



INTO Queen's LLP, trading as INTO Queen's University Belfast

Educational Oversight - Exceptional Arrangements

February 2023

About this report

This is a report of a review under the Educational Oversight-Exceptional Arrangements method conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at INTO Queen's LLP, Belfast. The review took place on 28 February 2023 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Margaret Johnson, QAA Officer
- Brenda Eade, Reviewer
- Elizabeth Shackels, Reviewer
- Aaron Lowman, Student Reviewer.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner
- make judgements on the provider's management and enhancement of the quality 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 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. More information about this review method can be found in the [Handbook for Providers](#).

Key findings

The QAA review team considered evidence relating to the educational provision at INTO Queen's LLP, trading as INTO Queen's University Belfast (INTO Queen's; the Centre), including information supplied in advance and evidence gathered during the review visit. The review has resulted in the key findings stated in this section.

Judgements

The QAA panel formed the following judgement about INTO Queen's LLP.

- **Confidence** can be placed in INTO Queen's LLP's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner.
- **Confidence** can be placed in INTO Queen's LLP's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **feature of good practice** at INTO Queen's LLP.

- The inclusive academic and pastoral support provided by INTO Queens LLP which enhances the quality of the student learning experience (paragraph 2.11).

Recommendations

The QAA panel makes the following **recommendation** to INTO Queen's LLP.

It is **advisable** for the provider to:

- Keep under review the accuracy and transparency of admission and recruitment information to ensure that students are clear about the institution they are joining (paragraph 2.5).

About INTO Queen's LLP

INTO Queens was established in 2009-10 and is a Joint Venture (JV) between Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and INTO University Partnerships (IUP). It is operated through a Limited Liability Partnership with a signed agreement, a business plan and a quality assurance agreement. Each partner has a 50% ownership of the Centre. The Centre was set up to support QUB's strategic ambition of recruiting international students and gives the University access to a global network of international agents.

The Centre offers a range of academic pathways as well as English language only programmes, specifically designed for international students. There are 10 academic programmes validated by Queen's University Belfast; three English language programmes are validated by IUP and the British Council.

303 students are currently enrolled in INTO Queen's programmes. 270 students are following programmes validated by Queen's University and 33 students are following English language programmes validated by IUP and the British Council. Student numbers for 2022-23 show a small increase over 2021-22, but numbers are likely to increase further once the March intake has been confirmed.

The Centre has a full-time equivalent (FTE) of 29.7 academic staff - 19 of whom are full-time academics and 22 are part-time. This compares with an FTE equivalent of 22.6 academic staff at the time of the last Educational Oversight-Exceptional Arrangements (EOEA) Review in November 2018. In addition, there are 14 administrative/support staff - 12 of whom are full-time and two are part-time (15.4 FTE).

Queen's University Belfast, as the awarding body, is ultimately responsible for academic standards of the awards and the quality of the provision leading to them. The Centre operates to a Business Plan agreed by the JV to deliver programmes which enables students to progress to specific degree programmes at the University. The operational responsibilities of each member of the partnership are set out in the responsibilities checklist and are further discussed in paragraphs 1.4-1.6 and 2.1-2.2 of this report.

The Centre makes use of the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) as an external reference point for the design, approval, assessment and monitoring of programmes. Programme specifications refer to *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* and QAA Subject Benchmark Statements as outlined in paragraphs 1.12-1.13.

There have been no major changes since the last EOEA, although the Centre is currently in the process of appointing a Centre Director.

The Centre is accredited by the British Council for the provision of English language programmes. The last accreditation by the British Council took place in May 2018. Reaccreditation is due in 2023. The 2018 report from the British Council is positive and identifies many strengths in relation to the high quality and standard of the provision. There were two recommendations - one regarding accommodation and the other relating to teaching and learning. These have been addressed and the Centre has provided Annual Declarations confirming this to the British Council.

As the awarding body, and a key external reference point, Queen's University conducts annual reviews of the Centre through the process of Continuing Action for Programme Enhancement (CAPE). The University also conducted a Review of the International Year One, BEng pilot programmes in 2021. The Centre has also effectively responded to all Periodic Review reports.

Detailed findings about INTO Queen's LLP

1 Academic standards

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

1.1 As the validating body for all INTO Queen's (the Centre's) academic programmes, Queen's University Belfast (QUB) has overall responsibility for setting, academic standards, and for ensuring that they are monitored and maintained.

