

## South Thames Colleges Group (STCG)

### Access and Participation Statement 2025/26

#### Introduction to the College

Welcome to South Thames Colleges Group's (STCG) Access and Participation Statement for the academic year 2025/26.

STCG is a General Further Education College (GFEC) delivering vocational education and skills training. Formed on 1 August 2017 STCG comprises four colleges that are promoted and operate to the public, applicants, and students under their geographical/historic titles - Carshalton College, Kingston College, Merton College, and South Thames College.

Kingston College is situated in Kingston town centre, in the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and attracts students locally but also significantly from other West and South London boroughs and from the northern districts of the adjoining county of Surrey.

Carshalton College is situated in the London Borough of Sutton and the sole provider of HE in the borough. The College attracts learners locally, primarily from the London boroughs of Sutton, Merton, and Croydon.

Merton College is situated in the London Borough of Merton and attracts learners locally, primarily from the London boroughs of Sutton, Merton, Wandsworth, and Croydon.

South Thames College operates from two campuses – Wandsworth High Street and the other in Tooting High Street (which is a predominantly adult education centre) – both in the London Borough of Wandsworth and again attracting students from adjoining London boroughs of Merton and Lambeth.

In summary, STCG sits within a relatively prosperous part of Southwest London, amongst a relatively diverse and generally well qualified and educated population. There are a small number of pockets of relative deprivation, and less well qualified citizens within the College's catchment area.

In May 2024 an Ofsted inspection resulted in the awarding of an overall grade of "Good". In the section of the report entitled "What is it like to be a learner with this provider?" Inspectors explain that "Learners and apprentices thrive in an inclusive, caring, and welcoming environment at the college. Governors, leaders, and staff create an environment in which all learners feel they have the opportunity to succeed, and in which diversity is acknowledged and celebrated. Staff at all levels care very much about their learners and apprentices and provide them with excellent support, including counselling, and exceptional support for mental health. Learners and apprentices feel safe and know who to turn to if they have a concern. They feel valued by staff and take pride in being part of the college. Most learners stay on their courses and achieve well".

The total number of students enrolled at STCG during 2022/23 was approximately 16,731. STCG's student population included 4,626 16-to-18-year-old students, 586 apprentices, 573 higher education students, 8,063 adult learners in directly funded provision and 2,252 adult learners enrolled under the two adult education contracts delivered by the Group for Wandsworth and Merton Councils.

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## STCG’s Higher Education (HE) Status

In May 2021 the Department of Education granted STCG the use of the “University Centre” title in recognition of its long history of higher education (HE) provision, successful collaboration with university partners and delivery of successful experiences and outcomes for students over a prolonged period. In December 2023 STCG was awarded Bronze at the 2023 Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) process (the Office for Students’ announcement of this TEF Award explained that “typically, the experience students have at STCG and the outcomes it leads to are high quality, and there are some very high quality features”).

## What is an Access and Participation Statement?

This Access and Participation Statement sets out how STCG will support wider participation in HE, assisting students from underrepresented groups into HE, help them to be successful, achieve their potential during their studies at the College and progress to successful careers. STCG’s commitment encompasses support at all stages of the student lifecycle – access, continuation, completion, attainment, and progression.

This is the first Access and Participation Statement issued by STCG since its formation having previously operated under an Access and Participation Plan approved by the Office for Students (OfS). With a reduced and reshaped HE provision for 2025/26 (see below) STCG will charge new and continuing students tuition fees only up to the maximum basic fee level (£6,165 for full time courses, and £4,625 for part time courses).

This Access and Participation Statement refers to four dimensions of the College’s activity:

1. The promotion of, recruitment to, delivery of and support of students to succeed and progress whilst studying on the College’s directly funded HE programmes.
2. The promotion of, recruitment to, delivery of, and support of students to succeed and progress whilst studying on programmes delivered in partnership with university partners under franchised arrangements, which are covered more directly by the partner university’s Access and Participation Plans.
3. Working with students aged 16-19, and those more mature, studying level 1-3 programmes (including a range of 21 Access to HE programmes offered across 3 of the colleges) with an aspiration to progress to HE, either at STCG itself, or elsewhere. STCG is one of the largest FE College feeders to HE in the country with 576 students having been placed at HE providers in Autumn 2023 (83% of those that applied).
4. STCG will continue its partnership working strategies to support its widening participation objectives, including with educational partners such as Kingston University, Linking London, Aim Higher London South, and partner schools across all four boroughs of its catchment area, local government partners including the London Boroughs of Kingston, Wandsworth, Merton, and Sutton, third and private sector organisations and employers. An additional example of this is the College’s partnership with St Georges NHS Trust, the major health provider within the London Borough of Wandsworth, and specifically with its National Breast Education Centre, which supports the delivery of the L4 Mammography Apprenticeship. Commenced in 2019, this is just one of four delivery arrangements across the country,

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supporting the training and qualification of mammographers in health settings across London and the Southeast.

