

1. Introduction

1.1 This 'Student Protection Plan' is applicable to Higher Education provision at Strode College and covers all delivery regulated by the Office for Students.

1.2 Please note the following information:

The legal address of the HE provider is:
STRODE COLLEGE
Church Road
Street, Somerset
BA16 0AB UK

All enquiries related to this plan should be made to:
Sarah Probert
Head of Faculty, Higher Education
sprobert@strode-college.ac.uk 01458 844625

1.3 The purpose of this plan is to reassure current and prospective students that Strode College, as a provider of Higher Education programmes, is committed to upholding the interests of all learners and has the necessary arrangements in operation to protect the quality and continuation of all courses of study.

2. Risk assessment and mitigation

2.1 Determining Risk

2.1.1 Every Higher Education provider is faced with potential risks to the courses made available to learners, depending on their particular situation and any altered circumstances that may arise during the delivery of a programme. Instances of change that occur can also impact to differing degrees on students with specific individual needs or learner characteristics.

2.1.2 An important context for the assessment of risk to HE courses at Strode College is that all our programmes are validated by either the University of Plymouth (Degrees and Foundation Degrees) or Pearson (HNC/HND). We do not have awarding powers ourselves, nor do we have any strategic objective to acquire these in the foreseeable future.

2.1.3 This plan sets out the range and extent of risk to programmes as assessed by the College and the measures that would be implemented, should any of these possible issues come about in reality. In our preparedness for identified risks and the diverse solutions we have determined to put in place, it is equally our belief that Strode College is able to cope effectively with unforeseen eventualities.

Risk Level	Identified Risk	Rationale for Risk Level	Proposed Mitigation
Very Low	The College loses validation for one or more courses because the awarding body completely ceases to operate.	As major educational institutions it is highly unlikely that either the University of Plymouth or Pearson would cease operation.	Contacts are maintained with other HEIs and in any such eventuality alternative validation could be available.
Low	The College as a whole is no longer able to operate due to financial instability.	The risk that the Strode College as a whole is unable to operate is low because our financial performance and position is graded as satisfactory by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA).	The ESFA will provide assurance that the College is sufficiently stable not to be in danger of complete closure.

Risk Level	Identified Risk	Rationale for Risk Level	Proposed Mitigation
Low	The College loses validation for one or more courses due to particular programmes being cut by the awarding body.	Courses validated by Plymouth are distinct from provision at the University; however, faculty reorganisation could lead to difficulties in continued delivery.	Such changes would develop over a longer time period allowing the College to seek validation for its programme from another university.
		Pearson establishes unit structures for HNC/HND and could decide to eliminate specific units or a particular range of courses.	In the case of unit amendments, existing units would be replaced with alternative appropriate units following consultation with students. Should it be announced that an entire group of HNC/HND units would no longer be available through Pearson, approval for delivery would be sought from the University of Plymouth or another HNC/HND provider. If neither solution is suitable, the College will make every effort to support individual students in finding an alternative course at another provider.
	The College is no longer able to delivering HE on the main college campus.	Strode College has reviewed the possibility of a significant event taking place on campus that could interrupt delivery to students for a period while alternative facilities are secured and deems this risk to be low.	A business continuity plan exists to deal with any occurrence impacting on our ability to deliver courses to students.
	The College is no longer able to deliver courses in one or more subjects due to staffing issues.	Succession planning is a regular management activity in terms of course delivery and it is our policy for programmes not to have single person dependency.	All programmes are designed for modules/units to be taught by integrated teams of academic staff with a suitable skill mix.
	The College makes the strategic decision to close a course within the next three years.	In the Strode College strategic development plan the aim to increase Higher Education provision is clearly indicated and course closures are therefore not envisaged in the near future.	Refer to section 2.2 'Continuity of Provision and College Commitments' below. In the unlikely event of a course validated by Plymouth needing to close, support would be sought from the University to address programme continuity.
Moderate	The College is no longer able to deliver courses in one or more subjects due to the availability of teaching space.	The strategic aim to grow HE provision could in the short term place pressure on existing rooms and learning spaces.	Quality teaching space is at a premium and different student groups have specific needs; however, deliberate timetabling, with priority given to HE courses to use the appropriate facilities, combined with an ongoing strategy for campus development should in most cases overcome this issue.

