stakeholders will be informed of changes to course design at the application stage and, where recruited, during the programme itself.
- **Lakes College Higher Education Strategic Direction:** To mitigate the risks of discontinuation resulting from a change of strategic direction on Higher Education provision, the college will make decisions well in advance of the recruitment process. To some extent this is necessitated by external validation process with HEI partners (and Awarding Organisations such as Pearson) as well as the college own Programme Approval process and so forms part of the college Curriculum Planning. In the unlikely event that strategic partnerships change during current provision, for example with HEI partners, the college will ensure that there is continuation of this provision as part of a `lead out` arrangement. In exceptional circumstances, alternative partners may be sought but only where this is permissible.

## **Lakes College Higher Education Fees Policy and continuation of study**

The college has a Fees Policy which includes arrangements for Higher Education Students.

This includes the following related to compensation where the college is no longer able to continue the provision:

- refunds for students in receipt of tuitions fee loan from the Student Loans Company.
- refunds for students who pay their own tuition fees.
- refunds for students whose tuition fees are paid by a sponsor/employer.
- compensation for tuition and maintenance costs where students have to transfer courses or provider.

The college is able to deliver the financial implications of our refund and compensation policy because we have cash reserves. This would, given the numbers of Higher Education Students, be sufficient to provide refunds and compensation for those students for whom we have identified an increased risk of non-continuation of study.

The college currently has Public & Products Liability and Business Interruption insurance cover up to £5m which could be used to provide refunds and compensation for those students for whom we have identified an increased risk of non-continuation of study.

The college does not provide Higher Education specific bursaries or maintenance costs, such as living accommodation, and so our refund policy does not cover these aspects.

## **How Lakes College will communicate this plan with Higher Education Students**

There are a number of ways in which Lakes College will communicate this plan to Higher Education Students as follows:

Students as applicants for a course:

- Once registered, the college will publish the above Student Protection Plan on the college website within the Higher Education Section
- Students will be made aware of the risk and protections through the application and admissions process through consultation with the Student Services team as well as through events such as Open days.
- The course induction will provide details of the risk and protections in the Student Protection plan with opportunities for discussion.
- Where changes are likely to be made before a Higher Education course has started, students will be normally be informed within 10 working days of the changes by letter with an option to attend a whole course meeting with the Curriculum Operational Leader.
- Should changes to or closure of a course need to be implemented, the college will support Students both individually and collectively through this process using the protections stated in this plan as well as being advised on alternative options, where relevant.
- At all stages, Students will be signposted to independent advice as well as made aware of the college complaints policy and process.

**Current Students:**

- Current students will be made aware of the risk and protections by their respective course leaders as part of an update on the establishment of the Office for Students
- Current Students will be invited to contribute to the Student Protection Plan review process each year to ensure their views are taken into account. This will nominally be through each course Student Representative as part of the Higher Education Summative Review of provision.
- Where changes are likely to be made during a Higher Education course, students will be informed within 10 working days of the changes by a whole course meeting with the teaching team and curriculum Operational Leaders followed up in writing.
- Should changes need to be implemented, the college will support Students both individually and collectively through this process using the protections stated in this plan.
- At all stages, Students will be signposted to the possibility of changes in their course handbooks, induction and on-going reviews as well as being signposted to the college complaints procedure and the availability of independent advice such as The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

**Staff:**

- Staff will be made aware of all aspects of the Office for Students as part of the `HE Forum` meetings held routinely with all Higher Education teams. This will consider the implications of the Student Protection plan and especially how these risks and protections are communicated to Students whether applicants or current.

**Review of the Student Protection plan:**

- The Student Protection Plan will be reviewed in an ongoing manner as part of the college Curriculum planning and review process to evaluate the risks and protections at course level to include a Higher Education Student representative.
- The risk and protections of the plan will also be considered at College level as part of the college annual Higher Education Self-Assessment Report which is evaluated and validated by the full College Governing body which includes a Higher Education Student representative.