### **STCG’s Mission and Commitment to Opportunity and Success for All**

STCG’s published College’s Mission is - “To achieve the ambitions of more students and partners than ever before” and its Values: “STCG aspires to be an exceptional Further and Higher Education provider, leading our sector in London and beyond. This will mean;

- Excelling in our curriculum, securing great outcomes for our students
- Growing our provision, attracting new students, and developing new pathways to success
- Upholding the fundamental values of our community, especially equalities and wellbeing
- Transforming our teaching, learning and services through digital innovation
- Establishing and sustaining effective partnerships with employers and schools across the region
- Managing resources well so that we are financially robust to invest in our buildings and staff”

STCG’s Strategy for 2021-24, published on the “about us” section of the website explains the “fundamental values” underpinning the Strategy. “These values span many influences and expectations from within and beyond the Group and are captured here, updated to reflect our new priorities [At STCG] we:

- Aspire to excellent outcomes for everyone, ensuring our students succeed and progress to great futures, improving our work continuously through reflection and mutual support.
- Innovate to develop and expand the Group, with an active focus on new ways of working, digital transformation, and meaningful partnerships.
- Make equality happen, equalising outcomes, raising diverse talent through our work and including everyone from all our communities.
- Care about the wellbeing of our staff and students, building resilience in a challenging world, safeguarding the vulnerable and promoting happiness To secure these values in practice, we have committed to a curriculum which will:
  - secure equal access for students from all backgrounds,
  - ensure structured and ambitious learning towards successful attainment of meaningful qualifications,
  - develop capable people, able to adapt, progress and continue to learn into the future
  - sustain a line of sight on employment and its requisite skills across a broad range of vocations”

The Strategy explains the College’s commitment to “Equalities;

“The Group will continue to strengthen inclusion and improve outcomes for people from all protected characteristics, targeting areas of concern and promoting high expectations for people from all backgrounds. The leadership of this strategic ambition will establish widespread awareness of equalities issues across the Group, using practice-led and evidence-based approaches to:

- establish data and reporting routines to create open accountability for and understanding of equalities issues:
- identify performance gaps and improve outcomes for disadvantaged people:

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- identify and bring into the Group key campaigns to promote equal outcomes and level up between demographic cohorts:
- create capacity through training and development for individuals to effect positive and sustainable progress:
- make the Group and even fairer place to work and study.”

### **STCG’s Diverse Higher Education Pathways, Provision and Encouragement of Underrepresented Groups**

STCG is unusual due to the high number of its current HE provider partners (five), Kingston University, University of West London, Middlesex University, University of Roehampton, and Canterbury Christchurch University. This will have reduced to four by beginning of the period covered by this statement. STCG also works with Pearson’s in respect of its Higher National Certificate and Diploma (HNC/D) provision.

These partnerships form part of the College’s strategic approach to the provision of diverse higher pathways and study opportunities to learners from widening participation groups and students from non-traditional routes. As a GFEC, without awarding body powers, these partnerships provide opportunities for learners to achieve, and top up, L4 and 5 learning, to Full Honours Degrees either at the College, or with partners in locations, settings, and environments well suited to learners progressing through an HE in FE environment. Partners have been specifically chosen to complement the expertise of the STCG’s subject based Schools, as well as to widen the range of progression opportunities available to students.

The HE course offer provides a range of diverse pathways, different entry points and durations and styles of study encompassing more than 20 individual degree and sub-degree programmes ranging from Foundation Year Zero programmes, to Honours and Foundation Degrees and HND/Cs to a post-graduate teaching certificate and include higher and degree apprenticeships.

At the time of writing there are 497 students enrolled on higher education courses, just under half (213) are on directly funded courses, of the others (248) are studying on franchised programmes offered as part of agreements with STCG’s university partners and 36 are apprentices studying on the Chartered Manger Degree Apprenticeship and Higher Apprenticeships in Human Resources. There is a majority full time student population (86%), with part time students only appearing on HNC/D Engineering courses at Kingston College, and the Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong learning Sector (PGCE) at South Thames College. Kingston College has the largest number of HE students (379) 82% of those currently enrolled, with smaller numbers (39) at South Thames College, and (43) at Carshalton College. Merton College at the time of writing does not offer Higher Education courses.

