



# Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) of Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group)

May to November 2016

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## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group). The review took place in two stages from 9 to 27 May and from 30 September to 4 November 2016. It was conducted by a team of nine reviewers, as follows:

- Professor Brian Anderton
- Mrs Catherine Fairhurst
- Dr Jenny Gilbert
- Dr Sylvia Hargreaves
- Dr David Houlston
- Professor Donald Pennington
- Professor Gaynor Taylor
- Professor Denis Wright
- Ms Kate Wicklow (student reviewer).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group) and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK [higher education providers](#) expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - - the setting and maintenance of threshold academic standards
  - - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - - the information provided about higher education provision
  - - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- provides a commentary on the selected theme
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

The review included 15 Study Group International Study Centres and Colleges:

- Huddersfield International Study Centre
- Istituto Marangoni International Study Centre
- John Moores International Study Centre
- Keele International Study Centre
- Kingston International Study Centre
- Lancaster International Study Centre
- Leeds International Study Centre
- Leicester International Study Centre
- Lincoln International Study Centre
- London International Study Centre
- Royal Holloway International Study Centre
- Sheffield International College

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code).

- Surrey International Study Centre
- Strathclyde International Study Centre
- Sussex International Study Centre.

In all cases the centres met UK expectations in relation to maintaining academic standards, the quality of learning opportunities and information. There are four commended judgements for quality of learning opportunities at the Lancaster, Royal Holloway, Surrey and Sussex International Study Centres.

In Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) there is also a check on the provider's financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG). This check has the aim of giving students reasonable confidence that they should not be at risk of being unable to complete their course as a result of financial failure of their education provider.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 3. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 8.

In reviewing Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group) the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [themes](#) for the academic year 2014-15 are Digital Literacies and Student Employability,<sup>2</sup> and the provider is required to select, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated section explains the method for Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges).<sup>4</sup> For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.

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<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Review themes: [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=106).

<sup>3</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Pages/Educational-Oversight.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/ReviewsAndReports/Pages/Educational-Oversight.aspx).

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group)

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group).

- The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of the awards offered by itself and on behalf of degree-awarding bodies **meet** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group):

- the one-year post-approval review for new programmes that provides an early check on the maintenance of academic standards (Expectation A3.3)
- the use of a warning system to inform the provision of appropriate support to identified students (Expectation B4).

### Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms** the following actions that Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group) is already taking to make academic standards secure and improve the educational provision offered to its students:

- the plans in place to review the effectiveness of the approval process (Expectations A3.1, B1)
- 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 (Expectation A3.3)
- the steps being taken to ensure external examiners are using an appropriate template in which to submit their findings (Expectations A3.4, A3.3, B7)
- 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 (Expectation B4)
- the steps being taken to ensure student membership on Quality Assurance and Enhancement Groups (Expectation B5).

### Theme: Student Employability

Study Group's approach to student employability is to introduce employment-relevant skills into programmes of study. A review conducted by Study Group, involving desk research and feedback from students, Heads of ISCs and HEI partners, identified key areas for assisting students on their journey to employability. This led Study Group to develop a strategic global initiative called 'CareerAhead', which aims to enhance the employability of its students by supporting each student to have a career direction of travel, an understanding of how graduate recruiters assess applicants for jobs, and develop a CV, personal statement and personal career plan.

Study Group piloted the CareerAhead scheme at the Sussex ISC, and the scheme is being implemented across all UK ISCs during 2016-17. Evaluation of lessons learnt from the pilot at Sussex ISC were discussed at a Head of Centres meeting in February 2016 and at a workshop for centres in June 2016. Provider-level support and guidance was recommended and a 'CareerAhead lead' has been appointed to facilitate training. Centres which do not already have an Employability Champion will do so during 2016-17.

CareerAhead may take the form of separate standalone modules at some ISCs, while others have chosen to integrate the vocational and interpersonal skills within existing programme modules. In some cases the individual ISCs are linking with employability programmes at the partner HEI.

## **Financial sustainability, management and governance**

There were no material issues identified at Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group) during the financial sustainability, management and governance check.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Higher Education Review](#) (Embedded Colleges).

## **About Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group)**

Study Group is a privately owned education provider that operates across three geographically distinct higher education divisions globally: the UK, Australia and North America. Within the International Study Centre unit, there are currently 17 dedicated centres that prepare international students for entry to higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK and Europe at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It is Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (BES Ltd) with whom university partners contract formally, although the company is generally known as Study Group. Of these centres, 15 operate within the Quality Assurance Agency's educational oversight framework (or are seeking to under HEREC).

The preparatory programmes at the ISCs (or 'embedded colleges') range from Level 3 foundation years to Level 6 Pre-Masters courses. They do not lead to recognised qualifications, although they may lead to university credit depending upon the relationship with the partner HEI; rather, they entitle students who meet the pre-agreed academic and English language thresholds to progress to a named degree programme at the partner university. Study Group works closely with each partner HEI to tailor programmes of study for student progression to that university. Programmes may be validated by the partner HEI or approved by Study Group itself. Definitions of each can be found in the Provider Glossary (BES002). It is the relationship with the partner HEI that sets out the business and educational model Study Group work to. Rather than having a very centralised structure that predetermines quality frameworks and curriculum, Study Group have a system that is designed to be flexible enough to provide students a seamless transition onto the award programme with each HEI partner. At the heart of this flexible, decentralised and distributed model of educational provision is a set of Study Group frameworks, strategies and regulations that establish minimum expectations that centres must follow to ensure that all students have a consistent and equitable experience and so that fair access to programmes and the curriculum can be demonstrated. In addition, the provider has drawn together a number of key elements of its activity under an umbrella Enhancement Strategy to articulate as a network their commitment to seeking opportunities to enhance learning opportunities for students with a view to maximising their outcomes potential.

At the time of the reviews there were 1,363 Levels 4-6 higher education students and 2,911 Level 3 students.

Since the last annual monitoring review in 2014, there have been some changes, including:

- changes to the senior management structure
- the appointment of a Director of Learning and Teaching and Senior Quality Administrator
- opening of two new centres in London and Sheffield
- a restructuring of the admissions process
- changes to governance.

Study Group states that its main challenges include the current UK Visas and Immigration policy, consolidating a secure system for quality assurance and enhancement and managing the extensive network of study centres.

In May 2012, QAA made the following judgement:

'The team has limited confidence in the provider's management of its responsibilities for the academic standards of the awards it offers through its embedded college provision. The team has confidence that the provider is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students through embedded colleges. The team considers that reliance can be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the provider is responsible for publishing about itself, its embedded colleges, and the programmes that it delivers.' In December 2012, the judgement in the soundness of Study Group's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards and those at the University of Surrey International Study Centre and the University of Lincoln International Study Centre was amended to confidence. The report was amended to reflect the new judgement and was published in December 2012 (BES055).

Following that initial review, Study Group has received annual monitoring visits - in 2013, 2014 and 2015 - the outcomes of which have been described in terms of making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision (BES042, BES043, BES044). In particular, Study Group:

- continues to strengthen quality management
- ensures all centres have a system of peer observation
- ensures all centres have published assessment regulations
- ensures assessments are marked and moderated in centres with some cross-centre moderation
- is making progress for student representation
- is improving relations between centres and universities at subject level
- ensures students are aware of progression requirements
- supports students who do not make the grade to progress at their chosen university.

The Provider Academic Quality Action Plan (PAQAP) is the key mechanism for the management of quality assurance and its articulation through the academic governance structure. It is reviewed at least quarterly by the Head of Quality, Director of Learning and Teaching and Chief Operating Officer and then at each AQAEC meeting, where the Committee is advised by the Head of Quality on progress with actions (BES037; BES045).

## Explanation of the findings about Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group)

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#) is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.

## **1 Judgement: The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered by itself and on behalf of degree-awarding bodies**

**Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:**

**a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* are met by:**

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

**b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics**

**c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework**

**d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

### **Findings**

1.1 The programmes offered by Study Group through its International Study Centre (ISC) network range from the Level 3 International Foundation Year (IFY), through the Level 4 International Year One (IY1), to the Level 6 Pre-Masters. Individual International Study Centres will offer at least one of these programmes, with some ISCs offering programmes at all three levels. The programmes do not lead to a recognised qualification. They may lead to University credit depending on the arrangement between the higher education institution (HEI) partner and Study Group. On all programmes, successful achievement of agreed academic and English language outcomes entitles students to progress to named degree programmes at the partner HEI.

1.2 The provision offered by Study Group falls into two types: a) validated where programmes are approved by the partner HEI for delivery by the ISC, and where responsibility for academic standards rests with the partner HEI; and b) approved programmes where academic standards and the quality of teaching and learning opportunities are approved by Study Group itself through its own academic quality assurance and programme approval processes. Currently, 10 ISCs offer exclusively approved programmes, four ISCs offer exclusively validated provision, and one ISC (Leicester) offers a mixture of approved and validated provision.

