



Review of UK transnational education in the Republic of Ireland: London Metropolitan University and Portobello Institute

October 2017

Executive summary

London Metropolitan University (the University) has some 10,000 students based on three campuses in the capital, and some 4,000 students enrolled with 25 collaborative partners, of whom 12 are overseas. The University has a history of providing educational opportunities to non-traditional students who might otherwise be unable to fulfil their potential, especially in commercial and technical subjects. Portobello Institute (the Institute) is a Dublin-based, private, commercial provider of further and higher education and training to some 2,300 students in Montessori and special needs, business, travel and tourism and sports therapy, among other subjects. The Institute franchises degree-level programmes in early childhood studies, and sports and sports therapy from the University. The partnership started in 2013, and now has some 165 students. It is the University's only partnership in Ireland.

Both organisations have considerable reputations in early childhood studies in their different jurisdictions. The sports courses have features that are unique to this provision in Ireland.

The partnership is well established and generally well sustained. An Institutional and Course (Periodic) Review of July 2017 was a particularly good example of effective University oversight. There have been some staffing difficulties in the sports courses, but both the Institute and the University appear to have solved these with new appointments and procedural changes. Some of the University's stated requirements in formal course management and student feedback have not been followed, although there is no sign that this has had a negative impact on the student experience in practice. Recently introduced procedural changes appear to offer an effective means of improvement in these matters.

Standards in the programmes are well maintained. Students of both early childhood and sports programmes are positive about their learning experiences. The close collaboration between the University and the Institute (involving other, UK-based partners that also franchise the programme) in annual Programme Enhancement Meetings in London is an effective guarantor of standards, a means of staff development, a way of consolidating the relationship between the partners, and a particularly positive feature of the partnership.

Introduction

1 London Metropolitan University (the University) took its present shape in 2002 following the merger of London Guildhall University and the University of North London. From its Victorian origins, it has been committed to providing educational opportunities to non-traditional students who might otherwise be unable to fulfil their potential, especially in commercial and technical subjects. Some 10,000 students are enrolled on three London sites (Holloway, Aldgate and Moorgate) and a further 4,000 with 25 collaborative partners, of whom 12 are overseas. Each University programme is associated with one of the University's six schools: Social Sciences; Business, Languages and Law; Computing and Digital Media; Human Sciences; Social Professions; and the Sir John Cass School of Art, Architecture and Design (the University refers to programmes as 'courses', and this terminology is used for the rest of this report).

2 Portobello Institute (the Institute) was established in 1981 and is a private, commercial provider of further and higher education and training offering courses in creative studies, beauty therapy, Montessori and special needs, business, travel and tourism, and sports therapy. The Institute has both a national and an international market. It delivers courses to some 2,300 students at its principal location in Dublin, and at 30 other locations in Ireland. The Institute is registered as a provider by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and has been offering courses validated by one of QQI's predecessor bodies, the Further Education and Training Awards Council since 2006. The Institute offers three University awards under franchise arrangements: BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies (95 students); BSc (Hons) Sports Therapy (45 students); and BSc (Hons) Sports Science and Physical Education (25 students). Early childhood studies is associated with the University's School of Social Professions, and the sports courses with the School of Human Sciences.

3 The University states that it has no separate TNE strategy as it is assumed to be part of its partnership strategy, and its approach to international engagement is currently under review. The University draws attention to partnerships in areas where only a very small proportion of the population have the financial means to access study in the UK, such as Nepal and Sri Lanka, although Ireland does not fall into this category, having, as the University has noted, one of the highest participation rates for 18 to 20-year-olds in the world. The University has no stated preference for any particular model of partnership, and possible kinds include validation, franchise, dual awards, 'flying faculty', and articulation arrangements.

4 The partnership with the Institute was established in 2013 with the franchise of the University's distance learning BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies course to the Institute. In 2014, BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies was approved for standard delivery, and BSc (Hons) Sports Therapy and BSc (Hons) Sports Science and Physical Education were added. From 2017-18, BSc (Hons) Sports Science and Physical Education is being replaced by a new franchised course, BSc (Hons) Sports Psychology, Coaching and Physical Education. Students registered for BSc (Hons) Sports Science and Physical Education continue under a 'teach-out' arrangement.

