

STUDENT PROTECTION PLAN 2023– 2024

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Introduction

Registered higher education providers in England are required to publish a 'Student Protection Plan.' This Student Protection Plan details what the Group is doing to prevent serious disruption to our students and what it will do if our students' studies were to be seriously disrupted. This plan must be approved by the Office for Students (OfS) under the condition imposed under sections 5 and 13(1)(c) of HERA.

A Student Protection Plan covers the following:

- An explanation of potential risks to the continuation of study for EKC Group Higher Education students and the likelihood that those risks will become real.
- An explanation of the measures that the College has put in place to mitigate risks.
- The Group's approach to student redress in the event that the institution is no longer able to ensure continuation of study.
- Information about how the Group will communicate with students and staff about the student protection plan.
- Information about how the Group will consult with students through the development of the Student Protection Plan.

This plan applies to all students at EKC Group who are registered on a taught Higher Education programme and Higher and Degree Apprenticeships.

The Student Protection Plan will be reviewed annually. This review will be overseen by the Higher Education Group.

Section One – Assessment of Risk

An assessment of the range of risks to the continuation of study for our students and the likelihood that those risks will crystallise.

1. Risk of entire Group closure

EKC Group operates a diversified education and training curriculum and this is key in mitigating the financial and operating risk to our relatively small HE offer. EKC Group is one of the largest education providers in the Southeast, with 1,400 staff delivering education to over 10,000 students across our family of six Colleges, one Business Unit and our sister Multi Academy Trust, the EKC Schools Trust. The Group's financial performance is continually monitored and there are robust processes and accountabilities in place to effectively manage financial performance. This is reviewed monthly at Senior Executive meetings. Our financial health has been endorsed as 'good' by the Education Skills and Funding Agency. The risk that EKC Group as a whole is unable to operate is **exceptionally low**.

2. Risk of HE market exit

The Group is committed to the delivery of Higher Education as a core component of our portfolio. We are registered with the Office for Students and continue to meet our conditions of registration or reporting obligations. The risk that the provider is unable to operate as a higher education provider is **low**.

3. Risk to programme delivery at business units

All of our colleges have been operating for a long time and are well established in their particular location so the risk of entire closure of a college, either temporarily or permanently, is **low**.

The risk that we are no longer able to deliver core components of our courses is **moderate**, primarily due to national challenges in the recruitment of qualified staff.

The Group has a strategy for growth in Higher Education provision and are responding to the demand for increased higher technical education at levels 4 and 5 however, at this early stage in our five-year higher qualification plan, low applicant numbers is currently a **moderate** risk to delivery of programmes. The HE Group considers student applications in its meeting in spring, following the UCAS equal consideration deadline. Applications will then be closely monitored until June when any courses that are not indicating recruitment of a minimum number of students to ensure viability will be discussed. A decision to discontinue a programme will be taken no later than by the beginning of the Clearing Process, upon recommendation by the HE Group. We may decide to suspend admissions to a programme of study to new students due to viability, shifting market demand, strategic review or other factors at any point in the recruitment cycle.

4. Risk of material changes to the programme

The Group has a long history of delivering higher qualifications and all of our programmes are currently validated by the University of Kent or by Pearson. Whenever a decision will be made to introduce or discontinue a particular mode of study, this will be implemented so as not to adversely affect current students.

We will give students adequate notice when we need to make significant material changes to their courses. We will always do this well in advance of changes.

The risk of material changes is **moderate**.

5. Risk associated with changes to validating partnerships

We are continuously monitored by our validating partners and continue to meet the conditions required. Our courses are validated through The University of Kent and Pearson. Pearson is the UK's largest awarding body and are regulated by Ofqual in England. The University of Kent is a well established higher education institution, and our offer is validated through Divisions recognised by the University as priority areas.

Any changes to validating partnerships will seek to enable students to be 'taught-out' under the existing validation partner arrangement. As a result, the Group is committed to working together with all partners to ensure that there is no material impact on the student experience. Should this prove not to be possible the county of Kent is fortunate to have a number of local Higher Education Providers that could provide alternative options for learners, who would be supported to transfer by the Group. The risk of changes to validating partnerships and its impact to student continuation is **low**.

