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Student Protection Plan – Academic Year 24/25

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

Belfast Metropolitan College is a **Non-Departmental Public Body (NDBP)** and as such has a properly constituted Audit Risk and Assurance Committee (ARAC) which meets quarterly. Risk management forms an integral part of the College's internal control and corporate governance arrangements. Our Risk Management Policy sets out Belfast Met's approach to risk management and the processes which should be followed to formally identify, assess and manage risks to the College objectives. Risk registers are maintained at the corporate, directorate, departmental and project levels within the College. All risk registers are reviewed quarterly.

The Corporate Risk Register outlines risks that could impact upon the long-term strategic objectives of the organisation and this register provides Governing Body with an assurance that these are being managed. These risks are managed by the Executive Leadership Team and should be escalated to the DfE if considered appropriate and necessary by the Executive Leadership Team.

Directorate risk registers outline risks that could impact on the delivery of directorate business plans and provide the Principal & Chief Executive of the College with an assurance that these are being managed. These risks are managed by Directors and can be escalated to the Corporate Risk register if appropriate.

Operational risk registers detail risks that could impact on the delivery of the departmental business plans and provide the relevant Directors with an assurance that these are being managed. These risk registers are generally operational in nature, focussing on the day to day issues that the organisation is confronted with as it strives to deliver its strategic objectives. As such, they are distinct from the corporate risk register which focusses on risks that could impact upon the long-term strategic direction of the organisation. Operational risks are managed by Heads of Department and can be escalated to either the Directorate or Corporate Risk register as appropriate. Operational risk registers should be informed by the range of risk assessment methods employed by the College in relation to specific activities or projects.

The College's Corporate Risk Register is reviewed at ARAC at each quarterly meeting. The parent body, Department for the Economy (DfE), is represented at these meetings. The ARAC fully supports the Governing Body and Accounting Officer by reviewing the completeness, reliability and integrity of assurances provided by Management and from independent sources.

The risk that Belfast Metropolitan College is able to operate as a whole is low because of its NDPB status and sound financial performance. The College is satisfied that the organisation is a going concern on the basis that there is no reason to believe that the Department's future sponsorship and future Assembly approval will not be forthcoming to meet the College's liabilities as they fall due.

The Northern Ireland Audit office (NIAO) gave the College an unqualified audit report in 2022/23 with no issues raised. The Internal Audit Annual report 2022/23 published in November 2023 resulted in the College achieving an overall rating of a 'Satisfactory' assurance.

NB "Satisfactory" is now the highest level of audit opinion as defined in Accounting Officer letter DAO (DoF) 07/16.

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

As detailed above, the College takes great care to ensure that programmes can be successful. All new curriculum developments are approved by Director of Curriculum and the Colleges Executive Leadership Team. All new courses go through a validation process to ensure that staff and resources are in place to ensure students succeed. If we were not able to deliver a programme because there were issues with specialist provision, we would work with our networks and partner HEIs/ wider FE Sector to ensure that courses could continue. These considerations form part of the validation process.

Furthermore, each year programme has undertaken an annual monitoring process which encourages an evaluation of a range of issues including teaching and learning, issues of continuation and resource issues. These are considered by the Curriculum Area Manager, the Head of School and form part of a wider Self Evaluation Document and action plan which is signed off by Organisational Quality Assurance Department, Director of Curriculum, Colleges Executive Leadership Team, Curriculum Quality and Engagement Committee (CQE), a subcommittee to the Governing Body, the CQE committee (Chair) presents the Colleges Whole College Quality Improvement Plan (WCQIP) to Governing Body for sign off before the WCQIP is submitted to the Quality Improvement Branch in the Department for Economy (DfE).

The performance of all courses is subject to scrutiny, through a formal quarterly, performance review process. Each quarter, a deep dive analysis of key curriculum metrics by course e.g., retention, achievement, success and attendance are conducted with each of the five curriculum schools. This process encourages a robust evaluation of a range of issues including teaching and learning, issues of quality, continuation and resource issues. At the strategic level, focussed Planning and Performance reviews also take place with each School, twice per annum, to discuss any problem areas identified through the local deep dives and key planning issues to be addressed going forward.

