



Educational Oversight for embedded colleges: report of the monitoring visit of Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group), October 2017

1 Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the monitoring team concludes that Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group) is making commendable progress in implementing the action plan following the October 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Embedded Colleges\)](#).

2 Changes since the last QAA review

2 Across the network of International Study Centres (ISCs), the total number of enrolled and predicted students for 2017-18 increased by approximately 12 per cent compared to 2016-17.

3 A number of changes have been made to the staffing structure since the last QAA review. A new senior management team is now in place and includes the role of Director of ISCs. Regional Directors have been replaced by Cluster Directors and Network Directors, the latter of which are also part of the senior management team and are charged with chairing Regional Quality Assurance and Enhancement Group (QAEG) meetings. The Academic Office has been developed (including the functions of Registry, Secretariat and Learning Development) to support the achievement of improved academic outcomes.

4 A new centre has been added to the network, with Durham ISC having opened in Autumn 2017. This ISC offers pathways to both undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes at Durham University. The London ISC has relocated to premises that are no longer on a university campus, but belonging to Study Group, located near Greenwich. Only programmes that facilitate progression to Coventry University London Campus are now offered at this ISC, as the partnership with the University of Law has not been renewed by mutual agreement.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

5 The 2016 review identified two instances of good practice and made five affirmations. Actions related to these have been fully implemented, except for the formal review of the effectiveness of the programme approval process. The latter has been delayed, but actions taken demonstrate that progress has been made. The resulting improvements in the provider's management of its higher education provision were clearly evidenced in the documentation submitted to the review team, and in meetings with a range of staff. Actions are listed on the provider's Action Plan, which is regularly monitored by the provider's Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee (AQAE). The team noted highly effective student engagement in line with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

6 The first point of good practice was 'the one year post-approval review for new programmes that provides an early check on the maintenance of academic standards'. This has now been incorporated into the programme approval process and approved by the

AQAEC. Programmes approved at the new ISC in Durham will be subject to post-approval review using the original panel, which will meet tutors and students. The resulting reports will be considered by the AQAEC. The review team also noted that external members of approval/reapproval panels are now routinely approached to offer feedback.

7 The second point of good practice was 'the use of a warning system to inform the provision of appropriate support to identified students'. The student progress tracking system, which rates each student as red, pink, amber or green (RPAG) according to a number of indicators, is now being used in all centres; students who are rated other than 'green' are offered additional support. Such support varies between ISCs, but normally involves additional targeted classes or material. The newly appointed Associate Director of Learning, Teaching and Innovation is seeking to share good practice in student support across embedded colleges. The Heads of Centre forum in April 2017 focused on student outcomes and progression. Evidence of the success of the approach so far is seen in the considerably improved progression figures at ISCs for the 2016-17 academic year, with over 80 per cent of completing students offered progression. The progression tracking system is being further enhanced through the introduction of a Student Outcomes Group and the development of ISC-level Student Outcome Plans. These are intended to make further use of data from the RPAG system to draw on good practice across the network of ISCs, and to develop local and provider initiatives to further improve student progression.

8 The review team affirmed 'the plans in place to review the effectiveness of the approval process'. A full review has been postponed to the 2017-18 academic year. However, a number of enhancements have been made to the process, demonstrating that progress has been made. A 'one year on review' has been formally introduced for new programmes; oversight of programme changes has been strengthened by ensuring that all changes are reported through the provider's Programme Approval and Validation Committee (PAVC). This even includes those that do not require PAVC approval, thus making it easier to ensure definitive programme documentation is accurate.

9 The second affirmation noted 'the steps being taken to strengthen provider oversight of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities through the introduction of the Study Group Annual Monitoring Report'. The first provider Annual Monitoring Report was produced for the 2015-16 academic year. It is presented to the provider Board to provide a summary of key data, changes and issues within the academic year concerned. It is a reflective document that makes recommendations to the AQAEC, with the 2015-16 report leading to an amended template for 2016-17, which will be put together by a subgroup of the AQAEC to further enhance Board-level knowledge and scrutiny of academic standards across the network.

10 The third affirmation highlighted 'the steps being taken to ensure external examiners are using an appropriate template in which to submit their findings'. The reporting template has been revised and will be submitted directly to the provider Registry. It includes guidance for external examiners who may wish to raise matters of concern directly to the Director of Learning, Teaching and Quality Enhancement without consulting the embedded college concerned. All ISCs are required to use this template unless the partner university requires use of university forms, in which case an agreement is reached to add any information required by the provider. External examiner reports and embedded college responses to these now form part of each ISC's annual monitoring process. A summary of issues raised is received by the AQAEC and included in the provider Annual Monitoring Report.