1.3 The arrangements would allow the Expectation to be met.

1.4 The review team tested whether this was the case in practice by examining provider-level documentation on course development and approval available to centres through the provider's 'Huddle' site, documentation seen as part of the review of individual ISCs, and through discussion with senior staff.

1.5 During programme development, and at programme approval/re-approval, or validation/revalidation, Study Group benchmarks the academic standards of its programmes against *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) for programmes at Levels 4 and 6, and the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for programmes at Level 3. New module and programme specification templates have been developed by Study Group which require programme teams to record module and programme alignment to external reference points such as the FHEQ and RQF. These are being phased in as programmes are re-approved in the individual ISCs. Programme and module specifications seen as part of the review of the individual ISCs draw attention to the placement of the provision within the qualifications framework. Subject Benchmark Statements inform the process of curriculum development as appropriate. Where applicable, the new Study Group template for programme and module specifications requires the Subject Benchmark used in developing the module or programme to be recorded. In due course, Study Group will engage explicitly with published qualification characteristic statements where appropriate.

1.6 Programmes and modules are designed to fit with the partner university's academic framework in terms of credit equivalence, following the convention that 1 credit = 10 notional learning hours. In the case of validated provision, programmes and modules are explicitly credit-rated, since they fall within the parameters of the partner HEI's academic regulations. In the case of approved provision, this is never credit-rated since Study Group does not award academic credit. However, programme design does work to the notion of credit equivalence reflecting standard sector practice. Students receive a record of their achievement using a standard Study Group template. On programmes leading to University credit, students receive a University-generated transcript.

1.7 Overall, the evidence seen and heard by the review team supports the view that this Expectation is met with low risk.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.8 The responsibility for the maintenance of academic standards for Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group) programmes lies with the partner University for validated programmes or with Study Group for approved programmes. The collaborative arrangements between an International Study Centre and the respective University partner define responsibilities for quality assurance of academic provision.

1.9 Where the partner HEI validates the provision, the Centre's academic framework and regulations are scrutinised during the validation or revalidation process. Where programmes are approved by Study Group there is alignment of the academic regulations framework with those of the collaborative University partner to support student achievement levels and progression.

1.10 Study Group scrutinises and approves each centre's academic framework and set of academic regulations through the programme and review processes where academic provision is Study Group-approved. A Student Handbook or the virtual learning environment at each centre provide detailed Assessment Regulations for academic programmes.

1.11 Study Group centres adhere to the principles of the credit accumulation framework but only award credits when programmes are validated by a partner university. Credit equivalence is identified for non-validated Study Group programmes that support potential progression onto a credit-rated higher education programme.

1.12 The adoption of standardised processes for Centre Review, annual monitoring reports, action planning, programme and module specifications, and programme approval and re-approval across centres supports adherence to the Study Group's quality framework. These arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

1.13 The review team examined all relevant documents, including Study Group's Academic Quality Handbook and subsequent Action Plan, minutes and terms of reference of the committees and each of the centres' policies and regulations. The team held meetings with the head of Study Group and senior staff; and with regional and centre staff during visits to each centre.

1.14 The Centre Review process was introduced in 2015 and forms a key part of Study Group's procedures for providing assurance about the academic standards and quality of the student learning experience at each centre. The Centre Review process provides a cyclical rather than annual scrutiny and is scheduled according to suggested indicators of risk. It was the declared intention of Study Group to undertake a review of each of its centres during the first year of the process being implemented, with reviews thereafter undertaken within a four-year cycle or according to risk.

1.15 During a review team visit to one centre it was confirmed that the scheduled Centre Review had been postponed from November 2015 due to senior management staff recruitment difficulties and had yet to be undertaken. During this delay period further disruptions to staffing provision occurred, however Study Group had taken action to resolve

the issue. To mitigate potential risk to academic standards during periods of senior staffing change, Study Group should adhere to defined Centre Review procedures. Study Group senior management recognise this.

1.16 Study Group's deliberative body responsible for academic quality is the Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (AQAEC). Changes to policies and procedures by AQAEC are sent to a Regional Quality Assurance and Enhancement Group (RQAEG). Two recently introduced subcommittees support the AQAEC; the Curriculum and Learning Enhancement Committee (CLEC) is responsible for academic provision and the Programme Approval and Validation Committee (PAVC) is responsible for overseeing all programme approval processes.

1.17 Each centre has a Quality Assurance and Enhancement Group (QAEG) that uses a standard agenda format and reports to the RQAEG. The QAEG also reports its business to a partnership University management committee or board to ensure institutional oversight of academic standards. Study Group maintains and publishes a calendar of academic business meetings across its centres, and is taking steps to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of recording these meetings.

1.18 The extent of development of the distributed academic governance and regulatory framework is dependent on each centre's relationship with their HEI partners and oversight by Study Group. Elements of academic regulations might vary between centres but the deliberative organisational and reporting procedures are routinely and consistently linked to Study Group academic framework requirements.

1.19 The deliberative governance framework ensures responsibilities for academic standards and quality are appropriately discharged. The quality governance and responsibilities structure is clearly separated from those related to business and development, hence academic standards are not compromised by business imperatives.

1.20 The academic frameworks and regulations are transparently and comprehensively detailed in the Provider Academic Quality Handbook, November 2015, which is available on a cloud-based content collaboration platform (Huddle) together with the Study Group Academic Quality Action Plan. The Action Plan is reviewed by the AQAEC and the Committee is advised by the Head of Quality on progress with actions.

1.21 Study Group's development and implementation of an academic governance and regulatory framework that establishes minimum expectations for each centre allows the Expectation to be met. The need to ensure corporate management oversight during periods of senior staff changes within centres is recognised by Study Group to avoid any threat of risk to the maintenance of academic standards.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: *Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards***

1.22 Each academic programme and qualification provided by Study Group throughout its network of International Study Centres has a definitive set of programme documents that serve as a reference point for the approval, delivery, assessment, monitoring and evaluation of the academic provision. These include programme and module specifications or handbooks that follow a prescribed Study Group template or adopt a partner template where the academic provision is validated by a University.

1.23 A Centre Specification document is being introduced throughout the 2016-17 academic year to furnish a record of entry requirements for each programme, a listing of external examiners, and information on progression requirements onto a university partner programme for each study centre.

1.24 Study Group maintains a central library of these documents, together with module handbooks and student handbooks. The Study Group Academic Manager is responsible for ensuring stored documents are accurate and current, and works with the Study Group Quality Team to maintain a record of any changes to ISC modules and programmes. In one centre, the review team recommended an amendment to a particular programme specification document to ensure it included a recent modification to the academic programme.

1.25 Study Group has processes in place to provide an appropriate level of oversight and these arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

1.26 The review teams examined examples of programme specifications and definitive module documents within each centre and confirmed the programme and module documents provided a record of alignment with relevant subject benchmarks, the programme outcomes, teaching and learning strategies, assessment demands and processes, and student guidance mechanisms. Meetings were also held with staff and students across ISCs.

1.27 In meetings with staff and students, the review team heard these documents were effective and accessible reference sources that provided sufficient information on the content, structure and organisation of programme delivery and assessment. Programme and module documents were made available in hard copy and through a virtual learning environment at each centre.

1.28 In reviewing documentation across centres and through discussion with senior management staff, the team concluded there are appropriate monitoring procedures for approval, re-approval and evaluation of programme and module specifications. The PAVC approves all business-responsive changes to programmes including substantive changes to programmes or modules. The PAVC has authority to recommend approval of modifications to programmes, while authority for final approval is retained by AQAEC for Study Group-approved programmes or the appropriate approval committee or panel for those programmes validated by University partners.

1.29 Each centre has to produce an annual monitoring report that provides a reflective appraisal of the key successes or issues arising during the previous academic session, and identifies subsequent actions required to maintain or enhance academic standards. These monitoring reports incorporate feedback from students and external examiners and are then submitted for scrutiny by the RQAEG and then the AQAEC. The outcomes of this annual monitoring process inform Study Group and the Centre Action Plan (CAP).

1.30 The programme specifications and other documentary records maintained by Study Group ensure that there is an unambiguous understanding of the taught programmes that have been approved through formal channels, so the Expectation is met with low risk.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.31 In the case of validated provision, since the partner HEI is responsible for academic standards and quality, programmes are approved by the HEI using its own quality assurance procedures for programme approval. The ISCs with validated provision work closely with their HEI partner within this quality assurance framework, but successful completion of any validation conditions and the granting of approval is entirely the responsibility of the HEI.

