



## Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, September 2017

### 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 Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS) is making acceptable progress with implementing the action plan from the October 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### 2 Changes since the last QAA review

2 OCMS continues to deliver a research degree programme, with MPhil and PhD degrees validated and awarded by Middlesex University (the University). OCMS has 109 students, 11 per cent fewer than at the October 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers). These figures include 16 part-time students still at the OCMS stage, who are not yet registered at the University. There are 13 academic and seven professional support staff. The students continue to be supported by supervisory teams drawn from a network of around 150 leading academics based in the UK and overseas.

### 3 Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The examination of a range of documents and meetings with members of faculty, students, and the Middlesex University Link Tutor indicate that OCMS has made acceptable progress overall, but there is some variability in the progress regarding the implementation of its action plan on the area of good practice, recommendations and the affirmation identified during the October 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers). The Dean's Reviews and Pre-submission Subcommittee meetings (paragraph 4) continue to play a key role in student development. OCMS has yet to complete the formalisation and implementation of document management procedures to ensure the accuracy of information. The Website Committee maintains oversight of the actions being taken to improve the accuracy of information, and the effectiveness of the actions is yet to be evaluated. The review team therefore conclude that despite inconsistencies observed in the published information, progress made with implementing the action plan from the October 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) is acceptable (paragraph 5). The VLE Committee has made good progress with the development of a platform and templates for the virtual learning environment (paragraph 6). A new Programme Governance Board has been established (paragraph 7), with governance and deliberative functions and built-in externality, to develop and implement a strategic plan. Terms of reference of this and other committees have been drafted and implemented (paragraph 11). OCMS has implemented its planned actions to establish a Staff Development Plan (paragraph 8), which has been strengthened by a new staff induction plan. It involves staff attending training at the University, although uptake of training by supervisors is still low. OCMS has not encountered students with physical disabilities, whose needs are meant to be addressed within the limitations of its listed building (paragraph 9), but students with learning disabilities are referred to the University. In addition to the established student forum, there is greater student participation in quality assurance activities and on key OCMS committees (paragraph 10). Complaints and appeals procedures are in place and students and staff

demonstrated an understanding of them (paragraph 12). The new Programme Review, Enhancement and Monitoring Committee plays a key role in the annual monitoring processes (paragraph 13) and oversees enhancement at a strategic level (paragraph 14). Externality still plays a key role in OCMS through the use of external examiners and supervisors (paragraph 15), the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) (paragraph 18), and through the validation arrangement with the University. The admissions processes in OCMS remain strong (paragraph 16) and are evidenced by high retention and achievement rates (paragraph 17).

4 OCMS continues to conduct the Dean's Reviews and Pre-submission Subcommittee meetings. These reviews are clearly documented in the Programme Handbooks, with a mandate to provide students with help and guidance to achieve successful examination outcomes. Students confirmed that these reviews, particularly the Dean's Review, are valuable in providing a clear schedule for completion. OCMS has begun to collect more systematically appropriate qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate the efficacy of the Dean's Reviews and Pre-submission Subcommittee meetings, using a range of questions. It has plans to discuss the data and their implications at designated meetings of the OCMS Progression Panel, and to forward recommendations to the Programme Review, Enhancement and Monitoring Committee for inclusion in the Strategic Plan. Common themes arising from the initial review of the reports include insufficient direct engagement with primary sources, and insufficient critical engagement. However, OCMS has noted, for example, that students are now moving more quickly through the OCMS Stage.

5 The clarification, formalisation and implementation of document management procedures to ensure the accuracy of information is underway. The Programme Handbook, Research Student Handbook and Supervisor Handbook for the 2017-18 academic year have been revised and contain the review dates. The Executive Director, the Quality Officer and the Development Officer review the prospectus annually, making any substantial changes through the year as necessary. Although the plan to assign the review of sections of the website to the responsible members of staff was implemented, the effectiveness of the actions taken is yet to be evaluated. Management asserted that a review of the effectiveness of the arrangements to ensure the accuracy of information would help eliminate inconsistencies observed between sections, for example those on admissions criteria and the word count of the essay required as part of the admissions process. The newly formed Website Committee is tasked with maintaining oversight of the accuracy of information regarding learning opportunities available to students. The review team therefore considered that the progress made in implementing the planned actions justifies an overall acceptable progress outcome of the review.

6 An extensive VLE Strategy has been prepared and a VLE Committee formed, which has so far been designing the platform and relevant templates with plans to launch the VLE in October 2017. Students demonstrated awareness of the resources already available to them online.

7 After deliberations, with input from the University Link Tutor, OCMS established a Programme Governance Board, thus separating the functions of governance and programme monitoring. The new board has governance and deliberative functions, with built-in externality including input from the Middlesex University Link Tutor, whose role includes participation in programme governance. It also has input from Progression Panels and PREMC on quality assurance, which sets the priorities for the Programme Governance Board. PREMC had its first meeting in June 2017 and has since met again, in September 2017. The output from a complete cycle of the Programme Governance Board is the production of the Strategic Plan. Staff were taken through the processes and the governance structure.

