



ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad

Recognition Scheme for Educational
Oversight Review by the Quality Assurance
Agency for Higher Education

May 2016

About this report

This is a report of a review under the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad. The review took place on 3 May 2016 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Professor Christopher Gale
- Dr Jenny Gilbert
- Professor Robert Harris.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about the provider's delegated responsibilities for the management of quality and improvement of learning opportunities
- draw a conclusion about whether the provider's public information is reliable
- produce a commentary on how effectively the provider discharges its responsibilities for academic standards
- report on any features of good practice
- make recommendations for action.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2. The [context](#) in which these findings should be interpreted is explained on page 3. [Explanations](#) of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 4.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.¹ More information about this the review method can be found in the [published handbook](#).²

¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us

² www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=202

Key findings

The QAA panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision at ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (ACCENT), both information supplied in advance and evidence gathered during the review visit itself. The review has resulted in the key findings stated in this section.

Judgements

The QAA panel formed the following judgement about ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad.

- **Confidence** can be placed in ACCENT's management of its responsibilities for the quality of learning opportunities.

The QAA review panel also concluded that ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding partners.

Conclusion about public information

The QAA panel concluded that:

- **reliance can** be placed on the information that ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers.

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **features of good practice** at ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad.

- A planned sequence of visits supporting both the academic curriculum and the development of students' cross-cultural awareness is assimilated into the teaching programme (paragraph 2.2).
- Academic and personal support for students is holistic, effective and sympathetic in design and delivery, and identified by students as the distinctive feature of their educational experience (paragraph 2.5).

Recommendations

The QAA panel makes the following recommendation to ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad. It is **desirable** for ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad to:

- engage increasingly, and to the extent that contractual obligations permit, with key features of the UK external higher education environment (paragraph 1.11).

Context

ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (ACCENT) is a third party study abroad provider and an associate member of the Association of American Study Abroad Programmes UK. It provides logistical and academic support for students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at accredited US higher education institutions listed on the US Department of Education website.

ACCENT's London premises are situated in Bloomsbury, and comprise seven classrooms, a student study/lounge, office space for staff and faculty, and a library. ACCENT London employs a Centre Director and six supporting staff, of whom five are full-time. They have clearly defined roles and responsibilities and are subject to annual performance review, which is supported by a newly strengthened training and development programme.

In collaborating with colleges and universities, ACCENT aims to create study abroad programmes of academic integrity and rich cross-cultural focus, and to encourage intellectual and personal growth by providing educational opportunities that foster an understanding of different cultures.

ACCENT London manages three types of study abroad programme, all of which contribute to students' home university awards.

- Island programmes: courses are taught at the ACCENT centre by locally employed adjunct faculty, sometimes working alongside visiting US faculty. Typically these are semester-length courses.
- Faculty-led programmes: courses are taught by US faculty with ACCENT providing various levels of support from housing, classrooms and other logistical support to guest speakers, visits and academic enhancement. Typically these are short summer programmes.
- Direct enrol programmes: students study at UK universities with ACCENT providing support as necessary.

It follows that there are no ACCENT students as such; students' home university determines the courses and cultural enhancement required for their students, and students are taught and housed with peers from the same university. ACCENT advises and supports partner universities as appropriate, and makes and oversees all necessary arrangements.

Programmes are subject to regular review by the colleges and universities concerned, and close interaction between ACCENT London and its US partner universities is achieved by mutual visits and extensive teleconferencing and videoconferencing.

1 Academic standards

How effectively does ACCENT fulfil its responsibilities for the management of academic standards?

1.1 ACCENT operates three types of study abroad programme, mainly for students of approximately 15 US universities, though its strategy is to take larger numbers of students from fewer institutions. First, island programmes normally last for one semester, and are taught by local staff and occasionally by visiting US faculty. Secondly, faculty-led programmes are typically short summer programmes taught by US faculty. In both these cases ACCENT provides support, including accommodation, classrooms, guest speakers and visits. Thirdly, direct enrol programmes involve students taking a programme at a UK university, with ACCENT providing various forms of backup support. In each case the programme is approved and managed by the host university.

