Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of Northern College of Acupuncture, October 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 the Northern College of Acupuncture (the College) is making commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the October 2017 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers).

2 Changes since the last QAA review/monitoring visit

2   Since the previous review, the College has successfully completed the change of awarding body from Middlesex University to London South Bank University (LSBU) and has had both institutional approval and course validation visits during the early part of 2018. All of the Middlesex University courses commenced a four-year teach-out in September 2018, and the replacement courses from LSBU started at the same time. Total student numbers have remained broadly similar to the 200 recorded at the 2017 visit, and at the time of this review there were 209, with 78 on the new LSBU programmes, and the remainder on the Middlesex teach-out provision.

3   The College has a core staff team, supported by part-time and sessional staff who are also practitioners in the fields of acupuncture and nutrition. The workforce is experienced and stable, and the current headcount of 130 staff covers nine senior managers (4.56 full-time equivalent (FTE)), 110 academics (5.12 FTE) and 11 administrative staff (4.79 FTE). This compares closely with the 16 FTE identified at the previous review.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

4   The College has made commendable progress with implementing the action plan and demonstrates a highly effective engagement with relevant external reference points including the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). Information that it produces is trustworthy, accessible and fit for purpose (paragraph 12). The College has fully addressed all four recommendations arising from the 2017 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)), embedding actions and reporting progress within a detailed College Quality Improvement Plan (QIP), which is monitored through regular Academic Board meetings (paragraphs 8 and 9). In addition, the College has further maintained its areas of good practice. These steps have led to improvements in the College's management of its provision (paragraph 10).

5   The QIP also includes targeted actions to promote further strategic College-wide enhancement in the areas of good practice identified within the 2017 HER (AP). The College have implemented further the good practice identified within their procedures for programme development, as part of the validation work with the new university partner. A Collaborations Management Handbook has been prepared to clarify responsibilities and ensure that good practice in programme development is maintained.

6   Good practice in relation to the integration of professional practice and research-informed teaching has been supported by revisions to the Staff Handbook to

underline the importance of Research and Scholarship. The addition of prompts to discuss research and scholarship in professional reviews and as agenda items within college committee meetings further strengthens the support for research and scholarship. Additional investment in the College's resource base of online journals to support staff and students engaged in dissertations or research has taken place. The role of Research Director has also been extended with the approval of Academic Board and the Board of Directors. Students reported that they drew inspiration from working with tutors who include expert practitioners and those involved in research including doctoral study, which collectively informs their learning.

7   The use of virtual and real resources and support mechanisms to underpin professional staff and student development and achievement is progressing in line with planned targets. Examples included the addition of further 'Short e-learning' materials to the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) to provide learning resources for students and the recent appointment of students as 'training tutors' who are supported through a PGCE qualification in anticipation of their taking on teaching roles in the future. The College have also added strategic enhancement themes in support of student development to the QIP. The College is monitoring progress with these initiatives and actions arising from the annual staff development day for more widespread implementation across the College in the future.

8   Students were extremely positive about opportunities available for them to feed back through course representatives or directly to programme teams and they indicated that their comments were addressed appropriately. Course representatives also reported their engagement with proposals for changes to programmes or programme design proposals which they fed back to fellow students. The review of the structure and membership of College boards and committees continues to ensure that students have input into the decision-making process of College committees.

9   The QIP is updated annually to ensure that the outcomes of all monitoring activities are effectively captured, and used to inform improvements and enhancements across the whole provision. The remits and reporting lines for College committees and the Marketing Working Group have been reviewed and clarified in the College Handbook and Academic Quality Handbook. In addition to maintaining oversight of the QIP, the Academic Board receives the newly created Unified Action Tracker, (which brings together actions from across the College, and from different reviews) and summary reports from committee chairs. The College's Board of Directors maintains oversight of the work of the Academic Board, which includes consideration of progress against items of strategic importance within the Unified Action Tracker.

10   The Academic Board has also taken on a role to formalise and systematise processes in the strategic identification of areas for College-wide enhancement. This is addressed by revisions to its remit which are now documented in the College's Handbook and the Academic Quality Handbook. Summaries of programme-level evaluations and recommendations for improvements are now considered at Academic Board in order to identify common challenges and recommend strategic enhancement proposals to support programme teams and inform the Board of Directors as they formulate a five-year Strategic Plan.

