



# Review of UK Transnational Education in the Caribbean: University of Hertfordshire and CTS College of Business and Computer Science Ltd

November 2014

## Executive summary

The partnership between the University of Hertfordshire (the University) and the CTS College of Business and Computer Science Ltd (the College) was established in 2006. The partnership enrolls students on to three top-up programmes leading to an undergraduate degree: BSc (Hons) Computer Science, BSc (Hons) Information Technology and BA (Hons) Business Administration. The programme is delivered and assessed online by the University, with support teaching provided by the College alongside regular University visits.

All students enrol on to the final year of each of the programmes through advanced standing. The programmes are mapped against Level 6 of *The Framework of Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and are delivered and assessed in English by the University.

All assessments undertaken by students at the College are submitted online through the University's virtual learning environment (VLE), StudyNet.

The College was established in 1999 and was legally established in 2002 under the Companies Act of Trinidad and Tobago. The College is based on two sites in Chaguanas, Trinidad and is registered with the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT) to offer higher education level programmes.

The College operates as an academic support partner whose role is to provide tutorial, pastoral, IT and specialist library support to augment the delivery of an otherwise online range of programmes.

The College is approved by ACTT to support all three programmes until 2017. Around 70 per cent of students qualify to receive Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) funding.

There are evident strengths in the comprehensive and clear academic support agreement underpinned by the University's centre for online distance learning, UH Online, which provides online distance-learning support via StudyNet and is supported by e-learning technologists. Other positive features include the effective communication between the University staff and College tutors at the College.

The University's quality assurance procedures and their implementation in its partnership with the College meet the Expectation of *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others* of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code).

## Introduction

1 The University of Hertfordshire (the University) considers itself a medium-sized UK University which employs over 2,400 staff and has around 27,000 registered students, 21,000 undergraduate and 6,000 postgraduate students. These figures include both home and collaborative provision. The majority of the University's students are based at its home campuses in Hatfield, UK. However, around 6,700 students are registered on programmes which are delivered, assessed and/or supported through collaborative partnerships, 3,000 in the UK and 3,700 overseas.

2 The partnership between the University and CTS College of Business and Computer Science Ltd (the College) was established in 2006. The partnership began by supporting the delivery of the University's BSc (Hons) in Computer Science and Information Systems (now the BSc (Hons) in Computer Science and Information Technology), with a first intake of 63 students in March 2006. The original arrangement was extended in 2008 to the University's BA (Hons) Business Administration, with an intake of 82 in October 2010. The provision in Trinidad is based upon an Academic Support Arrangement.

3 The University chose the College as a collaborative partner for a number of reasons. These include the similarity of the Trinidadian and UK secondary education systems, the use of English as a first language, the availability of government financial support for students, the geographical reach of the campus at Chaguanas whose catchment area covers the whole island and sufficient demand to make the partnership viable. The College chose the University because it considered that it would provide students with highly reputable, internationally recognised and accredited qualifications which would support the national labour demand for skilled ICT and business orientated students, and provide a blended learning environment enabling students to benefit from local and UK-based tutors. The College is interested in developing new programmes with the University which are not dependent on Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) funding.

4 The College was founded in 1999 and legally established in 2002. It is registered with the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT) to offer higher education level programmes and is described by the University as an academic support partner, whose role is to provide tutorial, pastoral, IT and specialist library support essential to the delivery of an otherwise online programme. In addition to its partnership with the University, the College also has links with other accredited educational providers, such as the Australian Institute of Business, and with professional associations, such as the Association of Business Executives (ABE) and the Association of Business Managers and Administrators (ABMA).

5 The University is the sole awarding body for each programme. Currently, the following University awards are offered via supported distance learning at the College: BSc (Hons) Computer Science (105 students), BSc (Hons) Information Technology (283 students), and BA (Hons) Business Administration (262 students). Some 1,200 students have graduated since 2006.