5 The link with the Institute is the University's sole partnership in Ireland.

Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link

6 The University has a partnership strategy, which was reviewed in 2013, and is summarised in the University Strategic Plan 2015-. The review concluded that the University should concentrate on a small number of significant partners, making strengthening and growth of existing partnerships a priority. In general, the University does not seek partnerships, but is willing to consider approaches that meet a set of criteria relating to benefits for both partners, and coherence of mission and values. Although the Institute partnership was initiated before the new arrangements came into force, it is considered by the University to fulfil the criteria of quality, diversity and openness; the partnership makes a 'positive contribution'; and the mission, values, and core purposes of both institutions are in alignment.

7 The University provided the Institute with programme-design capability that was not available in house. The opportunity to franchise a course already in existence meant being able to go to market with a recognised qualification relatively quickly. The Institute considered that the lead-time and uncertainty of QQI accreditation at the higher level would also have been significantly greater.

8 Where a University school considers that a potential partner meets partnership criteria, and the link is congruent with strategic and business plans, a two-stage due diligence procedure is initiated, including an Institutional Approval Form, a business case, a report based on a site visit, a formal risk assessment, and a draft memorandum of understanding. Those responsible for the various aspects of the due diligence process include the head of school, the school head of academic partnerships, the Quality Enhancement Unit (QEU), and the finance department, according to expertise and competence. The business case and QEU risk report are submitted to the University's Collaborative Provision Committee (CPC), which handles arrangements for an institutional approval and course validation event at the partner institution. Although there is a single event, the University formally distinguishes between institutional and course approval: the former precedes the latter. Final approval or otherwise is made by the CPC on the basis of the report of the event. Partnerships are subject to review at both institutional and course levels after three years' operation. These arrangements are summarised in the University's Quality Manual and its Partnerships Operational Manual. These publications appear comprehensive, refer frequently to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), and give the University a sound basis on which to establish partnerships.

9 The Institute partnership was initiated before all current requirements came into force, and, in addition, since 2013 there have been changes to procedure associated with changes to responsibilities and committee names (following restructuring at the University). Nonetheless, many features of the arrangements described above applied in 2013, including the risk assessment and approval events with reports. It appears that the Institute partnership, at the point of initiation, did not benefit from the detailed committee scrutiny that the Quality Manual prescribes now; while the risk assessment was thorough, some elements do not appear to have been followed up at the approval events. The Outcomes Report of the approval event did not distinguish between institutional and course aspects of the approval, and a single external member of the panel appeared to serve both institutional and course needs. However, the report of the review of the partnership, carried out in July 2017, demonstrates an extremely thorough application of the current procedures: for instance, there is a clear distinction between institutional and course aspects, and three external advisers were appointed to the panel, with distinct responsibilities for specific elements of the review. Where the 2013 approval report had to make provision of the Institute staff CVs a condition of approval, members of the 2017 review panel had clearly seen them in advance.

The review and its report suggest that the new arrangements are being applied fully, and support confidence in the University's current management of the approval and review of international partners.

10 The 2013 approval report does not mention the regulatory context for early childhood studies in Ireland - there were significant changes in 2014 with the publication of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-20, the Irish national policy framework for children and young people; and with the Irish Children and Family Relationships Act 2015. The review team noted, however, that the Institute was fully aware of this context, and that the University recognised this. As noted in the University's 2017 review report, the Institute has a long history of Further Education and Training Awards Council delivery of early years courses, has extensive links with early-years providers, and students are given additional reading material to meet the needs of Irish legislation. The sports courses have no equivalent regulatory context.

11 The University's QEU is responsible for managing the procedural aspects of quality assurance in relation to all partnerships, and a specific QEU Institution Liaison Officer is appointed for the Institute. Each school has a head of academic partnerships, and school academic liaison tutors are appointed at course level. The Institute is required to identify a corresponding course director for each course. The University requires the Institute to set up a course committee for each course, which should meet twice yearly and be chaired by a member of the University.

12 It appears that communications via academic liaison tutors have been successful in the case of the early childhood course, although there have been some problems in the case of the sports courses, in part due to staffing changes at both partners. New appointments appear to have solved these problems.

13 Agreements between the University and partners form a hierarchical set. The overall Institutional Memorandum of Agreement (IMoA) between institutions is fairly generic, but refers to Course Level Agreements (CLAs), which make reference to Course Specifications, which in turn refer to Module Specifications: each level is more narrow and specific than the one above. The IMoA is fixed-term, its continuation dependent on successful institutional review. The QEU keeps a record of all partnership documentation.

