



# **ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad**

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

November 2020

## 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 9 June 2020 and 23 and 24 November 2020 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Ms Brenda Eade
- Professor Christopher Maguire
- Mr Simon Ives.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- produce a commentary on how effectively the provider discharges its responsibilities for academic standards
- make judgements about the provider's delegated responsibilities for the management of quality and improvement of learning opportunities
- 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 2. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 4.

## The impact of COVID-19

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the review of ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad, was subject to an interim outcome in June 2020 and was concluded in November 2020. The review was conducted online and included meetings with the senior management team, teaching staff and former students. The scope of the evidence considered, and the nature of the judgements and operational milestones have remained the same but with some adjustments due to the online format. A risk assessment was carried out prior to the review to identify and mitigate any potential risks. Annual monitoring will resume again in 2021-22.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us) and its mission.<sup>1</sup> More information about this review method can be found in the [published handbook](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/rseo-handbook-for-providers.pdf).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us)

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/rseo-handbook-for-providers.pdf](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/rseo-handbook-for-providers.pdf)

## Key findings

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

## Judgements

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

The team concluded that:

- **confidence** can be placed in the provider's management and improvement of the quality of learning opportunities.

The QAA review team also concluded that the provider **satisfactorily** manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding partners.

## Good practice

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

- The continuing holistic support for students, including through a rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic, allows a flexibility of approach to delivery and enables students to enjoy a high-quality learning experience (paragraphs 1.6, 2.12, 2.13 and 2.19).

## Recommendations

The QAA team made no recommendations.

## Context

ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (ACCENT) is a 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 by the US Department of Education.

ACCENT's London premises are situated in Bloomsbury and comprise seminar rooms, a student study/lounge, office space for professional support staff and faculty teaching staff, and a small library. ACCENT employs a London 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 training and development programme.

Through its collaboration with colleges and universities, ACCENT aims to create study abroad programmes of academic integrity with a 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 where courses are taught at the ACCENT centre by locally employed adjunct faculty, sometimes working alongside visiting US faculty. Generally, these are semester-length courses.
- Faculty-led programmes where 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. Generally, these are short summer programmes.
- Direct enrol programmes where students study at UK universities with ACCENT providing support as necessary.

There are no specifically ACCENT students and the home universities determine the courses and cultural enhancement required for their students. Students in London are taught and housed with peers from the same university. ACCENT advises and supports its partner as appropriate in the development and delivery of its programmes.

Programmes are subject to regular review by the partner colleges and universities (the home institutions), and close interaction between ACCENT London and its US partner universities is achieved by exchange visits and extensive teleconferencing and videoconferencing.

In spring 2020, during the period of the review, ACCENT's operations were seriously affected by the emerging COVID-19 pandemic. The spring 2020 semester students returned home and all summer 2020 programmes were cancelled. ACCENT spent considerable time monitoring and reacting as the pandemic unfolded. ACCENT took immediate steps to adapt and provide the support to students, partners, and colleagues. ACCENT is acutely aware of the potential global impact that will undoubtedly continue to affect study abroad providers.

ACCENT's immediate response to the pandemic was to ensure a smooth transition to online learning and teaching, and ensure that students were able to complete their semester studies remotely to gain the academic credit needed to contribute towards their degrees. Considerable work has been undertaken with academic faculty and partner institutions to make appropriate moderations to syllabi and assessment.

ACCENT was subject to a successful QAA Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO) review in April 2016. This review resulted in the identification of two areas of good practice and one desirable recommendation. Subsequent annual monitoring visits by QAA have confirmed the progress by ACCENT on the action plan emanating from the 2016 review. The annual monitoring report of 2019 confirmed that ACCENT had made commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision. Additionally, feeder institutions and other overseas providers frequently make review visits to ACCENT before placing their students on the programme. ACCENT was subject to a full UKVI inspection in 2018 which resulted in confirmation of compliance with sponsor duties and full Tier IV Sponsor Status maintained.

## Detailed findings about ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad

### 1 Academic standards

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

1.1 ACCENT is responsible for the management of academic standards on behalf of its US partners to whose awards its programmes contribute. The partner institutions are established US universities. Each partner is accredited by one of the seven US regional higher education accrediting bodies, and recognised by the National Recognition Information Centre (NARIC). The programmes are individual to each partner institution. Each partner sets and oversees the academic standards, level and credit awarded through the approval of its programmes' curriculum, syllabi, assessment methods, and credit weighting. Academic faculty are appointed by ACCENT but are formally approved by the home institution. Any changes to the programmes are discussed with the home institution during the year and incorporated into the definitive programme specification. This documentation is formally sent to the home institution in the term preceding the start of the next student intake. The individuality of programmes to a specific partner, and the approval and monitoring mechanisms applied, ensure that students on the programme are treated equally.