1.32 Study Group is responsible for ensuring the programmes it approves (that is, non-university-validated provision) meet the appropriate academic standard. It does so through its Programme Approval Process. A new Study Group programme approval procedure was introduced during 2015-16 for roll-out to the ISC network. This replaced approval procedures previously used by Study Group. Within these procedures, a programme approval team is convened under the auspices of the Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee (AQAEC), which includes (normally two) external academic members. The approval team receives documentation in advance, and an approval event is held on the premises of the relevant ISC, with the panel able to meet teaching and management/administrative staff, students and representatives of the partner HEI. The process is designed to achieve detailed scrutiny of the programme, as well as centre regulations and procedures. A programme report is produced which now goes to the Programme Approval and Validation Committee (PAVC), a subcommittee of AQAEC. Approval is typically accompanied by conditions and/or recommendations laid out in the report. PAVC oversees fulfilment of the approval conditions before the programme is able to be delivered, but formal approval of a new programme is given by AQAEC on the recommendation from PAVC. The review team was told that the introduction of PAVC, which meets a need rather than a set timetable and which includes senior staff with quality assurance responsibilities, had sped up business relating to programme approval. The review team was also told that a review of committees including PAVC had taken place during summer 2016, with consideration given to refining the terms of reference and membership.

1.33 As well as external academic advisers, Study Group has a policy of encouraging the use of student representatives on approval panels. This is, however, a desirable rather than an essential feature of the approval process since it was recognised that, with one-year programmes, securing interest in becoming a student approval panel member was challenging. A student representative had been included in the pilot approval event at the University of Sussex ISC, and the review panel also noted that the approval of programmes at the University of Sheffield ISC in 2015, as part of the transition from a previous provider to Study Group, had included a student representative from another ISC on the approval panel. The process for programme approval is described by Study Group as a 'robust system'. Senior staff told the review team they believed the new process ensured externality, facilitated the possibility of student involvement in the approval process, and had resulted in more detailed approval panel reports, more formalised approval panel meetings and, overall, a more comprehensive process for programme approval. However, an effectiveness review of the approval process was scheduled for summer 2016 after completion of the 2015-16

approval cycle. The review team was told this was normal practice where a new process has been introduced.

1.34 Overall, the policies and procedures which Study Group has in place should ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for qualifications. The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

1.35 The review team was able to test whether this was the case in practice through discussion with senior staff and, in particular, through the reviews conducted of the individual ISCs. This enabled a detailed examination of programme approval practice and its alignment to Study Group policies and procedures.

1.36 Reviews of all 15 ISCs conducted during 2016 showed that, for both approved and validated programme provision, curricula are developed by the ISCs' academic teams working with the partner HEIs. In all cases, review teams found good working relations existed between the individual ISCs and their partner HEIs and in three cases, Huddersfield, Sussex and Sheffield International College, the quality of the working relationship was found to be **good practice**. In all cases of approved provision, the partner HEI had endorsed the Study Group programmes as suitable for progression to its degree programmes.

1.37 Only a minority of the approved provision in the ISCs had been scrutinised through the current approval process. The bulk of the approved provision had been subject to the earlier approaches to programme approval used by Study Group. In the case of one ISC, Strathclyde ISC, there had been no programme approval since the ISC had been set up, so it was not possible to comment on the effectiveness of the approval process. However, in the majority of ISCs, the review team found that a rigorous process of programme approval had been implemented, albeit in most cases reflecting older practice. External advisers were universally a part of approval panels, and contributed effectively to the scrutiny of programme proposals. In current practice, there are normally two external advisers on each panel but, in earlier approval events, there was only one external in some cases. This could lead to the external's ability to make effective comments being stretched by the range of discipline areas being considered in an approval event. However, overall the review team were satisfied Study Group used external involvement effectively in its programme approval process.

1.38 The outcome of approval panels is normally approval, but subject to conditions being fulfilled and recommendations being considered by the relevant ISC. In all cases, the review team saw evidence that the approval conditions had been dealt with effectively, and that formal approval had been given by AQAEC prior to the programme being allowed to operate. With new ISCs, where there may be few staff for the approval panel to meet and no students, Study Group has a policy of conducting a further review of progress after the first year of operation of the new programme(s). This was done in the case of both the London Centre and the University of Sheffield IC. In both cases, the review was run in exactly the same way as for programme approval, with a formal panel convened including external advisers, and so far as possible continuity between the original approval panel and the review panel.

1.39 The review team asked senior staff about progress with the effectiveness review of the approval process, which had originally been scheduled for summer 2016 after completion of the 2015-16 approval cycle. Staff indicated that this had not yet taken place, but it was still their intention to undertake the effectiveness review. The review team **affirms** the plans in place to review the effectiveness of the approval process.

1.40 Overall, the review team formed the view that the Expectation was met with low risk.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.41 All programmes have overarching learning outcomes which are recorded in the programme specification. These overall learning outcomes are mapped to module learning outcomes and these are in turn mapped to assessments. These learning outcomes form the threshold standards for achievement at programme and module level. Assessments are described in programme and module specifications and included in programme handbooks and module handbooks and students are informed of related assessment criteria. The intended outcomes of each assessment task are identified and aligned to generic assessment criteria. Validated programmes comply with the regulations of the awarding university.

1.42 Module marks are ratified at a formal Programme Assessment Board (PAB) with the relevant external examiner required to attend, and is often chaired by a University representative. A centre may also have a Module Assessment Board (MAB) at the end of each term or semester to confirm provisional marks until the PAB verifies module marks and programme performance.

1.43 The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

1.44 The review team tested its application by studying handbooks, programme and module specifications, assessment regulations, and minutes of PABs and MABs, and by speaking to students and academic staff.

1.45 While it is recognised that assessment tasks should broadly align with the approach of the partner institution to ensure adequate preparation for students transitioning, Study Group is introducing a Learning, Teaching and Assessment Framework. All centres are required to ensure that their local policies align with the principles and expectations in both the Learning, Teaching and Assessment framework and the assessment framework. Centres confirmed that they are checking that their assessment regulations align with the two frameworks and each centre has produced a draft Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy.

1.46 Study Group does not award credit to students. For some validated programmes, credit is awarded by the partner university. Centre PABs provide an appropriate level of scrutiny of student learning against criteria. External examiners and University staff help to ensure academic standards through their membership of PABs.

1.47 Study Group use external examiner reports and discussions at AQAEC and CLEC in enhancing centres' approaches to assessment. Regional training events have been held for assessors and moderators using external facilitators.

1.48 In conclusion, all Study Group centres devise programmes and modules that are mapped to learning outcomes and in turn to assessments. Programmes align to UK threshold standards. Therefore the Expectation is met and the associated risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.49 Study Group has established mechanisms for the monitoring and review of programmes and ISCs, which explicitly address whether academic standards are achieved and maintained, comprising annual programme monitoring, ongoing review via Centre Action Plans and the Study Group Quality Action Plan, and Centre Review.

1.50 The Study Group Provider Academic Quality Handbook (PAQH), which is accessible to all staff on Study Group intranet, contains a range of monitoring and review documentation, including module review and annual monitoring templates; Centre Action Plan (CAP) templates; and the Centre Review process.

1.51 Study Group's arrangements for monitoring and review explicitly address whether academic standards are achieved and maintained, and allow the Expectation to be met.

1.52 The team explored the effectiveness of the arrangements by examining monitoring and review documentation including process documents, AMRs, Centre Review reports, CAPS, the Study Group Academic Quality Action Plan, Regional Directors' quarterly reports to AQAEC, and minutes of internal meetings. The team also met with Study Group senior managers during a provider visit in May 2016 and at subsequent meetings in September and November 2016.

1.53 Study Group's Academic Quality Handbook sets out templates for use in annual module and programme review for Study Group-approved programmes. Further information about the process is communicated to ISCs via the respective Regional Directors. The review team found that staff understand the process.

1.54 Monitoring at ISC level, recorded in annual monitoring reports (AMRs), draws on programme and module review. In some cases, individual AMR development is supported by and informed through peer review undertaken by a Head of Centre from a different ISC. AMRs address academic standards matters through the presentation and analysis of student progression, achievement and completion data. External examiner feedback is addressed, and reports generally set out a record of responses, with actions taken. The review team **affirms** the steps being taken to ensure external examiners are using an appropriate template in which to submit their findings (see also Expectations A3.4, B7).

1.55 The processes require ISC-level and regional-level oversight to be maintained, respectively, through ISC Quality Assurance and Enhancement Groups (QAEGs) and Regional Quality Assurance and Enhancement Groups (RQAEGs), which are tasked with receiving and scrutinising AMRs. The processes also provide for Study Group oversight to be maintained by Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee (AQAEC) via Regional Directors' quarterly reports and, for Sussex and Sheffield, Centre Directors' quarterly reports. AMRs are also submitted to the respective University partners, where required.

1.56 The Study Group Academic Quality Action Plan provides a key link between Study Group and the ISC network. Centre Action Plans (CAPs) generally capture and follow

through standards-related issues identified through monitoring and review, as well as Study Group initiatives and priorities.

1.57 There was clear evidence of effective monitoring of CAPs by QAEGs, RQAEGs, and AQAEC. However, the review team found the extent of recorded discussion of AMRs at RQAEGs to be variable. Further, while relevant minutes confirm that AQAEC receives Regional Directors' and Centre Directors' reports, there was limited evidence of AQAEC consideration of the outcomes of annual programme review, as recorded through ISC-level AMRs.