6 The College caters for students throughout Trinidad and Tobago. Some movement of students from Computer Science to Information Technology has occurred in recent years, but recruitment to all three awards is forecast to remain stable over the forthcoming years and no additional award titles are currently planned. The College offers a range of undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes in partnership with other higher education institutions, but classes for different partners are not combined with each other.

7 The University describes the collaborative provision with the College as an Academic Support Arrangement. Academic support partnerships are considered by the University on the basis of their viability and their contribution towards the University's aim for a high profile overseas brand. The delivery mode is supported distance learning, with local support complementing online delivery and assessment by the University. The College provides face-to-face support in the form of module tutorial sessions for each cohort of students. Students have access to computer and library facilities outside scheduled study times. The University monitors the appropriateness of the College facilities during annual visits.

8 All programmes supported by the College are taught and assessed in English. Students tend to be English native speakers and secondary school educational provision is based on the English GCSE and A Level examination system.

9 The University's Mission, which is an integral part of the 2010-15 Strategic Plan, is to be an innovative and enterprising university, challenging individuals and organisations to excel. The Strategic Plan identifies a focus on international engagement and states that the University's international activities will advance its commitment to scholarship and learning by providing access to educational provision for individuals and organisations around the world, and by developing the global horizons of its staff and students. The commitment in the University's Strategic Plan is realised through its implementation plans for UH Online and StudyNet, through its resourcing of learning technologists who provide support for each module of each programme and through its international partnerships with providers such as the College. The translation of the University's strategic planning into the organisational, pedagogic and partnership models to support distance learning are identified as a **positive feature**.

## Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link

10 The University has an Academic Development Committee (ADC), chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor which is responsible for approving programmes delivered at the University itself, but also for programmes leading to University awards delivered at other educational institutions and organisations. The work of ADC is complemented by that of the University's international office, UH Global, which is responsible for developing overseas collaborative partnerships that can contribute towards the University's aim for a high profile overseas brand.

11 The University has established a centre for online distance learning, UH Online, to enhance and extend the University's online provision and work towards achieving the key strategic goal of 25 per cent of the University's teaching and learning provision being delivered by distance learning. UH Online works with Schools to develop, market, administer and support online distance learning courses, and provides expertise and advice on best practice in online distance learning.

12 The University's procedures for supported distance learning partners provide three models by which online programmes may be supported by UH Online, one of which defines its role in supported distance learning programmes. UH Online supports the University's Academic Support Partners by providing advice and guidance in areas such as student applications and fees, student records, student support, student withdrawal, technical support, and staff registration with the University.

13 An approval visit is not required in order to approve or reapprove an academic support partnership. However, a visit is required in order to approve individual programmes

to be supported by an academic support partner. The arrangement is formalised through an Academic Support Agreement. The fact that the College is supporting students means that the University has responsibility for approving the College and assuring the quality of provision at the College. The degree programmes are delivered primarily through online distance learning methods written and assessed by members of staff of the University. The College supports delivery by providing physical resources and tutorials.

14 The University's documented processes for partner approval and written agreements are described in its Academic Quality policies and regulations and in ADC guidance. The partnership with the College was formally reapproved by ADC in March 2013. This involved the completion of a standard proforma signed off by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (International), a financial audit, a review of the Academic Support Agreement and consideration of the re-approval documentation by ADC. Following this process, re-approval was formally granted, subject to a new legal agreement being presented. The financial due diligence conducted on behalf of ADC indicated that the College has a good base on which to grow its business. The proposal for reapproval explained that ACTT had granted continued recognition to the University's programmes at the College.