The number of HE students studying at STCG has declined significantly since its formation in 2017 as the HE environment has become ever more competitive. This reduction has impacted more upon the directly funded provision with the number of students studying under franchised arrangements remaining more stable.

The provision of HE is embedded within the College’s School structures and, apart from some separate Learning Resources zones, the College does not separate Further Education (FE) and HE students by any physical barriers on its campuses. FE courses students can progress to HE

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immediately after completing their L3 studies, or later as their careers develop, and they return to learning. The presence of HE students within the STCG provides inspiration to new FE learners and helps to raise awareness of progression opportunities to HE particularly for those from non-traditional backgrounds and whose parents did not attend university.

### Higher Education Student Profiles at STCG - Access

The statistics below draw upon data from the TEF Shape and Size Dashboard (updated in 2023) and provides a picture of the characteristics of the overall HE student population at STCG (both directly funded and franchised) over the preceding four years (2018/19-2021/22).

The composition of STCG's HE population is quite different from the HE sector overall, and provides greater opportunity to a number of underrepresented groups than offered by many other HE providers.

- More mature students study at STCG than at other HE providers – of the full time STCG HE population 29.5% is aged 31 + (sector just 7.9%), and 31.9% is aged 21-30 (sector just 14.9%). The sector overall has a predominantly young (aged under 21) full time student population of 77.2%, whereas at STCG the young (under 21 student population) is only 38.7%. With the future HE course offer likely to be more relevant to those already in work, and looking to develop their careers or change career route, this majority mature student population is likely to increase.
- More full time female students study at STCG than male, and more than at other HE providers – of the full time STCG HE population 69.7% are female (sector just 55.5%). This is partly explained by STCG's largest curriculum offer being in the subject of Education and Training (including significantly Early Years) which attract a majority female student population. Of the part time student population 58.1% are male compared with a sector average of 44.3%, partly explained by the male dominant subject of Engineering being the single biggest part time course offer at STCG.
- More students identify as black than is the case across the sector. Of the full time STCG HE population 14.7% identify as black (sector just 8.0%) and 10.8% of the part time students identify as black compared to a sector average of 4.3%. Whilst Asian students represent 12% of the full time HE student population, almost the same as the sector (12.3%), the % of part time students identifying as Asian is 11.6%, almost three times the sector average of 4.3%. Larger proportions of other ethnic minority students studying at STCG can be recognised by comparing the proportion of white students studying at STCG which is lower than the sector – STCG full time 50.6% (sector 55.5%) and part time 64.6% (sector 84.0%).
- More students study at STCG having not studied A levels previously than the sector overall. At STCG, only 10% of full time students have studied A levels previously, and 12.6% of part time students, compared with 51.2% of full time, and 9.2% part time, students across the sector. Students who have studied BTECs make up the biggest proportion of the full time and part time student population (24.1% and 25.2% respectively), significantly more than the 15.6% and 8.7% (respectively) of the sector.
- The proportion of students studying at STCG with reported disabilities is similar to the sector, as is those drawn from the more deprived communities (IMD quintiles 1 and 2).

- Considering the majority mature population an analysis of TUNDRA data and eligibility for free school meals has not been undertaken.

### **STCG and Continuation and Completion**

The TEF Panel Statement 2023 rated STCG’s Student Outcomes as “Bronze”, with outcomes for some groups of students, including part time students, regarded as “outstanding” but for some groups continuation and completion rates were “not very high quality”.

The most recent 2 year OfS Aggregate data from the OfS APP data dashboard suggests that full time students from the most deprived communities are less successful [than those from communities with least deprivation] in continuing (by 18.4 percentage points) and completing (by 32.4 percentage points) their studies, students identifying as black are less successful than white students in continuing (by 17.9 percentage points) and completing (by 20.9 percentage points) their studies, and students identifying as Asian are less successful than white students in completing (by 12.8 percentage points) their studies. Whilst STCG is addressing these historical equality gaps, which in themselves are based on a small volume of data and have some elements of statistical uncertainty, it should be noted that with a much reduced HE student population going forward it may not be possible, nor appropriate, to make such statistical comparison between groups given the small numbers of students and hence the sensitivity of data.