8 OCMS now has a Staff Development Plan that covers the processes of programme design, approval, development, delivery and monitoring. The plan includes dedicating the weekly lecture series slots in February and July to ensuring that faculty and students understand these processes. Faculty confirmed that they were fully involved in the recent Institutional Review process through surveys and day consultations, and in decision-making processes on the Institutional Reviews themselves. Staff development has also been strengthened by the introduction of an induction programme. The use of external frameworks, such as the Vitae Researcher Development Framework, is now well understood by faculty and students. As part of the supervisor training process, new supervisors shadow experienced supervisors.

9 OCMS facilitates access within the restrictions of its building, with ramps, a disabled toilet, accessible desks and meeting rooms suitable for students with physical disabilities. OCMS states that it has no experience of supporting students with physical disabilities. To date, OCMS has had one student with learning difficulties, who was supported effectively through the pre-registration process. Students have access to resources and people to assist with reading or writing, in addition to the School making allowances such as extra time during panels and oral examinations. Post-registration, the University's considerable resources for academic and learning support become available to aid students with learning disabilities, including the Disability and Dyslexia Service and the Learning Enhancement Team. However, no OCMS staff attended the Partner Institution Forum on disability and inclusivity offered at the University in May 2017.

10 The student forum outlined procedures for the appointment of student representatives and details of their role. The new cycle of elections for student representatives has yet to be completed and training has not yet taken place. The elected representatives will attend the Programme Review and Enhancement Monitoring Committee (PREMC), a new committee formed to review and monitor the programme to ensure that it operates in accordance with University Regulations and internal quality assurance arrangements. Other students have been asked to join specific committees involved in the administration of the academic programme, such as the Library Management Group. Student representatives will also initiate and follow up on actions agreed at these meetings.

11 OCMS has clearly outlined the responsibilities and extensively described the terms of reference for various committees and panels charged with academic governance, programme design, approval, monitoring and review. The OCMS Progression Panel and the Board of Study are responsible for the review, analysis and deliberative guidance of the programme. PREMC carries out the executive functions within these processes and produces the necessary documents for approval by the Programme Governance Board, which has deliberative functions and therefore approves, amends, or sends back for further work the PREMC's Strategic Action Plan or reports to the University or other external bodies. There are plans for PREMC to fully take over the roles of the QAA Working Committee set up to respond to the recommendations of the 2016 HER (AP), effective January 2018.

12 Regarding formal appeals and complaints made at the OCMS stage, students confirmed that they would take any complaints to their House Tutor in the first instance. OCMS has drawn up, approved and implemented procedures for dealing with complaints at the pre-registration stage, and has contacted the Office of the Independent Adjudicator regarding membership. The University deals with all academic complaints post-registration.

13 OCMS conducted a wider Instructional Review throughout the 2016-17 academic year. PREMC develops OCMS's annual Strategic Plan and reviews the QAA action plan. In addition, OCMS is required to provide an annual monitoring report to the University. PREMC produces the report, which the OCMS Progression Panel considers, and its deliberations feed into the action plan. The Programme Governance Board approves the

report. The University confirmed that the action plan is a key part of the annual monitoring process, which it monitors. OCMS is compiling a dashboard of indicators that will be updated regularly with a view to deriving insights into various monitoring activities, including student achievement and progression.

14 OCMS has made progress with regard to taking a strategic approach to enhancing the quality of student learning opportunities. It has assigned PREMC the overall role for enhancement. OCMS has produced a document that outlines where skills enhancement takes place within the programme. A Research Skills Working Party has made recommendations based on the Researcher Development Framework that are being incorporated across the programme, beginning with the Research Induction School (RIS) and through to completion. OCMS also makes more use of the opportunities for student training, networking and workshops provided by the University, including a library induction day held there.

15 OCMS continues to involve external supervisors within the Research Induction School. It also continues to use external examiners' reports, which are reviewed by the OCMS Progression Panel (OPP) and may thus help to improve procedures and the programme or to address concerns about the examination process and programme management in general.

16 OCMS has a rigorous admissions process, which includes an initial enquiry to request information on the application process, the completion of an application form, the submission of references and, subsequently, a short essay on the proposed research topic. Students confirmed that they have been able to discuss the programme with faculty before interview, and that interviews were conducted in person or by Skype with two members of faculty. Applicants' English language proficiency is confirmed through the submission of a minimum International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 6.5 for applicants from non-majority English speaking countries. Decisions on admission to the OCMS stage of the programme are made by the Admissions Committee. Decisions on whether students can progress to University registration at the end of the OCMS stage are taken by the Programme Governance Board and are then approved by the University.

17 Student data shows high retention rates, ranging from 78 per cent to 100 per cent from the 2014-15 cohorts to the 2017-18 cohorts. The withdrawal rate at the pre-registration stage with the University is estimated at 22 per cent, which indicates that the stage successfully identifies those who will be able to succeed at PhD level. This is reflected in the high achievement rates of 93.4 per cent.

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

18 Chapter B11 of the Quality Code is the basis of the validated and jointly delivered research degree with the University. OCMS operates within the guidelines stipulated in the joint Programme Handbook. The Supervisor Handbook, also referring to Chapter B11 of the Quality Code, outlines the roles of the research supervisors. However, although supervisors are encouraged to attend the supervisor's training programme run by the University's Research and Knowledge Transfer Office, they make very little use of the opportunities for skills development. Training on the Quality Code also forms part of the link tutor training offered by the University.

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

19 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 interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

20 The monitoring visit was carried out by Professor Helen King, Reviewer, and Mr Christopher Mabika, Coordinator, on 27 September 2017.

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