



## Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, 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 Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS) is making acceptable progress with implementing the action plan since the September 2017 [monitoring visit](#).

### 2 Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 OCMS continues to deliver a research degree programme, with MPhil and PhD degrees validated and awarded by Middlesex University (the University). OCMS has 101 students of whom 93 per cent are part-time. These figures include 19 part-time students still at the OCMS stage, who are not yet registered at the University. There are 22 academic and professional support staff. The students continue to be supported by doctoral 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 academic staff and students, and a demonstration of the virtual learning environment (VLE), indicate that OCMS has made acceptable progress overall. Many of the actions from the 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) have been completed. Further actions continue to be implemented and evaluated following the annual monitoring visit in 2017.

4 Document management procedures have now been formalised and implemented (paragraph 5). Information provided to students is now consistent, accurate and up to date (paragraph 5). Students participate effectively and appropriately in quality assurance and enhancement activities (paragraph 6). OCMS continues to have external involvement in the Research Induction School. The Programme Governance Board (PGB) meets regularly and is now well embedded as a key committee. However, its terms of reference are not fully or consistently addressed and there is variability in the reporting and recording of actions (paragraph 8). Similarly, with the Programme Review, Enhancement and Monitoring Committee (PREMC) it is not clear how actions are identified, monitored and evaluated (paragraph 9). Analysis of external examiners' reports takes place and evaluative summaries draw out overarching themes. The Strategic Plan effectively identifies and monitors progress, with actions arising drawn together from internal monitoring and committee discussion. It is not explicit how actions are identified for inclusion in the Strategic Plan, or how action points from committees are included (paragraph 10). A helpful set of quantitative and qualitative performance indicators provides systematic evaluation across the research, and the role of the House Tutor in relation to the supervisory team has been clarified (paragraph 11). The functionality of the VLE has been significantly enhanced, and includes the introduction of a Personal Development Portfolio (PDP), which provides a valuable single repository for self-evaluation of students' research progress (paragraph 12). The Research Ethics Committee effectively reviews potential risks of student research proposals. The introduction of a five-day Transfer Portfolio Intensive Workshop has been

highly successful and OCMS intends to provide this more widely to student groups during the 2018-19 academic year (paragraph 12). The admissions process is systematic and rigorous and valued by students and supports applicants who declare a disability (paragraphs 14 to 17).

5 The September 2017 monitoring visit reported variability in progress with implementation of the action plan. Subsequently, document management has been formalised and implemented. The Document Management Policy details the range of documents covered and their lifecycle from creation through distribution, use, maintenance and destruction. This action has been completed and appropriately implemented and evaluated. The Website Committee meets on a regular basis and the website is reviewed for accuracy and currency. Staff are assigned specific areas of responsibility with oversight by the Stage Leader. Processes in place now ensure that published information is accurate, consistent and up to date. Implementation of the action for published information has been evaluated and shown to be effective.

6 Students engage effectively in formal and informal quality assurance and enhancement activities, including through the Student Forum. The Lead Student Representative has produced guidelines for training of student representatives, which are in the process of ratification. Student participation in quality assurance activities is challenging in the context of the worldwide geographical location of students, who are mainly studying part-time.

7 OCMS continues to involve externality in the Research Induction School, and a working group produces evaluative reports that consider the effectiveness of learning and teaching approaches, and identify potential improvements and amendments. The Research Ethics Committee effectively considers issues related to individual student research proposals and ethical risks.

8 The PGB is now embedded as a key part of the academic structure. Responsibilities include programme governance and assuring and enhancing standards. The board's decision-making role includes the approval of students' application to register with Middlesex University, and approval of transfer from MPhil to PhD. Minutes of the PGB provide a strong focus on individual students' progress. However, PGB records demonstrate little consideration and oversight of wider aspects of quality assurance and enhancement, as required by its terms of reference, which would provide greater oversight of standards and quality.

9 The PREMC meets quarterly. Minutes of meetings vary in their approach with only some providing clear action points. Where actions are identified it is not clear how progress is subsequently reviewed. Summary reports of overarching themes from external examiners' reports are produced, which provide an analysis of strengths and weaknesses. Reports are considered by the Board of Studies and have resulted in enhancements, such as the submission and assessment of students' research development planners.

