

Regulatory case report for Bradford College and the University of Greater Manchester: Conditions B1 and B4

Summary

This case report explains the regulatory judgement of the Office for Students (OfS) in relation to a quality assessment of computing courses delivered by Bradford College ('the provider') and leading to qualifications awarded by the University of Greater Manchester, formerly known as the University of Bolton ('the awarding partner'), and the compliance of these providers with ongoing conditions of registration B1 and B4. In it, we explain our findings and why we have decided not to undertake further regulatory intervention for either higher education provider at this stage.

Background

We require all registered higher education providers' courses to meet conditions that relate to quality and standards. The detailed requirements of these conditions can be found in our regulatory framework.¹

As a result of our general monitoring, in December 2022 we decided to open an investigation into the quality of computing courses delivered by Bradford College and leading to qualifications awarded by the University of Greater Manchester. We appointed an assessment team, consisting of three academic expert assessors and a member of OfS staff. The team was asked to give its advice and judgements about the quality of the provider's computing courses.

We published the quality assessment report setting out the assessment team's advice and judgements in May 2024.² Through its activities, the team identified three areas of concern that could relate to Bradford College's compliance with the OfS's conditions of registration:

- **Concern 1:** The assessment team found that the level of educational challenge and coherence (in relation to depth of content) of the computing courses considered were below what would be expected of a computer science higher education course. This raised concerns that students were not required to develop relevant skills. Concern 1 relates to condition of registration B1.
- **Concern 2:** The assessment team found indications that students were not being assessed effectively. There were high proportions of non-technical assessments in modules with technical subject matter, and learning outcomes and assessments were weighted towards writing and referencing skills. Additionally, the assessment team was concerned that the use of writing-based marking criteria for more technical assessments could mean that academic regulations (marking criteria) were not designed to ensure the credibility of relevant awards.

¹ See [Regulatory framework for higher education in England - Office for Students](#).

² See [Quality assessment report BSc Computing courses at Bradford College - Office for Students](#).

This is because they appeared not to have been designed for the assessment of technical practical work. Concern 2 relates to condition of registration B4.

- **Concern 3:** The assessment team found that the standards and marking for technical assessment may suggest that students achieve higher grades than the technical skills demonstrated support. This raised concerns that the relevant awards may not be credible. Concern 3 relates to condition of registration B4.

The team also considered multiple sources of information that were relevant to condition B2, concerning resources, support and student engagement. The assessment team did not identify any concerns relating to this condition from reviewing this information.

During and after the assessment, we engaged with the provider to understand its views on the assessment team's concerns. The OfS also engaged with the awarding partner before the publication of the assessment report. As part of this engagement, the provider explained the progress that had been made since our assessment in relation to the concerns set out in the report. We carefully considered the content of the quality assessment report, and the information given during the course of the engagement in reaching our decisions.

Relevant OfS conditions of registration and OfS regulatory finding

Our view is that the concerns raised by the assessment team represent breaches of general ongoing conditions B1 and B4. Where courses are delivered through partnership arrangements, both the delivery provider and the awarding partner must comply with our conditions of registration relating to the quality of courses.³ Following consideration of the context of this particular partnership, we have decided that both the delivery provider, Bradford College, and the awarding partner, the University of Greater Manchester, have breached conditions B1 and B4.

Condition B1

This condition requires a provider and awarding partner to ensure that students 'receive a high quality academic experience' including but not limited to ensuring that each higher education course provides an appropriate level of educational challenge, is coherent and requires students to develop relevant skills.

Educational challenge means a challenge that is no less than the minimum level of rigour and difficulty reasonably expected of the higher education course, in the context of the subject matter and level of the course.

A **coherent** course means a higher education course that ensures that there is an appropriate balance between breadth and depth of content; that subjects and skills are taught in an appropriate order and, where necessary, build on each other throughout the course; and that key concepts are introduced at the appropriate point in the course content.

Relevant skills are the knowledge and understanding relevant to the subject matter and level of the higher education course; and other skills relevant to the subject matter and level of the higher

³ See the OfS Regulatory framework, [paragraphs 332B-C](#) and [paragraphs 335E-F](#).

education course including, but not limited to, cognitive skills, practical skills, transferable skills and professional competences.

OfS judgement on condition B1

We have judged that Bradford College has breached condition B1. Based on the evidence gathered by the assessment team and presented in its report, we consider that there were legitimate concerns about the educational challenge and coherence of computing courses, and the relevant skills required of students on these courses.

The assessment team identified that the level of educational challenge was not appropriate to the level of the courses delivered. Course specifications, including learning outcomes, teaching and assessment, did not require students to demonstrate that they had attained practical or technical skills and knowledge integral to the subject area of computing, such as writing their own code or using algorithms, at an appropriately challenging level. In part, this was because of an emphasis on written academic skills instead of the core technical and practical skills relevant to computing.

The provider had not ensured coherence in relation to the progressive difficulty and depth of content in the computing courses. For example, final year projects submitted for the courses did not demonstrate an appropriate progression of difficulty and depth from Levels 4 to 6.

As a result of the level of educational challenge and lack of coherence of the computing courses, the provider had not ensured that students, having completed their studies, were required to demonstrate the relevant skills expected for a computing degree. We consider that it would have been reasonable to expect the provider to ensure, through the design, delivery and assessment of its computing courses, that it had required students to develop and demonstrate relevant knowledge and skills.

Having considered our regulatory requirements and the context of the partnership, we have also judged that University of Greater Manchester has breached condition B1. As the awarding partner, the University of Greater Manchester approved the provider's computing degree courses and award qualifications to students. We consider that it is reasonable to expect the awarding partner to have identified shortcomings in the educational challenge, coherence, and requirement to develop skills in the relevant courses through its approval and oversight processes, but it did not.

