



American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd

Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight

Review by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

April 2014

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 the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd. The review took place on 15 April 2014 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Professor Diane Meehan
- Dr Stephen Ryrie.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about the provider's delegated responsibilities for the management of quality and enhancement 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/aboutus/pages/default.aspx

² www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/RSEO-Handbook-2013.pdf

Key findings

The QAA panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd 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 the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd:

- **confidence** can be placed in the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd's management of its responsibilities for the quality of learning opportunities.

The QAA review panel also concluded that the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding bodies.

Conclusion about public information

The QAA panel concluded that:

- **reliance can** be placed on the information that the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers.

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **features of good practice** at the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd:

- the high-quality, wide-ranging, timely and clearly-explained academic and pastoral support provided (paragraph 2.11)
- the personalised support and information for prospective students prior to their leaving their home country (paragraph 3.4).

Context

The American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd (AIFS London), founded in 1964, is a provider of pastoral, cultural, logistical and administrative support for students from some 40 established universities and colleges based in the USA (home universities, partner institutions). It maintains an up-to-date record of the accreditation status of such partners and takes into account external expectations and guidelines, including those of the Forum for Education Abroad and of QAA. Nevertheless, its main benchmark is the requirements and expectations of partner institutions: these universities undertake, and share with AIFS London, regular evaluations of provision. These evaluations are almost entirely positive in tone and content.

The majority of students spend six weeks or less at AIFS London, though a minority stay for one semester: all student groups are accompanied by faculty from the home university, who exercise overall responsibility for welfare, discipline and (in most cases) teaching and assessing credit-bearing work. Some students undertake an internship, which AIFS London arranges and helps support, but does not assess.

While AIFS London regards its main function as providing backup support for USA faculty teaching their own courses abroad, it also provides one regular course, British Life and Culture, available to all visiting student groups, and, on request, other courses (most frequently Art History and Theatre). Assignments for these courses may be set and marked by visiting faculty or delegated to the UK-based adjunct faculty member concerned. In this latter case, adjunct and syllabus and assessment are subject to the formal approval of the home university. The adjunct is bound by the policies and procedures of the home university, albeit that he or she is contracted by AIFS London, which provides reimbursed payroll services.

Detailed findings about the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd

1 Academic standards

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

1.1 AIFS London does not have responsibility for the management of academic standards other than in the formal sense that it may be the contractor of adjunct faculty who assess as well as teach courses to the specification of home universities. In such cases, AIFS London is responsible for collecting and verifying curricula vitae and references, and submitting them to the home university for advance approval. Any academic mentoring, support or oversight required by the adjunct is the responsibility of the home university and normally discharged by visiting faculty accompanying each student group. Hence, AIFS London reasonably regards itself as facilitating study abroad programmes by providing logistical, cultural, administrative and pastoral support evaluations.

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

1.2 AIFS London, while it takes into account the expectations of external bodies which include the Forum for Education Abroad and QAA, is bound by the requirements and expectations of its partner institutions. Its assurance that threshold academic standards are maintained is driven by the care it takes both to establish the continuing accreditation status of such institutions and to engage in continuing dialogue, both formal and informal, with home university personnel. These interactions take place in both the UK and the USA, where staff visit universities to meet staff and prospective students, and to attend higher education conferences. AIFS London is aware of relevant aspects of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and plans and monitors internships with great care and professionalism (see paragraph 2.3). It has no responsibility for assessing them.

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

1.3 Assessment is the responsibility of partner institutions.

The panel concludes that the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding organisations.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

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

2.1 AIFS London is responsible for logistical support; providing facilities for the delivery of courses; ensuring students receive appropriate academic, administrative and personal assistance; recruiting adjunct faculty (whose appointments are subject to the approval of the home universities concerned); finding and monitoring suitable internship opportunities; collecting and responding to students' and home university evaluations; and providing visiting faculty with appropriate teaching facilities and support.