1.2 Responsibility for the award of credit rests with ACCENT's academic partners, all of which are accredited US institutions recognised by the National Academic Recognition Information Centre for the UK (NARIC). Each course is governed by the regulations of the awarding university.

1.3 ACCENT interviews and appoints faculty to teach a specific course within an awarding body's programme; no courses recruit from more than one university, so no situation arises whereby students in one class are subject to separate standards requirements. The syllabus may be written by, or negotiated with, the appointed tutor, though both tutor and syllabus are subject to approval by the awarding university. ACCENT specifies the minimum qualification and experience requirements in the Academic Quality Control Manual but beyond this, requirements vary by university.

1.4 The ACCENT Academic Quality Control Manual includes guidelines for the completion of syllabi and academic handbooks. All handbooks are required to include weekly teaching topics, assessment and grading, excursions, academic integrity and attendance. Each course is verified annually with the awarding US university. ACCENT's future plans, however, include creating a cross-institutional syllabus template with a more standardised workload, and a set amount of reading, writing and assignments. This is currently work in progress.

1.5 Each awarding university has a policy indicating how non-attendance or lateness affects students' grades. In certain cases class participation contributes to grades, and this is monitored by individual teaching staff. Individual or class requests for extensions to assignment hand-in dates are subject to the approval of the ACCENT London Director to ensure consistency of decision-making in the context of the institutional regulations appertaining. Students are informed of all such policies, including those for academic integrity, in the Academic Handbook.

1.6 In alignment with US practice, courses typically have a large number of small assessments, with class participation and attendance contributing to overall grades, and examinations occurring more frequently. The procedures and requirements are clearly spelt out in each course handbook. Students submit work online and staff provide grades and feedback on electronic or hard copy. After the teaching faculty have marked the assessments, the UK marking scheme is converted into the US scale. For some universities ACCENT administrative staff enter student grades directly onto the university system concerned.

1.7 ACCENT complements any student evaluations conducted by, or on behalf of, awarding institutions with its own post-course evaluation questionnaire; this includes questions about support, visits and social activities. The results, which are overwhelmingly

positive, are analysed by ACCENT staff, who produce a short summary for discussion with the faculty members concerned and transmission to the awarding university. ACCENT also administers a programme evaluation questionnaire at the end of each programme, which includes a comparison of the level and volume of work with previous on-campus experience; the outcomes are broadly that, while most courses present similar levels of academic challenge, they are often delivered at a faster pace.

1.8 Full-time administrative staff are appraised annually. Teaching faculty are not appraised, but are subject both to the teaching evaluations described above, in the light of which they may be asked to take further training (although this is very rare), and to teaching observation by an ACCENT staff member; the observation, which takes place once per course, is recorded, and any issues arising are discussed with the Director. The review panel also noted that ACCENT's appointments procedure is rigorous, and that almost all faculty are employed by a local university. Faculty or administrative staff from the home university also visit ACCENT and undertake observations of London-based teaching faculty.

How effectively are external reference points used in the management of academic standards?

1.9 The key reference points are those of the US awarding university and any external reference points to which it may be subject. In each case ACCENT and the university concerned sign an Agreement of Cooperation or Program Contract. In addition, ACCENT undertakes informal relationship building, with US staff making regular visits to ACCENT in London and some reciprocal visits to US campuses taking place. ACCENT keeps a record of all visits, but not formal minutes of meetings.

1.10 Overall programme design is approved by partner universities, and courses are normally aligned to the US home programme, thus allowing students to gain major credit without extending the length of their degree programme. Students described this as an important factor in choosing where to study abroad.

1.11 ACCENT makes little reference to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), to which it is not formally subject, and acknowledges that it is not a priority area for the organisation. The review panel, while acknowledging that this is so, formed the view that reviewing institutional practices in the light of the Quality Code in particular would be helpful to ACCENT, both in areas such as internship support and by strengthening its engagement with UK higher education. It would be **desirable** for ACCENT to engage increasingly, and to the extent that contractual obligations permit, with key features of the UK external higher education environment.

