Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight

Review by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

November 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 Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. The review took place on 5 November 2014 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Professor Debbie Lockton
- Professor Diane Meehan

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]

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[1] www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us
[2] www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=66

Key findings

The QAA panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision at Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, both information supplied in advance and evidence gathered during the visit of the review itself. The review has resulted in the key findings stated in this section.

Judgements

The QAA panel formed the following judgement about Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

- **confidence** can be placed in Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies's management of its responsibilities for the quality of learning opportunities.

The QAA review panel also concluded that the Centre 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 Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers.

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following features of **good practice** at Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies:

- the Centre has taken the initiative in mapping institutional practice against relevant chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, and has subsequently made constructive use of the Quality Code in higher education quality management (paragraph 1.10).

Recommendation

The QAA panel makes the following **recommendation** to Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies:

- extend its Quality Assurance Policy to the point at which the Policy constitutes a comprehensive reference point for all quality-related processes and procedures (paragraph 1.6).

Context

Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (the Centre), a study centre based in Oxford, offers academic programmes leading to credit for overseas students undertaking one (or occasionally two) semesters of study. It has a formal association with Keble College, University of Oxford, where the Principal is a Fellow and students are members of the Junior Common Room. The Centre works almost exclusively with higher education institutions in the USA. Its relationships with awarding bodies are governed by formal contractual arrangements, and all partner institutions are accredited by the appropriate regional bodies.

In the academic year prior to the visit, the Centre was acquired by Middlebury College. This College, based in Vermont, is an established and accredited higher education institution and was the lead partner in the former Consortium which supplied students and oversaw the Centre's educational services. The new management structure became operational in September 2014, when the current Principal, a senior Middlebury College staff member on secondment, assumed office. The previous senior staff members have now left the Centre.

Detailed findings about Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies

1 Academic standards

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

1.1 Since the transition to Middlebury College's management of the former Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (see page 3), the Centre has been part of Middlebury College's study abroad network. A senior Middlebury staff member assumed office as Principal in September 2014, joining a Senior Tutor who had been in post since January. The transition, though legally complex, left the student experience at the Centre largely untouched. The smooth management of the transition met a recommendation from the previous visit by QAA, when negotiations were underway and there was consequential uncertainty.

1.2 The Centre offers a one-semester (occasionally one-year) credit-bearing academic programme to undergraduate students from accredited North American colleges and universities, most of which were members of the Consortium. Responsibility for the award of credit now rests with Middlebury College, replacing the previous more complex arrangement, whereby each home institution granted general or specific credit on the basis of individual negotiations.

1.3 Like all Middlebury schools abroad, the Centre has a Faculty Advisory Board consisting of senior administrators and faculty members. This Board meets once a semester to consider relevant academic issues. Two of its faculty members will visit the Centre annually (the first visit is scheduled for March 2015), each writing a report, the content of which, including any recommendations, will be considered by the Centre's Academic Board**.**

1.4 The Centre views its Academic Board, which has responsibility for oversight of the academic programme, as a source of expert external guidance. The Board consists of academics from a number of US and UK higher education institutions, and is attended by the Principal and Senior Tutor. The Centre has addressed a recommendation of the 2013 RSEO report that the Board should take a more proactive role in the oversight of academic standards by increasing the frequency of meetings (it now meets biannually rather than annually), with formal meetings supplemented by informal meetings and email communication. The panel now confirms the Board's effectiveness, both academically and in addressing external expectations.

1.5 The Centre's Academic Committee, consisting of the Principal and Senior Tutor, reports to the Academic Board, members of which may attend its meetings. Others involved with the Centre, including tutors and non-academic staff, may be invited to do so for specific items. Formally the Committee meets weekly, but its two members meet informally virtually daily. Its responsibilities cover admissions; teaching; curriculum development; quality assurance; academic complaints and appeals; and the requirements of external regulators. The panel confirms that the Committee operates effectively and in accordance with its remit.