15 As part of the reapproval process the Academic Support Agreement with the College was renewed on 1 March 2013 for a further six years. The Agreement presents separate schedules for each programme supported by the College which identify the support services to be offered by the College, including the provision of study facilities (primarily classrooms and computers), the provision of seminars, workshops and tutorials, and the provision of technical support. The agreement also identifies shared responsibilities in respect of applications and admissions, student records, non-academic support services, assessment and examinations, academic quality, student and staff resources, student complaints and appeals, programme documentation, approval of marketing and promotional materials; and the assistance of visiting University staff in holding classes or meetings. In discussion with staff at the College a good understanding of the arrangements was evident together with clarity over the division of responsibilities. The review team considered that the documentation was thorough and that the University was working with the College to ensure the implementation of the procedures. The comprehensive procedures for institutional approval underpinned by the clarity of the Academic Support Agreement which details the services to be provided by the College is identified as a **positive feature**.

16 The College is required to notify the University as early as possible of any changes or prospective changes in the laws and regulations in Trinidad which may affect the delivery of the programmes and advise the University on the impact of these.

17 Collaboration with the College falls within the quality assurance responsibilities of two academic Schools: the Hertfordshire Business School and the School of Computer Science. While Academic Board takes ultimate responsibility for the standards of awards, it is the School Academic Committees that have devolved responsibility for the ongoing monitoring of collaborative links, including the formal consideration of Annual Monitoring and Evaluation Reports (AMERs), and external examiners' reports. In discussion with staff at the College it was confirmed that the annual monitoring process captures key management information. The University makes it clear when improvement at the College is required and works with it to achieve the necessary changes.

18 Programmes are managed at School level by a programme tutor and a link tutor, whose role it is to visit and liaise with the College. Modules are managed by a module leader within the School.

19 Each module is also supported at the College by a local tutor who liaises with the School module leaders to agree activities with the students in class. Local support tutors

may reinforce aspects of the lecture, provide assessment guidance, complete in-class activities from the workbook or additional supplementary activities, as well as provide information and guidance on academic writing. Programmes are managed locally by a programme manager, who is the first point of contact for students and liaises regularly with the School programme tutor, the link tutor, and the UH Online administrative team.

20 Staff at the College confirmed that the module leader deals with most day-to-day questions. The link tutor role is to visit and liaise with the College, to deal with issues such as student transcripts and to provide support for various administrative processes. The programme tutor deals with specific student issues and the programme manager liaises between the University, tutors and students in addition to scheduling classes and organising orientation sessions.

21 The College has ACTT approval to support all three programmes until May 2017 and around 70 per cent of students qualify to receive financial support through the GATE programme. In June 2012, University representatives supported the College in the ACTT reaccreditation of University programmes supported by the College.

## Quality assurance

### Academic standards and the quality of programmes

22 The University operates standard processes for programme approval and the approval of Academic Support Partners to support the University programmes. The University states that the programmes concerned are validated and periodically reviewed in the same manner as any other programme delivered and assessed by the University. The key addition is the emphasis on the delivery mode which relates to online and supported distance learning and the effectiveness of the College as the primary support partner. From the evidence available to the review team the University procedures are clear and have been applied appropriately.

23 In respect of the programmes running at the College, the BSc Computer Science programme leading to BSc (Hons) Computer Science and BSc (Hons) Information Technology was initially validated in April 2004, with the College being approved to offer the programme from March 2006. The BA (Hons) Business Administration programme was initially validated in October 2007 and the College was approved to offer the programme from October 2010 onwards. The approval of the College to support the University programmes falls within the quality assurance responsibility of the relevant School Academic Committee whose minutes indicate clarity of approach.

24 The BSc (Hons) Computer Science programme for 2012-13 had a student population of 254 students comprising mainly mature students aged 25 and over, studying in part-time mode and geographically dispersed across the world: UK, Ghana, Ireland, Kenya, Nigeria, South Korea and Trinidad and Tobago. Overseas students account for 77 per cent of the student population, with home and EU students constituting nine per cent and 14 per cent respectively. There are three intakes each year of the programme, in September, January and May, with the May intake currently being available only in Trinidad. In 2012-13 71 per cent of students graduated with a first or upper second class degree.