1.2 QUB effectively maintains oversight of standards and the quality of the learning experience through annual review of programmes, the Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement (CAPE), and Periodic Review. The Centre submits an Annual Monitoring of Collaborative Arrangements to the University's Education Committee (Quality and Standards) (ECQS). A subgroup of ECQS is then convened to review the submission and to report on outcomes to ECQS. The review reports are detailed and evaluative, and make recommendations for enhancements to programmes and the student learning experience.

1.3 The Joint Venture Board which is responsible for the financial and strategic direction of the Centre, delegates its authority for academic oversight and the quality of the student learning experience to the Academic Subgroup (ASG) which acts as an overall management committee for all programmes. ASG meets quarterly and its membership includes senior members of staff from the University, representatives from each University School and senior managers from the Centre.

1.4 The Centre effectively fulfils its responsibilities for the management of academic standards through its well-defined deliberative committees, and a clear management reporting structure. The processes and procedures for maintaining and monitoring academic standards are set out in a detailed Quality Assurance Manual which is based on the policies of QUB.

1.5 The terms of reference of the key management committees are included in the Quality Assurance Manual. Following recommendations from the 2018 EOE, the terms of reference for all committees have been updated to include quoracy, and this is monitored at each committee meeting.

1.6 The Academic Management Committee (AMC) reports to the ASG and meets monthly. It is responsible for the operational oversight of quality and standards for all programmes delivered by the Centre. The Academic Director chairs the Committee and membership includes the Academic Quality Manager, representatives from student support services and programme managers. AMC receives reports from meetings of the Programme Co-ordination Committees which discuss issues raised by staff and students relating to the operation and delivery of programmes. The Students of Concern Group and the International Student Representative Committee report into the Programme Co-ordination Committees.

1.7 Minutes of the meetings of ASG provide evidence of the effective monitoring of standards across programmes through the consideration of reports received from the Centre and the updating of the strategic action plan.

1.8 To further support interaction between QUB and the Centre, a Joint Programme Committee (JPC) was established following a review of the International Year One in Engineering (IYOE) pilot programme within the Engineering faculty. The JPC supports the oversight of the Engineering curriculum and has led to the development of a new stream in Computer Science (CS) with three new CS-specific modules

1.9 The Centre Director is responsible for managing academic and support staff. The Academic Director, the Head of Student Services, the Assistant Director for Recruitment, and the Human Resources (HR) Manager, report to the Centre Director and are responsible for managing each of their functional areas. The Academic Quality and Planning Manager has oversight of academic standards and quality assurance, and supports the Academic Director in the maintenance of standards and the enhancement of the student learning experience. He is a member of several Queen's University Committees including the ECQS. Programme managers chair the programme coordination committees and are responsible for the day-to-day running of their programmes. They line manage teaching staff and report into the AMC. At the time of the review, the post of Centre Director was vacant, but interviews were due to take place during the following week, with a view to making a new appointment in April.

1.10 Faculty advisers provide a further layer of oversight for standards and quality. They are nominated university faculty academics who advise on new programme development and changes to existing programmes. They play a pivotal role in Periodic Review and contribute to the Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement (CAPE) assuring a strong academic link between university faculties and those of the Centre.

1.11 The Centre is responsible for ensuring that the standards of the English language only programmes are correctly set and maintained in accordance with British Council requirements and international English language standards. These programmes are managed through the Academic English Senior Management Group and the Academic English Operations Group.

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

1.12 The Centre effectively uses the Quality Code and the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements for the design, approval, assessment and monitoring of programmes. Programme specifications include appropriate references to *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ)* and Subject Benchmark Statements. A recent report from an external examiner confirms their effective use in teaching, learning and assessment. The Quality Assurance Manual reflects the Expectations, Core and Common practices, and advice and guidance of the Quality Code. Reference to the Code is further evidenced by a mapping exercise undertaken by the Centre which demonstrates how their core processes and procedures meet the Expectations of the Quality Code. Teaching staff were able to provide evidence of their use of the Quality Code to enhance their teaching and assessment.

1.13 English language courses are benchmarked against the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) descriptors. These provide clear benchmarks for student admission, assessment and progression. The British Council is responsible for oversight of standards and quality of these courses, and the Centre is required to make an annual declaration indicating that it has responded to recommendations from the accreditation visit.

How effectively does the provider use external moderation, verification or examining to assure academic standards?