1.58 Study Group has identified as a strategic priority the extension of its oversight of academic quality processes and systems. In line with this strategy, a Study Group AMR (PAMR), drawing on programme AMRs and informing the Study Group Academic Quality Action Plan, was introduced for 2014-15.

1.59 Although at the date of the review the first PAMR (for 2014-15) was still in draft, the review team formed the view that this reporting mechanism has the potential to enhance Study Group oversight of academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities across the ISC network. The report sets out an agreed framework and tighter timelines for annual reporting, noting in particular that the last ISC AMR for 2014-15 was not received until late March 2015. The report also makes a number of recommendations concerning the AMR process and format for 2015-16, including the provision of Regional Directors' summary reports on ISC-level AMRs and the inclusion of a summary of Centre Review outcomes, with actions incorporated into the Study Group Quality Action Plan where appropriate.

1.60 The review team **affirms** the steps being taken to strengthen provider oversight of academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities through the introduction of the Study Group Annual Monitoring Report.

1.61 With respect to new ISCs, Study Group requires programmes to be reviewed following one full cycle of operation. The process, completed by a panel incorporating appropriate externality, is designed to ensure that programmes are being delivered as validated and that all Study Group expectations are being met. Evidence relating to 'one-year' reviews carried out recently confirmed the effective operation of this requirement. The review team considered the one-year post-approval review for new programmes that provides an early check on the maintenance of academic standards to be **good practice**.

1.62 Centre Review addresses the security and ISC management of academic standards and the use of management information (student retention and achievement, student complaints and misconduct), through examination of a wide evidence base including external examiner reports, AMRs, QAEG and RQAEG minutes, the Centre Action Plan, and programme approval and review documentation. Review panels meet with senior managers, staff and students.

1.63 In accordance with Study Group processes, AQAEC maintains effective oversight of Centre Review through receipt of a summary report produced by the Director of Learning and Teaching and the respective Regional Directors, together with a compendium of Heads of Centre responses to Centre Review outcomes. Recommendations addressed to Study Group are presented and subsequently monitored on a bi-monthly basis at Study Group's Management Meeting.

1.64 The first cycle of Centre Reviews has been completed and all ISCs have been reviewed, with one exception, Leeds ISC (LISC). For future cycles, each extending over four years, the sequence of reviews across the network will be determined using clearly defined, risk-based criteria. The first LISC Centre Review has been postponed to spring 2017 due to

the appointment of a new Head of Centre in 2015. While the review team was assured by Study Group senior staff that actions on poor progression rates at LISC are being continually monitored, the team considered that implementation of the original schedule would have provided a timely opportunity for a formal review of LISC's progress on its ongoing Progression Improvement Plan.

1.65 The recently inaugurated Progression Steering Group has made significant progress in establishing robust systems for the enhancement of data quality and its gathering, collation and use, to enable Study Group oversight of student progression and outcomes (see Enhancement section).

1.66 Study Group has in place, and implements, effective mechanisms for the monitoring and review of programmes and ISCs, which explicitly address whether academic standards are achieved and maintained. The review team considered the one-year post-approval review for new programmes to be **good practice**, and affirmed the steps taken to enhance Study Group oversight of academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities through the introduction of the Study Group Annual Monitoring Report. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:**

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.67 Study Group uses the expertise and experience of external academics during programme approval and re-approval panels and in external examining. External expertise is also applied to Centre Reviews.

1.68 External examiners are required to confirm that the standards set for the programme conform to external reference points and are comparable with the standards of similar programmes offered by other institutions. There is a document indicating the roles and responsibilities of external examiners for approved programmes.

1.69 Study Group has arrangements that allow the Expectation to be met.

1.70 The team tested its application by studying regulations, minutes of events and external examiners' reports and in discussion with students and academic staff.

1.71 External assessors are members of the approval or re-approval team and comment on the transparency, good management and efficiency of certain approval/review events.

1.72 During the review process, Study Group had made a number of changes to the management of external examiners' reports. The review team saw examples of reports in various formats; mostly on University templates, but some reports were received to centres as written letters or notes. An external examiner report template has now been created to ensure that external examiner reports provide comprehensive feedback to centres, and from September 2016 will be used for all centres who do not use the University template. The review team **affirms** the steps being taken to ensure external examiners are using an appropriate template in which to submit their findings.

1.73 Procedures pertaining to the Centre Review process dictate that an external panel member will be present. Study Group also state Centre Review is used as a way of ensuring external scrutiny. However, some Centre Reviews have not included an external panel member and when questioned Study Group conveyed that this was no longer a mandatory element of the process. The November 2015 AQAEC meeting agreed the proposal that the policy should be amended to reflect the optional use of externals, which was subsequently actioned and used to inform 2016 Centre Review panel membership.

1.74 Overall Study Group routinely uses external expertise in the setting and maintenance of academic standards. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered by itself and on behalf of degree-awarding bodies: Summary of findings

1.75 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.76 All of the Expectations in this area are met and low risk, except for Expectation A2.1 that is met but with moderate risk. The higher level of risk relates to the potential for a lack of management oversight of standards to occur in centres experiencing changes to senior staff.

1.77 There are no recommendations, three affirmations and one area of good practice recorded for this section of the report, which spread across three of the seven Expectations.

1.78 The review team concludes that the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of the awards at Study Group **meet** UK expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design and Approval**

#### **Findings**

2.1 Programme approval is the process by which Study Group ensures a programme of study is academically sound. It seeks to ensure that academic standards are set appropriately, the curriculum can deliver to the required standards and that learning and teaching methods allow achievement of standards. It ensures that assessments appropriately measure achievement of learning outcomes. In addition, programme approval ensures adequate programme-specific resources are available to support the proposal.

2.2 Study Group has defined processes, roles and responsibilities for programme design, development and approval (Indicator 3) through its programme approval process which is informed by *Chapter B1* of the Quality Code. There is also a procedure for approval of programmes in new ISCs, where the programme has not been fully developed, and provision for a further full re-approval in 12 months' time. This was invoked in relation to the approval of programmes at University of Sheffield ISC in the transition from the previous provider to Study Group, with a further approval panel event having taken place in July 2016.. Study Group has developed new detailed programme and module design and development guidance plans for use in all centres from summer 2016.

2.3 Stage 1 of the approval process involves scrutiny of the programme proposal by the QAEG of the ISC at which the proposed programme would run. The Study Group approval process stipulates a check-list of criteria QAEG must consider, and the agreement of the partner University that the proposed programme should go forward must also be secured. The programme proposal then goes forward for outline approval to: a) the Senior Management Team (SMT) to consider the business case and resource adequacy to support the new programme; and b) PAVC (acting on behalf of AQAEC) to consider whether the proposal is in line with Study Group's and the partner University's ethos.

2.4 Stage 2 involves the relevant ISC setting up a programme development team. It is tasked with producing documentation to support the approval process using Study Group templates. PAVC is responsible for the appointment of an approval panel to consider the programme proposal. The panel includes an external academic adviser (Indicator 5), and the Study Group approval process documentation provides guidance on the criteria for selection of an external adviser. Study Group also has a policy of using ex-students as members of approval panels (Indicator 6), but this is desirable rather than essential, since engagement of students who only study with an ISC for one year can be problematic. The programme approval event is held at the ISC, with a requirement documentation must be with panel members at least five days before the event. Study Group's approval process documentation includes a specimen agenda, and guidance to the Panel Chair and Panel Secretary on their roles and responsibilities. The Panel Secretary produces a report of the approval event and the outcome recommendations together with any conditions which must be fulfilled before the programme may run. PAVC receives the approval panel report, oversees the approval process and, when the approval conditions have been completed, gives consent on behalf of AQAEC for the programme to recruit students. PAVC is responsible, on behalf of AQAEC,

for overseeing all programme approval/re-approval processes and events, and it meets as needed rather than to a set schedule of dates.

2.5 The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

2.6 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team scrutinised the revised approval process and met senior management staff.

2.7 Study Group has undertaken a pilot evaluation of its approval process, and plans an effectiveness review (Indicator 4) following the 2016 programme approval events scheduled in ISCs during spring and summer 2016. The review team were told such effectiveness reviews were normal Study Group practice. This review has not yet taken place, but it is Study Group's intention to do so. (This is the subject of the affirmation in section A3.1.) It also aims to use expertise from across its network of centres to support programme design and development. This is said, historically, to have operated 'organically' as networks of practice. However, Study Group plans to develop a new registry function making programme documentation more readily available..

2.8 There is an existing process for course development and approval which is well established, but there is an aspiration to develop new procedures for rolling out in the network during 2016-17. Study Group also has policies which govern modifications to existing programmes, which include metrics on where authority lies to approve different levels of programme modification, or whether a re-approval event must take place. It also has procedures governing programme withdrawal.