25 There are a number of Level 6 modules that have post-resit failure rates above 10 per cent. For 2012-13, 11 modules had a failure rate of between 11 per cent and 52 per cent, an increase on 2011-12 when seven modules had post-resit failures. The AMER report for 2012-13 states that it was difficult to ascertain the reasons for the high failure rates and that students who failed were individuals with low levels of engagement with the University

academic team on StudyNet. The report states that failure rates on modules that require programming, and greater levels of StudyNet engagement and self-regulation remain high at the College and this is a focus of the current AMER action plan. The external examiner for the programme comments on some very good assignments, excellent case studies and appropriate marking schemes. It is noted that the e-learning environment provides excellent support for the students, coupled with excellent management of the programmes. The external examiner recommends that the variable student attainment on modules should be monitored throughout the programme.

26 The BA (Hons) Business Administration programme for 2012-13 had a student population of 163, which was a decrease on the previous year of 180 students. Students can start the programme at three entry points in the academic year. The College continues to have more students enrolled on the programme than any other centre, but the programme is also offered in the UK, Singapore and Mauritius. Of the 163 new enrolments 135 were registered in Trinidad. There were 151 graduating students globally, over 90 per cent of who (137) graduated in Trinidad. Students achieved well on the programme at all centres with 62.25 per cent achieving a first or upper second class degree. The external examiners confirmed that the standard for awards was appropriate for the academic level and the discipline, and that the standards were comparable with those of other higher education institutions.

27 The programme specifications for each of the courses run at the College are clear and well presented, and contain the key information required for students. All programmes offered and their respective programme specifications are referenced to Level 6 of the FHEQ. The College role in modules is to reinforce the core texts and to tutor in alignment with the materials supplied by the University. The College ensures that module topics and learning outcomes are delivered comprehensively in the classroom environment. Students confirmed to the review team that they had access to the programme specifications via their course handbook, study guides and on StudyNet. Students confirmed that everything they experienced aligned with the materials provided which they went through on a week-by-week basis.

28 Award aims and learning outcomes for all three online awards are identical to those for the same awards delivered through a primarily classroom-based mode by the University. For the purposes of validation, programme management, annual monitoring and periodic review the online and classroom-based modes are considered as separate programmes. This allows both programmes to benefit from external examiners with appropriate experience.

29 All applicant decisions are made by the University Admissions Tutor in the relevant School. Entry qualifications for the programmes are approved at validation and reapproved during periodic review, and are detailed in the programme specifications. Approved entry qualifications are published on the College website and are judged in terms of their credit and curriculum match. Applicants must have achieved 240 credits, including 120 credits at Level 5 of the FHEQ, and College staff are aware of the nature of the curriculum mapping exercise undertaken by the University. Applicants are also required to have English language competence at IELTS 6.0 or greater, so as to allow them both to contribute to and benefit from the programme. In practice this level of language is not a challenge for Caribbean applicants as their first language is English and the majority have gone through schooling in Trinidad and Tobago.

30 The University approach to programme monitoring and review is effective. Through the annual visit the link tutor monitors the support provided by the College, outcomes and associated actions are reported to the programme tutor or Associate Dean of School

(Academic Quality Assurance). The University's Collaborative Working Practices Handbook provides clear guidance to link tutors on their responsibilities.

31 Link tutors provide feedback to Schools using a standard visit report template which is received by the School Academic Committee. The visit report identifies details of meetings with staff and students, staff development activities, and any managerial, resource, learning, teaching or assessment issues. College staff confirmed that the link tutor reports are integrated into annual monitoring, followed up during the year and audited through the AMER.

32 Academic oversight at course level is maintained by the programme committee, a sub-committee of the School Academic Committee. The programme committee meets online twice in an academic year and all students are invited to contribute, via an online discussion forum. Students can contribute under their own name, or anonymously. Although the University has a clear process in place to involve students in the programme committee, students at the College told the review team that, while they were in constant contact with the programme leader and students from other countries using online forums, they were unaware of and had not participated in the online programme committee. The review team **recommends** that the University raises awareness of, and encourages participation in, programme committees for online programmes.