Condition B4

This condition includes requirements for a provider and awarding partner to ensure that students are assessed effectively and that awards are credible at the point of being granted and when compared to those granted previously.

To ensure that students are **assessed effectively**, providers must ensure that students are assessed in a challenging and appropriately comprehensive way for the subject of the higher education course. This includes that assessment should provide appropriate stretch and rigour for the level of the course and test relevant skills.

Credible awards must, in our opinion, reflect students' knowledge and skills, including that assessment takes place in a way that results in students demonstrating knowledge and skills in the way intended by design of the assessment.

OfS judgement on condition B4

We have judged that Bradford College has breached condition B4. Based on the evidence, we consider that the assessment team identified legitimate concerns in respect of the efficacy and credibility of assessment.

The assessment team reviewed the assessment of all modules across Levels 4, 5 and 6 of the provider's computing degrees. It found that assignments set for computing students on most modules at Levels 4, 5, and 6 did not include an appropriate proportion of assessment of technical or practical skills, such as coding or the use of algorithms. Instead, a significant proportion of the assessments of the computing courses were written tasks of limited relevance to the degree subject. This means that the assessment did not provide appropriate stretch and rigour for the level of the course and did not test relevant skills. We consider that it would have been reasonable to expect the provider to design its assessments such that students on its computing courses had been required to demonstrate relevant skills and were assessed on these skills. On this basis, we consider that the provider did not ensure that that students were assessed effectively.

Concerning the credibility of awards, the assessment team found that the application of marking rubrics was excessively lenient, and rubrics were not appropriately tailored to assess technical or practical skills. Students were able to achieve high marks without demonstrating relevant skills. Additionally, students were frequently provided with templates for the completion of assignments and could achieve a high grade through use of these templates. This meant that the provider did not ensure that awards reflected students' knowledge and skills relevant to the learning objectives, assignment, subject area and level of study.

Having considered our regulatory requirements and the context of the partnership, we have also judged that the University of Greater Manchester has breached condition B4. As the awarding partner, the University of Greater Manchester had oversight of the assessment of the computing courses reviewed by the assessment team. We consider that it is reasonable to expect the awarding partner to have identified shortcomings in the assessment of relevant courses through its approval and oversight processes, but it did not.

Actions since the publication of the OfS's quality assessment report

Bradford College engaged positively with us during the quality assessment and has provided information about the actions it has taken or is taking in response to the report. As well as examining evidence gathered during the assessment and in the assessment report, we have carefully reviewed the information submitted by the provider since the publication of the report as part of our assessment of compliance, and when weighing up the appropriateness of our intervention. Our view is that the actions described by the provider are appropriate to remedy its non-compliance with conditions B1 and B4.

At the time of the quality assessment report's publication in 2024, the provider had already taken a decision to cease recruitment to its computing degrees from 2023. This means that no new students will be registered on the courses reviewed by the assessment team.

In addition, the provider has submitted detailed plans for revisions to the teaching and assessment of courses for students already registered on these courses. These revisions have especially focused on bolstering the presence of relevant technical and practical skills in teaching and assessment. Actions have included redesigning learning objectives and course organisation, and

the provider has removed templates from assessments and introduced new rubrics for practical assessments. The provider has also strengthened the teaching team for its computing courses.

We also noted that the provider has communicated with students about these changes to computing courses and acknowledged that changes were a result of concerns raised by the OfS. These communications have included a consultation on changes to courses and assessments and the offer of additional support to students affected by the changes.

We consider that the provider is progressing well with actions to remedy the concerns identified by the assessment team. It has appropriately targeted the substantive issues and actions have been appropriate to the scale and scope of our concerns.

Regulatory intervention

In considering our regulatory response following these findings, we have weighed up the relevant intervention factors and our general duties as set out in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017.⁴ We have also considered the scale and impact of the breaches we have found. The concerns raised by the assessment team were serious, due to the scale of provision in scope of our assessment and the nature of the concerns identified by the assessment team. We also took into account that the college's decision to close relevant courses to new students meant that a relatively small number of students could potentially be disadvantaged by the concerns set out in the assessment report.

Following the closure of relevant computing courses, our main objective is to ensure that the provider and its awarding partner comply with conditions B1 and B4 and ensure that students currently studying on relevant computing courses receive a high quality education. We have found that the college has taken several actions that we view as sufficient remedy for the assessment team's particular concerns. We consider that these actions and our interventions to date, including the publication of this case report, have been sufficient to secure our desired regulatory outcomes in relation to relevant computing courses. These outcomes include ensuring that the college and the university comply with our conditions of registration and protecting the interests of students currently studying on relevant courses.

When considering how we could best address the breaches of conditions, we considered whether further interventions would be a more effective way to deliver the intended outcomes for students. While further interventions were an option, we judged that the imposition of additional or alternative interventions on the college may not improve outcomes for students beyond the changes already being made following our assessment. It could also be more burdensome for the college than necessary.

Following our assessment, we consider that the University of Greater Manchester remains at increased risk of a future breach of ongoing conditions of registration B1 and B4 in relation to its partnership activity. We will continue to monitor this risk. This is because the university's systems for oversight of partners should have identified issues relating to the quality of computing courses at Bradford College. In practice, those systems did not prevent breaches of conditions B1 and B4. As a result, we remain concerned about the University of Greater Manchester's oversight of the quality of other courses it provides through partnership arrangements.

⁴ See [Regulatory advice 15: Monitoring and intervention](#) and [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#).