2.9 Study Group operates effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission***

#### **Findings**

2.10 The Study Group Admissions Policy and Structure document describes the principles and structure by which student admissions function. Recruitment and selection of students for ISC programmes are, with one part exception, processed centrally by Study Group Admission Centres in Singapore and Brighton, with borderline cases being referred to the Head of the ISC for a final decision. For Istituto Marangoni ISC, the admissions process is jointly managed with Study Group. Students are either able to come through Istituto's application system, or apply to Study Group. In addition, the Study Group Admissions Centre refers applications for the RHISC IFY Arts (Music) pathway to the HEI's Music Department for pre-approval prior to any confirmation or offer of a place. All students recruited and admitted to programmes offered at UK ISCs are overseas students and the admissions process conforms with UK Visas and Immigration Tier 4 licence to study (visa) requirements. A Study Group Admissions Complaints and Appeals Policy is in place.

2.11 The arrangements on admissions policies, structures and procedures allow the Expectation to be met.

2.12 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review teams examined published information on admission requirements and the procedures regarding admissions, and held meetings with Study Group senior management and staff and students in the centres.

2.13 The key criteria by which prospective students are considered for admission to a programme offered at an ISC are: academic qualifications and English requirements, meeting requirements of the UKVI, and availability of the progression route at the partner university. Changes to programmes, including admissions criteria, are approved by Study Group's PAVC.

2.14 Study Group's Admission Policy gives clear and explicit guidelines for communication with prospective students throughout the application and admission process. This involves acknowledgement of receipt of the application, an email decision following consideration of the application and a number of formal notifications such as Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies (CAS). Students can disclose a disability during the application process, enabling Study Group, in conjunction with the ISCs, to guide and support students who may have specific accessibility and learning needs.

2.15 Study Group Student Enrolment Advisors work with students who wish to apply without the use of an agent. ISC websites provide a direct, online application process. Students applying through a local agent contact the agent for an application form. Any changes affecting the availability of a programme or progression (articulation) to the partner HEI are managed by the admissions team to ensure applicants are kept informed and any necessary actions taken.

2.16 Prospective students are able to make an appeal against a decision concerning their application to study at an ISC and programme of choice through the procedure described in the Study Group Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy. This policy also provides guidance on how a student can make a complaint about some aspects of the

admissions process conducted by the provider, either in Singapore or the UK admissions processes. The Admissions Appeals and Complaints Policy clearly sets out grounds for appeal and eligibility criteria for appeal. The Admissions Manager has overall responsibility for ensuring that appeals and complaints are dealt with according to Study Group's policy and stated timescales.

2.17 The students who met the review teams were very positive about the admissions process.

2.18 The review teams confirm that the recruitment, selection and admissions procedures operated by Study Group are transparent, reliable, valid and inclusive, and that accordingly the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

#### **Findings**

2.19 Central support and direction for teaching and learning is provided by a Director of Teaching and Learning who sits on the Study Group Senior Management Team and the global Academic Leadership Team. This is a recent appointment. The provider's aims, in terms of teaching and assessment practice and the opportunities provided for learning across the network of ISCs, are articulated in the recently approved Learning, Teaching and Assessment Framework which sets out overarching principles from which ISCs have been required to agree local strategies for learning, teaching and assessment.

2.20 Teaching staff are appointed by centres. However, Study Group requires each new appointee to be appropriately qualified with subject tutors holding at least a first degree and English language tutors a first degree plus a qualification in teaching English at the appropriate level.

2.21 The quality of teaching is assessed at regular intervals, through both observations that feed in to the appraisal system and via peer observation. A new peer observation and academic staff performance review system has been piloted at one centre.

2.22 Each centre drafts an annual staff development plan so that tutors can further develop their teaching skills and keep their subject knowledge updated and record centre-level training needs.

2.23 The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

2.24 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team considered the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Framework, CLEC minutes and individual reports on the embedded colleges. In addition the team met with the Head of the provider, other senior members of provider staff and held a final meeting with a range of provider staff.

2.25 The review team learned from the Head of the provider that Study Group aims to embed consistency of procedures across its centres, but, as the purpose of the network is to align with the universities to allow transition for students from a centre to its partner university, the provider specifies minimum expectations and frameworks for policies and processes, allowing a bespoke approach within these for each centre. An example of this is the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Framework which was presented to CLEC in January 2016. The framework articulates a set of key principles and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, to 'facilitate a consistent and equitable approach within the network while allowing for local differences that may reflect the partner university's preferred approaches'. An audit was carried out to see which centres had learning and teaching strategies in place. This revealed that some had produced their own strategies while others made use of that of their partner University. All centres were then asked to submit a Teaching, Learning and Assessment Strategy, meeting the requirements of the Framework, to AQAEC by September 2016. The resulting strategies are now being peer-reviewed by members of CLEC, providing opportunity for spreading good practice, and it is anticipated

that, following any further amendments, they will be agreed by AQAEC and implemented. A review of implementation is anticipated in 2017-18.

2.26 The appointment of teaching staff is carried out by each centre, but Study Group requires each new appointee to be appropriately qualified; that is, subject tutors will have at least an undergraduate degree while English tutors will have an appropriate language teaching qualification. Visits to individual centres demonstrated that this was the case with some centres also involving partner universities in the approval of teaching staff. Staff and Centre Handbooks are prepared by each centre to a provider-supplied template and document not only operational procedures, but expectations of staff in teaching and supporting learning.

2.27 All centres are required to have an appraisal process in place and this was confirmed by individual centre reports. In most, but not all, cases the appraisal process includes teaching observation by a manager. Most centres also use peer observations with an increasing number of cross-subject and centre/partner university observations used primarily for developmental purposes.

2.28 Each centre drafts an annual staff development plan considering both pedagogic and subject-specific training needs. A range of staff development opportunities is then made available including central provision of workshops on key topics such as assessment, local staff meetings and partner university events. Study Group offers financial support for staff development in some cases. Individuals can apply for funding for specific training through a central budget held by HR (for example, where funding for a PhD or masters course is sought). It is planned to continue this, but centres will also be given a specific budget for local CPD needs. Centre staff were aware of the opportunities for development and able to cite cases where these had been used.

2.29 The review team noted, in particular, that all staff, both teaching and support, were required to complete certificated online training in Safeguarding and Prevent Duty. Completion is logged with the training overseen by Study Group's Director of Student Services.

2.30 In line with the provider's approach to enhancement of trialling new processes in one centre, the Sussex ISC is piloting a new peer observation and academic staff performance review system which is specifically geared to understanding the training needs of individual staff members. Annual appraisal of staff will be based around a set of key metrics including class observations, but also student feedback, student outcomes, external feedback and staff individual reflections on the past year's delivery.

2.31 The quality of teaching and learning is monitored through the annual monitoring and reporting system and through the process of Centre Review. Annual Monitoring reports are discussed at QAEG and RQAEG and a summary is reported to AQAEC. The review team saw considerable variance in the current annual monitoring reports, but note that reports for approved provision from the current academic year forward will use a standard pro-forma which includes a summary of feedback from students and external examiners' comments as well as the Programme Leader's reflections on the way the programme has run. This will provide better and more consistent oversight of teaching and learning across the centres.

2.32 Centre Reviews were introduced to provide an overview of the centre as a whole and the scope includes a number of areas relevant to learning and teaching such as staff recruitment and development and quality of teaching. All centres have received a review; further reviews will be scheduled on the basis of perceived risk.

2.33 There are comprehensive policies and procedures covering appointment, appraisal and development of teaching staff. The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.34 In all centres availability and access to resources are agreed with the partner university and reviewed in the Centre Review process. All students are provided with opportunities to engage with PDP. This is principally achieved through the framework for English language tuition, but local centres may offer additional elements of PDP provision through other modules or personal tutorials. It is planned to enhance this for 2016-17 by introducing an employability framework where students will be required to undertake an online skills assessment which will enable them to consider and reflect upon their learning needs with regards to particular employability skills acquisition.

2.35 Progression rates have always been seen as a key performance indicator. Until recently these were considered individually by centres. There is now a central Progression Steering Group in place to monitor and report on student retention and achievement across the network of ISCs.

2.36 All centres support student learning via the use of VLEs, either Study Group's own or one linked to the partner's system.

2.37 The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

2.38 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team considered the memoranda of agreement with partner universities together with documentation concerning tracking and improving progression.

2.39 All centres have a memorandum of agreement in place with the partner university and this specifies the access ISC students have to university facilities. Centre students are able to use university libraries and in most cases a wide range of other facilities such as health, counselling, learning support, student societies and sports clubs, often on the same terms as the university's own students.

2.40 All centres offer pre-arrival information and induction activities covering issues such as health and police registration, campus orientation and diagnostic testing in mathematics and/or English language. The latter ensures that each student is on the right programme of study and, where applicable, can be streamed according to ability. Arrangements are made for induction for students who arrive late due to issues beyond their control.