Moderate	The College is no longer able to recruit or teach a particular type of student	Different learners have specific, individual needs and in some cases this will involve the College in additional resourcing and expenditure; however, the ambition remains to extend numbers from all student groups	HE Strategy (SMT) regularly reviews the finances of this area of College provision and has made allocations accordingly.
	The College is no longer able to deliver a particular mode of study or provide the required teaching resources.		
	The College decides to discontinue a programme due to concerns over quality.	Whilst more imaginable than a strategic decision for course closure, constant monitoring and review of programmes should allow for remedial action before the need to discontinue teaching	Refer to section 2.2 'Continuity of Provision and College Commitments' below. In the unlikely event of a course validated by Plymouth needing to close, support would be sought from the University to address programme continuity.
High	The College is no longer able to provide the normal external progression route as publicised.	In current circumstances, this would universally be a decision taken by the University of Plymouth and ultimately beyond our control to prevent.	Whilst progression routes to degree top-up courses at the University of Plymouth are advertised as an advantage of the course, students are always advised that in unusual cases course alterations precluding such progression may be made.

2.2 Continuity of Provision and College Commitments

2.2.1 Strode College commits to deliver any programme to its normal conclusion for all students currently registered on an HE course. The rural context of our provision and the fact that many of our students, including mature students and those from low income households, do not have the wherewithal to travel significant distances to study make it important that we are able to uphold this commitment and we firmly believe that the College has the financial stability and institutional resolve to make this a reality.

2.2.2 Strode College commits to ensure that an appropriate level of quality is maintained throughout the duration of all programmes. All our monitoring and developmental procedures are closely aligned to the QAA UK Quality Code, as is our self-assessment review and action-planning process.

2.2.3 Full-time HE students from low income backgrounds and/or low participation neighbourhoods, who meet specific eligibility criteria, may apply for cash bursaries. The level of financial support available to qualifying students, deadlines for application and the process of decision-making is made clear throughout the admissions process and at enrolment, as well during delivery. Strode College commits to honour all bursaries granted, irrespective of any alterations in validation arrangements or in the eventuality of merger; however, the amounts offered each academic year remain at the discretion of the College, as it seeks to address the ongoing needs of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

2.2.4 Strode College operates a clear process to protect the academic interests of students. In the HE Student Contract reference is made to all circumstances, in which amendment to a programme of study or even course closure may be justifiable. As well as financial considerations, reasons to make changes or close courses include insufficient numbers to make the programme a valuable learning experience for students or the lack of key personnel without whom effective delivery cannot be assured.

2.2.5 Any decision not to run a course will always be taken by the Senior Management Team and would normally only come about as a result of the regular reviews of application numbers and other determining factors at HE Strategy meetings. At least 60 days' notice of alterations or course closure will be given in written form (email and/or letter) to all applicants, with the College endeavouring to suggest an alternative course of study or taking steps to mitigate the effects of the intended change. Independent advice to support students in this circumstance will be made available, facilitated by the College's close cooperation on CEIAG with Somerset County Council. The local authority has developed a website catering for all regional HE provision, which as appropriate would direct students towards courses available at other institutions.

Amended by: Head of Higher Education	Date amendment: Dec 2021	Review Date: Oct 2022	Page 3
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2.2.6 Any amendments proposed by the College would need to be appropriately communicated to the awarding body concerned. With respect to University of Plymouth courses, requests for minor changes would be brought before the Joint Boards of Study and would then follow the University's Minor Change procedure. As part of their responsibilities, awarding bodies also monitor providers in the discharge of their duties and may in particular situations require a programme to be altered, suspended or terminated in the collective interests of the students.