How effectively does ACCENT use external scrutiny of assessment processes to assure academic standards (where applicable)?

1.12 US universities neither require moderation nor appoint external examiners. Nevertheless, ACCENT monitors course grading profiles to ensure comparability with partner university norms. The profiles are normally signed off by the partner university's representative, and the outcomes of recent such activities justify confidence in the comparability of academic standards.

The panel has concluded that ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding partners.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

How effectively does ACCENT fulfil its responsibilities for managing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.1 Responsibility for managing the quality of learning opportunities rests, as it does for academic standards, with partner institutions, all of which monitor ACCENT's service delivery in the manner described above (see paragraph 1.2). The delivery of island programmes (see paragraph 1.1) takes forms that include classroom-based lectures and seminars, film screening and site visits, any of which may be complemented and enhanced by social and cultural activities.

2.2 The review panel explored the integrated nature of academic teaching and external activities, including the competent, timely and professional manner in which ACCENT corrected a course where students had identified a misalignment between the two. The panel formed the view that a varied and accessible mode of course delivery is complemented by a programme of cultural visits that renders the whole greater than the sum of its parts. A planned sequence of visits supporting both the academic curriculum and the development of students' cross-cultural awareness is assimilated into the teaching programme and is **good practice**.

How effectively are external reference points used in monitoring and evaluation processes?

2.3 As noted at paragraph 1.2, ACCENT's programmes are designed to meet partner universities' academic requirements, and are approved solely on that basis. Hence the main reference points are those of the partner universities, which are themselves accredited by appropriate bodies in the US. Evidence from successive reviews by such universities justifies confidence that ACCENT makes effective use of the external reference points to which it is subject.

How effectively does ACCENT assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced?

2.4 ACCENT makes extensive use of student evaluations at both course and programme level. Evaluation reports are sent to partner universities and discussed in faculty meetings. Mid-semester meetings are held between senior staff and students to discuss the latter's academic experience, and any necessary or desirable adjustments emerging therefrom are quickly put into practice.

How effectively does ACCENT assure itself that students are appropriately supported?

2.5 Prior to students' arrival in London, ACCENT provides extensive general information for dissemination by the home university, communicating directly with potential students as appropriate. On arrival, an orientation programme covering academic and non-academic matters is provided. ACCENT then provides continuing pastoral care, including an emergency telephone number and comprehensive instructions as to how to proceed in such circumstances. Housing, access to health care and a wide range of extracurricular activities are provided; academic support is available from course handbooks, sessional tutors and full time ACCENT staff; faculty are contracted to make time available before and after sessions for student meetings; and student interns are similarly well supported professionally and academically by ACCENT staff. ACCENT's academic and personal support, which is holistic, effective and sympathetic in both design and delivery, and identified by students as the distinctive feature of their educational experience, is **good practice**.

How effective are ACCENT's arrangements for staff development in relation to maintaining and/or enhancing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.6 A variety of developmental opportunities is available for full-time staff, including annual retreats and meetings with guest speakers. The various European site directors have Europe-wide meetings, and more junior staff are encouraged to share problems and good practice with their counterparts within the organisation through various forms of virtual communication. Formal appraisals take place for full-time staff on an annual basis and feedback is provided; arrangements for the monitoring and support of teaching faculty are as described above (see paragraph 1.8). In particular, all faculty are briefed on, and made aware of, cultural sensitivities, student expectations and grading conventions. Ad hoc support for activities such as conference attendance may be available on request where it is relevant to their ACCENT responsibilities.

How effectively does ACCENT ensure that students have access to learning resources that are sufficient to enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programmes?

2.7 ACCENT's London Centre houses a library, a student study/lounge and facilities that students regard as satisfactory. Students also have remote access to home university facilities and borrowing facilities at some nearby libraries. Students, all of whom have a laptop, confirm that these arrangements are sufficient to enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programmes.

<p>The panel has confidence that ACCENT is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.</p>
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3 Public information

How effective are ACCENT's arrangements for assuring the accuracy and completeness of information it has responsibility for publishing?