2.41 Centres offer personal support to students through a range of personal tutor mechanisms, some highly developed with tutors trained for their role and regular, scheduled meetings.

2.42 All students are provided with opportunities to engage with PDP. This is principally achieved through English language teaching, but some centres may offer additional elements of PDP provision through other modules or via personal tutorials following a scheme of work. 2016-17 will introduce the employability curriculum, termed CareerAhead, piloted at the Sussex ISC, in which students undertake an online skills assessment enabling them to determine their learning needs with respect to particular employability skills, recognise skills deficits and seek help to remedy these. (See the Student Employability theme.)

2.43 All centres use virtual learning environments (VLEs), whether Study Group's own or one linked to the partner university's own system. A Learning Technologies Manager and team support centres with the development of their VLE systems and materials on a request basis and report to the Director of Learning and Teaching. Oversight of VLEs lies with CLEC. Current initiatives include the use of e-Champs across the network, incorporation of e-learning principles into centre-level Learning and Teaching Strategies, and the establishment of a framework that sets out minimum expectations for staff for usage of VLEs.

2.44 To monitor student progression throughout the year, a network-wide framework has been established using standard definitions of student achievement coded as Red, Pink, Amber or Green (PRAG). Data considered includes attendance as well as performance in both formative and summative assessment. Students whose status is other than green are then offered counselling and additional classes targeted at specific weaknesses in subject areas or particular English language skills. This was further developed during 2015-16 with three centres piloting the use of the provider's student record system to track PRAG status, making the process automated and more secure. This approach is now being rolled out to all centres and a provider data team collates the resulting figures and is able to produce Centre and thematic statistics, offering insight into reasons for student underperformance and evaluating the impact of interventions.. One Centre has already made effective use of such data in reviewing curriculum. The use of a warning system to inform the provision of appropriate support to identified students is **good practice**.

2.45 Many of Study Group's partner universities demand high grades for progression to certain courses so that students may complete their course at the ISC, achieving a threshold mark of 40 per cent or more, but not be eligible to progress. Individual centres detailed support for such students including the possibility of progression to a different university course with a lower tariff or to another Study Group course such as an International Year 1. In addition the provider now offers support with a central team available to meet with students in such cases, advise on their options and provide support in making applications to other HEIs where appropriate. The review team **affirms** 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.

2.46 Study Group retains oversight of arrangements and resources to support students via its Centre Review process which checks the collaborative arrangements with partner universities including access to libraries and opportunities for students to engage with the HEI through activities such as 'taster' lectures. Centre Review also includes scrutiny of staffing levels, academic support available, the efficacy of personal tutorial systems and the resourcing of teaching and learning, for example the virtual learning environment, specific learning resources such as interactive whiteboards and classrooms.

2.47 The range of processes in place at the centres and the oversight of these by the provider ensure that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

2.48 All programmes have student representatives and all centres run staff-student liaison meetings. The 2015-16 academic year has seen the introduction of student members on centre quality committees and the use of students as members of approval events has been piloted. Students also have further opportunity to feed back on their experiences through the use of module feedback forms.

2.49 The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

2.50 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team examined the effectiveness of staff-student committees and student QAEG representatives. Documentation from an approval event involving ex-students as members of the panel was also available.

2.51 The Student Engagement Policy, an appendix to Study Group's Enhancement Strategy, sets out minimum expectations concerning student engagement at centre level. All centres have some form of student representation system, varying from centre to centre; for example, Huddersfield operates a two-tier system. Student representatives are elected and some centres encourage presentations from potential representatives as part of this process, offering a valuable opportunity for skills development. Representatives are offered support and training by various means ranging from access to the partner university's Student Union Representative training to briefing by the Head of Department. All centres bring representatives together in committees various such as the Student Voice Committee, Staff-Student Liaison Committee, Student Consultative Committee and Student Forum, and the review team noted that centres supported representatives both in seeking the views of their peers and in feeding back the response of the Centre to any issues raised. In some cases a representative is elected to chair or co-chair the committee with support from centre staff - again, an opportunity for skills development.

2.52 From 2015-16 Study Group introduced student membership to Centre QAEGs. Again implementation has varied with some centres electing QAEG members from the set of Student Representatives and others offering attendance/membership to all Student Representatives. Student response has been varied with some centres noting the need to encourage more attendance and participation in QAEG. Some centres are also involving students as members in other governance committees. The review team **affirms** the steps being taken to ensure student membership on Quality Assurance and Enhancement Groups.

2.53 Student surveys and focus groups also remain important tools for seeking both quantitative and qualitative feedback from students. All centres operate end-of-module surveys, some survey post-induction and focus groups also play a part, for example in providing an opportunity for students to contribute to curriculum development.

2.54 For the programme approval event held in Sheffield prior to the opening of the centre in 2015-16, Study Group successfully trialled the use of a recent alumnus of another centre as a panel member. The current provider approval process encourages inclusion of student or ex-student members on the panel wherever possible.

2.55 There is comprehensive use of student representatives across the network and the increasing involvement of students in a wider range of committees and in programme approval. The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning**

**Findings**

2.56 Study Group has a set of minimum expectations for assessment with which ISCs should comply. Assessments are written by the module lead, endorsed by link tutors and reviewed by external examiners. Each assessment is linked to module learning outcomes and all learning outcomes for all modules are assessed. Assessment criteria and grade boundaries are shared with students and feedback sheets link to criteria. Summative assessment is published at the start of a module in the module handbook, with clear deadlines and marking returns.

2.57 Assessment regulations are published in student handbooks. All assessed work is marked anonymously where possible. Students can claim mitigation, and there are mitigating circumstances panels at each ISC. An ISC appeals process is included in the student handbook and appeals can escalate to the provider.

2.58 Standardisation is used where there is more than one first marker and assessments are moderated internally with at least 15 to 20 per cent moderated by the external examiner. Marks are verified and confirmed at MABs and PABs with external examiners and an independent Chair present at the latter. Marks are stored on Progresso.

2.59 The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

2.60 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team scrutinised assessment regulations, student and staff handbooks and met with senior management. It also met staff and students in all the centres.

2.61 Because of the requirements of different awarding bodies regulations across Study Group vary, the QAA monitoring review (July 2015) indicated there was a need to ensure students are fully aware of the particular requirements with regard to assessment submission and the retake or resubmission rules. Student handbooks at centres contain detailed information on the assessment regulations for each programme, and broadly align to the regulations for the partner university.

2.62 Assessments are set, marked and moderated at individual centres, with some examples of cross-centre moderation. There is variation across the Study Centres in the way in which this assessment is second marked and moderated. This has led to a recommendation at one centre.

2.63 The centre PABs provide an appropriate level of scrutiny of student learning against criteria. External examiners and university staff help to ensure academic standards through their membership of PABs, and where centres have MABs, these are also used effectively. Statistics from assessment are considered as part of the module and annual monitoring review process.

2.64 APL is not permitted in any of the programmes due to the nature of the provision. Academic integrity is a key element in assessment regulations and is addressed in detail in

student handbooks. Study Group has introduced a number of framework documents to ensure greater consistency across centres. The two key documents in the area of assessment are the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Framework and the assessment framework. Centres are required to check that their assessment regulations align with the two frameworks and bring their regulations into line by September 2016. The draft assessment framework addresses the following aspects of the Quality Code: regulations for award of credit; staff development; processes to support staff new to marking/assessment; good academic practice; assessment volume defined in relation to credit; security of exam papers; and feedback to students. During the review visits, each centre had started to develop their Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategies in line with these provider documents.

2.65 Study Group use external examiner reports and discussions at AQAEC and CLEC in enhancing centres' approaches to assessment. Regional training events have been held for assessors and moderators using external facilitators.

2.66 Study Group operates equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought. The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## **Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

#### **Findings**

2.67 Where provision is validated by the partner university, external examining is carried out under the university's arrangements with externals normally appointed by the university. For approved provision RQAEC considers nominations for the appointment of external examiners and AQAEC is informed. This is also the case for validated provision where the University does not appoint. AQAEC also approves extensions to appointments. There is a Study Group policy for external examiners that includes a person specification and roles and responsibilities. A log of externals is maintained by the Senior Quality Administrator at the Brighton head office and tracked by AQAEC.

2.68 Study Group's self-evaluation document states that the external examining statement aligns with *Chapter B7* of the Quality Code. There are policies and criteria for nomination and termination. Conflicts of interest and terms of office are addressed and academic standards must be confirmed. External examiners must scrutinise assessment and are required to confirm that the standards set for the programme conform to external reference points and are comparable with the standards of similar programmes offered by other institutions.

2.69 Records of appointment are kept and external examiners receive a contract indicating roles and responsibilities and areas of duty. They should receive an induction. A serious problem raised by an external examiner can be escalated directly to Study Group. However, external examiners' concerns are normally reported locally through the CAP and then passed up to regional level through RQAEG to AQAEC. These reports are also shared with students by a variety of means, in student forums or via the VLE. There is the intention to make this more consistent for 2016-17.