2.2.7 HE provision at Strode College is deliberately 'niche' in its desire to meet the particular needs of the local community. Whilst not being the sole provider of specific courses, the combinations and format of study on our programmes is often such that it is not replicated precisely elsewhere. The FdA/BA (Hons) History, Heritage and Archaeology course brings three separate, yet allied disciplines together under a single programme, whilst the FdA Management course commences with a common year before offering the choice between a broader Business focus and a strand aimed uniquely at the Public Sector. In both cases, and in light of above reassurances, the College commits to retain the course structure and content through to the culmination of the enrolled studies or, in the unlikely circumstance that it is not wholly replicable, to help students seek appropriate alternative provision should that be their preferred option.

2.2.8 The views of students are systematically taken into consideration, particularly where they express a desire for changes to the pattern of delivery. Reconfiguration of modules/units based on student feedback is relatively common, but the best example is probably the decision to change from FdSc E-Business Technologies to HND Computing, which came about following employer advice, guidance from teaching staff, but, most explicitly, the will of the students.

2.2.9 Strode College engages closely with other Higher Education providers in the region with respect to the rationale and continuity of provision. On previous occasions when programme closure at local providers has become an inevitability, we have worked with the institution concerned in an effort to provide a viable alternative for students and we would always adopt this positive approach were such circumstances to arise on a future occasion.

3. Refunds and compensation

3.1 As outlined above, the situation should only arise very rarely that the College is not in a position to preserve continuation of study for an individual or small number of specific students. For this unlikely eventuality, however, the Strode College HE Refunds and Compensation Policy is readily accessible to students via the College website. This document should be consulted for all details relevant to the continuity of provision.

3.2 The HE Refunds and Compensation Policy also deals with the following situations:

- the transfer of students to alternative courses both internally and externally, including where there is a cost differential in fee charges
- the financial implications of compensating students for maintenance and tuition fees
- procedures and refund arrangements in situations where a student withdraws from a programme for academic, personal or other reasons

4. Arrangements for Student Transfer

4.1 Transfer to Strode College

4.1.1 In a spirit of collaboration with higher education partners, Strode College welcomes applications from students wishing to transfer on to our courses from other institutions and actively supports their needs. No attempt is made to seek any competitive advantage or to promote our courses ahead of those already being studied; there is simply a readiness to meet the expressed desires of individual students.

Amended by: Head of Higher Education	Date amendment: Dec 2021	Review Date: Oct 2022	Page 4
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4.1.2 In such cases, appropriate HE courses on offer at the College would be outlined and, as applicable, the situation regarding APL of completed modules/units investigated. A detailed comparison would be made of modules already studied and associated learning outcomes with those on the Strode programme. If a direct equivalence of all learning outcomes is achieved, this would need ultimately to be articulated clearly to the Award Assessment Board; however, if the LOs/modules don't map across effectively, a general credit may also be given. Care is always taken to ensure students are fully aware of any effect on the final Award Classification (i.e. a general credit may reduce the overall degree classification).

4.1.3 There have been a small, yet significant number of such applications to transfer over past years. This has in most instances been due to students relocating and yet wanting to continue benefitting from local higher education; however, in the specific case of our BA (Hons) History, Heritage and Archaeology top-up degree programme, we have also received direct applications from other University of Plymouth partner institutions with appropriately similar foundation degrees, including as far afield as Truro and Penwith. Students making this form of transfer have generally done so having chosen to complete their degree on our diverse programme, rather than opting for the single discipline course at the University.

4.2 Transfer to alternative provision

4.2.1 The most common transfer of students from Strode College to other higher education institutions comes in the form of progression to higher level programmes. The College has an enviable record of continuing education amongst its graduates, in terms both of those advancing to guaranteed places on top-up courses at the University of Plymouth following foundation degrees and students seeking out further study at other providers.

4.2.2 Many HND graduates, in both Computing and Engineering, elect to turn their Level 5 qualifications into full degrees by applying to join the third year of programmes at places in the wider vicinity, such as UWE and Bournemouth University. A sizeable proportion of those completing foundation degrees also choose, or feel obliged through personal circumstances, to avail themselves of opportunities to remain closer to home in order to finish their degrees, rather than travelling as far as Plymouth. In both cases, Strode staff will engage in discussions with the receiving organisations to ensure that the coverage of learning outcomes is sufficient to allow a smooth and successful transfer to the new programme.

