



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Oxford Business College, June 2019

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 Business College (the College) is making progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision, but further improvement is required since the [May 2018 monitoring visit](#).

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The College continues to deliver HNC and HND programmes awarded by Pearson taught to the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF). There are currently 13 teaching staff, who are on 0.5 contracts.

3 The College currently has 41 students, 10 less than at the previous monitoring visit. Twenty nine students are registered for the HNC, and 12 for the HND Business programmes, including pathways in Accounting, Human Resource Management and Marketing. Most of the students registered on the HNC programme will progress to the HND following completion of the relevant units.

Findings from the monitoring visit

4 Progress towards achievement of the recommendations and affirmations of the 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)), has been made as indicated in the 2018 monitoring report. Programme specifications fully meet Pearson requirements. Examination boards in line with Pearson requirements operate thorough Academic Assessment Boards with supporting policy. However, there is currently insufficient oversight of retention and achievement through College committees (paragraph 8, 9 and 18) and a decline in the support, quality and level of teaching perceived by students (paragraph 9). Consequently, there is a potential risk to academic standards and quality.

5 The policies and procedures around enhancement noted in the 2018 monitoring visit report remain and enhancement initiatives include introducing a new virtual learning environment (VLE), refurbishing the premises, and increasing the number of visiting speakers and external visits to enrich the curriculum. Other examples of enhancement provided by staff are those aimed at improving student achievement (see paragraph 9). Staff training in the last year covered national issues such as Prevent and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), awarding organisation training on assignment writing, assessment and grading, and College training on the VLE. However, there is no evidence of the formal evaluation of this training and students stated that a poorly managed introduction and use of the new VLE by staff had impacted negatively on their learning experience. Although students praised some staff for their teaching and support, students were critical of the quality and level of some of the teaching they received.

6 The new VLE was not consistently used by all staff resulting in students having to check two systems. Students believed that some staff were not sufficiently familiar with the new system to use it effectively. It is mainly used to submit assignments, which are then

checked with plagiarism-detection software. Staff confirmed that some of them had not transferred fully to the new system, and that there was little use of the interactive or monitoring functions of the system.

7 As a result of issues around poor attendance, the College has introduced regular online attendance monitoring with follow-up letters and personal interviews for poor attenders. Students submit electronic assignment drafts, which are centrally monitored with feedback provided in personal tutorials. However, students reported that not all staff provide timely feedback to allow them to improve their draft. Long delays and poor-quality feedback were also reported at the awarding organisation annual review. Students also felt that additional academic support had declined, with the withdrawal of 'Curriculum Plus' in favour of the individual tutorials, which varied in the level and nature of support provided and although available and timetabled were not compulsory. No evidence was provided of evaluation of the effectiveness of 'Curriculum Plus' or of management decision to withdraw it.

8 Steps taken by the College to improve achievement through close monitoring and support have yet to show significant improvement with similar rates of referral and non-submission for assessed work across units. The October 2018 Academic Assessment Board showed only 17 per cent of HNC students and 33 per cent of HND students, an overall 24.5 per cent, passed all of the units taken. One unit showed one merit, one pass, three referrals and 14 non-submissions. Staff explanations for poor results range from a decline in the calibre of students to students not realising how much work they need to do to achieve. Students cite bunching of assessments, delayed feedback and declining support.

9 Some of the examples of good practice identified in the HER (AP) 2016 remain as strengths for the College, but are in varying stages of development to improve students' learning opportunities. The clear and supportive admissions processes remain but are less effective to prepare students' future learning (see paragraph 11 and 12). The partnership between the College and its students identified as good practice in the HER (AP) remains, with positive comments from students who praise the accessibility of senior and support staff and most teaching staff. However, although processes to involve and to elicit student opinion remain in place, they are not effective. Student representatives are trained and entitled to sit on committees. Although a representative attended two senior management team (SMT S) meetings in 2018, other committee minutes show student attendance to be rare. Student representatives meet at a Student Council and unit-level questionnaires are used to gather student views on curriculum and teaching. However, students thought the representative system no longer operated. The awarding organisation annual monitoring noted that students did not feel they had a strong voice in the College. The only minutes provided from a Student Council meeting are brief, discussing social events and chairs rather than substantive issues of student experience.