2.2 AIFS London gives high priority to ensuring the quality of its internship programme, which is managed by its Academic Director and Internship Coordinator. Students taking internships receive extensive pre-departure information and briefings, supported by a comprehensive handbook and an opportunity for a one-on-one discussion with the Academic Director, to discuss their interests and preferences. On arrival they undergo an internship orientation programme, and receive continuing supervision from a work-based supervisor and a faculty supervisor from the home university. Students were very appreciative of the care taken by AIFS London to prepare them for their internships.

2.3 The quality of internships is monitored by formal visits to all placements, end-of-programme evaluations by both student and placement provider, and student focus groups. The evidence from these sources that students view their internship experience very positively was confirmed by students who met the review panel. The panel confirms that procedures are in place for all relevant information to be appropriately considered and utilised.

2.4 Student feedback is central to AIFS London's approach to managing the quality of learning opportunities. It is sought mainly through focus groups with student representatives, regular meetings with students, and end-of-programme evaluations. AIFS London staff meet to review the evaluations and identify any actions to be taken, and the review panel saw evidence of beneficial changes resulting, including developing classroom behavioural standards for students and academic and internship procedures for faculty, both aimed at achieving greater consistency of practice. Partner institutions also evaluate AIFS London's performance in the light of faculty observations and student reports: the outcomes are shared with AIFS London Senior Vice President and reviewed alongside AIFS London's own evaluations.

2.5 The review panel found that AIFS has effective arrangements to monitor the quality of learning opportunities, and that it seeks and utilises comprehensive student and partner institution feedback to enhance students' overall experience.

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

2.6 AIFS London, in addition to its awareness of the Quality Code (see paragraph 1.2), benchmarks its provision through membership of professional associations such as the Forum on Education Abroad and the Association of American Study Abroad Programmes. These bodies variously provide principles and guidelines and facilitate opportunities for networking and the discussion and promotion of good practice.

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

2.7 Classes taught by adjunct faculty are evaluated by students, whose reports are forwarded to their home universities. Visiting faculty and the AIFS Academic Director sit in on adjunct faculty classes during the early part of each programme: this approach has recently been supplemented by the use of external observers with appropriate academic expertise. Adjunct faculty are provided with summaries of class evaluations, and, should areas of concern arise, they would be invited to discuss them with AIFS London staff.

2.8 Student complaints and academic appeals are handled by home universities, with appropriate support from AIFS London. All relevant AIFS London policies, including the Student Code of Conduct, Equal Opportunities and Harassment and Bullying are published in the Student Handbook, which is given to each student on arrival.

2.9 The review panel concluded that AIFS London has effective arrangements to ensure that the quality of teaching and learning is maintained and enhanced.

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

2.10 AIFS London pays considerable attention to communicating with home universities in setting up study programmes and preparing students and visiting faculty for their time in London; it does so mainly through pre-departure handbooks, hand-outs, electronic presentations and, when possible, visiting campuses in the USA to meet students and faculty pre-departure.

2.11 On arrival, students receive a handbook and orientation programme. Accommodation is provided, as are wide-ranging support, appropriate learning facilities, cultural activities and outings and an emergency 24-hour telephone service. These were well regarded by students, who spoke very highly of the helpfulness and responsiveness of AIFS staff and of the support they received both prior to departure and while in London. They were clear what support is available and whom to approach to receive it. The high-quality, wide-ranging, timely and clearly-explained academic and pastoral support provided by AIFS London is a feature of **good practice**.

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

2.12 AIFS London does not have formal responsibility for the development of visiting or adjunct faculty, although adjunct faculty confirmed that staff development opportunities and funding would be available if required. The performance of AIFS London staff is reviewed through annual appraisal by line managers: staff who met the review panel are satisfied with the development and training opportunities available to them.

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

2.13 AIFS London is responsible for providing learning resources, including teaching accommodation, computing facilities and access to library facilities. Computing facilities are provided at the AIFS study centre, open during office hours, and students have internet access both in AIFS London and at their residences. The satisfaction with teaching accommodation and IT support voiced to the review panel by visiting faculty and students was reflected in the minutes of student focus group meetings.

2.14 Access to paid libraries such as that of the University of London is at the discretion of the home university, which is also responsible for providing all necessary teaching materials. AIFS London encourages all students to take out free library membership (which includes the British Library), and helps them do so. Students expressed satisfaction with the resources available.