2.70 The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

2.71 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team scrutinised regulations, external examiners' reports, and minutes of committees and held discussions with senior management. It also met staff and students in all the centres.

2.72 The appointment of external examiners for approved provision follows Study Group regulations. External examiners' reports from all provision are considered at Study Group AQAEC and RQAEC and centres ensure that their reports are shared with students. CLEC also uses external examiner feedback in the enhancement of assessment. Centres ensure that reports are considered by departments and actions to be taken are included in Centre Action Plans and are responded to.

2.73 During the review process, Study Group had made a number of changes to the management of external examiners' reports. The review team saw examples of reports in various formats; mostly on university templates, but some reports were received to centres as written letters or notes. An external examiner report template has now been created to ensure that external examiners provide comprehensive feedback to centres, and from September 2016 will be used for all centres who do not use the University template. This relates to an affirmation in section A3.4.

2.74 Overall the review team found that Study Group make scrupulous use of external examiners and has appropriate oversight of external examiners. Therefore, the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

**Findings**

2.75 As discussed in section A3.3, Study Group has established mechanisms for the monitoring and review of programmes and ISCs which explicitly address academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, comprising annual programme monitoring, ongoing review via Centre Action Plans and the Provider Quality Action Plan, and Centre Review.

2.76 The Study Group Academic Quality Handbook (PAQH), which is accessible to all staff on Study Group intranet, contains a range of monitoring and review documentation, including module review and annual monitoring templates; Centre Action Plan (CAP) templates; and the Centre Review process.

2.77 These arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

2.78 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team explored the effectiveness of the arrangements by examining monitoring and review documentation including process documents, AMRs, Centre Review reports, CAPS, the Provider Academic Quality Action Plan, Regional Directors' quarterly reports to AQAEC, and minutes of internal meetings. The team also met with Study Group senior managers during a provider visit in May 2016 and at subsequent meetings in September and November 2016. It also met staff and students in all the centres.

2.79 Module and programme review culminates in the production of annual monitoring reports (AMRs), their scrutiny at centre and regional levels by QAEGs and RQAEGs, respectively, and AQAEC oversight via Regional Director and Centre Director reports (see section A3.3). Study Group module review and AMR templates for approved programmes, introduced for 2015-16, require commentary and evaluation of external examiner and student feedback, quality assurance and enhancement, and incorporate action planning. Formerly, AMRs were presented in different formats, and University templates will continue to be used for validated programmes.

2.80 Annual monitoring reports examined by the review team generally provide useful accounts of the provision of suitable student learning opportunities. Typically, they draw on the evidence provided by student and staff feedback, external examiner reports, external quality review processes, including QAA review and monitoring reports, and progression and achievement data, though the depth of commentary, analysis and evaluation across AMRs were found to be variable.

2.81 As discussed in section A3.3, QAEGs, RQAEGs and AQAEC are required to maintain oversight of AMRs, which are also submitted to the relevant university, where required.

2.82 The review team found limited recorded discussion of AMRs at RQAEGs.

2.83 Further, while relevant minutes confirm that AQAEC receives Regional Directors' and Centre Directors' reports, there was limited evidence of AQAEC consideration of the outcomes of annual programme review, as recorded through ISC-level AMRs.

2.84 As also discussed in section A3.3, to enhance its oversight of annual monitoring, Study Group has introduced a Provider AMR (PAMR) for the 2014-15 cycle. This is designed to draw on programme AMRs and inform the Provider Academic Quality Action Plan. On examining the first (draft) PAMR, and noting in particular its recommendations for further improvements to the AMR process and format, the review team formed the view that this reporting mechanism has the potential to enhance Study Group oversight of academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities across the ISC network. The team affirmed the steps taken by Study Group in this respect (see section A3.3).

2.85 Centre Review is a rigorous process which comprehensively addresses the security and Centre management of academic standards and the review and evaluation of students' learning opportunities. Centre Review reports record appropriate scrutiny of delivery and assessment strategies, student support, learning resources, teaching quality and staff development. The final Centre Review in the current cycle, of Leeds ISC, has been postponed to spring 2017 (see section A3.3).

2.86 Heads of Centre report directly to AQAEC on progress made in response to the outcomes of Centre Review, allowing Study Group to maintain effective oversight of the Centre Review process, its outcomes and ISCs' progress on following up commendations and recommendations. Recommendations addressed to the provider are presented and subsequently monitored on a bi-monthly basis at the provider Management Meeting. Examples include the review of expectations for running programmes with small cohorts (now incorporated into formal processes) and the review of ESUS (now completed). However, the extent of scrutiny of the outcomes of Centre Review at regional level by RQAEGs is variable.

2.87 The provider Academic Quality Action Plan captures and monitors network-wide initiatives and priorities, which are incorporated into Centre Action Plans (CAPs) via a provider-driven spreadsheet. CAPs provide evidence of the capture, monitoring and completion of Study Group priorities. Recent examples include the establishment of local teaching and learning strategies, now in draft at all ISCs, and progress on the implementation of Study Group's employability framework (see section B3 and Theme). CAPs generally capture and follow through the recommendations arising from Centre Reviews. CAPs are closely monitored by QAEGs, RQAEGs and AQAEC.

2.88 Study Group has in place, and implements, effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and review of programmes and centres. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

#### **Findings**

2.89 Study Group has an Academic-Related Complaints and Appeals Policy, with an overarching set of principles and minimum expectations for use across ISCs, which was approved at AQAEC in April 2016 for implementation at ISCs from the start of the 2016-17 academic year.

2.90 The arrangements allow the Expectation to be met.

2.91 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team examined documents relating to appeals and complaints, and centre and student handbooks. It also met senior Study Group staff and staff and students in all the centres.

2.92 Study Group maintains oversight of academic appeals and student complaints made at ISCs through a range of central processes. Study Group examines appeals and complaints procedures at programme approval and re-approval and at the periodic Centre Review process, and these are endorsed or, where relevant, validated/revalidated by the partner HEI (see sections B1, B8).

2.93 The policy for complaints involves both informal and formal stages with formal complaints being made to the Head of Centre or nominee if they cannot be resolved informally. Academic appeals will only be considered on grounds of procedural irregularity or mitigating circumstances.

2.94 The way in which an appeal or complaint by a student at an ISC is managed depends on whether the ISC programme is validated or approved by the partner HEI. Where there is a validation arrangement, appeals are managed by the HEI while complaints are managed between the centre and the HEI, although wherever possible complaints are dealt with informally at local, centre level. At centres, where programmes are approved by the HEI, appeals and complaints are managed by the centre, with the provider having overall responsibility.

2.95 Centres ensure that students are made aware that academic appeals and complaints procedures are in student/programme handbooks. The students who met the review teams were aware of where to find details of how to make an academic appeal or complaint. Details of academic appeals and complaints procedures are also available in Centre Handbooks. Study Group has also developed an Admissions and Appeals Policy, which was implemented in mid-2016 (see section B2).

2.96 The review team concludes that there are clear policies and procedures for academic appeals and complaints overseen by Study Group and articulated by the centres to their students. The Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.97 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.98 All Expectations are met with low risk. Study Group has effective processes in place for approving programmes, recruiting and admitting students, learning and teaching, assessing students and using external examiners, for monitoring and reviewing programmes and for complaints and appeals. There is one area of good practice relating to the warning system to inform the provision of appropriate support to identified students. There are two affirmations for the support offered to students who are not eligible to progress to their chosen university and for the steps being taken to ensure student membership on the QAEG.

2.99 The quality of student learning opportunities at Study Group **meets** UK expectations.

### **3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities**

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.**

#### **Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision**

##### **Findings**

- 3.1 The establishment by Study Group of a standardised and consistent set of information documents for each of its centres has supported the quality assurance and management processes. This set of documentation includes handbooks for staff and students, programme and module specifications, a Calendar of Business for the academic cycle, and a definitive organisational structure.
- 3.2 The recent introduction of a Centre Specification supplements these information sources and all documents are available in hard copy and electronically at the respective centre. The provision of these information sources across each of the centres is monitored by the Regional Directors and reported annually to AQAEC.
- 3.3 The production of a marketing brochure for each centre is undertaken centrally by Study Group in coordination with the Head of Centre and partner university. The Head of Centre is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of published information on academic provision. The partner universities have final approval for programme publicity where this is identified in their contractual arrangements with Study Group.
- 3.4 The validity and reliability of website information in each centre is monitored at regular intervals by Study Group Content Managers and by the university partner where this is a requirement of the collaborative agreement. Exploration of centre website information during the review of each centre identified a minor shortcoming in the extent and sufficiency of programme-specific information available on one centre's website and its concordance with related information on the partner university website. Study Group also manages a defined social media policy across all of its centres.
- 3.5 All documentation is reviewed and updated annually, or when changes to the partnership university provision necessitate amendments to information sources, for example over progression and admissions requirements. Regional Directors report annually to AQAEC that all documents are in place for each of their centres. Study Group's legal team ensures all information for students and prospective students complies with consumer protection legislation.
- 3.6 Study Group has arrangements in place for the management and governance of the production and publication of information to allow this Expectation to be met.
- 3.7 The team tested the application of the processes through discussion with senior managers from Study Group and in each centre, and through examination of appropriate documents and websites.
- 3.8 The review team meetings with Heads of Centre confirmed the post-holders' clear understanding of their responsibility for the provision of public information and conformed to Study Group and partnership expectations.