14 The University's system for written agreements appears to be efficient, and in most aspects complete. The IMoA explicitly states that 'The University is ultimately responsible for the quality and standards of the Franchised Course.' Details are set out about residual responsibilities to students with incomplete courses, in the event of negotiated early termination of the agreement. There is no statement about the University's responsibilities in the event of sudden, non-negotiated termination. Nonetheless, senior staff of the University were convinced that the University has a '100% commitment' to its ultimate responsibility to students registered for its courses at partners, and the reviewers learned of at least one occasion when the University had provided its own tutors to ensure that students' needs were fulfilled when PI lost a member of staff with insufficient notice to enable local replacement.

Quality assurance

Academic standards

15 University courses delivered at the Institute are franchised, and all three run in UK versions at the 'home' campus: course standards, and practices for such matters as marking and moderation are therefore set at initial course approval events, independent of the partner. The same assessment tasks, external examiners and assessment boards apply to both UK and Institute students. With respect to standards, approval at the partner institution only concentrates on ability to deliver, covering such matters as staff qualifications and the means by which the University and the Institute assure themselves that entrants are qualified and able to manage the demands of the courses. In relation to the early childhood courses, it appears that the panel for the initial approval event in 2013 did not have Institute staff CVs, despite providing them being a condition of approval, as was as being a requirement for staff development in assessment. The approval panel also considered standards of entry, especially for those students who entered the course at level 5 of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), having completed a qualification at level 6 of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) - the NFQ has 10 levels, the honours degree being level 8, equivalent to FHEQ level 6. This too was the subject of a condition of approval. The sports courses' approval event made similar conditions, although no stipulation about advanced entry applied. Comprehensive and documented responses to the conditions of approval were made, by the due dates, in the cases of both subjects.

16 All three courses were successfully reviewed at the Institutional and Course (Periodic) Review in July 2017. The report, of what appeared to be a detailed and thorough review, does not reprise any of the standards conditions of the original approval. Both initial approvals and the review benefitted from external advice, and, in the case of the review event, the three externals were of considerable expertise and seniority.

17 External examiners are appointed by the University at course level, and the same external examiner covers both in-house and partner delivery. External examiner reports name the partner institutions included, and while they are not required to distinguish between them, reports do so where there are material factors. The examples of external examiner reports for early childhood seen by the review team are positive. However, there are very critical comments from one of the sports external examiners. Responses are sent by the school to the external examiner. The responses seen by the review team show close attention to detail, and identify specific actions to remedy problems. The concerns about the sports degree related to named modules, and the chief remedy was staff development, some of it on site. This resulted in a comprehensive action plan with names and timescales. Students stated that they were aware of external examiner arrangements, but had never seen their reports. Excepting this matter, the review team concluded that the University deals effectively with external examiners' reports as they relate to partners.

18 The University's schools are responsible for fulfilling monitoring and enhancement procedures. School monitoring is on the basis of 'course logs' compiled by the partner with the assistance of the University academic liaison tutor; institutional Collaborative Annual Monitoring Statements by the partner based on the logs; and a school Partnership Annual Monitoring Statement for all the school's collaborative provision supplied to the University Collaborative Provision Committee. In addition, a separate 'module log' is compiled in order to track, evaluate and improve student achievement on the basis of such information as performance data, external examiner comment and student feedback. Although module logs appear to be useful tools in relation to overall module monitoring and development, they have only limited relevance to partner delivery, since there is no requirement to refer

explicitly to the delivery of the module at partners. Sample logs supplied to the review team included no mention of the Institute.

19 Course logs were compiled by the Institute in a spreadsheet template supplied by the University. The evidence supplied suggested that the course logs were initially not fully effective at capturing the information intended by the University - the Institute, for example, misunderstood the meaning of such terms as 'externality'. The format for the logs was redesigned for 2015-16, requiring significantly greater input from the school academic liaison tutor. The logs are now much more complete, and data on progression and completion in particular is comprehensive. The new design for 'course logs', including comparative subject, faculty and University data, is a **positive feature**.

