

Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of Arden University, February 2016

Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that Arden University (the University) has made commendable progress with implementing the action plan from the December 2013 [Review for Specific Course Designation](#).

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review visit

2 Since the December 2013 review, the Resource Development International Limited (as the University was then known), has been awarded taught degree awarding powers with effect from September 2014. It was then granted permission to use university title in July 2015. It changed its name to Arden University in August 2015. In January 2016, the University used its degree awarding powers for the first time to introduce an LLB (Hons) degree, recognised by the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Bar Standards Board. The number of students is currently 6,557, representing a 15 per cent increase from 5,698, the number at the time of the December 2013 review. (The number given in the report arising from that review is 8,950, but this includes students at the University's Hong Kong subsidiary, which is not within the scope of the current monitoring visit.)

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The University has continued to consolidate and build on the features of good practice identified in the report of the December 2013 review. Both these and the recommendations (see paragraphs 4 and 5) have been systematically monitored and evaluated as part of its action plan. The University was praised for the way in which its legal framework maintains its academic standards and integrity by defining its responsibilities and those of its parent company, Capella Education. This framework is now firmly embedded in the practice of its bodies responsible for governance and management. The continuing enhancement of the virtual learning environment (VLE) was also identified as good practice. The Learning and Teaching Committee fosters further improvements to the VLE through an annual review, the outcomes of which are widely disseminated within the University. The University also shares good practice with its partner universities and at a national level.

4 The University has made good progress in relation to the two advisable recommendations in the report. In order to achieve greater student engagement with the skills-oriented mini-modules that it has developed, the University has ensured consistent signposting of students to these modules in the light of their performance in assessment; has embedded the modules in induction materials; and has developed a range of additional modules. Student use of these modules has increased significantly. With regard to the clarity of the student representation system, the University has given greater prominence to representation mechanisms in the student handbook and during the online student induction. A mini-module for student representatives has recently been launched and communications to students from their representatives are facilitated on the VLE. In particular, welcome messages from student representatives are now posted in induction forums. Students are very positive about these developments.

5 The University has also made good progress in relation to three desirable recommendations in the report. It has continued to pursue external benchmarking through professional body recognition of its programmes, as demonstrated by the recognition of its LLB (Hons) degree (see paragraph 2) and the accreditation by the Chartered Institute of Marketing of two master's degrees. It has fully implemented the diagnostic testing of academic skills for each student as part of the induction process and has extended this approach to provide study skills support throughout the student's period of study. Students see this as a really helpful development. It has fostered external links to promote innovation in teaching and learning, mainly with the Higher Education Academy (HEA). Since the 2013 report, membership of the HEA has increased from 16 per cent to 44 per cent. Further links are developed by members of staff studying for doctorates at other universities.

6 The University's quality assurance processes are effective in ensuring the maintenance of academic standards and the enhancement of the quality of education. The University claims that the continuous review of quality and response to student feedback is one of its strengths and the review team believes that this claim is fully justified. Rigorous University-wide monitoring of quality and academic standards is undertaken by the Quality and Standards Committee, with oversight by the Academic Board. Course committees meet quarterly to coincide with the cycle of module delivery. At these meetings, careful consideration is given to feedback from students, external examiners' reports, and an exceptionally thorough analysis is made of the mark patterns and general characteristics of individual modules, including retention and achievement. These all contribute to the course annual monitoring process, which ensures an holistic overview of the courses and the evaluation of previous actions. These course reviews feed into annual monitoring reports to the University's awarding bodies. The reports are comprehensive and rigorous and are supplemented by detailed periodic institutional reviews by the validating universities. This process is complemented by an academic strategy plan, currently grouped round five key objectives, which is updated annually and forms part of a comprehensive planning process that ensures the integration of academic and non-academic actions to achieve the University's priorities.