4.2.3 Whilst a relatively rare occurrence on past experience, should any student decide to request a move to another institution mid-course, based on their perception of the provision on offer, potential threats to the Strode course and/or their own individual needs, every assistance would be given. Detailed academic support and discussion would, as appropriate, lead to contact being made with possible new study destinations and give reassurance that the proposed transfer was in the best interests of the student concerned. Advice would also be offered as required regarding the most suitable of various options, but always in an independent, non-partisan fashion that takes into consideration the student's personal situation and motivations. Support towards making any move, in terms of application or APL evidence from completed modules/units, would also be made available, as would a constructive outline of any impact on qualification outcomes and/or financial implications.

5. Policy communication

5.1 In order for current and prospective students to be appropriately informed about all aspects of HE provision at Strode College, policies and procedures that may be of particular importance to them or have a profound effect on their situation, including this Student Protection Plan, are all made readily accessible during through the application and enrolment process and throughout teaching programmes.

5.2 All policies related to Higher Education are:

- up front, clear, accurate and comprehensive
- easily available, transparent, unambiguous and written in plain language
- published on the College website
- able to be obtained in hard copy upon request

Amended by: Head of Higher Education	Date amendment: Dec 2021	Review Date: Oct 2022	Page 5
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5.3 All policies and processes relating to HE provision at Strode College have been specially developed to be in line with the requirements of partner awarding bodies. This ensures that the College is able to meet its responsibility of delivering programmes in an appropriate fashion, whilst maintaining academic standards and providing a quality student experience that supports achievement for all.

5.4 All policies are regularly reviewed and updated based on new developments in HE regulatory frameworks and direct feedback from students. As required, differing arrangements for students following University of Plymouth programmes and those on Pearson HND/HNC courses are clearly explained, with the context of policy reflecting the relevant guidance provided by both awarding bodies.

5.5 In the course of development and review, policies are shared with student representatives, with teaching teams and at HE Management Group meetings before being agreed and officially implemented by the Strode College Senior Management Team. A similar process was undertaken in creating the HE Student Contract, which underpins admissions and enrolment on to programmes, and the widely appreciated HE Student Charter, which was developed with significant student input and outlines the commitments made by the College on behalf of its HE students.

5.6 As an integral part of the admissions process, Strode College always provides new students with the HE Student Contract at the point of offer. Each learner also has open access to both the Student Protection Plan and the HE Student Charter in the context of the College's determination to ensure that all students are aware of their rights and the measures in place to assist them. Attention is also regularly drawn to these support mechanisms and the College's commitments made to students at representative meetings.

5.7 Students were fully consulted at Programme Committee Meetings (PCM) for all courses about the preparation of documentation for the OfS registration process and their comments were included in the subsequent policy development.

5.8 All Higher Education staff have taken part in professional training sessions specific to the inception of the Office for Students and related HE developments. The whole Senior Management team were appraised of the changes to be implemented and their positive implications for the College.

5.9 Staff, students and governors are directly engaged in reviewing the Student Protection Plan and other documentation related to ongoing conditions of registration, as a means of ensuring that the College offers the best possible service and high quality provision to its higher education students.

6. Complaints and Appeals

6.1 Strode College is fully committed to offering the best possible Higher Education programmes and encourages attention being brought to any instance where it is felt this objective is not being met. A full and fair procedure exists for anyone wishing to express their dissatisfaction regarding a particular aspect of the service they receive from the College in relation to Higher Education.

6.2 The Strode College Higher Education Complaints Procedure is open, transparent and available to all HE students equally, irrespective of the course of study being followed and may also be utilised by other clients of the College associated with the delivery of HE programme. In making depositions about the quality of learning opportunities or other matters of concern, there is absolutely no risk of disadvantage to the complainant. Students can consult the procedure via the College website.