10 The approach to the use of digital technology, which enhances student learning opportunities, remains insofar as the College now has consistent processes of electronic record keeping, attendance monitoring and electronic assignment submission. However, the inconsistent use of the VLE to support learning is identified above (see paragraph 6).

11 The 2018 monitoring praised the new Tutor Council for allowing the College to build on the good practice identified at the HER (AP). The Tutor Council further strengthened team ethos and effective sharing of best practice with staff updates on curriculum and regulations, feedback from students and committees. Records of the meetings showed them to be a useful forum for sharing and review, but it was discontinued after its April 2018 meeting in favour of less structured, termly tutor meetings.

12 An admissions policy informs the process and all students either receive an interview or electronic communications with admissions staff following a detailed pro forma.

The College Admissions Officer checks language competency qualifications and prior qualifications to ensure that students enrolled meet entry requirements. A detailed pre-arrival pack and comprehensive induction programme prepare students for study at the College and in the UK. English language lessons support students in writing for academic purposes.

13 Support for overseas students is enhanced by the extensive linguistic abilities of the staff who collectively speak over 15 languages. Although the premises are not easily accessible for students with physical disability, support for students requiring reasonable adjustments is strong. Support for mental health and personal problems is extensive with drop in and appointment sessions provided by two trained counsellors on the staff. Student survey evidence confirms the admissions processes to be fair and effective, and students who met the team thought the information provided to them was accurate and confirmed receiving a detailed induction. Although the College was shortlisted for the independent sector of the student choice awards (2018), some students judged the programme not to have met their expectations. Students met by the team judged the post-entry support as insufficient for those coming from overseas with no student mentors or help in understanding the UK system of learning and assessment.

14 The awarding organisation confirms the effectiveness of internal quality sampling of assessed work and that appropriate standards are maintained. The Staff Handbook and Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy guide staff assessment procedures and new tutors receive an induction coupled with peer support. Observation of teaching facilitates the sharing of good practice. Guidance and staff development support staff in assessment decisions and feedback. However, the effectiveness of the training has not been evaluated and student comments on delayed and poor feedback, as noted in paragraph 8, calls into question the impact of the training across all teaching staff.

15 Steps to improve gathering and use of data to inform decision making include the appointment of a part-time data analyst, and a centralised database covering the whole student journey. Operational senior management team meetings (SMT O) take quarterly reports on academic matters, admissions, marketing, finance and human resources. Programme monitoring focuses on student surveys, attendance monitoring and termly analysis of performance at assessment boards. The Academic Assessment Board formally approves results and is responsible to the (SMT S).

16 The student cohorts from 2017-18 are due to graduate in 2019 and 2020, so limiting the analysis of current achievement data and the effectiveness of new initiatives for improvement. Aggregate figures for 2016-17 show 69 enrolments, 11 discontinued and 28 passes, which is a pass rate of 48 per cent. Cohort sizes for most programmes are small making figures unreliable as indicators of performance within the aggregate totals. As noted in paragraph 8, submission and achievement rates show 24.5 per cent of students passing all units taken. Only one student was expected to complete in January 2019 out of the three enrolled, although all six students from the April/May 2018 entry are expected to complete in April 2020.

18 The Academic Assessment Board meets termly, with the last board meeting in October 2018 considering the July results, but with no subsequent Board to consider student progress and achievement. The external examiner report states that the Assessment Board processes are compliant with awarding organisation requirements. Although the Academic Assessment Board is responsible to the SMT, minutes from 7 December 2018 and 31 January 2019 show no discussion of results of the October Board, suggesting inconsistent oversight of student progression and achievement.

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

19 The College uses external reference points to help assure academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. These include adhering to Pearson's quality management processes and the RQF. Staff are active in the Independent Higher Education group (IHE), attend QAA events, Office for Students training and consultations. Some staff have achieved recognition with Advance HE and some have relevant professional organisation membership. However, the College has not prepared for the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) with staff development or mapping exercises and staff show little knowledge of the Quality Code, or its application.

Background to the monitoring visit

20 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.

21 The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Glenn Barr, Reviewer, and Mr Millard Parkinson, QAA Officer, on 6 June 2019.

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