



## Specific Course Designation: report of the extended monitoring visit of ifs University College, February 2016

### Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that ifs University College (the College) has made commendable progress with implementing the action plan from the November 2014 [Higher Education Review](#).

### Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2 At the time of the review, there were 3,761 students enrolled on 25 programmes from Levels 4 to 7, some part-time and some full-time. Most programmes are now offered by the College under its own degree awarding powers, but a few programmes are still under the aegis of the University of Kent. Two recent appointments include a Student Engagement Manager and a Head of Careers and Employability.

3 The monitoring visit included the investigation of a concern that had been raised about the University College's complaints process. See paragraph 12 for the findings of this investigation.

### Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

4 The College has made commendable progress in implementing all parts of the action plan developed after the 2014 review. The action plan included a detailed range of appropriate actions to address the four recommendations and one item of good practice resulting from the 2014 review. All of these have been comprehensively addressed. The minutes from the various committee meetings indicate that the recommendations were widely discussed by the relevant teams and provide evidence of widespread engagement by staff from across the organisation.

5 The College has revised specifications for a range of programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level in order to provide learning outcomes for all interim awards where these are available as exit routes. These were approved by the Academic Board in July 2015 and reported to the Academic Board and Academic Audit Committee. They are available on the College website and ensure that students, staff and examiners have a clear understanding of the required outcomes for all awards.

6 The College has developed and implemented a clear and consistent policy, which ensures that staff are appropriately prepared to teach at all levels and in different modes of delivery. All lecturers are required to complete the College Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education if they do not hold a recognised teaching qualification or membership of the Higher Education Academy. Exemptions are granted where appointees provide expert practitioner input at MSc level; currently this is only a small minority of teaching staff. Staff found the College qualification useful and relevant, especially because of its emphasis on financial education. The programme attracts outside participants as well as College staff and this along with the well-structured blended learning approach helps ensure that the needs of the participants are met. Students commented favourably on the quality of

teaching. Staff were well informed, teaching sessions were interactive and staff responded to the needs of individual students. A particular feature of the approach was the use of an online forum for each module which enabled rapid receipt of feedback and an opportunity for further discussion with each other and tutors.

7 The College has developed a comprehensive range of formal opportunities for students to actively engage in the annual monitoring and review of programmes. The policy and procedures that were developed are based on an agreed set of principles for student involvement which take into account the part-time and distributed nature of the majority of the student body. Agreement was sought from students during the drafting stage to ensure that there was clear understanding and ownership of the new procedure. The first opportunity to follow the new procedure was during the monitoring of the 2014-15 academic year when student representatives were asked to comment on relevant sections of the draft annual monitoring report. They were then asked to provide a statement for inclusion in the final report. This process has worked well and students commented very favourably on their involvement in the process and the very useful role played by the recently appointed Student Engagement Manager.

8 The College has developed and implemented a clear and consistent approach to assessment feedback to ensure students receive feedback that is both timely and developmental. As a consequence, there are now institutional benchmarks for return of feedback for students which staff are expected to adhere to. This is being monitored to ensure that not only is feedback timely but that the process continues to follow the moderation procedures and that quality of feedback is not compromised. Again, this process was developed in close consultation with teaching staff and students. Increasingly use is being made of online submission, and other electronic means of providing feedback are being explored in order to further reduce the time taken to provide feedback. Where an assignment was being returned slightly late the student was informed. Students confirmed that feedback was now timelier, useful, and feed-forward material was provided. Students spoke enthusiastically about the ample opportunities to discuss feedback with staff.

9 The College has continued to develop student awareness and engagement with the financial services sector which was noted as good practice at the earlier review. The College considers this an integral aspect of its work and provides a wide range of opportunities for student engagement, which students clearly appreciate. Opportunities for students to publish their work in professional magazines continue. The College is continuing to develop its 'Future Self' e-mentoring scheme which aims to match experienced professionals with less experienced students. While this is still at an early stage, students welcomed this opportunity to engage with the sector.

10 The team reviewed admissions procedures with staff and students and found that they were rigorous and designed in such a way as to facilitate the recruitment of those with the skills and ability to complete the course applied for. For undergraduate degree courses most admissions are via UCAS, although the College also admits mature students through Access courses or on the basis of extensive relevant work experience. Support for writing and presentation skills is provided for those students who require it. Retention and completion rates on almost all programmes are extremely high.

11 The College demonstrated during the visit that it has a robust system for the annual monitoring and periodic review of its programmes. The outcomes of these activities are reviewed by the College's Learning and Teaching Committee. Several significant changes had been introduced as a result of recent monitoring activity, for example creation of greater module choice in one programme and a greater focus on employability matters.

12 The team discussed with the College its response to a concern that had been raised about the wording of a section of its Code of Practice related to student complaints. The relevant sections have been reworded to align more closely with the policies of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator, in particular by providing for a formal warning before any action is taken in respect of frivolous or vexatious complaints. The new wording has been approved by the College's Academic Board and the revised chapter of the Code has also been placed on the College website.

#### **Section 4: Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education**

13 The College maintains its own Code of Practice, closely modelled on and aligned with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. Each chapter is 'owned' by an individual member of staff, who is responsible for disseminating information about it. Chapters are reviewed on a regular basis to take account of changes within the sector, and the majority of the chapters were reviewed in 2014-15. Updates and modifications have to receive formal approval from the relevant committee. An annual higher education conference and regular development days for the College's teaching and examining staff, whether based in London or elsewhere, are used to provide information on the College's Code of Practice and other matters related to developments in higher education.

#### **Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit**

14 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.

15 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr David Taylor (Coordinator) and Mrs Catherine Symonds (Reviewer) on 25 February 2016.

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