11   Academic Board minutes and discussions with staff provided evidence for successful strategic outcomes arising from the clarification of the College's governance structure and improved lines of communication, and oversight. Examples of progress since the 2017 HER (AP) include the further development of an integrated College-wide staff research director role and the introduction of modules that facilitate the effective use of resources, consistency of approach and exchange of good practice.

12   In order to confirm the processes for maintaining the accuracy and currency of the information provided to stakeholders by the College, guidance for the production and checking of information has been developed and approved by Academic Board. Supporting sections have also been added to the Staff Handbook to clarify College-wide understanding. The team met staff with a range of roles and responsibilities all of whom were able to articulate clearly their own responsibilities and the responsibilities of other key staff in this context. Students reported satisfaction with the accuracy of the information provided during their applications to study at the College.

13   The team found that the College's admissions processes were explicitly aligned to the Expectations of the Quality Code, *Chapter B2*. Clear and robust policies and procedures continue to be in place for the admission of students.

14   The Registrar has responsibility for admissions, and is supported in this by the Principal, Programme Directors and Marketing Manager. The College Handbook and website contain comprehensive information relating to admissions, including policies and process maps, course content, regulations, fees and college life. For students enrolling on programmes with a practitioner training element the demonstration of fitness to practise and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks are also covered.

15   The College's validating universities and professional accrediting bodies are responsible for ensuring that criteria for admissions are appropriate. Once agreed admissions criteria and minimum English Language requirements are detailed within programme specifications available on the College website. Details on how recognition of prior learning (RPL) arrangements operate are provided within the College's RPL policy.

16   All applicants are interviewed by members of the programme team and by either professional body members or experienced practitioners where practice-based learning will be taking place. The use of guidance notes for interviewers and interview pro formas ensures consistency and confers thoroughness on the process ensuring that all information required is captured and available to inform the decision-making process. As well as confirming academic qualifications it was clear that questions on the application form also test students' motivation, professional aspirations and aptitude. Students were unanimous that the admissions and interview process, which included an open day, had been a valuable, informative experience.

17   The review team found that the College's assessment policies, processes and regulations fully align with the Expectations of the Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*.

18   Information is presented in the College Handbook and on the College Website with assignment-specific information detailed within Programme Handbooks, which include Module Descriptors. The information provided is comprehensive and supported by detailed guidance for students and staff. Oversight is maintained by the validating universities and professional accrediting bodies and the College has prepared a Collaboration Handbook which outlines responsibilities for assessment. Input from external examiners and programme leaders continues to inform the examination boards and provide detailed oversight at the assignment level of programme level assessment strategies. There is a rigorous approach to internal moderation. Sessions on assessment moderation and providing feedback have been included within the 2017 Staff Development day and the College have included examples of good feedback within the Staff Development area of the VLE.

19   Students were very positive about the information provided regarding assessment, the College's actions to ensure their preparedness for assessment, the support provided through regular formative, summative and practice-based assessments and the amount of

feedback with guidance on how to improve. The provision of 'Short e-learning' materials has been piloted on one programme to guide new and progressing students on a range of assessment-related matters including specifically how to avoid plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct.

20   Over the past three academic years retention and achievement rates for all courses have been increasing, and the overall retention for the 2017-18 cohort was 83 per cent with some areas within this achieving 100 per cent. An equivalent pattern exists in relation to achievement. The College has small cohorts, which have a disproportionate statistical effect on data; and the percentage of students suspending their studies, moving from full to part-time or the reverse, or spreading part-time modules over more years due to unexpected life changes, reflects their predominantly mature student demographic.

21   The College continues to recognise the centrality of data to its effective operation, and to this end has arranged a specific internship from a university independent of its partners, for a three-month project, focusing on business process analysis including data systems development.

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

22   The College uses the Quality Code as a reference point when developing programmes, policies and procedures for maintaining academic standards and the quality of the student experience. A detailed mapping exercise has been completed to ensure that College policies and processes reflect the expectations and indicators of the Quality Code. The College has also been awarded professional accreditation for its programmes thereby ensuring alignment with external reference points specific to the programmes of study and connections for both staff and students with current research and professional practice in their chosen field of study.

5   Background to the monitoring visit

23   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.

24   The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Elizabeth Smith, Reviewer, and Mrs Roshani Swift, QAA Officer, on 23 October 2018.