20 Partnership Annual Monitoring Statements cover all partnership activity in the school. In the examples considered by the review team, the Statements clearly identify partner-specific matters, including the critical external examiner comments mentioned above. The reviewers concluded that the University has an effective means of transmitting information about such matters between responsible agencies at all levels of the University.

Assessment

21 All three courses are franchised, and therefore the same processes for maintaining assessment standards of the courses apply to both London and Dublin delivery. The courses have the same regulatory framework and assessment strategies. Assessment tasks are set by the University and approved by the relevant external examiner. Assignments for sports courses are marked and second marked at the Institute, and then sent to London for moderation before a sample goes to the external examiner. For the Early Childhood Studies course, first marking is at the Institute, and second marking in London, with Institute staff participating alongside staff of the six partners involved in delivery of the programme, including the University, in a Performance and Enhancement Meeting. Modules are re-marked if significant differences are revealed. The annual Performance and Enhancement Meetings for early childhood studies, which are effective in relation to standards, and foster good understanding between the University and its partners, is a **positive feature**. It is intended that sports course staff participate in the equivalent event from 2017.

22 External examiners for the early childhood studies degree are content with both the performance of students, and the administration of assessment, including the arrangements for seeing scripts and the evidence of effective moderation and feedback to students. The single external examiner report for the sports degrees is very critical of some aspects of the management of assessment, especially in two specific modules at the Institute. As indicated above, the University appears to deal with these criticisms effectively. The review team noted that the question of assessment in sports degrees was taken up in the Institutional and Course (Periodic) Review of July 2017. The review report lists actions already taken by the University, and makes further recommendations for improvement. Although it is a matter of concern that problems persist, the review team found that the University was taking steps to address them, and the fact that the matter was taken up in the course review indicates that the University's procedures were working in a 'joined-up' manner.

23 Procedures for dealing with plagiarism and poor academic practice are the University's. Where feasible, assignments are submitted via the University's virtual learning environment, which includes plagiarism detection software.

Quality of learning opportunities

24 Applications for all three degrees are made directly to the Institute. Almost all students for early childhood studies progress from the Institute's QQI-accredited course and enter at FHEQ level 5. Entry standards are set by the University. Applications that fall outside standard entry, and any credit recognition claims, are determined by University academic liaison tutors. Students are registered on the University's student records systems using University module registration forms. Student induction is managed by the Institute, supported by academic liaison tutors.

25 With the exception of an emergency arrangement, where University staff stepped in following the unexpected departure of a member of the Institute sports staff, all teaching for the three courses is by Institute staff or guest lecturers paid by the Institute. The current IMoA states that minimum qualification requirements for staff of the partner institution should be stated in CLAs. The CLA for early childhood studies (which predates the IMoA) contains no stipulation about staff qualifications (and no statement about approval of the Institute staffing for the programme). The CLAs for the sports courses do, however, state that Institute staff teaching the University course shall be qualified to master's level and/or have equivalent professional qualifications. Although, as indicated above, there have been some difficulties with the provision of CVs in advance of approval events, the conditions of approval have ensured that the University has oversight of staff CVs following the events. The arrangement is now that new staff CVs shall be checked by the University academic liaison tutor. While this procedure has been followed in the case of the early childhood course, it does not appear to have worked effectively in the case of the sports courses. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that historically the Institute has had no standard format for staff CVs, which might make qualifications and experience explicit. It is to the credit of the University's review procedures that the matter was picked up in the 2017 Institutional and Course (Periodic) Review, which refers to the University's commitment to consider CVs, as a matter of course, before interview. However, this was not made a condition of re-approval, or even a formal recommendation, and on the evidence of comments made to the review team in meetings, is still not universally understood. The review team **recommends** that the University take steps to clarify and implement its requirements regarding the CVs of partner staff, in relation to approval and review events, and to new appointments.

26 The Institute has limited in-house staff development arrangements, although staff have been given time and sometimes funding to attend conferences and to improve qualifications. When academic liaison tutors attend the Institute on their routine visits, they provide a range of staff development opportunities, and have also provided staff development in reaction to specific matters, such as the critical external examiner's report described above. The regular moderation and programme enhancement and moderation meetings in London are always attended by early childhood studies staff, and provide a valuable opportunity for the exchange of views about the programme.

