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Student protection plan for the period 2020-2021

INTRODUCTION

This plan ("the Plan") is the student protection plan for UCS as required by the Office for Students ("OfS") pursuant to Part 1 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA 2017).

The Plan provides a clear and accessible statement of the risks to the continuation of higher education (HE) study of University Centre Sparsholt (UCS) students, the likelihood that those risks will crystallise, and the severity of the impact of the impact on students should those risks crystallise. The Plan sets out the measures that UCS has put in place to mitigate these risks including how and when such measures would be triggered. The purpose of the Plan is to ensure that students' interests are protected and that, as far as possible, they are able to continue their studies in the event of any change in circumstances.

UCS is an integral part of Sparsholt College (the College), which provides students regionally (and in some cases nationally) with land based higher education (HE) and further education ("FE") from its campus at Sparsholt near Winchester. The College also provides a range of FE and sixth form education, plus a small number of Higher National certificate (HNC) programmes to students in Andover from its Andover College campus, as well as a growing range of apprenticeships from its campuses at both Sparsholt and Andover. UCS currently delivers 8 Foundation degrees (FdSc), 6 Bachelor of Science degrees (BSc), 2 BSc top-up degrees and 2 Masters in Science (MSc), all of which are delivered full-time and campus based. Additionally, there is 1 part-time, campus based BSc top-up programme. Therefore, the specialist land-based HE portfolio is small and managed within one discrete faculty.

The fact the College has been established over many years and has consistently demonstrated strong financial and academic health means that the overall risk of it ceasing to be able to honour its commitments is very low: historically this has never happened. Nevertheless, UCS recognises the importance of identifying and monitoring the full range of risks that could affect the ability of higher education students to complete their studies: this includes the critical need to reflect the student perspective and accordingly students are involved with the creation and implementation of the Plan.

UCS is committed to the continuation of study for all current and potential students: this is central to its role as a higher education provider.

To support the development of this Plan a Higher Education Governance Working Group was established (HEGWG), consisting of five governors plus one student governor and three members of the Higher Education Strategy group. The governors provided peer review of documents, feedback on key messages and guidance on some of the legal elements. The UCS student community was represented by the student governor who additionally provided student opinion and promoted participation in the student survey. Following full registration with OfS in September 2018, this document was reviewed and updated by the HE Strategy group on 20.07.2020.

RISK ASSESSMENT

This Section addressed OfS Question 1 (below) primarily by reference to the range of risks that are identified by the OfS in paragraph 383 of the OfS's Regulatory Framework.

Risk Classification:

Risk management is a central part of the College's strategic governance arrangements. It is the process whereby the College methodically addresses risks attached to its activities which may impact on the achievement of its strategic objectives. Furthermore, it is a continuous and developing process which runs throughout the College's strategic planning and implementation process, which is monitored by the governor Audit Committee which reports to the Board of Governors. It is integrated into the culture of the College through development of an effective Risk Management Plan resulting in a Risk Register. The evaluation and prioritisation of risks for the Student Protection Plan was achieved through a simplified risk scoring model that incorporates two factors that affect risk, namely impact (materiality) and likelihood. Risks were banded and scored as high (3), medium (2) or low (1) category and the overall risk score was calculated from impact multiplied by likelihood. Overall scores were then categorised as;

Very low – score of 0 to 1

Low – score of 2 to 3

Moderate – score of 4 to 6

High – score of greater than 6

The College operates a Single Equality Scheme and the identified risks have been reviewed in consideration of this.

1. An assessment of the range of risks to the continuation of study for your students, how those risks may differ based on your students' needs, characteristics and circumstances, and the likelihood that those risks will crystallise

RISK 1: Cessation of operations

OfS risk: "UCS as a whole is no longer able to operate or intends to operate"

Likelihood of Risk crystallising: VERY LOW

Evidence:

- UCS forms part of the College whose financial performance is rated 'good' by the Education and Skills Funding Agency ("ESFA") with an operating surplus in each year of the forward financial plan. The College has produced operating surplus for each of the previous 3 years. There are no anticipated conditions that would alter the surplus position in the foreseeable future.
- The majority of HE provision is delivered at the Sparsholt campus, with only two HE programmes (HNCs) delivered at the Andover campus. The Area Review, conducted in 2017, confirmed the viability of both campuses to continue as stand alone education providers.
- Both campuses recruit predominantly local students with appropriate levels of on-site residential accommodation available at Sparsholt for non-local students. Bursaries associated with study, transport and accommodation costs will continue to be available to students identified as under-represented within the approved Access & Participation Plan.

