



## Embedded College Review for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group UK), January 2016

### University of Strathclyde International Study Centre

#### **Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit**

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the University of Strathclyde International Study Centre (the Centre) is making acceptable progress with implementing the action plan following the November 2014 [Embedded College Review for Educational Oversight](#).

#### **Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review**

2 The Principal of the Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (BES) network of international colleges left in 2015 although the proprietor remains the same. The Chief Operating Officer is acting Principal. A new Head of Centre was appointed in spring 2015 and took up post at the beginning of June 2015.

3 The provision at the Centre is unchanged from the time of the 2014 review. No new programmes are being offered at the Centre, and student numbers are increasing overall in the current academic year as a result of January and April recruitment.

#### **Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit**

4 The Centre has developed an action plan covering actions arising from the previous QAA visit in 2014, from the Centre and its partner University and from BES. BES states that the plan is reviewed and updated regularly, and scrutinised by the Centre's Quality Assurance and Enhancement Group (QAEG). Minutes of that Group demonstrate that actions resulting from the QAA review were considered at the January 2015 meeting and there had been discussion pertaining to some actions at the June meeting, although other minutes did not include an explicit item considering the plan. BES also states that the action plan is considered with the University at the Academic Management Board and Steering Group (AMB). Minutes of the AMB for October 2015 demonstrate discussion of an item relating to the plan, but offered limited evidence of consideration of the recommendations arising from the review visit. All actions related to the visit are shown as 'on target', but no start or completion dates have been listed and there is limited evidence of the evaluation of impact to date.

5 The 2014 report made one advisable recommendation to the Centre, namely that it make full effective use of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) in the management of academic standards, and the management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities. The action plan notes that BES is supporting engagement with the Quality Code on a thematic basis on a three-year cycle and that a workshop was held for all Centre Heads in December 2015. The Centre Head had attended this, but other staff demonstrate less awareness of the Quality Code. Progress with this recommendation is acceptable, but, as noted in the action plan, the upcoming Higher Education Review

(Embedded Colleges) will require centres to engage directly with each expectation of the Quality Code and the review team will wish to revisit this.

6 More progress has been made with the two desirable recommendations. In order to further develop the approach to learning and teaching so that it sufficiently challenges all learners regardless of prior knowledge or skills, a strategy paper was presented for discussion at the Curriculum Committee and it was decided that there should be an attempt to stream students according to existing skills and knowledge when groups were sufficiently large. The review team was informed that this had occurred, but it was as yet too early to evaluate impact. Students regard the streaming as helpful for their learning. The action plan also notes that a Centre-level Teaching and Learning Strategy will be fully in place by September 2016. This will be of interest to the team conducting the Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges). More opportunities have been made available for staff to access professional development. In particular, they have access to the University's programmes and a number of staff are beginning to use these opportunities. Progress has been made with developing the virtual learning environment (VLE) since the 2014 review and one member of teaching staff has responsibility for this area. Plagiarism-detection software has been introduced for both formative and summative assessment purposes.

7 The 2014 report noted three areas of good practice. The first area was the effective use of external examiners shared by both University programmes and those of the Centre. This has continued with new appointments. The second area concerned the comprehensive engagement of students in the quality assurance process and the enhancement of learning opportunities. This includes training opportunities for student representatives, making available external examiner reports on the VLE, discussion of these in student assemblies, and attendance of student representatives at AMB meetings. The third area related to the quality of academic and pastoral support. The review team notes that this continues and has been expanded, for example a series of 'taster days' are held with faculties at the University, at which students can ask detailed questions about their degree choices to the department in which they will be studying. In addition, BES has instigated a new Guardianship/Safeguarding mechanism, whereby all students beginning their studies aged under 18 must have a guardian in place to provide them with pastoral and welfare support. Additional support has also been put in place for students who show early signs of failure to progress (see paragraph 13).

## **Admissions**

8 Admissions criteria are set in conjunction with the University at the time of programme approval and may be amended only through discussion with the University. All admissions to International Study Centres are processed centrally either in Brighton or Singapore by BES's Admissions Centre which checks that students are academically qualified and meet the English level entry requirements for the chosen programme, that the chosen centre has an appropriate degree progression route and that students' circumstances meet UK Visas and Immigration entry regulations. All reference letters from previous study in the UK are also checked. The Centre and the University become directly involved in marginal cases or when a portfolio of previous work is to be assessed. Students informed the review team that they had to produce their original qualification documentation prior to acceptance.

## Assessments

9 Assessments are set by the teaching staff following a clearly defined process documented by BES. Evidence of this is found in the Centre Handbook, and BES's Assessment Strategies and Assessment Regulations, and verification documents. Coursework assignments and examination questions are subject to scrutiny by link tutors and external examiners before being issued to students. The Centre continues to appoint subject external examiners who also examine at the partner University, which allows for consistency and continuity.

10 A proportion of all assignments is moderated internally and, in case of a significant discrepancy in the marks allocated, a third marker is used and the complete set of assessments remarked.

11 There are two levels of assessment board: Module Assessment Boards, chaired by the Head of Centre with partner link tutors present; and Programme Assessment Boards, chaired by a member of staff of the partner University. External examiners are invited to attend the Programme Assessment Board and the attendance of at least one external examiner is required for quoracy. External examiners also make written reports. In response to comments made by external examiners, an additional internal check on drafts to ensure that they are written clearly has been introduced and the diet of coursework in one programme made more challenging and better reflective of the approach at university level.

## Annual monitoring

12 Annual monitoring following the first year of operation was Centre-based with a short report noting student progression data and discussing student feedback. There was no opportunity for reflection or consideration of possible action, neither was data from the external examiners' reports included. The report for the second year of operation will follow a template from BES which includes external examiners' reports, comment on the previous year's actions, an analysis of student feedback, and reflection on both strengths and areas for improvement. The first report produced using this template was not available at the time of the visit and should be followed up in the next review.

13 Student progression data is available for the two full years of operation of the programmes. Completion and progression rates in the first year of operation were below BES's expectations and, as a result, it has put in place a number of initiatives such as additional classes and personal tutoring to further support weaker students. This has resulted in improved progression figures for the second year.

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

14 As noted in paragraph 5, the report from the 2014 QAA review advised the Centre to make full effective use of the Quality Code in the management of academic standards and the management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities. In response, BES is supporting Centre engagement with the Quality Code on a thematic cycle with 2015-16 focused on student engagement, external examining and programme approval. The Head of Centre has attended a workshop organised by BES and is responsible for dissemination to other staff through the committee structure.

## Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit

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

16 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Philip Markey (Review Manager) and Professor Gaynor Taylor (Reviewer) on 26 January 2016.

**QAA1534 - R4983 - Apr 16**

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