33 The University states that external examiners play a critical role in the quality assurance and enhancement of the assessment process. External examiners for supported distance-learning programmes are nominated and appointed in the same way as any other external examiner, and cover both the online and the equivalent campus-based programmes. They are therefore responsible for similar modules on both programmes and can monitor the equivalence of learning outcomes across the different modes of study. External examiner reports are made available through StudyNet and students met by the review team confirmed that this was the case.

34 The reports from external examiners for both the BSc (Hons) Computer Science and BA (Hons) Business Administration programmes are generally positive, although the programme external examiner for the BA (Hons) Business Administration identified an issue in the 2012-13 annual report. This was an ongoing issue about the extent to which some College staff were over-preparing students for assessments. The external examiner stated that she had raised the issue of 'coaching' in a specific module as a serious concern in her previous report, yet the practice had still continued in a different module in 2013. The University addressed the issue through a visit by the School's Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) to the College. The University provided specific training for College staff to ensure that staff were clear about what was expected and did not inadvertently over prepare students. Additionally the University confirmed that staff and students had been guided in the importance of research, referencing and the dangers of collusion and plagiarism. The issues and actions were fully documented in the AMER for 2012-13 and a detailed response was also provided from the Head of Collaborations (HBS) to the external examiner who had raised the concerns. While action taken to date appears not to have resolved this recurring issue in Trinidad, there is evidence that the University is taking the matter seriously and taking appropriate steps to resolve it.

35 All University taught programmes are subject to annual monitoring using the standard AMER format. The annual monitoring process includes the evaluation of programme data and student feedback, and a response to matters arising in programme committees, external examiner reports and link tutor reports. A sub-committee of the School Academic Committee considers the AMERs, which enables a direct comparison of the student experience and achievement at the College with those of their counterparts at other academic support partners. The Associate Dean (Academic Quality Assurance) for the

School is required to submit a summary report to the University Academic Standards and Audit Committee (ASAC), outlining the major issues arising across the School's programmes, including those reported in online and collaborative provision AMERs. The AMER process is effective with detailed reporting between the University and the College, and clear action plans that are acted upon in a timely manner by both the University and the College.

36 The programmes offered at the College have been periodically reviewed in recent years. The BSc (Hons) Computer Science programme was reviewed in February 2010 and approved for a period of six years, with no conditions being specified. The panel commended the programme team on the extremely good feedback received from students at the College which demonstrated, in its view, that partner support was invaluable and of a high standard. The BA (Hons) Business Administration programme was reviewed in May 2012 and approved for a six-year period subject to five conditions and three recommendations. The periodic review focused on a number of conditions including the need for processes for managing the link tutor arrangements in accordance with university requirements, enabling students to provide feedback on modules and the formal mapping of the content of the ABE Diploma to FHEQ Level 4 and 5 programme curriculum. The monitoring of academic support partners was also identified as a concern by the review panel, and a number of conditions emerged that have been satisfied in the AMER process. The review team confirm that the periodic review process is effective, well documented with clear actions, with conditions and recommendations, which have been acted upon.

## **Assessment**

37 All assessments undertaken by students at the College are submitted online through the University's VLE, StudyNet, and marked by University staff. Modules are assessed by coursework and tests. Examples of coursework assessments used include essays, online tests, reports, live presentations, peer review activities, teamwork and video logs. Group work is further represented through contributions to blogs, wikis and discussion forums, as well as in group projects or presentations. The University uses Question Mark Perception as the main online testing software platform. Electronic submission of assessed work is handled through the assignment submission section of StudyNet.

38 The review team learned that the authentication of students and their work was achieved primarily via students' StudyNet credentials. When students are admitted to online programmes they must provide a copy of their passport and additional photographs. The verified identity of students is made available to module teams in order that online assessments and viva voce can be undertaken securely. The University currently uses Turnitin plagiarism-detection software for appropriate student work, and students confirmed that they were familiar with the use of Turnitin and found the feedback helpful in supporting future assignments. The University confirmed that it uses the same security measures for both on and off-campus students and that any cases of plagiarism are reported to the School Academic Conduct Officer for investigation.

