



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of QAHE (Ulst) Ltd, January 2020

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that QAHE (Ulst) Ltd is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the October 2018 [monitoring visit](#).

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 QAHE (Ulst) continues to offer Ulster University (the University) franchised undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in Business, Marketing, Accounting and Management, and Computing at its two campuses in London and Birmingham. Student numbers have increased from the previous academic year - notably for postgraduate programmes at the Birmingham campus. In September 2019, total student enrolments were 717 full-time students, compared to 446 full-time students in October 2018. The composition of the current cohort is: 150 undergraduates and 567 postgraduates; in comparison to 142 undergraduates and 304 postgraduates in the previous year.

3 Recent changes to the senior management team include: new appointments for a Dean of Computing and a Deputy Dean (Regions) based in Birmingham; a Director of Apprenticeships, and a Teaching and Learning Manager. A further appointment is planned for a Deputy Dean at the London Campus. The staffing profile has seen a commensurate, managed increase since September 2018, with the addition of 67 new full-time, part-time and freelance staff to the 30 existing faculty staff employed at that time. In addition, the number of administrative and support staff has increased by 13, since the previous monitoring visit.

4 QAHE (Ulst) has expanded its estate infrastructure with leases on two buildings near to the main London campus, enabling transfer of the library and other support services to these buildings. These relocations have created space for three additional classrooms and a room for further IT facilities.

5 The annual monitoring visit was undertaken as an extended visit due to the increase in total student numbers, the increase in staff numbers and the acquisition of a new building.

Findings from the monitoring visit

6 QAHE (Ulst) has a clearly articulated organisational structure that enables monitoring, evaluation and further developments of its action plans at both course and programme levels.

7 The review team analysed a range of documentary evidence, including the 2019 Annual Return and accompanying data sets; and held meetings with a range of staff and students, which allowed QAHE (Ulst) to demonstrate continuation of the monitoring, reviewing and enhancement of its higher education provision. In the past year, QAHE (Ulst)

has continued to address the actions which arose from the 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers (AP)) (see paragraphs 8-13) and is demonstrating engagement with relevant external reference points, including developments which start to address the revised Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) (see paragraphs 16-20).

8 QAHE (Ulst) continues to enhance and review actions in support of identified good practice in the development of learning materials that are contextualised to the location and profile of the student body. The current updated action plan demonstrates ongoing and completed aspects of materials contextualisation guided by Course Directors. Most recent enhancements include the development of specific case studies for students in London and Birmingham, and an increased focus on joint staff development days for the two campuses. The increase in Course Directors at Birmingham has contributed to improvements in interactions between the two campuses and student understanding of different campus locations.

9 Identified good practice in the sustained development of study skills, incorporating the use of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for an increasingly diverse student body, remains an ongoing action plan priority. Academic skills modules have been reviewed and refined to meet the needs of, for example, the computing degree students by including aspects of presentation and writing skills. Students are consulted on further learner support needs. Welfare support staff are involved in supporting learners, including assessment of individual student adjustments by the Academic Community of Excellence (ACE) team. The EAP team hold regular professional development workshops each semester, most recently focused on intercultural diversity and managing cultural expectations for international students.

10 QAHE (Ulst) continues to develop and improve its response to the recommendation to ensure that all students are provided with formal opportunities for individual reflection on their progress to further their academic development. Enhancement strategies are based on the delivery of more effective support from the Studies Advisors, underpinned by the personal tutor system. Student awareness of Studies Advisors' support is raised through an improved communications strategy and at induction. New staff have been mentored in their role, part of which focuses upon their activities as Studies Advisors, thus allowing them to provide appropriate academic support and effective communication with students. Evaluation and feedback on the use of Studies Advisors is obtained from student representatives at Staff-Student Consultative Committee meetings. Students who met the team commented that they value the individual support that they receive from accessible Studies Advisors and personal tutors.

11 Recent improvements to student induction contribute to the affirmation of continued deliberative steps being taken to ensure the transition of learners to higher education through extended induction procedures. Induction is held immediately after enrolment, using revised content of presentations in response to student feedback. QAHE (Ulst) has further revised its postgraduate induction for January 2020 to include the use of pre-arrival business studies materials for non-cognate entry students, as part of its retention strategy, with subsequent impact evaluation to be carried out as part of its New Arrivals Survey.