3.1 The ACCENT website is aimed more at universities than at students, who are expected to access their own institutional website, where the information relevant to their study abroad options is located. Of necessity this includes course descriptions for the overseas programmes, since students select and register for specific courses from those available. The ACCENT website, which is subject to formal internal review for currency and accuracy does, however, include information about housing, centre facilities, London-based staff, cultural visits and activities, and neighbourhood information, which is complemented by a social media page. Students reported that the website contains excellent information for 'survival' in London.

3.2 Students who met the review panel, who were all from one island programme, reported that the application process at the home university is thorough. Their university provided them with extensive relevant information, individually and in group sessions, some of which were attended also by alumni/ae of the programme; parents were also given information, which they found useful and reassuring.

3.3 ACCENT provides timetabling information, useful advice and orientation on arrival. Programme handbooks include all necessary information, including full details of assessment. Subject only to very occasional and unavoidable last-minute adjustments, students confirmed their accuracy.

The panel concludes that **reliance can be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of the information that ACCENT is responsible for publishing about itself and the programmes it delivers.

4 Action plan³

ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight in May 2016						
Good practice	Intended outcomes	Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes	Target date(s)	Action by	Reported to	Evaluation (process or evidence)
The review panel identified the following areas of good practice that are worthy of wider dissemination within ACCENT:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a planned sequence of visits supporting both the academic curriculum and the development of students' cross-cultural awareness is assimilated into the teaching programme 	<p>To enhance the students' academic and personal development</p> <p>To embed London into all courses</p> <p>To challenge students' preconceptions about London</p>	<p>A Program Development Intern attends guest lectures and site visits. A completed report includes summary of the event and observations on relevance to the curriculum and student engagement</p> <p>A searchable database of site visits and guest speakers will provide accessible and accurate information on available visits and speakers</p>	<p>1 August 2016</p> <p>December 2016</p>	<p>Centre Director and Program Development team</p> <p>Centre Director and Program Development team</p>	<p>Director of European Operations</p>	<p>Copies of report and database</p> <p>Improvement in student evaluations</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> academic and personal support for 	That students are fully supported in all aspects of their life in London	A faculty guide will be created outlining the ACCENT policies and	September 2016	Centre Director and	Director of European Operations	Improved evaluations and

³ ACCENT has been required to develop this action plan to follow up on good practice and address any recommendations arising from the review. QAA monitors progress against the action plan.

students is holistic, effective and sympathetic in design and delivery, and identified by students as the distinctive feature of their educational experience.	That students are aware of the resources available to them Ensure academic support is clearly articulated to students and that faculty are aware of their role and responsibilities	procedures pertinent to academic delivery Review of orientation, orientation materials and academic handbooks to ensure that the available support is clearly outlined Through continuous training and staff meetings ensure that all administrative staff are up to date with the services available to the students	Ongoing Ongoing	Program Coordinator All staff, led by Senior Programs Coordinator Centre Director and Senior Programs Coordinator	Centre Director Director of European Operations	feedback from students Improved communication with faculty
Desirable	Intended outcomes	Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes	Target date/s	Action by	Reported to	Evaluation (process or evidence)
The panel considers that it would be desirable for ACCENT to:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> engage increasingly, and to the extent that contractual obligations permit, with key features of the UK external higher education environment. 	For UK higher education to better inform and enhance the curriculum, to give US students more access UK higher education	<p>To work with adjunct faculty to include UK debate into their courses (where appropriate)</p> <p>To work with US partners to engage with UK faculty</p> <p>To encourage staff to engage with UK higher education, attend lectures at the University of London, networking events and so on</p>	Ongoing through 2016-17	All staff, led by Centre Director	Centre Director and Director of European Operations	<p>Improved engagement with UK faculty</p> <p>More engagement between US staff and UK faculty, facilitated through more formal meetings during site visits</p>

Glossary

This glossary explains terms used in this report. You can find a fuller glossary at: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary. More details and formal definitions of key terms can be found in the [handbook](#)⁴ for this review method.

Academic quality A comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, higher education providers manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed.

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

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.

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 QAA's review processes.

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

Programme (of study) An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

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

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

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⁴ www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=202