1.6 As part of its response to a recommendation from the 2013 RSEO that it should adopt a systematic approach to quality assurance as a whole, the Centre has produced a Quality Assurance Policy, which will be reviewed annually. While the panel considered this a useful document, it found that not all the tutors whom it met in the course of the visit were aware of it and that it does not capture in detail the full range of operational procedures (for example, double marking and teaching observations). It would be **desirable** for the Centre to

extend its Quality Assurance Policy to the point at which it constitutes a comprehensive reference point for all quality-related processes and procedures.

1.7   Subject to the agreement of the Faculty Advisory Board, responsibility for the oversight of academic programme lies with the Academic Board. The Centre has made a number of changes to the current programme, responding in particular to critical comment about one course by reconceptualising it as a research-based one guided by tutorial support. Students who met the panel spoke well of this and of the 'Oxford experience' it provided.

1.8   The Quality Assurance Policy outlines the procedure for course development: proposals are submitted first to the Academic Committee, thence, if the Committee so determines, to the Academic Board. The Academic Committee monitors learning outcomes each semester, scrutinising student grades and student feedback and presenting cumulative data to the summer meeting of the Academic Board, the minutes of which confirm that detailed consideration is given to the data and that appropriate recommendations derive from them. The Centre also operates a biennial periodic review procedure which the panel found appropriate. It contains a thematic element: the 2015 theme will be tutorial provision.

1.9   Assessment is undertaken by tutors using grading criteria which accord with North American practice: the procedure, developed in consultation with external Academic Board members, includes arrangements for blind second marking (see paragraph 1.11). Students, who are aware of and understand the system, receive an explanation of assessment at orientation and thereafter as necessary. Tutors provide regular written feedback on progress, supplemented by oral feedback and discussion in tutorials; students feel able to request advice at any time. The panel found the Centre's assessment strategies effective and clearly articulated.

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

1.10   The Centre's primary external reference points are the requirements of the participating institutions. In addition, prior to the 2013 RSEO visit, the Centre mapped its provision against relevant chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). It updated this in August 2014, in what was described as a useful exercise in encouraging reflection. Senior staff see the Quality Code as a useful reference point, particularly in its development of a systematic appeals and complaints procedure. The Centre's initiative in mapping institutional practice against relevant Chapters of the Quality Code and its subsequent constructive use of the Quality Code in higher education quality management is **good practice**.

How effectively does the Centre use external scrutiny of assessment processes to assure academic standards?

1.11   As part of its response to a recommendation in the 2013 RSEO report, integral course essays have been double-marked since spring 2014. This has been extended to seminar courses in the current academic year. To support this development the Centre has appointed some tutors as subject advisers to undertake blind second marking. The panel, on exploring the arrangements, found that while senior staff are clear about the procedures for resolving major and minor discrepancies, not all subject advisers are equally so. Since it would be demonstrably beneficial for all relevant information to be available in one place and in some detail, the panel reiterates the desirability of the Centre ensuring the comprehensiveness of its Quality Assurance Policy (see paragraph 1.6).

1.12   The Centre complements the assurance provided by double marking by a detailed comparative analysis of grades obtained. This is set also against students' grade point average (a high minimum of 3.5 is required for acceptance) and performance in their home institution. The panel found this procedure robust in conception and conscientiously applied.

1.13   The Centre has structures and processes in place (including double marking and moderation) which give it assurance that it meets all external expectations relating to the maintenance and assurance of academic standards. These are overseen by an Academic Board with significant external involvement, have developed in response to previous reviews, and are subject to annual monitoring.

> The panel concludes that Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding bodies.

2   Quality of learning opportunities

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

2.1   The Centre provides on-site accommodation for all students, where 24-hour support and guidance are available from staff (during working hours) and junior deans (resident DPhil students of the University of Oxford) at evenings and weekends. Students value the availability and the quality of the pastoral and practical help provided and the approachability of those providing it. The on-site Feneley Library is now in line with course requirements; wireless access and free printing are available on site; students have reading rights at the Bodleian and Keble College Libraries; and they have access to the online resources of Middlebury College and their own institution. They described learning resources as excellent.

