Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad, May 2019

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1. From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review panel concludes that ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad has made commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the May 2017 monitoring visit.

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2. The previous ACCENT London Centre Director left in June 2018 and was replaced by the Assistant Director. Additionally, a new senior programme coordinator has been appointed, and there have also been changes in administrative staff. Structures, roles and responsibilities for staff are well defined and understood.

3. ACCENT London continues to work with a number of accredited US higher education institutions. Partnerships are appropriately governed by formal agreements and the agreement with Michigan State University (MSU) has been renewed for the period 2019-21. Student numbers have remained stable during 2018-19 with some variation between semesters. A drop in the number of students attending in the autumn semester has been balanced out by an increase in those attending in spring. ACCENT London is working with the University of Southern California (USC) to try to address this imbalance.

4. The programme that was developed with Queen Mary University (QMU) did not proceed owing to insufficient numbers. ACCENT London has taken over responsibility for an additional University of Southern California (USC) programme with students based in a number of UK Universities including Kings College London, University College London, the London School of Economics, Queen Mary University of London, the University of Bristol, the University of Sussex, and the University of Edinburgh. ACCENT London is also seeking to expand its programmes with existing partners rather than enter into new partnerships. ACCENT London underwent a successful UKVI compliance assessment in November 2018.

Findings from the monitoring visit

5. The actions identified following the 2016 review have been fully addressed and the good practice further developed and enhanced. ACCENT has built on the two areas of good practice and continues to provide a planned sequence of visits supporting the academic curriculum and highly-effective and holistic academic and personal support for students. ACCENT continues to engage with the UK external higher education environment.

6. A wide range of site visits, trips, guest speakers and cross-cultural awareness topics are embedded into the programmes. Students spoke positively about the integration of these activities into the curriculum and the effective way in which they support the achievement of learning outcomes.
7 ACCENT continues to offer its students comprehensive and effective, academic and pastoral support, building on previous good practice. Students acknowledge the positive and proactive nature of the guidance provided by support and academic staff, and the comprehensive information provided to them. ACCENT places considerable emphasis on student welfare and safety. The November 2018 annual staff awayday comprised a health and safety workshop with the aim of ensuring that all staff are fully trained and up-to-date with student issues. An all-day mental health workshop led by an industry expert has also been held for staff. All students now have access to a free 24-hour mental health hotline, with a live chat function and website resources specifically aimed at study abroad students. The helpline allows students to talk to trained professionals who can assist them in booking an appointment with a local specialist counsellor or psychiatrist.

8 To further enhance the student experience, internships are offered as an integral part of a number of ACCENT London's programmes. Students are sponsored by ACCENT London for their Tier 4 Visas, allowing them to undertake internships which are assessed as part of their credit-bearing study. Internships are well-organised and valued by students. Two internship coordinators place students based on their interests and abilities. Students undertake online interviews with potential placement providers, and internship coordinators visit students during the placement period. Effective arrangements are in place to relocate students should an internship prove to be unsuitable.

9 Monitoring and review remain a key feature of ACCENT's activities and a number of appropriate and effective mechanisms are in place which ensure that enhancements are made to the quality of learning opportunities. All policies and procedures are set out in a comprehensive policies and procedures handbook and reviewed every six months. Regular reciprocal site visits between ACCENT London and its partners support the quality of the student experience and ensure that standards are maintained. ACCENT’s annual week-long directors’ meeting, attended by the London Centre Director, also allows discussion of good practice, review of policies, future planning, company-wide communication, financial reporting, health and safety, the student experience, innovation and reviewing the past academic year.

10 ACCENT continues to utilise effectively its online Program Evaluation Form to enhance provision. Evaluation questions are regularly reviewed in collaboration with ACCENT's partner institutions and through focus groups. Taught modules are fully evaluated using a paper form circulated during the penultimate week of teaching and completed anonymously. Results are collated and then viewed by ACCENT staff. The qualitative and quantitative information from evaluations are considered by senior staff, and areas of enhancement discussed with partners. Students had yet to complete evaluations but are aware of the process.

11 ACCENT has recently reviewed its approach to academic orientation to ensure that students fully understand how learning in the UK may differ from the US. The review has resulted in a more formalised and standardised approach to academic orientation and a set of resources which can be utilised consistently across all programmes.

12 Student Ambassadors continue to be used effectively to engage students in quality assurance and enhancement. Student ambassadors have a role in providing further communication between ACCENT and the student body, helping to organise events, suggesting ideas for trips and visits and providing a better understanding of the student experience. Issues arising from student ambassadors are reported to staff. Student ambassadors confirmed that they were clear about their role, and that the meetings allow them to raise issues and identify potential enhancements. Students provided examples of issues that they had raised and which were being addressed.
All ACCENT London students are studying at US Institutions and are taught in English and assessed for English language competence by the partner institutions, which also check students' prior qualifications and suitability for Study Abroad. To test students’ commitment to study, ACCENT London maintain attendance registers for all classes and check that assignments are completed and submitted on time. Local faculty inform programme coordinators in cases of non-attendance and students confirm that they are contacted if they do not attend classes.

Students are bound by the academic regulations of their home university set out in their academic handbook. To ensure that standards are met and students receive the relevant credits, syllabi are approved by US partners. London faculty confirmed that they are able to contextualise syllabus content for semester programs. Assessment methods are set out in course syllabi having previously been ratified by the Academic Standards Committee of the relevant US university. Students submit assignments online through a course management system, which records the time of submission and allows faculty to access work remotely for marking. Students confirmed that they understand what is expected of them in relation to assessment and that marking criteria and grading systems are clear.

Students confirmed that they are made aware of the need to avoid academic malpractice such as plagiarism. Students may appeal grades, in accordance with their home university regulations. At the end of a semester, grades are shared with the US partner’s Academic Coordinator, to allow them to verify grade distribution before being finalised. London staff confirmed that grading and grade distributions are also discussed at faculty meetings.

All ACCENT students are studying for full degrees at their home US institutions and are therefore taught in English and assessed for English language competence by the partner US institutions. ACCENT students coming to the UK from US universities are exempt from Tier 4 English language tests. Students’ prior qualifications and suitability are assessed prior to arrival in London by US partner institutions. To confirm and verify that students are genuinely here to study weekly, attendance registers for all classes are taken, and staff verify that assignments are completed and submitted on time.

Progress in working with the relevant external reference points relating to academic standards and quality for higher education

ACCENT continues effectively to utilise a number of relevant external reference points for comparing and measuring academic standards. Primary reference points are those used in relation to its US partners. In addition, ACCENT continues to hold 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 and NAFSA: Association of International Educators in the US. ACCENT staff attend network events, briefings and training sessions organised by Independent Higher Education and AASAP which help to inform their understanding of the external environment. ACCENT was runner-up at the Independent Higher Education 2018 Awards, in the category of Best International Student Experience.

Senior staff within ACCENT London are fully cognisant of the Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), and the changes which have recently occurred, and are now considering the most effective way to utilise the new version of the Quality Code. ACCENT London employs faculty members with a range of experience of UK higher education, UK academic frameworks including the Quality Code and sector practices. As noted in paragraph 4, it also has a number of students studying at UK universities through its programmes with the University of Southern California, Texas Christian University and
Washington University in St Louis. ACCENT also works closely with a number of local universities and other local Study Abroad providers in relation to areas such as facilities management.

**Background to the monitoring visit**

19 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 of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

20 The monitoring visit was carried out by Simon Ives, QAA Officer, and Professor Diane Meehan, review panel member on 14 May 2019.