1.14 The Centre effectively uses external moderation and verification to assure academic standards. Summary reports are submitted to the external examiners confirming that the verification and standardisation processes have been implemented. Assessments are set by the Centre, internally moderated by the university faculty advisers, and externally moderated by the external examiners. First-marking and second-marking is undertaken by

academic staff at the Centre. Faculty advisers, who are subject specialists, may moderate a sample of scripts. External examiners assure that standards are being maintained by moderating a sample of scripts. They also advise on proposed changes to modules and programmes.

1.15 The University is responsible for the appointment of external examiners. The annual reports written by the external examiners confirm that standards are being maintained and that the assessment process is fit-for-purpose. Programme managers respond effectively to comments made by the external examiners. The reports and responses are considered by the ASG and contribute to the CAPE process. The review team confirms that external examiner comments are positive, and their reports commend the high quality of teaching, learning and assessment provided by the Centre's academic staff.

1.16 The University is currently considering a risk-based approach to external examining with the intention of simplifying the reporting process, and reducing the number of scripts which are externally moderated. The Academic Director is involved in discussions about the new proposals and the Centre will consider whether the revised process for external examining is suitable for the moderation of assessments.

1.17 Overall pass rates across the Centre's programmes are high - ranging from 93% to 100% on the September intake and 75%-100% on the January 2022 intake. Students progressing to the University continue to be monitored by the Centre, and their performance throughout their degree programmes compares favourably with equivalent international students who are direct entrants to the University. Reports on student achievement are submitted to ASG.

1.18 Details of the assessment process are clearly set out in the Centre's assessment policy. Oversight by the University and the external examiners assures that academic standards are correctly set and maintained.

The review team concludes that **confidence** can be placed in INTO Queen's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

How effectively does the provider fulfil its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.1 The day-to-day operational management of INTO Queen's rests with the senior management of the Centre, consisting of Centre Director, Academic Director, Head of Student Services, Assistant Director for Recruitment, and Human Resources (HR) Manager. Programme managers have responsibility for the day-to-day running of the programmes and line management of the teaching staff. In key operational areas such as admissions, recruitment and attendance, the Centre is guided by INTO University Partnerships (IUP) policies and procedures.

2.2 For all programmes, INTO Queen's operates programme coordination committees, chaired by the programme manager and comprising all programme teaching and designated academic support staff. Programme managers report into the Academic Management Committee, chaired by the Academic Director. The Academic Quality and Planning Manager

(AQPM), has oversight of the academic standards and quality assurance for INTO Queen's and supports the Academic Director in ensuring consistency in learning, teaching and assessment across all programmes. While the Centre follows university policies, procedures and regulations in key operational areas, the Quality Manual describes the Centre's quality assurance obligations to its key internal and external stakeholders.

2.3 As outlined in the Student Policy Handbook, students, once enrolled, are subject to the same general (non-programme specific) university policies, procedures and regulations that apply to academic pathway students.

How effectively are external reference points used in the management and enhancement of learning opportunities?

2.4 The recruitment, selection and admission of students is a joint responsibility with Queen's University. The University delegates operational responsibility for the recruitment, selection and admission of students to its international pathway programmes to INTO. In practice, Queen's sets entrance and progression criteria and INTO applies the criteria. Entrance and progression criteria are updated and published on a regular basis.

2.5 Although the majority of enrolled students are recruited through local recruitment agencies worldwide, INTO UK Central Admissions (UKCA) also plays a role in delivering an application service to students on behalf of all INTO UK partners. UKCA acts as a key point of contact for potential students, educational agents and sponsors. UKCA's role is clearly defined through service level agreements. All admissions decisions made by INTO UKCA are in accordance with the entry requirements agreed by INTO Queen's and the University. Any student who falls outside of these requirements but may be eligible are referred to the centre. Before issuing an offer, relevant checks are undertaken. INTO Queen's Assistant Director of Recruitment (ADR) plays a critical role in maintaining effective student recruitment. The ADR works with IUP and the University's marketing team to promote INTO Queen's and drive student recruitment. The ADR is assisted by a Recruitment and Marketing Manager. While students were positive of the process - such as the level of engagement with Centre staff both at pre-entry, departure and at arrival - some students indicated disappointment with the information they had been provided; they thought they were enrolling at the University, not the Centre. Consequently, **the review team advises the Centre to keep under review the accuracy and transparency of admission and recruitment information to ensure that students are clear about the institution they are joining.**

2.6 INTO Queen's students are registered as university students and have full access to the University's policy and procedures on Complaints and Appeals. Student-friendly versions are located in the Student Policy Handbook. Students confirmed that they are made aware of the complaints and appeals policy and procedure during induction. They were highly complementary of the induction process, indicating that the very comprehensive and wide-ranging programme, including a 'safe talk' from the Police Service Northern Ireland, supported their acclimatisation to their new surroundings quickly and effectively.