3.9 The students the review team met across the centres generally stated they had received accurate and helpful information during the application process and before commencing the programme. Students were clear on what was expected of them, how the course was run, and where to find information on policies, procedures and regulations provided in the Student Handbooks and on virtual learning environments.

3.10 In two centres, students commented that the programmes and learning experiences exceeded their expectations. Students also confirmed the information they received at induction and during the programmes was useful, accessible and accurate. Of particular note is the use of a Virtual Reception site as an interactive and effective communication repository for students at one centre. Minor discrepancies in progression requirements were identified in one centre and students were not given prior notice of the relocation of centre premises at another.

3.11 Students enrolled on university-validated or approved programmes have access to the universities' virtual learning environments alongside those of the centre. A Study Group review in 2015 promoted the appointment of an e-learning champion in each centre to enhance and extend the use of learning technologies. Instigated by the Study Group's Learning Technology Manager, this initiative has been complemented by the introduction of a minimum expectation for virtual learning environment resources to be adopted across the ISC network during 2016-17. Through meetings with academic and support staff, the review team was able to confirm the appointment of e-learning champions is being made across centres.

3.12 Study Group and its university partners have processes that provide sufficient oversight of the management of information. Therefore the Expectation is met and the associated risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.13 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.14 The Expectation in this area is met with low risk. Systems are in place to ensure that the quality of information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. There are no recommendations, affirmations or areas of good practice in this section.

3.15 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at Study Group **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 Study Group describes the enhancement of learning opportunities as a key focus for its educational model. Over past years, enhancement activity has been largely ISC-driven, within an operating model aimed to ensure that students receive a seamless transition from ISC to university. At Study Group level, enhancements were mainly focused on enabling ISCs to make this happen, as is evidenced by Study Group-led enhancement initiatives already undertaken and completed.

4.2 With the increasing size of the ISC network and the changing HE landscape, over the past year Study Group has recognised a need to adopt a more centralised enhancement model, aiming to provide a stronger context within which ISCs can deliver enhancements.

4.3 Following extensive consultation and discussion at Study Group level and across the network, a Provider Enhancement Strategy has recently been finalised, and approved by QAEC. The strategy, which is founded on clearly articulated core principles, sets out Study Group's minimum expectations to achieve an enhancement-led approach in curriculum design and development, student achievement, teaching, learning and assessment, student support and guidance, the provision of information, partnership development, staff development, quality management and reputational activity. Implementation is intended to operate through further development of Study Group policy statements to guide articulation in a local context by ISCs, with specific Study Group-identified themes communicated via the provider tab of Centre Action Plans, and monitoring and evaluation at Study Group, regional and centre levels effected through the academic quality assurance framework.

4.4 The arrangements in place, and those planned under the new Study Group Enhancement Strategy, provide and should continue to provide an appropriate Study Group-led enhancement framework, which allows the Expectation to be met.

4.5 To test whether the Expectation is met, the review team examined a range of documents including the draft and finalised Provider Enhancement Strategy, terms of reference and minutes of internal committees, and Centre Review documentation. The team also met with Study Group senior managers during a provider visit in May 2016 and at subsequent meetings in September and November 2016.

4.6 While it was not possible to evaluate the impact of the Study Group Enhancement Strategy, which was only recently finalised and approved at the date of the review, the team found that systematic and planned enhancement initiatives have been successfully progressed over recent academic cycles.

4.7 Organisational developments, comprising the introduction of two new QAEC subcommittees, the Programme Approval and Validation Committee (PAVC) and Curriculum Learning and Enhancement Committee (with a specific enhancement remit), and the establishment of the post of Director of Learning, Teaching and Quality, have strengthened Study Group-level governance structures and senior leadership.

4.8 The Study Group Centre Review process, launched in 2014-15, provides an effective mechanism for identifying areas for review and development, to enhance student learning opportunities. This is exemplified by the identification of the need for a Study Group

review of the rigour of English Skills for University Study (ESUS) provision, reiterated and reinforced in Centre Review outcomes, and now completed with the replacement of ESUS with Academic English Skills.

4.9 The Progression Steering Group, established in October 2015 to oversee and steer initiatives dealing with student progression and outcomes and support the enhancement of learning and teaching quality, has developed systems for detailed capture of data on individual students, including their RAG or RPAG rating. Enhancements arising from analysis of the data collected so far include support for ISCs with lower progression rates, and teaching support packs developed in some ISCs and shared with others.

4.10 Study Group has drawn on Study Group global initiatives, for example in the 'CareerAhead' project which has been developed with and piloted at the University of Sussex ISC, in line with the global drive for enhanced student employability. Successful dissemination of the outcomes is evidenced through the adoption of elements of good practice arising from the pilot at the University of Sheffield ISC, and similar developments are being progressed at other centres. A CareerAhead lead has recently been appointed at Study Group level, and CareerAhead champions are to be appointed at all centres later this year.

4.11 Overall, the review team concludes that Study Group takes deliberate and effective steps to enhance the quality of student learning opportunities. The new Enhancement Strategy provides an effective framework to drive forward further developments in this area of activity, though as this document had only recently been finalised and approved at the date of the review, it was not possible to evaluate the effectiveness of implementation. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.12 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.13 Systems are in place to enhance opportunities for student learning and a range of examples were found to demonstrate they are working effectively. The Expectation in this area is therefore met with low risk. There are no recommendations, affirmations or areas of good practice in this section.

4.14 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at Study Group **meets** UK expectations.

## 5 Commentary on the Theme: Student Employability

### Findings

5.1 Study Group's approach to student employability is to introduce employment-relevant skills into programmes of study. Key skills such as teamwork, presentations and debating are built into the preparatory programmes offered at ISCs. A review conducted by Study Group, involving desk research and feedback from students, Heads of ISCs and HEI partners, identified key areas for assisting students on their journey to employability. Feedback from HEIs, for example, informed Study Group that international students at ISCs either did not engage with or only partly used the employability and careers service resource offered by the HEI. This led Study Group to develop a strategic initiative called 'CareerAhead', which aims to enhance the employability of its students by supporting each student to have a career direction of travel, an understanding of how graduate recruiters assess applicants for jobs, and to develop a CV, personal statement and personal career plan. The CareerAhead initiative starts with a student's acceptance on a course, and continues during their programme at the ISC and progression to the partner HEI.

5.2 Study Group piloted the CareerAhead scheme at the Sussex ISC, and the scheme is being implemented across all UK ISCs during 2016-17.. Timelines and milestones for the implementation of Study Group's employability strategy through the CareerAhead scheme have been set.

5.3 Evaluation of lessons learnt from the pilot at Sussex ISC were discussed at a Head of Centres meeting in February 2016 and at a workshop for centres in June 2016. Study Group-level support and guidance was recommended and a 'CareerAhead lead' has been appointed to facilitate training. Centres which do not already have an Employability Champion will do so during 2016-17.

5.4 The Sussex model for CareerAhead was to introduce a separate module. The review teams saw a variety of other models being implemented across the network. At the University of Huddersfield ISC, for example, integration of vocational and interpersonal skills into IFY programmes has been achieved through the provision of bespoke modules for each curriculum pathway, which are linked to the University's employability scheme. Other centres are embedding the development of employability skills across the curriculum, and in some cases (e.g. Sheffield ISC, Royal Holloway ISC, Keele ISC, Surrey ISC) are linking with employability programmes at the partner HEI.

5.5 The review teams found that the CareerAhead scheme has been carefully considered and developed, based on evidence and research and piloted at Sussex ISC. This strategic approach to supporting international students to develop employability skills, plan ahead for employment and develop a personalised career plan is deemed to be a positive step taken by Study Group.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 27 to 29 of the [Higher Education Review \(Embedded Colleges\) handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx).

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

### Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

### Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

### Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

### Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

### Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'.

See also **blended learning**.

### Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning.

### **Embedded college**

Colleges, often operating as part of a network, that are embedded on or near the campuses of two or more UK higher education institutions (HEI) and that primarily provide preparatory programmes for higher education.

### **Enhancement**

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FHEQIS).

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

### **Learning outcomes**

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

### **Programme specifications**

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

### **Public information**

Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

### **Quality Code**

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** that all providers are required to meet.

### **Reference points**

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

### **Subject Benchmark Statement**

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

### **Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

### **Threshold academic standard**

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

### **Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

### **Widening participation**

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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