The panel has **confidence** that the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

3 Public information

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

3.1 Responsibility for producing and publishing information about provision is shared by AIFS London and home universities. AIFS London staff are clear about their responsibilities in this respect.

3.2 Content for both electronic and paper-based information sources is provided by AIFS marketing staff based in the USA and proofread by London-based staff; promotional material relating to a home university is checked by that institution. The review panel was assured, and confirms, that this ensures the accuracy of material about AIFS on home university websites.

3.3 The AIFS website provides a range of information about services for prospective students. Accepted students have access to the recently-upgraded AIFS portal which provides pre-departure documents and individualised information on academic and practical matters. Information about AIFS provision is provided in programme brochures relevant to specific partnership programmes and a Pre-Departure Handbook, which reviewers found informative and detailed. Students confirmed that they had found information provided by AIFS London and their home university helpful and accurate, that they used the portal frequently in preparing themselves for study at AIFS London, and that AIFS staff were responsive and helpful in dealing with pre-departure questions and enquiries.

3.4 The review panel found the personalised support and information for prospective students prior to their leaving their home country outstanding, and a feature of **good practice**.

The panel concludes that **reliance can be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd is responsible for publishing about itself and the programmes it delivers.

Action plan³

American Institute for Foreign Study (UK) Ltd action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight April 2014						
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 team identified the following areas of good practice that are worthy of wider dissemination within AIFS London:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the high-quality, wide-ranging, timely and clearly-explained academic and pastoral support provided (paragraph 2.11) 	Students feel well-supported and are clear who to go to when they need help	Regularly review materials given to students to ensure they are up-to-date and comprehensive	July and December each year	Programme Director, Academic Director and Head of Student Services	Senior Vice President	<p>Positive feedback in focus group, early bird questionnaires and student rep meetings</p> <p>Minimum 95 per cent of students rate their overall experience excellent or good in end of programme</p>

³ AIFS London 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.

		<p>Discuss feedback from evaluations, student representative meetings and focus groups in monthly staff meetings</p> <p>Minute any relevant action points and their response</p> <p>Review induction programme to ensure new staff understand their role and the levels of support they are expected to provide</p>	<p>Monthly</p> <p>July and December each year</p>	<p>Management team</p> <p>Senior Vice President and Vice Presidents</p>	<p>Senior Vice President</p> <p>Senior Vice President</p>	<p>evaluation summary</p> <p>Staff meeting minutes</p> <p>Positive feedback in focus groups and student rep meetings</p> <p>Minimum 95 per cent of students rate their overall experience excellent or good in end of programme evaluation summary</p> <p>Staff successfully complete six-month probation period</p>
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		<p>Review staff training programme to ensure staff receive appropriate training to enable them to provide high standard of academic and pastoral support</p> <p>Have annual all-staff two-day comprehensive training session</p>	December each year	Vice Presidents and Programme Director	Senior Vice President	<p>Positive feedback in focus groups and student rep meetings</p> <p>Minimum 95 per cent of students rate their overall experience excellent or good in end of programme evaluation summary</p> <p>Feedback in staff appraisal sessions</p> <p>Schedule of annual training session and summary of other training provided</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the personalised support and information for prospective students prior to their leaving their home 	Students arrive in the UK feeling well-prepared and ready to focus on the academic programme and cultural opportunities available	Introduce detailed evaluation of pre-departure services to gather information on how we can improve the way we prepare students for their experience	September 2014	Programme Director	Senior Vice President	<p>Management team meeting minutes</p> <p>Minimum 95 per cent of students say</p>

<p>country (paragraph 3.4).</p>	<p>Internship students have realistic expectations of their placements</p>	<p>Discuss results at management team meeting</p> <p>Regularly review materials given to students to ensure they are up-to-date and comprehensive</p>	<p>July and December</p>	<p>Programme Director, Academic Director and Head of Student Services</p>	<p>Senior Vice President</p>	<p>they felt well-prepared in pre-departure evaluation summary</p> <p>As above</p>
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Glossary

This glossary explains terms used in this report. You can find a fuller glossary at: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/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/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/RSEO-Handbook-2013.aspx