1.2 Staff roles are clearly set out and well understood. The London Centre Director is supported by senior programme coordinators, programme coordinators and an administrative assistant. Each programme coordinator is responsible for a range of programmes and a range of cross-centre administrative functions. The London Centre Director has overall responsibility for oversight of academic standards and quality of learning opportunities provided for students.

1.3 Faculty staff are established academics, who teach mainly within the UK higher education sector. Criteria for appointment are set out in the Faculty Hiring Process document. Appointments are made by the London Centre Director but are reviewed and approved by the relevant home institution. Staff meetings are held weekly which are effective in ensuring a shared understanding of ACCENT's activity. Agenda items include current programme delivery matters, future initiatives, academic resources and development, and the role of social media. The staff regard the meetings as a useful tool for academic improvement.

1.4 Currently, the College does not have a formal committee structure to oversee the standards or quality of its provision, which is currently addressed through a managerial approach. However, ACCENT plans to introduce an Advisory Board by the end of the current academic year, comprising representatives from its partners, academic faculty and professional support staff. Discussion of the Advisory Board's terms of reference demonstrate that it is intended to undertake functions typically associated with an internal, formal, academic oversight body such as an academic board. However, the planned establishment of a formal committee has the potential to further strengthen oversight of standards and quality.

1.5 Academic standards are supported by the provision of course specifications partner academic handbooks and a Policies and Procedures Handbook. These documents provide a range of policy information, including assessment grading criteria, conversion metrics between the UK and US systems, submission requirements, attendance requirements, academic integrity including plagiarism, and learning resources. ACCENT

faculty currently oversee academic integrity and do not currently use specialist anti-plagiarism software, but is planning to do so from autumn 2021.

1.6 Academic faculty draft assessments in accordance with the specification set out during the module approval process. New faculty members are supported by peers within the team, provided with guidance, and proposed assessment instruments are reviewed prior to application. Following the return home of the spring 2020 cohort owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the remaining part of the programme and the assessment were conducted online. The final element of the course assessment was changed to an open book, time-constrained examination with full agreement of the home institutions. Examiners mark autonomously, although there is no formalised internal or external moderation process. The London Centre Director and programme coordinators review assessment results, checking them for consistency of performance within and across modules, and alignment with the expectations of the home institution. The home institution then reviews the results prior to acceptance of the marks. Grade disputes are handled by the Director in conjunction with the home institution. Students at a meeting with the review panel confirmed that the transition to online learning had been effected smoothly. This matter is also addressed as good practice in paragraph 2.19.

1.7 Academic staff reported that consistency in approach between faculty is supported through faculty development events, including a peer discussion between academic staff, facilitated by the London Centre Director, about the different approaches to assessment and grading. These development activities were supported by staff-led workshops. A specific outcome of this event was the development of an annual academic orientation meeting.

1.8 Students confirmed that they are provided with clear information about the assessment process, and that the standards felt equivalent to their home institution. Some students commented positively that the nature of assessment was different, with the UK approach focused on analysis, evaluation and debate.

1.9 ACCENT has a well-established feedback and review process. This includes programme evaluation, module evaluation and feedback through a student ambassador network. The online Program Evaluation Form is administered through an electronic platform, which facilitates ease of completion, and automatically tabulates results for ease of reporting and analysis. The questions are continually reviewed in collaboration with the US partner institutions and through student focus groups. Each taught module is usually evaluated using a paper form, circulated during the penultimate week of teaching, and completed anonymously. For the spring 2020 cohort, this was converted to an online model. The information provided by these processes enable ACCENT to identify any issues in the delivery of the programme that may then impact academic standards.

1.10 ACCENT continues to use a system of student ambassadors to engage students in the quality assurance and enhancement process and to provide feedback directly to staff. In addition, programme coordinators conduct class observations to ensure the standard of teaching supports the achievement of expected learning outcomes. Observations are usually conducted early in the semester. However, once the programme had been transferred online, staff took advantage of digital functionality to conduct more frequent observations. The responses from all of these evaluations are reviewed by the Director and relevant programme coordinator, and any areas of enhancement are discussed with partners. Students confirmed there is ample opportunity to provide feedback and that ACCENT responds quickly and appropriately.

1.11 The review panel concludes that ACCENT effectively fulfils its responsibilities for the management of academic standards.

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

1.12 The main external reference points for ACCENT continue to be the requirements of the home institutions, which approve the programme content and syllabi as meeting the requirements for the award of credit. In addition, ACCENT maintains membership of Independent Higher Education and the Association of American Study Abroad Providers (AASAP) in the UK, as well as the Forum for International Education, NAFSA: Association of International Educators in the US. Meetings with faculty confirmed that reference is made to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) which informs practice in aspects of assessment, and to *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) in relation to academic level.