27 In relation to non-staff learning resources, students of the three awards are stated by the IMoA to be the Institute's rather than the University's, and the Institute is thus responsible for providing learning resources necessary to support the programmes. Learning resources are checked at approval and review events, and students confirmed that the Institute library contained all necessary texts. Some University electronic resources are made available to Institute students via the University's virtual learning environment when students are registered with the University by the Institute following enrolment. This service has in some cases been compromised by licensing difficulties, but both partners are aware of the problems and have taken steps to minimise the impact on students. Students reported that for some aspects of the sports degrees, specialised equipment was needed that was not available in-house. While the Institute had hired third-party facilities, pressure of numbers

meant that the time to use the facilities was constrained. However, sports students were positive about the access to the Gaelic Athletic Association, a feature unique to this provision. Other learning materials such as handbooks are developed by the University for UK versions of the programmes, and adapted by the Institute with supplementary materials such as case studies with local relevance.

28 The University's procedures state that feedback should be obtained from students at the end of each module, using the University's questionnaire pro forma. In addition, partners are required to establish course committees with student representatives, which should meet twice yearly, chaired by a member of the University school. The minutes of course meetings should be kept in a format determined by the University, with a list of agenda items, including course and module survey results. Copies are returned to the QEU.

29 The TNE review team considered the minutes of course committees 2013-16 from the three awards. There is no record of module feedback in questionnaire format in any of the minutes, although there are references to students' views gathered informally. Course committees do not appear always to meet twice yearly, and they are not always chaired by a member of the University. Minutes are not kept in the format required by the University, and are in some cases a very sketchy record of the proceedings. While the meetings are usually focused on student matters, student attendance is sometimes very sparse. The mechanisms of module questionnaires and course committees could provide the University with sufficient, reliable and regular information about student views of the courses in theory, but appear not to do so in practice. The review team **recommends** that the University consider whether its requirements for student feedback at module level, and its arrangements for course management at partner level, are being fully met.

30 The IMoA requires that Institute procedures are in line with the University's, but otherwise makes the Institute responsible for complaints procedures and management. However, the Institute informs the University when complaints are received. Appeals procedures are those of the University, and appeals are managed by the University directly.

Information on higher education provision

31 Publicity and promotional activity is governed by the IMoA, as is the monitoring of information. The University stated that one of its standard conditions of approval for collaborative programmes is that the partner works with the University marketing department, which approves information distributed by the partner. University academic liaison tutors monitor partner websites for accuracy of information about 'their' courses.

32 In most respects, the programme handbooks and Course Specification documents for Institute versions of programmes are the same as those for students at the London campuses. The Course Specification for early childhood studies is the one in use for UK students, with no reference to Ireland, even in the criteria for admission section, although the sports Course Specifications have differences in admissions criteria.

33 Certificates and records of study are issued by the University. Certificates do not distinguish between UK and Institute delivery of the programmes, but transcripts clearly state location and mode of study.

Conclusion

The University's link with the Institute is well established and generally well sustained. The Institutional and Course (Periodic) Review of July 2017 was a particularly good example of effective University oversight. Both organisations have considerable reputations in early childhood studies in their different jurisdictions. The sports courses have features that are unique to this provision in Ireland. Standards are well maintained. Students of both programmes are positive about their learning experiences. There have been some staffing difficulties in the sports courses, but both the Institute and the University appear to have solved these with new appointments and procedural changes. Some of the University's stated requirements in formal course management and student feedback have not been followed, although there is no sign that this has led to student views not being heard.

Positive features

The following positive features are identified:

- the new design for 'course logs', including comparative subject, faculty and University data (paragraph 19)
- the annual Performance and Enhancement Meetings for early childhood studies, which are effective in relation to standards, and foster good understanding between the University and its partners (paragraph 21).

Recommendations

London Metropolitan University is recommended to take the following action:

- take steps to clarify and implement its requirements regarding the CVs of partner staff, in relation to approval and review events, and to new appointments (paragraph 25)
- consider whether its requirements for student feedback at module level, and its arrangements for course management at partner level, are being fully met (paragraph 29).

London Metropolitan University's response to the review report

We welcome QAA's supportive report on our partnership with Portobello Institute, Dublin. In particular, we are pleased that positive features of the partnership have been identified and we are actively working to address the recommendations concerning student feedback and staff CVs.

This is a partnership between two institutions and we are grateful to Portobello colleagues for their hard work and commitment to providing the best possible experience for students.

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