39 The University believes that good assessment design and practice can help reduce the risk of plagiarism and authentication issues. Consequently University and College staff encourage the use of formative assessment wherever possible, with feedback and review being considered a natural part of the learning process. As part of the assessment strategy students are encouraged to contribute to discussion forums, wikis, and blogs, and students were positive about the feedback gained from participation in the global forums for their course programme. The University utilises online tests using question banks to ensure students are provided with individual, randomly generated tests.

40 University procedures apply to the College in terms of student feedback on their assessments, with a maximum four week turnaround time being specified. Students confirmed that marks and feedback were received via StudyNet or email within four weeks and that the feedback received was helpful in shaping and developing their learning.

41 Standard University procedures also apply in respect of the moderation of assignments. An academic member of staff in the School who is not the first marker will internally moderate marked student work, before external examiners have sight of it either by accessing student submissions themselves from the relevant StudyNet module site, or by receiving electronic samples of coursework. External examiners are given access to all materials on the module sites on StudyNet in order to gain a wider picture of the student learning and assessment experience as a whole. Staff and students at the College confirmed that deadlines were clear; that student work was routinely submitted via Turnitin to StudyNet; that the assessment process worked efficiently; and that it returned helpful, formative feedback.

42 Examination boards take place at the University without the involvement of staff from the College. College staff confirmed that they received feedback from the examination boards once they had met to consider and ratify student outcomes. College staff are able to benchmark the performance of their students in modules against that of students in Singapore and Mauritius.

## **Quality of learning opportunities**

43 The University is responsible for the admissions process, though applications are submitted via the College. The College Programme Manager assesses the student application form in terms of University requirements and forwards it to the relevant University admissions tutor. All relevant applications and supporting documents are uploaded using the University's online application system, and supported by the UH Online administrative team where appropriate. Admissions tutors review the application and make their decision through the online application system, which enables the College to track progress. Once an offer is made the student receives an email containing the course details and conditions of offer. Students registered by the University had varying backgrounds and prior learning such as an Advanced Diploma in Business Information Systems, an Associate Degree and the National Computing Centre NCC International Advanced Diploma. Students told the review team that they had learned about the University by word of mouth, from friends and from its website, and that they had chosen it because of its reputation.

44 In order to complete the online enrolment process students are provided with a username and password to their StudyNet account. The UH Online student administrator checks and verifies that all personal information and identity is correct. Students confirmed that the online process was both quick and efficient.

45 The University and the College confirmed that induction and support are all delivered online via StudyNet. Each semester has an induction week prior to the first teaching week and students receive an orientation programme and a CD for each module. Students who met the review team said that they felt well prepared via StudyNet and that the material supported their transition to the degree programme. StudyNet also provides guidance on plagiarism, collusion and study skills.

46 The College provides teaching support based on the online teaching materials provided for each module. Students typically attend two three-hour classes per week with local tutors. All tutorial classes take place at one of the College campuses. Students confirmed that local tutors explain the module learning materials to help them achieve the

module learning outcomes. Local tutors expand and contextualise the curriculum using local examples from both the public and private sectors within the Caribbean. The majority of students met by the review team were already in work and felt they were using the experience and learning from the course programmes in their work. Students reported that employers were supportive of their University education. In addition to the University's online materials the College provides free Wi-Fi and access to learning spaces for private study, and students were particularly appreciative of the access to free Wi-Fi.

47 The University induction arrangements are comprehensive and include a generic induction to studying online which also includes elements of digital literacy. The online induction package provides an orientation in the use of StudyNet, use of the online study materials, use of the online library and access to e-books. Technical specifications needed for student computers to access the online materials are also covered. Students met by the review team confirmed that the online library programme, Voyager, works well.