7 The University is a part-time distance learning provider with a very flexible mode of delivery. Modules are taken on a drop-in, drop-out basis. Students particularly appreciate the fact that they can pay for each individual module separately and sometimes take individual modules, which suit their career plans, rather than complete programmes of study. Moreover, at the time of the monitoring visit, only a small proportion of students had been registered long enough to complete their programme. Consequently, the University currently uses student retention and progression rates as key statistical indicators. These demonstrate an overall average retention rate of 85 per cent for the 2015-16 cohorts, 78 per cent for the 2013-14 cohorts, and 69 per cent for the 2012-13 cohorts (there are four entry points for each year). HEFCE's analysis of the University's retention rates is that they compare well with the retention rates for publicly funded higher education in the field of distance learning. These trends are reviewed and analysed carefully by course committees as part of the annual monitoring process. At the University-wide level, there is a succinct and thoughtful quarterly report to Academic Board on key statistical indicators including student retention and progression. As more students near the end of their maximum period of study, the monitoring of completion rates will become increasingly important.

8 The University has a comprehensive admissions policy which is designed both to assess the academic capabilities of applicants and their suitability for distance learning. The University recruits mainly from applicants who have obtained qualifications in the English language. Otherwise, an International English Language Testing System score of 6.5 or equivalent is required for postgraduate programmes and 6.0 or equivalent for undergraduate programmes. Admission is managed effectively by a team of experienced officers. The University conducts a regular audit of the admissions process which is

reviewed as part of the agenda of the Admissions Committee, a subcommittee of Academic Board. New members of the team are inducted into the systems, shadow experienced staff and are then mentored. Each team member concentrates on applications to a group of courses, thus building expertise in the entry requirements and study options of those courses. All applicants complete an application form, which requires a detailed personal statement, including their motivation for study, and documentary evidence of their existing qualifications. Admissions staff provide guidance throughout. In particular, careful consideration is given to applicants whose academic qualifications do not meet the normal minimum entry requirements. They are asked to provide a more detailed personal statement, together with appropriate references, and may be contacted for an informal discussion. Before a final decision is taken academic tutors are involved and, where necessary, awarding bodies are consulted. Unsuccessful applicants are provided with feedback to support them in accessing alternative provision. A clear policy for the accreditation of prior certified learning supports the admissions staff in helping applicants wishing to apply for credit for previous study. Students confirmed that admissions staff are proactive in their support during applications of this nature.

9 The University has well-established methods for the involvement of students in the management and enhancement of its provision (see also paragraph 4). Students nominate and elect representatives who attend course committee meetings, either in person or more frequently on a virtual basis. The representatives elect one of their number to attend Academic Board and Learning and Teaching Committee meetings. Students confirmed that they are supported in their role as representatives and feel welcomed and included in meetings. Issues raised have been addressed quickly and effectively. Contact between representatives and their fellow students is supported by use of introductions during induction, and facilities within the virtual learning platform.

10 Students are asked to complete evaluation surveys on completion of each module. There is also an annual satisfaction survey based on the content of the National Student Survey. Module surveys are carefully analysed and discussed at course committees and prompt action taken to address issues raised. The annual student survey results are analysed, benchmarked and reported both to Academic Board and to students.

Section 4: Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

11 Arden University currently provides courses in conjunction with a range of awarding bodies, and each course is managed in accordance with the requirements of its awarding body. Information about recognition of its courses by professional and statutory bodies is given in paragraphs 2 and 5.

12 The University makes extensive use of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) in ensuring that its policies and procedures provide an appropriate learning environment and maintain the quality and standards of its programmes. Detailed mapping has taken place against the expectations of the Quality Code, and there is a scheduled programme of review to ensure currency. The mapping of each section is allocated to individual senior staff and requires not only reference to evidence but also comment on filling any gaps in the evidence and opportunities for enhancement.

Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit

13 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's 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 of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

14 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Robert Jones (Coordinator) and Mrs Sue Miller (Reviewer) on 25 February 2016.

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