Section 2: Measures in Place

We have comprehensive insurance arrangements in place in the unlikely event that the Group is unable to provide education and learning to our students. We have robust Business Continuity Plans which cover continuation of teaching and learning in the event of significant adverse events, and we test aspects of the plan on an annual basis. We also have a strong risk management culture and continuity of education is covered in our risk register. The register is reviewed on a termly basis by an internal committee and is also subject to scrutiny by the governing body Audit Committee.

Our Risk Management processes are fully embedded, and any internal and external audit is driven by the risks identified in the Risk Register. The risk register and management processes have been subject to review by our internal auditors and the Education and Skills Funding Agency and have been endorsed.

If we are unable to deliver courses within the EKC Group, we will invoke our Business Continuity Plan and Communications Plan to ensure current and prospective students are kept informed of our position

Specific mitigation and measures to minimise disruption to studies are as follows:

- The Group will aim to have at least two members of staff qualified to teach every HE subject area. Furthermore, we maintain a cover policy to ensure continuity of provision and continue to develop and nurture links with our partner higher education institution so that we can address any gaps in provision and provide a seamless experience for our students.
- Our Partnership Agreement with the University of Kent has been in place since 2018 and renewed in 2024, and provisions are made in the agreement for the case of validated or franchised programme closure or termination of the agreement which aim at ensuring that students can finalise their started degree programmes.
- Where provision is discontinued with current students still enrolled, we are committed to teaching-out. However, we will ensure that the choice remains with the individual learner and students will be presented with one or more of the following options:
 - Remain on their chosen course to complete their studies with us (teach-out)
 - Transfer internally to an alternative course where one is available.
 - Transfer externally to another local provider or institution of their choice if space is available. The Group would support the learner in the selection and

administration of this and any tuition fees refunds will be arranged under the basis of the Group's Tuition Fees Policy.

- For students in stage one of a two year level 5 course, the option to fallback to a level 4 qualification.
- Students will receive individual support through their tutors, the Group Higher Education team and will be given priority for careers guidance from the Colleges dedicated Careers Advisers.
- The Group's Fees Policy, which is published on our Group website, articulates the circumstances in which we grant refunds. A refund will be automatically paid in case we have to close or cancel a course. There is also provision for when students withdraw. Students who withdraw from a course will be refunded in line with the liability periods stated in the Fees Policy. Financial support will be made available to help students with additional travel costs, where required.
- To protect students access to maintenance loans through student finance we will not change delivery modes to entirely distance learning unless other external factors require delivery to move online, such as was the case during parts of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Where the Group decides to discontinue a particular programme part-way through the admissions cycle, all applicants holding offers or places will be made an offer with the same conditions for an alternative course if one is available, and/or be advised on how to substitute for another institution or release themselves into clearing.

Section 3: How we will consult with students

We will review our Student Protection Plan annually through our HE Group committee. We will present any proposed changes to our student body via their Student Reps, inviting them to comment through an anonymous form. Suggestions and comments will then be considered by HE Group and a final plan agreed and published, with feedback given to students on reasons for any recommendations not taken forward.

We will review and update our mechanism for feedback from students on the Student Protection Plan each year as our student population grows.

Section 4: How we will ensure our students and staff are aware of the Student Protection Plan.

We will publicise our student protection plan publicly on our Group website and on our VLE and will include any updates to the plan in the HE Student Newsletter which is sent termly. Members of the HE Group will ensure that information about and changes to the plan are cascaded to relevant staff. We will ensure that staff are aware of the implications of our student protection plan when they propose course changes or at the point of the decision being taken to not run a course. Our communication plan will be implemented.

Section 5: How we will communicate with Students in the event that the Student Protection Plan needs to be implemented

Should key aspects of our SPP need to be implemented, the College they are enrolled at will inform students by email, through student representatives for the affected provision, through social media, through open meetings and/or through their tutors. We will ensure appropriate support is available for all students, and will always seek to communicate with students, clearly and in plain English, the nature of the changes, the actual or potential impact on them, the reasons for the changes, what their options are and what support is available to them.

We will remind students of the plan and its published location at the earliest point should the risk of course or College closure significantly increase.

Useful information & Related Policies:

<https://www.ekcgroup.ac.uk/about-us/policies-and-reporting/policies/>

<https://www.oiahe.org.uk/>