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

2.7 Teaching staff are appointed by INTO but only after university approval which then grants them recognised teacher status. All probationary teachers are observed within six months of appointment and before being confirmed in post. Lesson observations are used effectively to support professional development and to promote effective lesson delivery. They also provide information that can be used in the Centre's self-assessment of overall teaching quality and as part of the quality assurance processes of the partner university. Annual peer observation is undertaken to enrich the process. Where underperformance is identified through student feedback or a complaint, the teacher will be observed and an action plan for improvement agreed and implemented. Students are kept informed of actions taken but the confidentiality of the observation and of the manager is protected. Module and teacher evaluations are conducted at the end of each programme and inform the CAPE review process directly.

2.8 Programme committees are responsible for the overall management of their programmes including teaching and learning through effective assessment and moderation processes. Programme specifications and handbooks support effective teaching and learning by standardising the delivery of programmes. INTO Queen's work in partnership with their external examiners and their reports are invaluable in improving and enhancing programmes including teaching and learning. Finally, the annual monitoring and review process supports the concept of reflective practice and can identify relevant CPD.

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

2.9 The induction of new staff is outlined in the Induction Policy. An induction checklist covers both centre-wide and job-specific requirements. All new staff receive a copy of the INTO Queen's Quality Code Mapping Document and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy as part of their induction which is archived by Human Resources. Monitoring and appraisal of staff is formally managed through the Performance Coaching Policy and Procedures. Staff development is reviewed biannually, and provision is made for requirements that are identified and agreed upon. The review team was provided with evidence of how staff are encouraged to engage with Brightspace. The review team was also provided with evidence of staff who have completed, or are currently completing, their Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching (PGCHET) and that staff are encouraged to upskill to Master's and PhD level. The review team was also informed of how the Centre had been involved in wider Queen's staff development through dissemination events which is of benefit to and appreciated by staff.

How effectively does the provider assure itself that students are appropriately and effectively supported?

2.10 All students receive comprehensive learning support from teachers, academic support and student services. The nature, level and availability of the support available is outlined in the programme and policy handbooks and also during course induction. Prior to admission, prospective students are encouraged to take part in online pre-engagement information sessions on the Brightspace virtual learning environment (VLE). This pre-engagement information was valued by students. Students were also highly complementary of the induction process. A student representative process is also in place and student feedback is obtained through a variety of mechanisms such as student surveys and International Student Representative Committee meetings. Students are surveyed at the

start and end of their course of study with a focus on academic and non-academic activities. In addition, the Centre uses 'You Said We Did' as an informal feedback mechanism to capture not only the student voice but inform future planning. To support student development and achievement, the Centre provides progress reports on all academic pathway students each semester and also undertakes performance analysis of student achievement or 'tracking' to support student success and progression.

2.11 Students on academic pathway programmes, and on extended programmes through the pre-requisite study of Academic English, have ongoing direct access to, and support from, in-house Progression and Placement Officers. Students spoke of the extensive range of activities in which they are encouraged to be involved. Pastoral care is provided by the Student Services team including safeguarding arrangements. All students have access to the policy and procedure on extenuating (exceptional) circumstances, which reflects university regulations. Student feedback is obtained and recorded throughout the student journey. **The review team considers, as an area of good practice, the inclusive academic and pastoral support provided by INTO Queen's which enhances the quality of the student learning experience.**

How effectively does the provider ensure that learning resources are accessible and sufficient to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes?

2.12 INTO Queen's is responsible for the provision of learning resources within the Centre but can secure additional facilities from Queen's University as required, including the use of specialist university laboratories on campus for Science and Engineering modules. The Learning Resource Centre is used, not only for private study, but also as a study area for teacher or student-led study groups and computer access and printing. During induction, students have the opportunity to visit the main campus of Queen's University, including the main library and other learning resources.

2.13 INTO Queen's uses Brightspace as its VLE. All students have access to the platform and are enrolled on their individual modules. Teachers use the platform to provide students with resources as well as for creating assessments, such as quizzes and other gamification strategies to promote effective learning. To assist students with online learning, user guides were developed and shared with students through Brightspace.

The review team concludes that **confidence** can be placed in INTO Queen's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

QAA2764 - R13469 - May 23

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2023
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557000
Web www.qaa.ac.uk