



## Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of Kaplan Open Learning (Essex) Ltd, November 2018

### 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 Kaplan Open Learning (Essex) Ltd (KOL) is making commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the November 2017 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### 2 Changes since the last QAA review

2 There are currently 1,738 enrolled students studying on a part-time and distance learning basis, representing an increase 14 per cent since 2017. KOL have ten members of academic staff, seven of whom are on permanent contracts with two additional heads of department appointed in 2018. There has been no change of the University of Essex (the University) as the awarding body, or to premises. New Psychology undergraduate programmes and Education postgraduate programmes have been launched by KOL following successful validation by the University.

### 3 Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The monitoring team noted that good practice from the last Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER(AP)) has been further developed through embedding assessment and study skills within the 21 day induction programme (paragraph 4) and extending the application of learning analytics (paragraph 5). Recommendations have been completed successfully, including new governance arrangements and revised person specifications (paragraph 7), and amended admissions, APL and student progression and support policies (paragraphs 9-11). New procedures for the approval of information about learning opportunities have been introduced (paragraph 8). KOL monitors retention and pass rates for all of its cohorts (paragraph 15) and it has been successfully revalidated by the University using appropriate external reference points (paragraph 17). The monitoring team recognised numerous examples of innovation and refinement of current practices and policies that extend beyond required actions from the last HER (AP) to enhance the quality of learning opportunities, reinforced by enthusiastic staff and student feedback. Examples include the creation of a new role of Curriculum Manager (paragraph 7), the design and use of an enhanced study skills and English Language modules (paragraph 4), the evaluation of the student dashboard linked to learner analytics (paragraph 5), the use of policy gap analysis (paragraph 9), and the assessment support provided by the VLE using Discussion Forums and Question and Answer sessions (paragraphs 12-14).

4 KOL continues to operate the 21-day trial period, which provides students with an opportunity to assess whether online learning meets their needs, a good practice HER (AP) finding. Applicants undertake a written assignment, participate in online discussion forums and engage in a comprehensive two-week induction module. The academic team review written assignments to determine whether applicants need study skills support. Students may withdraw during this trial period if they feel that online study is not appropriate. Additionally, KOL has recently developed an enhanced study skills and English language

module for applicants who need support prior to later enrolment. Students who met the panel commented positively on the effectiveness of the trial period.

5 The identified good practice for the use of learning analytics to identify and support students at risk continues to be improved. An activity tracker enables the student support team to monitor student log-in times, posts submitted to online discussions, and assignment submission times. Student support advisers use the tracker to offer individual proactive support to students. Analytics also extend to the use of a new student dashboard for assisting students to monitor their progress and make comparisons with others on their programme. Staff commented in detail on impact analysis undertaken in the past year for this dashboard leading to additional innovative in-house metrics for increasing its functionality.

6 KOL has reviewed and updated its governance structure to ensure that committee business reflect the revised terms of reference, reinforced by the recent Institutional Review by the University. The approved new structure for facilitating planned growth includes an Executive Management Board which has oversight of the Academic Board and the Operations Management Board. The Student Experience Committee and Course Committees report directly to the Academic Board and include student representation within their terms of reference. Staff commented on the benefits of the new arrangements, which affords more effective oversight of strategic plans.

7 The Academic Director has reviewed the academic team structure, job descriptions and person specifications of permanent academic roles in response to the HER (AP) recommendation to ensure that future recruitment processes match the experience of appointees to the job description and person specification. The review has resulted in the new role of Curriculum Manager that is being piloted in the Law and Criminology department, with the intention of embedding the role across KOL.

8 KOL has introduced new policy and published a new standard operating procedure for checking and auditing APL decisions in response to the HER (AP) recommendation to ensure that decisions are accurately made. This detailed procedure includes the sampling of APL decisions, and reporting to the University through the Partnership Quality and Development Committee. With reference to the recommendation for developing and implementing documented procedures for the provision of information about learning opportunities, staff have access to the approved standard operating procedure for published information on the KOL Intranet. The procedures are comprehensive and cover all multimedia methods of communication to ensure that information is reliable and accurate.

9 The recommendation to develop documented guidance for implementing policies and procedures to underpin the management of academic standards and quality has been completed. New or revised policies and procedures over the past year include assessment and feedback, internal validation events, access to the staff intranet, academic offences, student verification and consent to share, and student progression. KOL also continually uses a policy gap analysis in conjunction with University documentation to ensure that policies and procedures remain valid and continue to meet awarding body requirements.

10 The recruitment and admissions process, using a revised Admissions Policy as recommended by the HER (AP), is overseen by the Marketing Team and the Head of Admissions. Applicants are tracked and contact maintained through guidance provided by dedicated admissions advisers up to the point of enrolment, and thereafter by dedicated student support advisers. Three entry routes (academic entry, work experience entry, and open entry) are clearly explained in the Admissions Policy. Kaplan International is responsible for vetting, approving and issuing contracts to recruitment agents. The Head of

Admissions monitors the quality of applicants referred by agents, with a clear procedure in place for recommending termination of agent contracts.