11 The fourth affirmation noted the introduction of support for students who complete but are not eligible to progress to their chosen university to enable them to continue in higher education. There is now a formal job description for a Network Retention Officer tasked with overseeing this activity; students in danger of not progressing are encouraged to look

elsewhere within the higher education system. This has contributed to overall improved progression rates across the network.

12 The final affirmation concerned 'the steps being taken to ensure student membership on Quality Assurance and Enhancement Groups'. The provider has approved a Student Engagement Policy, which includes the requirement that all embedded colleges in the network have student members on their QAEG. Programme approval and reapproval processes, and Centre Review, check for adherence to this policy and offer the opportunity to provide advice in cases where student attendance is a problem. 2016-17 saw the introduction of a mechanism for student engagement at provider level: a National Student Council that brought together a lead student representative from each embedded college with the Director of Learning, Teaching and Quality Enhancement and the Head of Quality.

13 Admissions to Study Group's ISCs are carried out centrally by the provider, with admissions teams based in Brighton and Singapore. Borderline cases where potential students have narrowly missed the entry requirements or have exceptional circumstances (such as the requirement to submit a portfolio of work) are referred to the Head of Centre, who will make a decision in consultation with ISC and partner university staff as appropriate. An admissions policy summarises the principles used, which is supported by written working practices for each office. Entry requirements for each programme are included in the Centre Specification located on the Academic Office Huddle site, and maintained in a centralised database. Amendments to entry requirements are controlled by the provider's Registry, with all amendments reported to the PAVC (those for provision, approved by Study Group, must be approved by the PAVC). Applications are assessed by checking documentation using trained staff, supported by a dedicated Visa and Accreditation Compliance Team. Agents are trained via the provider's 'Sales and Marketing University', which seeks to develop information and sales skills for agents. Training can be face to face or web-based, and is refreshed at least once a year. The provider is currently undertaking a significant review (seen as a priority) of Sales, Marketing and Admissions, beginning with a self-evaluation, based on academic review principles and overseen by the QAEC. Admissions staff told the review team that teams were engaged with the process and found it useful.

14 The provider requires each embedded college to review each module offered on an annual basis, using a standard template that brings together information from student feedback, external examiner comments, link tutor feedback, student outcomes, and tutor reflections. Module reviews are brought together in an annual programme review, on which the embedded college-level Annual Monitoring Report is based. In most cases, the Annual Monitoring Report uses a standard template, which will be updated for 2016-17. In colleges where the provision is validated by the partner university, the university may require that its own template be used. In such cases, the provider timeline must be followed and any information required by the provider and not by the partner university must be added. In 2015-16, Annual Monitoring Reports were approved by embedded college QAEGs before submission to the relevant Regional QAEG for peer review and sign off. This was followed by feedback from the Regional QAEG to the QAEG, for sign off at that level. As of 2017-18, chairs of Regional QAEGs are required to summarise regional matters of interest and to present these to the QAEC, from which they form a part of the provider Annual Monitoring Report. Actions resulting from the annual monitoring cycle are normally added to the Centre Action Plan, which is regularly reviewed by the QAEG.

4 The provider's use of external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

15 The provider demonstrates highly effective engagement with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code. Programmes offered by the embedded colleges are either approved by the provider or validated by the university partner. In either case, they are benchmarked against the Quality Code; Subject Benchmark Statements, where appropriate; the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*; and (for level 3) either the Regulated Qualifications Framework or the Scottish Qualifications Framework as appropriate. The provider's programme approval process checks standards against these reference points, and programme and module specifications using standard templates make reference to external reference points, listing appropriate benchmarks, and expressing aims and learning outcomes in terms of the appropriate level. External examiners are in place for all programmes and are required to report on standards.

16 The review team noted that student engagement, in line with the Quality Code, was effective, with student representatives meeting as a group, but also taking part in the QAEG, and receiving training and support for their roles.

5 Background to the monitoring visit

17 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's and its embedded colleges' continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider and its embedded colleges of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

18 The monitoring visit was carried out by Cameron Waitt, QAA Officer, and Professor Gaynor Taylor, Reviewer, on 3 October 2017.

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