- A strong academic performance. The college is rated “Gold” in the Teaching Excellence Framework and was ranked in the top 5 of land-based institutions in the UK for student satisfaction in the National Student Survey in 2019.

RISK 2: Loss of Validating Partner

OfS risk: “UCS is no longer able to award the qualifications for which its students are registered because a validating partner has withdrawn validation”

Likelihood of Risk crystallising: LOW

Evidence:

- All FdSc and BSc programmes are validated by one partner, the University of Portsmouth. The risk of this partnership failing and validation being withheld is rated as low. The partnership has been in place since 1995 and is subject to full Periodic Review every six years. A Periodic Review was conducted in April 2020 with the three key outcomes confirmed;
 1. Continued validity and relevance of the curriculum for all Programmes considered at this event.
 2. Effective Annual Monitoring and Review Processes
 3. Fitness of Partnership Arrangements Confirmed for a further six years

The college engages fully with all aspects of quality, aligns with the policies and processes of the validating partner as well as staff CPD and the HEA Fellowship programme organised by the University.

- HNC programmes are awarded by Pearson and the risk of non-accreditation is low. The college has many years of experience of delivering BTEC programmes and robust quality assurance has ensured no ‘suspension’ of accreditation.

RISK 3: Inability to deliver courses

OfS risks: “UCS is no longer able to deliver courses to students in one or more subject areas and/or departments, one or more courses to students, particularly if course closures are likely in the next three years.”

Apart from financial constraints which are addressed in Risk 1 above, UCS’s “inability” to deliver a course is likely to reflect a lack of specialist resource or a loss of the professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) approval required to deliver the course.

Likelihood of Risk crystallising: LOW

Evidence:

- The risk that the college would be unable to deliver programmes in highly specialised areas of land-based provision is rated as low. Specialist industry standard resources are good and are intrinsic to the specialist institution which is UCS. Investment in specialist aquaculture facilities, exotic animal collections and industry specific laboratory equipment and IT software has been maintained over the past 5 years. A £250,000 development at the equine unit was completed in 2018/19 and a proposed c.£2,000,000 investment in animal welfare, veterinary nursing and zoo collection is planned for 2020/21.
- The risk of loss of Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) approval is low. FdSc Veterinary Nursing results in Registered Veterinary Nurse (RVN) status for the students and is regulated by the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory body (PSRB), the Royal College of

Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). We liaise and work closely with the RCVS to ensure that our approved course reflects the required standards for RCVS approval. We ensure that our course complies with existing PSRB standards and have monitoring systems to ensure that we reflect new accreditation requirements in our academic planning. Amended and reviewed RCVS approved delivery and assessment is overseen by our validating partner, the external examiner and the RCVS appointed external verifier, all of whom can request the delivery of an action plan if any risks are apparent. Renewal of accreditation will be in place for academic year 2020/2021 and the college has no concerns about the quality of the provision. This view is supported by the most recent External Examiner report (July 2019) stated “it is clear to me the course still meets all professional body requirements” whilst the most recent annual Programme Provider Monitoring Visit Report completed on behalf of the RCVS in November 2019 stated ‘no concerns’. The RCVS provided a Quality Moderation report in January 2017 following an audit of assessment and were satisfied with the standard of assessments.

- The risk of undergraduate course closure is rated as low. There are common taught units at each level delivered by a range of appropriately qualified and experienced academic staff who are highly appropriate to the task. Specialist units are taught within each subject area but staffing is adequate to cover short term staff shortage. Recruitment to vacant teaching posts has attracted a range of suitably qualified and experienced applicants to ensure the continuity of provision which has not been compromised at any time in the history of HE provision at the college. There are suitably qualified and vocationally competent teaching staff within the FE provision who could be transferred to cover specific units if required.