1.13 The review panel concludes that external reference points are effectively used in the management of academic standards.

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

1.14 External scrutiny of standards is assured and reviewed by the home institution through the approval of the range of assessments, and through the conversion and confirmation of marks.

1.15 US home institutions do not require moderation of assessments or the appointment of external examiners. ACCENT effectively monitors course grading profiles to ensure comparability with partner university norms. The profiles are normally signed off by representatives of the home institution, and the outcomes of recent activities confirm the comparability of academic standards.

1.16 Additionally, home institutions undertake monitoring visits to ACCENT, and the London Centre Director regularly visits the University of Southern California and Michigan State University. These visits are effective in enabling effective evaluation of the programmes and facilitating feedback. Notes of these visits are stored on the ACCENT customer relationship management system.

1.17 The review panel concludes that ACCENT's use of external scrutiny of its assessment processes to assure academic standards is effective.

The team has concluded that the 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 and improving the quality of learning opportunities?**

2.1 ACCENT's London Centre fulfils its responsibilities for managing and improving the quality of learning opportunities through its management structure and adherence to its policies and procedures which are overseen by the head office. Overall responsibility for managing the quality of learning opportunities rests with partner institutions, all of which monitor ACCENT's service delivery in the manner described in paragraphs 1.1 to 1.16.

2.2 The London Centre Director has overall responsibility for the management and improvement of the quality of learning opportunities. Two senior programme coordinators - one full-time and one part time - and four programme coordinators are responsible for the quality of the learning experience and for supporting specific partner programmes.

2.3 Policies and procedures relating to managing and improving the quality of learning opportunities are clearly set out in ACCENT London Policies and Procedures Handbook. The review team considered these policies to be comprehensive and effective, and well understood by members of ACCENT staff and students. Two further handbooks provide guidelines for employees and visiting faculty. For each partner institution a separate academic handbook sets out the regulations for the course.

2.4 ACCENT does not have a formal committee structure, although weekly meetings with staff provide an effective forum for managing and reviewing programmes. Actions are identified, recorded and reviewed at these meetings. Staff indicated that they find these meetings supportive and stated that they provide an opportunity to share good practice and discuss enhancements.

2.5 London faculty academic staff are hired and managed by ACCENT. Partner institutions approve faculty for their specific programmes when new courses are accredited, or when there is a change of tutor. Programme development forms, which evaluate study tours and visits, guest speakers and events, provide a useful system for enhancement of the delivery and content of the programmes offered.

2.6 The panel concludes that ACCENT has effective processes in place to manage the quality of learning opportunities.

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

2.7 ACCENT effectively uses its network of UK and US partner universities as external reference points for the monitoring and evaluation of its processes. Faculty staff in the UK make regular visits to partner universities to discuss the effectiveness of the delivery of their programmes. These visits are recorded and provide an opportunity for ACCENT to enhance their programmes in response to feedback they receive from partners. The visit reports are considered by the London Centre Director and appropriate action taken where necessary.

2.8 Partner universities visit ACCENT at least annually to discuss the quality of the student learning experience. Meetings are held with students and classes are observed as part of the visit. Feedback from visiting partners is discussed at the end of the annual visits and is positive. Some partners use their own programme evaluation forms which provide an external and objective review of ACCENT's provision.

2.9 ACCENT continues to be a member of Independent Higher Education (IHE) and the Association of American Study Abroad Providers (AASAP) in the UK, as well as the Forum for International Education and NAFSA: Association of International Educators in the US. This engagement provides ACCENT with further international external reference points for managing and enhancing the quality of their programmes. ACCENT works with a number of local UK universities, including the London School of Economics, the New College of Humanities (NCH) and the University of Westminster. Faculty from ACCENT attend events and meetings at these institutions which inform their practice.

2.10 As a provider of study abroad programmes, ACCENT is required to meet the academic requirements of its partner universities. It is, however, aware of the revised Quality Code, and, where applicable, its policies and procedures reflect the advice and guidance of the Quality Code. This alignment includes its systems for student support, enabling student

achievement, and student engagement. During 2021, ACCENT plans to make more explicit reference to the Quality Code in its future documentation.

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

2.11 ACCENT uses a variety of methods to assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced. These methods include teaching observations, staff performance reviews, staff development opportunities, student course evaluations and meetings with student ambassadors.

2.12 All staff are observed at least once per year and new staff are supported and observed by the Centre Director. ACCENT has used the transition to online teaching as an opportunity to observe all teaching sessions remotely, and the outcomes have been used effectively to share good practice. This matter is also addressed as good practice in paragraph 2.19.