In the case of a major emergency the College's Business Continuity Group (oversees the Business Continuity Plan and Departmental Disaster Recovery Plans) which would be put in place in the case of any major form of disruption to provision. These documents detail the process of moving provision to other campuses and providing temporary classrooms within two weeks of any disastrous event. Students will be communicated with rapidly as to arrangements for them and there would be detailed discussions with partner HEIs on any support they could offer at this time.

If a course is closed for any reason, there are set processes to follow to ensure that students are not disadvantaged. These are drawn up with partner HEIs based on the good practice developed by the Association of Collaborative Providers. A copy of the

Colleges Higher Education 'Procedures for HE programme Closure, Suspension and Substantial Change(s) can be found at <https://www.belfastmet.ac.uk/about-us/corporate-information/public-documents/>

If the College was unable to deliver courses within the specialised areas identified, as a result of staff shortage or changes to professional regulation, the following plans would be put into place. The College works hard to maintain strong working relationships with all of the professional bodies concerned, as well as a wide range of current employers, in order to maintain access to professional expertise should any changes be required to the current teaching staff teams. The College would seek to recruit suitably qualified individuals to deliver and support students across the programmes identified in order to maintain academic standards and to secure the long-term viability of the course(s). In the event of changes to professional industry regulation, the College would again work closely with the accrediting bodies, employers and our validating partners to make the necessary modifications to our academic programmes in order to maintain full industry accreditation and professional recognition.

If a PSRB was to withdraw from a course accreditation arrangement, the College would work closely with employers and industry professionals to maintain the vocational focus of the course in the first instance. Where appropriate and possible, an alternative PSRB arrangement would be sought.

In the event of a validation agreement being terminated, the College would continue to teach all students currently enrolled on the programme(s) identified for the duration of the validated programme schedule (e.g. 3-5 years full time). All provision for this delivery would remain unchanged and students would continue to be supported fully by the College. The College would also consider the development of a new programme, in line with the College HE strategy and following extensive employer engagement and market research, in partnership with an alternative validating partner.

If an employer was unable to continue to support a higher or degree apprentice, the following actions would be initiated:

- The College would offer full support, via assessors, lecturers and student services, to support the apprentice to relocate into an alternative role. This may be within the same company.

- The College would support the apprentice to seek an alternative employer, if necessary, by engaging with other employers and organisations known to the College.
- The apprentice would be offered independent advice and guidance via a meeting with a member of the Guidance Team in order to explore a wider range of options – including alternative programmes from other funding streams (i.e. Taught foundation degree programmes).

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

Belfast Metropolitan College has a Fees and Charges Policy published on the College website.

Fees and Charges Policy 2024-2025

Students are directed to this policy document as part of their pre-enrolment, advice sessions and again at enrolment.

The policy makes provision for:

- Payment of Fees online
- Payment of Fees by Direct Debit
- Payment by Sponsor or Employer
- Payment of Tuition Fees by Student Loan Company (SLC)
- Late Payment
- Difficulty with Payment
- Refund Policy/Early Withdrawal from a Course

As soon as a student leaves a course, the College notifies the Student Loan Company. Every return for attendance to the SLC is checked through the College's register system to confirm continued attendance.

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

We will publicise our student protection plan to current and future students by including the student protection plan in all College literature and platforms including Programme Handbook. Student protection plan is available on the Colleges website <https://www.belfastmet.ac.uk/about-us/corporate-information/public-documents/> and via the college's VLE CANVAS. College student protection plan would also feature in the College's student handbook and be discussed as part of ongoing inductions with students.

We will ensure that staff are aware of the implications of our student protection plan when they propose course changes.

How we will work with current students in the development of your student protection plan.

We will review our student protection plan annually and as required i.e. mitigating factors internally and externally. Our students will be involved in our review by student voice i.e. survey and staff student consultative committee meetings (SSCC's).

Arrangements we will put in place to communicate with affected students should your student protection plan need to be implemented.

We will inform students if there are to be material changes to their course by verbal communication, email to students, advisor of study (tutorial), announcements on CANVAS, SSCC and student voice.

We will aim to give students 30 days' notice when we need to make material changes to their course, however, depending on the external environment, we will communicate at the earliest available opportunity through the various measures i.e. email, telephone call, face to face conversations, video conferencing and or CANVAS notifications.

If we need to implement the measures in our student protection plan, we will do work with internal student service departments to support students collectively and individually.

We will put in place internal student service arrangements to ensure that our students have access to independent advice if we need to implement the measures in our student protection plan.