10 The OCMS Strategic Plan identifies and monitors progress, with actions arising from a range of internal monitoring processes and committees. These include the Progression Panel, the Board of Studies and the PREMC. PREMC is responsible for the Strategic Plan and informs the Board of Studies and the PGB on progress with actions. The Strategic Plan is updated on a quarterly basis although it is not clear how actions from the range of deliberative committees are prioritised for inclusion, while other matters are not addressed. For those actions that are included the Strategic Plan is effectively used in monitoring and evaluating progress.

11 A recently developed set of quantitative and qualitative indicators allows for systematic evaluation across the research programme. This approach provides information

about areas of good practice and shows where enhancements may be made, and has helped to clarify the role of the House Tutor in relation to the supervisory team.

12 Good progress has been made with implementation of the VLE development plan. Sections on theology, qualitative and practice-based research and areas for student discussions are now included. A PDP functionality is now available on the VLE and provides students with an overview of their personal research journey. All students are now required to use PDP, and find this helpful. Feedback from students and staff is positive and PDP is seen as a valuable resource and support.

13 OCMS analysis found that students were not clear about requirements for the transfer panel and further help and support has been put in place through the trialling of a five-day Transfer Portfolio Intensive Workshop. Students reported that this activity has been highly effective in helping them prepare for the transfer to doctoral study. Over the 2018-19 academic year these workshops will be used more widely to support students.

14 Other developments include implementing a rota for admissions interviews, allowing students to feed back about their experience of progression events through the VLE, and the implementation of a Progression Panel to discuss and clarify the boundaries between the roles of House Tutor and the Supervisory Tutor. These actions have resulted in enhancements to the programme.

15 OCMS operates a thorough, systematic and rigorous admissions process. Students report the admissions process to be clear, well managed, and OCMS staff to be responsive and timely in dealing with their application. English requirements are set at the International English Language Testing System score of 6.5 or equivalent. In addition, applicants must provide evidence that they have access to appropriate facilities for their proposed research.

16 Applicants are interviewed in person or virtually by two members of faculty, one of whom has research experience in a similar area. Students report positively on the interview process which is challenging, but with expectations made clear and issues clarified. Offers are managed and overseen by the Admissions Committee and the process is regularly reviewed by the Academic Dean and the Strategic Management Team.

17 During the admissions process prospective students are asked to disclose potential disabilities, which are discussed with the student at the interview stage and are considered at the Admissions Committee. This disclosure is taken into account when deciding whether to offer a student a place. OCMS provides individual support at pre-registration stage. Access to Middlesex University's facilities is available to students following registration.

18 OCMS has designed a structured assessment framework to maintain standards and adapt to the needs of its dispersed, more mature, working student body. These assessment processes ensure that candidates for registration, transfer, or examination have demonstrated in their submissions their readiness to progress, including the appropriate level of development of research skills and demonstrating the capacity to succeed at doctoral level.

19 Assessment is conducted through four key stages: the Research Induction School, where students are given diagnostic assignments in various modules, including critical reading and short essays on their research topic; Registration, where students have produced a research proposal; Transfer to PhD, producing a significant body of written work indicating engagement with primary sources; and a Pre Submission Committee, where the full draft thesis is presented. These well-structured activities have been effective in supporting students' progression through to final doctoral submission.

20 Student data shows high retention rates, ranging from 70 per cent to 100 per cent from the 2015-16 cohorts and the 2017-18 cohorts. The withdrawal rate at the pre-registration stage with the University is 30 per cent for the two cohorts who started in 2015-16. In the 2016-17 cohort only one student has disenrolled, with a retention rate of 92 per cent. This data indicates that the staged assessment process including the pre-registration element, successfully identifies those who will be able to succeed at doctoral level. The effectiveness of these processes is reflected in the high achievement rates of 93 per cent.

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

21 OCMS demonstrates its use of the Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) through the mapping and updating of policies and procedures with those of Middlesex University. Specifically, it uses *Chapter B11* of the Quality Code as the basis of the validated and jointly delivered research degree with the University. OCMS operates within the guidelines stipulated in the University's joint Programme Handbook. The Supervisor Handbook, also refers to *Chapter B11* of the Quality Code, and outlines the roles of the research supervisors.

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

22 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.

23 The monitoring visit was carried out by Professor Donald Pennington, Reviewer, and Mr Simon Ives, QAA Officer, on 4 October 2018.

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557050  
Web [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)