48 To complete the induction package programme-specific induction is also available via the programme page on StudyNet. This involves a combination of tasks and activities designed to help break the ice and establish communication between students and academic members of the programme team at the University. Students are encouraged to share their views and experiences via class discussion on the programme page, though the College indicated that students tend to provide less feedback about induction than it would like.

49 The College reported that staffing has been fairly stable over recent years. The University approves all teaching support staff, whose CV and qualifications are shared with link tutors before appointments are made. The College also provides staff development opportunities, including professional workshops twice a year looking at best practice in learning and teaching, training sessions provided by the ACTT and workshops on the role of the tutor. The College employs administrative staff to support programme managers, and customer service is taken very seriously.

50 In addition to programme-specific pages, students can access the learning units for each module in the teaching resources section of StudyNet. Students also have access to the electronic resources of the University which include the library, electronic journals and subject-specific databases. Academic and administrative staff told the review team that StudyNet had made a massive difference in flexible access to learning materials and that they feel very much involved in helping to shape the support materials available to students.

51 Within UH Online, the University employs a team of experienced e-learning technologists to produce electronic module materials, with specialisms including 3D animation, multimedia design and mobile technologies. Each programme module has a technologist acting as the main point of contact who is also responsible for the technical development. It is evident from the quality of materials, the ease with which StudyNet can be used, and the feedback from students and College staff alike that this work is innovative and is making a significant contribution to a high quality learning experience.

52 The online programme modules available via StudyNet mirror the equivalent modules delivered on-campus at the University, and are written by the same school academic staff. The quality of the learning materials is checked at various points in the development lifecycle.

53 In terms of student feedback, the University uses Student Viewpoint, an anonymous online questionnaire which is administered for every module at the end of each semester. Results of the student feedback questionnaires are usually posted on the StudyNet module site. Although staff and students were aware of the questionnaires, staff from the University

and College, including students met by the review team, all regarded the participation level in the questionnaires as low. Students reported that they tend to prefer to contact staff directly when issues arise. The review team regarded the low participation rate as a missed opportunity to gain valuable formal feedback at module level and **recommends** that the University, in conjunction with the College, take steps to increase student engagement with the provision of module-level feedback.

54 The University takes the view that most student feedback is received via the programme committee meetings and by contacting module leaders and programme tutors directly. Additionally, a focus group takes place as part of the yearly partner visit. The University confirmed that a named Hertfordshire Students' Union (HSU) Sabbatical Officer for online students is available to be contacted directly. Students were aware of the HSU support but had never tried to contact them directly. However, receiving HSU news regularly, made the students feel part of the University community.

55 The College recognised the need for independent student representation and set up a student council which provides a periodic forum with an open agenda for student views to be heard and a tracking device to ensure that recommendations are acted upon. Students confirmed that the College staff use the council to solve issues and provide prompt feedback. A recent outcome from the student council was the proposal to involve students on the appointment panels of teaching staff, and the College is taking this forward.

56 Students have access to a wide variety of help and support via the Online Induction Help section of StudyNet. Administrative queries are handled within two working days. For academic issues students can contact tutors via the module's class discussion board or via email. For technical issues, the UH Online e-learning technologists are the first point of contact for all distance-learning students if they encounter any kind of technical issue. StudyNet also offers students guidance on a range of issues such as appeals and complaints, learning skills, academic regulations and external examiners. Students found appeals and complaints procedures in the programme handbook and were also able to obtain additional information from the programme administrator at the University. Through discussion with students the review team was able to verify the range of help and support available.

57 Communication between the University and College tutors is frequent and productive. Regular email and telephone contact between the programme manager and the University link tutor is evident, supported by the annual visits. At module level, University module leaders and College tutors also communicate regularly. The effectiveness of communication and interaction between University and College staff is a **positive feature**.