2.2   On arrival, students have an extended orientation programme, including general introductions, visits to cultural and historical sites, small group work, individual meetings with the Principal and Senior Tutor, and an introductory tutorial. They described this cluster of activities as helpful, accurate, enjoyable and culturally valuable. One student seemingly spoke for others in describing the introductory tutorial as helping alleviate his anxiety about adapting to the Oxford system.

2.3   As well as being members of the Keble College Junior Common Room (JCR), students are members of the Centre's own JCR, run by a committee of elected students and supported by a dedicated budget. Students described this as one of the ways in which to raise concerns, citing as an example the availability of internet access in part of the building; but they also emphasised that the availability of staff, junior deans and tutors means that matters raised are normally resolved immediately and informally.

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

2.4   The Centre has, as noted in paragraph 1.10, mapped its quality management and enhancement procedures against the Quality Code in what it described as a useful exercise. As also noted, however, (see paragraph 1.6) the Policy, while helpful, is not yet comprehensive, or sufficiently detailed to serve as a handbook for tutors and would benefit from becoming so. It will, however, be used in future monitoring and evaluation activities (for further details of which, see paragraph 1.8), when the programme will also be measured against the requirements of supplier institutions and the Faculty Advisory Board.

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

2.5   The Centre's teaching observation policy involves a report on observations being presented to the Academic Board; observations will also be undertaken by visiting members of the Faculty Advisory Board. Students complete evaluation questionnaires at the end of each semester and those seen by the panel were very positive. The students who met the panel had completed an initial questionnaire on cultural awareness and had, through the JCR, raised the question of internet access mentioned in paragraph 2.3, and requested a revision to the guest curfew policy. Overall, the students were confident that any issues they raised would be addressed. But while students made appropriate use of the formal representative structure of the JCR, of most significance by far is the fact that the size of the Centre, its relaxed atmosphere and the approachability of staff together provide an ambience in which most day-to-day issues are resolved as they arise, normally within hours.

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

2.6   The Senior Tutor sees students collectively once a week and is in regular email contact with them. Tutors meet their students in the intimate context of an individual tutorial. Student evaluations consistently score student support highly, and aspects of it were identified as good practice in the 2013 RSEO report. The students who met the panel spoke enthusiastically about it, and it is clear that many of them will remember this as the most significant feature of their study abroad experience.

2.7   The 2013 RSEO report recommended that the Centre establish an effective system for identifying and supporting students with disabilities. The Middlebury acquisition means that the Centre is now bound by that College's policies (which comply with federal legislation) and has access to Middlebury's resources. Applicants are encouraged to declare any disability, and the quality of the Centre's communication with home institutions is such that the needs of students requiring additional learning support are put in place prior to arrival. For physical disability, the Centre plans, in due course, to install a stair lift and elevator to facilitate access to its first floor premises. Its current arrangements include ensuring that teaching for students with mobility problems would take place in accessible accommodation.

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

2.8   The Centre employs three full-time staff: the Principal, the Senior Tutor and an administrator, and a Library Supervisor and two junior deans (who are DPhil students of the University) on a part-time basis. All of these are eligible for Middlebury College's staff development arrangements. Tutors are normally employed by the University of Oxford and are self-employed, and in their case the Centre supplements the staff development provided by their primary institution as necessary, for example to ensure that the particular needs of US students are met. New tutors are mentored by the Senior Tutor; junior deans have received mental health training and receive continuing support in a role which bears onerous responsibility.

2.9   Tutors meet formally at the beginning and end of each semester. The first meeting encourages the sharing of advice and experience in an informal setting; the second has a formal agenda, providing opportunities for tutors to comment and advise on any aspect of their experience. The Centre places particular emphasis on the sharing of good practice, and tutors who met the panel cited a number of examples of this having taken place.