### **STCG and Attainment**

The minority of the STCG’s HE qualifications lead to a full honours award of 1<sup>st</sup> or Upper Second, with HNC/Ds and Foundation Degrees providing the alternative opportunity of Merit or Distinction grades, and Foundation Year students progressing to their Full Degree study rather than a graded outcome. The volume of data about attainment, and the ability to compare between student subgroups and external benchmarks, means that it is not possible for the college to make an evidence based judgement on its support of attainment for different groups of students.

### **STCG and Progression**

The TEF Panel Statement 2023 considered that Progression was a “very high quality feature” with “very high quality rates of progression across the majority of the provider’s students and courses”. STCG does however recognise the most recent 2 year OfS Aggregate data from the OfS APP data dashboard suggests that students from the most deprived communities are less successful in progressing from their studies by 26.1 percentage points [than those from communities of the least deprivation]. Whilst STCG is addressing this historical equality gap, which in itself is based on a small volume of data and has some elements of statistical uncertainty, it should be noted that with a much reduced HE student population going forward it may not be possible, nor appropriate, to make such statistical comparison between groups given the small numbers of students and hence the sensitivity of data.

The TEF Panel 2023 “considered that [STCG] the provider articulates the educational gains it intends its students to achieve, and why these are relevant to its students. The panel considered that this was a very high quality feature.”

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## STCG's Monitoring of Equality of Opportunity and Student Engagement

The annual investigation of STCG's access, continuation, completion, attainment, and progression data to identify the risks to equality of opportunity resulting from age, ethnicity, gender, economic deprivation, and disability is, and will be informed, by reference to the following data sources:

- The OfS APP Data Dashboard
- The OfS TEF 2023 [and future years' Data Dashboard)
- The OfS TEF Shape and Size Data Dashboard (2022 and 2023 and future years)
- The College's TEF 2023 [and future] Written Submission (when and if available)
- The TEF 2023 [and future] Panel Statement (when and if available)
- And the College's own student data records sourced from college ILR returns, facilitated through the college's MiS system.

The Higher Education Academic Board (HEAB), chaired by the Group Manager of HE and HE Quality Assurance, and attended by the Vice Principal, Quality (with overall responsibility for HE) College Principals, Heads of School, academic and functional managers is a termly meeting which amongst other academic standard, learner experience and outcome analysis is responsible for the detailed analysis of access and participation activity impact, the identification of inequality gaps between groups, and the taking of appropriate action. HEAB reports and recommends to the College Senior Leadership Team and the HE Sub Committee of Governors.

The HE Sub Committee of Governors which meets termly is the principal Governor forum for the detailed analysis, evaluation and questioning of Access and Participation activity, outcomes, the identification of inequality gaps and actions to close them and reports its finding and recommendations to the Corporation.

It is likely that in the future, with a reduced overall student population, analysis of some student groups' performance in terms of continuation, completion, attainment, and progression, and statistical comparison between groups will not be appropriate given the small numbers of students and hence sensitivity of data.

Considering the majority mature population an analysis of TUNDRA data and eligibility for free school meals has not been undertaken.

### Student Engagement

The College's HE Student Engagement Policy ensures a formal and coordinated approach to hearing the student voice, responding, and implementing change and closing the feedback loop with students. This function is also the method by which students are informed of concerns (such as identified inequality gaps and the resulting actions). The key elements of feedback are collected from focus groups, National Student Survey (NSS), internal HE surveys answered by students not eligible for the NSS, Staff Student Consultation Committees, end of module and end of programme feedback, and the Student Council. HE representative receive training for their role. There is also Student Governor representation on the Corporation Board.

### Provision of Information to Students

The website is signposted as the most up to date source of information and advice for students.

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The website includes an undergraduate landing page, tailored to the HE audience, currently entitled “University Centre and Access Courses”. This highlights subject specific and course opportunities, and a tab currently entitled “undergraduate information” provides access to information about the different levels of HE studies and course types, and provides access to HE Policies and Strategies (including this Access and Participation Statement, information about Undergraduate Finance and Fees including about Student Finance and Disabled Students’ Allowance (DSA), further information for applicants and a set of frequently asked questions (FAQs).

Tuition fees appear on the website page of each course and are detailed in offer letters to applicants. Where a course is offered under a franchise agreement explanation is included on the course website page guiding the applicant also to the franchisor’s website for information about finance and financial support.

All courses are promoted via UCAS.

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