6.3 The procedure has been developed from documentation and guidance prepared by both the University of Plymouth and Pearson, as well as existing procedures applicable to other areas of delivery within the College. In this way it is designed to offer a high level of protection, whilst also incorporating essential elements of the systems set up by the University with respect to accredited courses delivered through partner colleges. It has been implemented with the agreement of the University of Plymouth, but applies equally to all taught courses delivered as part of Strode College Higher Education provision.

Amended by: Head of Higher Education	Date amendment: Dec 2021	Review Date: Oct 2022	Page 6
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6.4 The purpose of the Complaints Procedure is to outline how a complaint may be raised and also to explain the precise fashion, in which such complaints will be handled. The College promises that all concerns will be taken seriously and that issues raised will be investigated thoroughly and fairly with complainants being informed promptly of any outcome and actions to be taken. Alternative procedures are in place relating to academic appeals or disciplinary action.

6.5 The HE Complaints Procedure guides complainants sensitively through a series of stages, which begin relatively informally and become more detailed and regulated as the process advances. Initially complaints will often be dealt with verbally, but requirements for the production of written statements at later stages are made explicit. At all levels, however, concerns are handled privately and confidentially and information is only shared as is necessary in order to address the issue.

6.6 Clear guidelines are set out with regard to the reasonable timescales in which complaints need to be handled, the nature of written documentation for those complaints that progress to a more formal stage and also the membership of panels, who may be asked to investigate and produce findings in response to specific issues. The process is clearly signposted for students of all Strode College HE courses and the areas of responsibility that lie internally and with awarding bodies are fully outlined.

6.7 Strode College ensures that all complaints are handled in a timely and fair manner and that appropriate action is taken in line with any decision. The effectiveness of the Complaints Procedure is monitored and conclusions are reflected upon for enhancement purposes.

6.8 If the outcome is still not considered to be satisfactory at the conclusion of this three-staged process, the complainant would be able to present their complaint to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

6.9 Strode College also promises to treat all academic appeals seriously and, as part of offering high quality HE provision, is committed to offering an appeals process that is equitable, transparent and ensures proportionality. In order to achieve this aim, the Strode College HE Academic Appeals Procedure is made accessible to all Higher Education students in a similar manner to the arrangements catering for complaints.

6.10 As with the complaints process described above, the HE Appeals Procedure explains how an appeal can be made and how this will be dealt with fairly and confidentially. It confirms to students that any appeal may progress through various stages, which offer an appropriate level of independent scrutiny, whether that be through the University of Plymouth or external advisors. Clear signposting also guides all students through admissible timescales, required documentation and the membership of panels established to assess the validity of the appeal.

6.11 The procedure has been established to offer all HE students the same rights as those that are available through the University of Plymouth appeal mechanisms and has been developed with the University's authorisation; as necessary however, arrangements have been adapted to take into account the differing circumstances of HNC/HND courses accredited by Pearson.

6.12 When the appeal procedure reaches its conclusion – either because the appeal is deemed to be invalid or a decision in response to the appeal is reached – the student having submitted the appeal will be issued with a 'Completion of Procedures' letter explaining how a further review of the outcome may be requested from the OIA.

6.13 On each occasion that an appeal is initiated, the opportunity is taken to review the underlying causes of that appeal and to determine what measures might productively be implemented to improve the student experience and avoid similar instances occurring in the future.

6.14 In the circumstance where, following careful consideration of an application to join a Strode College Higher Education programme, a decision is taken not to offer a place, the College will communicate this conclusion to the individual concerned outlining our reasons and approaching the situation with sensitivity. If, however, the applicant wishes to question this outcome, a process is available to consider their case in a fair and considered manner. The applicant is invited to meet with the Head of Higher Education and Programme Manager to discuss their application. The appeal procedures for challenging any decision not to make an offer is available in the HE Admissions Policy.

Amended by: Head of Higher Education	Date amendment: Dec 2021	Review Date: Oct 2022	Page 7
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