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

2.10   As noted in paragraph 2.1 the on-site Feneley Library is now in line with course requirements; wireless access and free printing are available on site; students have reading rights at the Bodleian and Keble College Libraries; and they have access to the online resources of Middlebury College and their own institution. They described learning resources as excellent**.**

2.11   The Centre is meticulous in preparing for students' arrival, and for both preparing them for study and supporting them throughout their stay. Students speak very highly of the support they receive, and it is confirmed that, in both academic and pastoral terms, this support is both readily available and fit for purpose. The tutorial arrangements and learning resources available to students are excellent.

The panel has **confidence** that Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

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3   Public information

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

3.1   Middlebury College, which is responsible for the publication of promotional information about the Centre's programme, distributes brochures to Study Abroad offices as well as making it available on a bespoke website. Within the Centre the Principal is responsible for the accuracy of information.

3.2   The Centre has retained and is updating its website and other information sources following the Middlebury acquisition. At the time of the visit this was under way but not complete: for example the revised Staff Handbook was awaiting sign-off from legal representatives and the website still contained some information relating to previous management arrangements. The panel encourages the Centre to expedite the updating.

3.3   The Centre uses its website to disseminate information to applicants, current students, colleges and universities. It contains extensive, helpful and current information for both prospective and current students: for current students this includes advice on the level and style of work expected, plagiarism, and library and computer usage. This generic information is supplemented by detailed and appropriate course information, including syllabuses, reading lists and grading criteria. Students spoke well of all the information provided, both prior and subsequent to their arrival. The panel found that an appropriate level of information on the Centre's courses is made available to students and that this information is subject to regular updating.

3.4   The Senior Tutor is responsible for checking the websites of supplier institutions to ensure that any information about the Centre they may contain is accurate, and for ensuring corrections are made where necessary. This duty is discharged satisfactorily.

3.5   The Centre has sound procedures for ensuring that its published information is accurate and complete. This is ensured by a clear delineation of responsibilities among the

staff. Students confirm that the information made available to them throughout the process is wholly satisfactory.

The panel concludes that **reliance can be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the Centre is responsible for publishing about itself and the programmes it delivers.

Action plan[3]

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 panel identified the following area of **good practice** that is worthy of wider dissemination within the Centre.						
• The Centre has taken the initiative in mapping institutional practice against relevant chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, and has subsequently made constructive use of the Quality Code in higher education quality management (paragraph 1.10).	To make constructive use of the Quality Code and the institutional mapping exercise in ongoing quality management decisions and practices	Reference to the Quality Code and the mapping exercise in quality management decisions over the 2014-15 academic year	Up to summer 2015	Principal, Senior Tutor, Academic Committee	Academic Board	1 Minutes of Academic Committee 2 Minutes of Academic Board

Middlebury College - Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies's action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight, November 2014

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[3] The Centre 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.

Recommendation	Intended outcomes	Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes	Target date(s)	Action by	Reported to	Evaluation (process or evidence)
The panel considers that it would be **desirable** for the Centre to:						
• extend its Quality Assurance Policy to the point at which the Policy constitutes a comprehensive reference point for all quality-related processes and procedures (paragraph 1.6).	Production of a comprehensive Quality Assurance Policy, to act as the basis for ongoing quality assurance practices	1 Draft of comprehensive Quality Assurance Policy document 2 Quality Assurance Policy document to be circulated to Academic Board, then approved and/or amended as appropriate at summer 2015 meeting of Academic Board 3 Quality Assurance Policy to be a standard item on all Academic Board agendas	May 2015 Summer 2015	Senior Tutor and Principal Academic Board	Academic Board and Faculty Advisory Board	1 Text of comprehensive Quality Assurance Policy document 2 Minutes of summer 2015 Academic Board meeting

Glossary

This glossary explains terms used in this report. You can find a fuller glossary at: www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/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/information-and-guidance/publication?PubID=202