2.13 Meetings with student ambassadors take place every two weeks and provide an opportunity for students to give feedback on all aspects of their programmes. Comments made by the ambassadors are generally positive. Student evaluation responses indicate overall satisfaction with all aspects of their programme. The format of the current course evaluation form has been reviewed and will be replaced with an enhanced version which will enable students to reflect on and evaluate their own performance as well as that of their tutors. Outcomes of student feedback are reviewed by the London Centre Director and programme coordinator and areas for enhancement discussed with faculty and partners. Evaluations from students who have transitioned to online learning since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, indicate that the delivery of teaching and learning has continued to be of high quality, despite the significant change in approach. Students commented on the smooth transition and support provided by ACCENT during the pandemic.

2.14 ACCENT arranges internships for Washington University in St Louis, the University of Southern California and Colgate University. Internships form an integral part of students' academic study in the UK with seminars directly linked to their workplace. The panel met with the internships coordinator and discussed the support provided for students, and internship providers. Students are briefed about the internship on arrival at ACCENT. The internship coordinator makes regular visits to providers to discuss students' progress. In view of the current pandemic, discussions are taking place to develop virtual internships in the areas such as finance, fashion, IT and economic think-tanks. If established, the virtual internships will be accompanied by a course developed and taught by London faculty.

2.15 ACCENT is currently undertaking a project on developing e-learning and online instruction specifically designed for study abroad students. The research is being led by the Madrid Centre Director and the project aims to establish a framework for ACCENT to develop and provide its partners with new types of programmes and academic opportunities based on a customised, high-quality, and flexible approach to digital learning. The outcomes of this project are intended to provide customised e-learning experiences to match current and future partners' needs and include improvements to the course management system, based on end user feedback.

2.16 Prior to the pandemic, ACCENT had begun to widen its UK network of partner universities through its involvement in direct enrol programmes where students register directly with a UK university but are supported by ACCENT which provides emergency cover and cultural activities. The network now includes the University of Bristol, University of Sussex and University of Edinburgh. ACCENT is also working with Queen Mary's University London (QMUL), to integrate visiting students into the student population at the University

and provide them with the opportunity to study modules run by the QMUL. ACCENT is also working with the digital cultural exchange organisation, HOST UK, to provide home stay experiences for its students. These developments will provide opportunities to further enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

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

2.17 Since the QAA RSEO review in 2016, ACCENT has further enhanced student support by providing pre-arrival information for students in their home institution in the form of webinars. Webinars include 'Meet a Returnee, Living and Learning in London' and 'Pre-departure Orientation' - the latter covering health and safety, onsite support, and how students may plan effectively for a semester studying abroad.

2.18 Student feedback indicates that they are effectively supported during their studies for both their academic and pastoral needs. The ACCENT organisational structure clearly identifies responsibilities for student support. Support for students and approaches to wellbeing were one of the key areas for discussion and development at the November 2019 staff retreat.

2.19 In response to the pandemic, ACCENT has effectively managed the transition to online delivery including support for learning and assessment. This is confirmed by the most recent student evaluations and by the positive comments from students who met with the panel. This matter is also addressed in paragraphs 1.6, 2.12 and 2.13. ACCENT's immediate response to the pandemic was to ensure a smooth transition to online learning and teaching and ensure that students were able to complete their semester studies remotely to gain the academic credit needed to contribute towards their degrees. Considerable work has been undertaken with academic faculty and partner institutions to make appropriate moderations to syllabi and assessment. The continuing holistic support for students, including through a rapid response to the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrates a flexibility of approach to delivery and has enabled students to continue to enjoy a high-quality learning experience, and is **good practice**.

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

2.20 Staff performance reviews provide an opportunity for staff to reflect on their achievements throughout the year and identify their personal development needs for the following year. Staff performance is also reviewed as part of the programme evaluation process. ACCENT holds staff retreats which provide an opportunity for staff to discuss current issues and emerging practice. The most recent event focused on student support, including mental health and staff wellbeing. Additionally, the majority of faculty teach in other UK higher education institutions and are able to access staff development opportunities at these institutions.

### **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?**

2.21 The programme approval process requires programme designers to state what resources the programme requires and to give ACCENT time to acquire them. These are then placed in the ACCENT library. Electronic versions of materials are provided on the ACCENT course management system. Academic handbooks include a list of resources available for each programme. Students are able to print resources free of charge.

2.22 ACCENT provides students with access to a number of university libraries including the London School of Economics. Students also continue to use their home institution's electronic resources. Course evaluations indicate that resources are sufficient to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programmes. Students confirmed that resources are readily available and supported their learning and assessment needs.

The team has **confidence** that the provider is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and improving the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

**QAA2581 - R12007 - Feb 21**

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