RISK 4: Withdrawal of Mode of Study

OfS risk: “UCS is no longer able to deliver one or more modes of study to students, particularly if the withdrawal of a mode of study is likely”

Likelihood of Risk crystallising: LOW

Evidence:

- The risk that UCS would be unable to deliver part-time blended learning is low. UCS only deliver one top-up degree programme on a part-time blended learning basis. This programme consistently recruits a small viable cohort who access resources on-line using a virtual learning environment (VLE), in addition to attending six campus based block weeks over the duration of the course. In recent years the course has been redeveloped and all resources have been updated and reviewed for their accessibility and currency. The teaching team is experienced and stable and has been enhanced by the addition of an Academic Support tutor who provides weekly on-line tutorials and academic support as required.
- All other provision is full-time campus based with no expectation of withdrawal of mode of study.

RISK 5: Ability to recruit or teach

OfS risk: “UCS is no longer able to recruit or teach a particular type of student”

Likelihood of Risk crystallising: MODERATE

Evidence:

- The risk that the college would no longer be able to deliver postgraduate provision in Applied Zoo Biology, and Equine Behaviour, Performance & Training is rated as moderate. The college is dependent on a very limited number of members of the academic staff to deliver modules that require specialist knowledge and vocational experience. This group of staff are stable and committed to their roles, but the relatively small number of these for the postgraduate provision, does present a slightly higher level of risk than undergraduate teaching areas where there are greater numbers of staff to be able to call upon.
- The risk that the college is unable to deliver certain programmes of study given the niche and specialist nature of the provision due to low numbers of applicants e.g.; HNC programmes, is moderate. The decision to suspend delivery of one of these programmes would be made prior to enrolment and commencement of delivery. All cohorts of students already enrolled onto one of these programmes would be taught through to completion.

RISK MITIGATION

This Section addresses OfS Section 2 (below) in respect of Risk 5 being the only risk identified in Section 1 that is rated as Moderate or higher.

2. The measures that you have put in place to mitigate those risks that you consider to be reasonably likely to crystallise

RISK 5: Ability to recruit or teach

UCS is no longer able to recruit or teach a particular type of student

Details of measure put in place:

In all scenarios involving course closure the college anticipates that it would be able to complete the delivery of a degree programme without necessitating the transfer of students or mid-course closure. The college would be committed to teaching out any cohorts enrolled on the programmes, however in the unlikely event of course closure the following measures would be put in place;

Loss of suitably qualified teaching staff;

If the college is unable to recruit appropriately skilled and vocationally experienced staff to deliver our postgraduate courses in Applied Zoo Biology, and Equine Behaviour, Performance & Training which would result in course closure prior to students being enrolled on these programmes of study, the college will;

- Notify all applicants by 31st May prior to enrolment in the following September to enable applicants to select alternative courses.
- Provide advice and guidance to applicants on suitable alternative courses and providers.

If the college is unable to recruit appropriately skilled and vocationally experienced staff to deliver the postgraduate courses in Applied Zoo Biology, and Equine Behaviour, Performance & Training which would result in course closure whilst students are already enrolled on these programmes of study the college will;

- Provide advice and guidance on alternative providers of comparable courses utilising the college Landex membership to facilitate transfers. Landex (Land Based Colleges Aspiring to Excellence) is a national subscriber organisation with 49 member Colleges and Universities in England and 3 Members in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. To qualify

for membership, the provider must deliver significant volumes of education and training in land based occupational areas and meet Landex quality standards.

- Provide proportionate, reasonable and fair compensation to cover additional course fees, additional travel and additional accommodation costs that might be incurred as a result of the transfer.
- Reasonably facilitate the transfer and enrolment onto a similar degree programme at the college, or at another provider of similar degree courses. Where a student refuses the offer of a reasonable transfer, the college will have no liability to provide compensation.
- Liability for additional fees, transport and accommodation will be limited to the number of years of study outstanding at the point of transfer from the course that the student was enrolled on at Sparsholt.
- Provide proportionate, reasonable and fair compensation to cover a refund for fees, travel and accommodation costs that have been incurred where continuation of study is not possible.