12 There is evidence to support the affirmation of continued actions to engage students in higher-level committees through representative training, including student representation on the Academic Board and the Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC). Students have been involved in training sessions for committee chairs, and for recent programme validation panels. The LTC Equality, Diversity and Employability sub-committee is now chaired by a student member.

13 The affirmation of the introduction of structures, policies and procedures to improve the capacity to manage and enhance the provision of learning resources is underpinned by the CPD programme and the annual teaching and learning conference. Management structures have been revised with new sub-committees of the LTC with specific responsibilities for: technology; assessment; content and feedback; staff development; and Equality, Diversity and Employability. Recent enhancements to teaching skills development have focused on a team-based blended learning approach, 'Empowering Learning.' A new mentoring scheme using trained mentors and workshops assists staff HEA applications, together with peer observations and support to enhance subject knowledge. QAHE (Ulster) has engaged with students to develop the skills required for dissertations, including assistance with presentation skills, provided by the ACE team.

14 The provider's own internal quality monitoring processes have led to the development of a new dashboard information system to provide live student performance data and module analysis which has the potential to improve the student learning experience. The ACE team has recruited a London computing specialist in response to student feedback and intends to fill a similar post in Birmingham. A WEBx workshop is available for self-study by students to supplement classroom workshops. The recently appointed Dissertation Coordinator ensures effective communications with students throughout the dissertation module. QAHE (Ulster) has attempted to create a stronger sense of community identity to improve student satisfaction ratings through Ulster-focused social events and workshops. Student feedback has informed the delivery of IT technology to the conversion masters MSc Professional Software Development programme. More modules are now offered throughout a semester rather than the previous six-week intensive format. Enhancements to learner support for BSc (Hons) Computing Systems students include extended induction, teaching videos and improved on-line resources, and industry speakers supporting a Women in IT event. The impact of these initiatives is evaluated by the semester monitoring reports to course committees and by student module feedback surveys.

15 QAHE (Ulster) continues to have a wide range of cohort sizes across its provision at both campuses, varying between fewer than 10 students, up to a maximum of 106 on some programmes in October 2019. The average numbers of students enrolled initially on individual programmes for the three-year period 2016-19 were 11, 24 and 18 respectively. For the same period, the average retention rates were 84%, 77% and 87%, with average achievement rates for completing students of 77%, 62% and 72%. The strategies introduced for more rigorous induction processes, coupled with enhanced levels of academic skills and wider pastoral support, have contributed to improvement of both retention and completion rates in 2018-19.

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

16 Ulster University validated programmes are aligned with *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. The University revalidated the MSc Professional Software Development, BSc Computing Systems and MSc Marketing programmes in 2018. Programme specifications are articulated in student handbooks.

17 The British Council inspected and reaccredited QAHE (Ulster) in October 2018. The British Accreditation Council reviewed and reaccredited QAHE (Ulster) in March 2019.

18 Part of the approach of QAHE (Ulster) to managing quality is through its work with external examiners. External examiners' reports are reviewed by the Head of Quality Assurance, Course Directors and other senior staff in order to identify any arising actions. The Academic Board is responsible for monitoring these actions.

19 QAHE (Ulst) engaged effectively with the previous UK Quality Code, and is now in the process of addressing and engaging with the revised Quality Code. QAHE (Ulst) has begun an initial mapping of the Core and Common practices of the revised Quality Code. Meetings with academic and senior staff demonstrated an awareness that alignment of existing policies and procedures requires the transition to the revised Quality Code to be addressed through a stated QAHE (Ulst) policy of working group consultations with all stakeholders. Consideration of some aspects of the revised Quality Code is progressing and the team was informed that the mapping exercise has a target completion date of the end of March 2020.

20 QAHE (Ulst) works closely in an ongoing way with its validating university and the University's quality procedures for a forthcoming revalidation event will require full consideration of the revised Quality Code by both QAHE (Ulst) staff and students.

Background to the monitoring visit

21 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.

22 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Elizabeth Briggs, Reviewer, and Mrs Nadine Baker, QAA Officer, on 15 and 16 January 2020.

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