11 KOL English language requirements align with those of the University, equivalent to IELTSs 6.0 for undergraduate studies and 6.5 for postgraduate programmes. For applicants who do not have certified IELTSs, the Kaplan International Test for English (KITE) is used as an assessment tool. Spoken English skills are rigorously assessed through telephone interviews. All prior qualifications are assessed using the APL Policy, to ensure that they are appropriate for the level of study. A UK National Recognition Information Centre check is used to verify international qualifications. For the majority of students who apply through the work experience route, the relevance and scope of experience, CV information and employer references are scrutinised. Students who met the panel emphasised the clear and helpful guidance and support that they received throughout the entire admissions process. The online Complaints Policy is accessible to applicants who wish to make a complaint about any part of the admissions process. The panel considered the design and implementation of admissions processes developed since the last HER (AP) to be robust, consistent and comprehensive.

12 Assessment strategies are developed through the validation and periodic review of programmes. Applications to change assessment design require the approval of the University following commentary from the relevant external examiner. The Academic Head of Department has responsibility for managing the approval of verification of assessment briefs and grading criteria. Assessment design is intended to reduce the risk of plagiarism through requiring students to reflect in detail on their personal work experiences as illustrative examples within their studies. Students have opportunities for formative feedback, and to check for authenticity plagiarism detection software is applied for all submitted work. The monitoring team also recognised the continual, strategic and consistent use of the VLE for supporting students, including the use of Discussion Forums, Question and Answer sessions, and follow up communications by tutors when staff monitoring of student engagement with the VLE falls below a defined threshold. New tutors complete a training module and are mentored to support delivery of modules, assessment practice and feedback to students.

13 Published marking criteria are accessible for staff and students on the learning platform with specific grading criteria issued for each individual module. Sampled second marking takes place alongside first marking to facilitate rapid feedback, and all postgraduate dissertations are double marked. Assessed work is sampled by external examiners before the Board of Examiners meetings. External examiners' comments and KOL responses confirm the rigour and integrity of assessment practice to maintain and enhance academic standards.

14 Academic misconduct policies require students to check assignments through plagiarism-detection software prior to submission. Tutors access and compare submitted work and contributions to current Discussion Forums with previous written assessments and online posts to detect possible variations in writing style in order to identify potential false authorship. As an additional check the learner analytics system referred to in paragraph 4 is used to track anomalous behaviour through monitoring student log-in information. The Quality and Enhancement team manages cases of suspected academic misconduct, with serious cases referred to the University Academic Offences Committee. All of these measures are summarised in an annual report for Academic Board, leading to action planning.

15 The student body at KOL includes learners who are studying part-time and at a distance, including those who are returning to formal education after substantial absence because of employment and family circumstances. Retention and continuation rates for the

last three academic years are significantly above benchmarks across the sector, as reflected by the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Gold Award for KOL in June 2018. KOL emphasises that data for retention and achievement is best analysed at modular levels because completion rates can span up to nine years for a full honours degree within flexible online part-time delivery modes. For online and part-time provision, modular retention rates for all categories of students have remained consistently high over the 2015-18 period: at an average of 90 per cent for postgraduates and 88 per cent for undergraduates. Retention rates for Certificate students are lower at an average of 76 per cent over the same period, which is a reflection of the open entry route onto these programmes and part of KOL's widening participation strategy.

16 Within the last academic session the overall pass rate for undergraduate modules was 87 per cent, which compares with 89 per cent for the previous two academic sessions. For postgraduate modules the pass rate remains consistent at 90 per cent over the last three years. The higher retention rates for postgraduates are attributed to higher levels of motivation to succeed because of employment factors, including sponsorship by employers. As with retention data, Certificate of Continuing Education modules show lower overall pass rates - at 75 per cent for 2017-18 and 76 per cent for the previous two academic sessions - with KOL acknowledging that its open entry route for higher education students increases the risk of non-completion and achievement. Within this context KOL points to its ongoing development of support and learner analytics systems for these at-risk students, as referenced in the good practice finding by the HER (AP).

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

17 KOL makes use of external academic reference points through engagement with the UK Quality Code, and the strategic involvement of staff in a range of educational development opportunities. Undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are mapped to the qualification and regulatory frameworks of the relevant awarding body, with three subject areas undergoing internal and external periodic review with academic representation from other institutions. A total of 16 external examiners ensure that appropriate standards are observed, with KOL responding systematically to feedback with action points that are monitored. Other external reference points include the involvement of KOL staff in conferences and organisations in order to develop the use of open and distance learning materials and support the needs of distance and part-time students. Events and associations used over the last year include TELFest, the awarding body's Annual Good Teaching Conference, TEF, the Office for Students, and Office of the Independent Adjudicator and AdvanceHE webinars.

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

18 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.

19 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Elizabeth Briggs, Reviewer, and Professor Danny Saunders, QAA Officer, on 27 November 2018.

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