Lack of applications:

If the college is unable to deliver certain programmes of under graduate study e.g.; HNC programmes, due to low numbers of applicants the college will;

- Notify all applicants by 31st March prior to enrolment in the following September to enable applicants to select alternative courses.
- Offer alternative degree programmes, if available that will be running and ensure that the student can focus their assessment to their particular area of interest where appropriate
- Provide advice and guidance to applicants on suitable alternative courses and providers.

COMPENSATION POLICY

This Section addressed OfS Question 3 (below).

3. Information about the policy you have in place to refund tuition fees and other relevant costs to your students and to provide compensation where necessary in the event that you are no longer able to preserve continuation of study

See the UCS Fees, Refund and Compensation Policy available on the website found at <https://www.sparsholt.ac.uk/policies-reports/>.

We have cash reserves of 20% of annual Higher Education fee income which would be sufficient to provide refunds and compensation for any students for whom we have identified an increased risk of non-continuation of study.

COMMUNICATION OF PLAN

This Section addresses OfS Question 4 (below).

4. Information about how you will communicate with students about your student protection plan

UCS will publicise the Plan to current and prospective students by:

- uploading it to our website <https://www.sparsholt.ac.uk/policies-reports/> available via 'Quick Links' on the front page of the college website
- advise prospective students of the Plan within future publications of the prospectus
- introduce the Plan to prospective students at Course Information events
- include a briefing on the contents of the Plan during induction week for new students
- produce a summary leaflet of the Plan to explain the key elements to be distributed at Course Information events, during induction and during group tutorial sessions.
- inserting a hyperlink to the Plan into the Course Handbook that is available on-line for each student
- insert a copy of the Plan into the HE Student Information page on the VLE 'HE4U'

UCS will ensure that staff are aware of the implications of the Plan when they propose course changes by;

- Providing CPD for current staff during 2020/21
- Including Plan familiarisation to the staff induction process and probationary reviews for all new staff.

Current students have been involved in the development of the Plan in the following ways;

- Course tutors facilitated a review of the Plan during group tutorials by giving a short presentation on the proposed content. Discussion time was provided to enable Student Association reps to collate feedback.
- UCS students have been involved in the review by providing a summary of the identified risks, and their associated risk rating, through the use of Survey Monkey. This will be repeated annually to ensure currency and relevance of the Plan.

- In future academic years the Plan will be included as a standing agenda item for the Student Association meetings (four meetings per year) enabling representatives to feedback views from the wider student community.

Arrangements that will be put in place to communicate with affected students should the Plan need to be implemented will be;

- UCS will inform affected students if there are to be material changes to their course by adopting the University of Portsmouth 'Course and Unit Changes and Student Consultation' policy (1st October 2017). Course structure or unit changes will be complete 9 months prior to the commencement of study.
- UCS will inform undergraduate applicants of course closure by 31st March prior to their enrolment the following September.
- UCS will inform postgraduate applicants of course closure by 31st May prior to their enrolment the following September.
- UCS will inform enrolled students of potential non-continuation of their course a minimum of 1 term in advance of course closure.

If the UCS needs to implement the measures in the student protection plan, we will support students by;

- providing one to one tutorials to discuss transfer options available,
- providing meeting space for alternative providers to visit and discuss appropriate provision options,
- providing guidance on refund and compensation entitlement,
- providing financial summaries of refunds and compensation that will be available,
- providing guidance and support to complete Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to facilitate transfer to another provider,
- providing counselling and mentoring from the Student Services team to underpin student welfare,
- providing 'handover' notes and documentation relating to (Disabled Students Allowance) DSA support and exam access arrangements as appropriate to another provider where a transfer has been agreed.

If UCS needs to implement the measures in the Plan, we will also provide access to independent advice from;

- The Colleges qualified Careers Advisor,
- The Director of Quality Enhancement at Landex.