## Information on higher education provision

58 The University has produced guidelines for all partners, which define procedures on branding and the content of local advertising and marketing materials. The University requires sight of all promotional material produced by the College prior to publication. At University level responsibility for maintaining oversight of partner promotional material is located at school level and usually dealt with by the link tutor during the annual partner visit. The review team noted that although College publicity materials do not refer to the mode of delivery, all potential applicants are referred to UH Online for accurate and current information. Students met by the review team considered the information they had seen on websites or in paper form to be reliable and accurate.

59 The University, through ASAC, regularly undertakes audits of the publicity used by its collaborative partners. The Marketing and Communications Office considers materials

from a brand perspective and the Academic Services Office reviews the academic accuracy. The outcomes of audits are reported at meetings of ASAC. The University undertook an audit of the College during May 2014. The review team learnt that the audit identified some brand conformity issues, which included over-simplification of the presentation of University regulations and inconsistencies with the BA (Hons) Business and Computer Science webpages. The review team understood that a follow-up audit scheduled for July 2014 would be considered by ASAC in the autumn term 2014.

60 Once accepted on to a programme the University provides an offer letter to successful applicants together with induction arrangements and details of the expectations of each course programme. The relevant school manages student induction with further support from the UH Online induction resource. Additionally, the College undertakes its own induction programme locally for each new student cohort. The induction includes an introduction to the College and its resources and services, as well as the programme level support students can expect.

61 The University states that all students are provided with a programme handbook. The handbooks provide information about the University, the programme, regulations, the expectations of students in accessing supported distance learning, student's personal technology requirements, appeals and complaints, and the location of key contacts. Students confirmed to the review team that programme handbooks were made available electronically on StudyNet and had also been distributed by the College locally. Students also confirmed that they had received the programme specifications and definitive module documents via StudyNet. Students confirmed that the handbooks and the material available in the learning materials via StudyNet are useful.

62 At College level, students confirmed that they received careers support through the provision of information on vacancies via email, and that information was also available via StudyNet. While there was no substantive careers service, expert support and advice was available locally from programme managers.

63 The University states that award certificates are issued by the University's Examinations Office. The certificates issued for the College do not identify the location of study, although associated transcripts do. All graduating students from the College are issued with a transcript at the conclusion of their studies by the University's UH Online unit.

64 In discussion with both University and College staff it was confirmed that there have been no students from the College requesting to complete their studies in the UK.

## Conclusion

### Positive features

The following positive features are identified:

- the translation of the University's strategic planning into the organisational, pedagogic and partnership models to support distance learning (paragraph 9)
- the comprehensive procedures for institutional approval underpinned by the clarity of the Academic Support Agreement which details the services to be provided by the College (paragraph 15)
- the effectiveness of communication and interaction between University and College staff (paragraph 57).

## **Recommendations**

The University of Hertfordshire is recommended to take the following action:

- raise awareness of, and encourage participation in, programme committees for online programmes (paragraph 32)
- in conjunction with the College, take steps to increase student engagement with the provision of module-level feedback (paragraph 53).

### **University of Hertfordshire's response to the review report**

The University of Hertfordshire welcomes this report, which recognises the success of its strategic approach to the delivery of online (and supported distance learning) programmes across the world. This approach is underpinned by the University's centre for online distance learning, UH Online, and through the development of strong collaborative partnerships with organisations that strategically align with the University.

The University prioritises communication with, and support of, its collaborative partners, and it is pleasing to see this recognised in the report. The University has in recent years fundamentally reviewed the support that it offers to online/supported distance learning partners and students. It considers that the mechanisms developed represent best practice in the sector.

Throughout the report, the clarity of the University's processes are also evident. This deliberate policy of ensuring that the University's regulations, processes and associated guidance are clear to its schools, collaborative partners and students has proven to be very effective in improving the understanding and effectiveness of all concerned.

In common with many other UK institutions, the University acknowledges that engaging online students in quality assurance represents a challenge. It recognises that traditional methods of gaining student feedback are not effective, and it is already piloting novel methods of student engagement, through StudyNet (the University's Managed Learning Environment) and other new software platforms.

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