Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of SAE Education Ltd, 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 SAE Education Ltd. (the Institute) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the June 2018 monitoring visit.

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2   The Institute has 618 students currently enrolled on its programmes including 296 on the BA/BSc (Hons) Audio Production and 132 on the BA/BSc (Hons) Digital Film Production. 18 students are enrolled on a master's programme, the MA/MSc Professional Practice (Creative Media Industries). All the programmes are validated by Middlesex University. In 2017-18 the Institute recruited 778 students to its undergraduate and postgraduate programmes so there has been a reduction in recruitment over this time. This is in part due to the announcement in June 2018 of the closure of the Oxford campus and that no further recruitment would take place there after September 2018. This meant that the September intake numbers were impacted and there was no January 2019 intake at Oxford. This closure has also impacted on the numbers of full-time permanent academic staff which have reduced from 29 in 2017-18 to 22 in 2018-19.

Findings from the monitoring visit

3   The Institute has completed the actions arising from the 2016 action plan and further developed the identified areas of good practice (paragraph 4). Actions arising from the Institute's own monitoring of provision have been identified and most have been completed and evaluated. Some actions, in particular the provision of feedback to students, have made progress, but the Institute identifies that further work is needed (paragraph 4). Other actions such as the development of videos to assist students in assignment work, have yet to fully impact on the student experience (paragraph 10).

4   In the 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)) the review team identified seven areas of good practice and made no recommendations or affirmations. During the monitoring visit in 2018 the team noted that the Institute had made acceptable progress by successfully completing all the agreed actions relating to the areas of good practice and had also further developed them. These actions had been conflated with actions to address issues identified through the systematic monitoring of its provision. Actions had been robustly addressed, although some had yet to impact fully on the experience of students. There were two outstanding issues raised at the annual monitoring visit in 2018, as some students reported inconsistencies in their experience of admissions and the policy statement on annual quality monitoring included references to procedures that had been discontinued. Staff state that the policy has been amended and students now report consistent admissions experiences (paragraph 8). Some actions from the plan provided with last year's monitoring submission are yet to be completed. These include

improvements to the delivery of feedback which has been identified as a key area for further staff development, and the development of a central register for companies and contacts with whom students have found work placements.

5   The Institute works on action plans derived from the annual monitoring reports to its awarding body. The action plan for 2017-18 was reviewed as part of the annual monitoring report submitted in the current year and effective actions have been taken in all areas. The review of this action plan noted that student retention has improved as a result of weekly attendance monitoring including module attendance, consecutive absences and warnings to students who fail to meet attendance thresholds. A further system of calculating student risk is being trialled at Oxford. Project-based learning (PBL) has been further developed over the last two years with specific elective modules being taken up by students. This has resulted in positive student feedback and students met confirm that this is an effective method of learning. Revised grading rubrics have been introduced for every assessment across all programmes. External examiners comment that assessment rubrics are clearly expressed and contain specific guidance for students. Students confirm that the rubrics are helpful in planning their assessments.

6   The process of revalidation of Middlesex University programmes began in late 2018. Staff workshops were held on every campus followed by surveys allowing all staff to have input. Student focus groups have been held to gather further feedback. Surveys were also sent to alumni and employers and industry contacts. For discontinued programmes, a teach-out plan is being implemented at Oxford and students studying at this campus state that this has not affected their programme of study and that teaching and physical resources have been maintained.

7   The Institute's admissions process has not changed significantly since the last Annual Monitoring Visit. The Institute has an Admissions Policy and a detailed Admissions Manual, and the admissions team receive regular training and updating through UCAS, NARIC and UKCISA. The Institute has specialist procedures for applicants with additional support needs and for the accreditation of prior learning. Applicants submit a range of documents including their personal statement, a copy of their UK NARIC qualification for any overseas qualifications, and an English language certificate where the student's first language is not English. Any applicants who do not have English as a first language need to prove language competency to IELTS 6.0. English language requirements are communicated on the website.

8   Most students attending the Institute are from the United Kingdom and have the required competency in English, but they must provide evidence of a minimum of GCSE C grade in English. The admissions team are responsible for the final assessment of English competency through written work submitted and prior qualifications. Following an initial assessment by the admissions team, the Programme Coordinator determines each applicant's suitability through their prior qualifications and experience and follows the process as described in the June 2018 annual monitoring report. Students the review team met during the visit expressed satisfaction with the admissions process. They also confirmed that previous certificates and English language requirements are scrutinised during the process. Intent to study for international applicants is assessed by means of interviews, which may be conducted online.

9   The Institute's mental health support has been increased through partnership with Mind in the areas local to each campus. SAE London now offers a number of appointments for students in each week with Mind staff. Students are aware of the Institute's provision for mental health support.

10   The Institute's Quality Manual contains policies and procedures that relate to assessment and outline the processes which ensure that equitable, valid and reliable processes are in place [pages 43 - 49]. The policies are published on the website and are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that staff positions and responsibilities are accurately reflected. A set of videos explaining grading criteria have been produced by the Institute for a selection of Level 5 and 6 modules. The videos also reduce the need for class time to be taken up with providing guidance and examples of previous student's work. Although most of the students the review team met were aware of the videos, none had watched them. Staff have engaged with online teaching resources as a professional development tool particularly for upskilling in software applications and are now extending the use of external online programmes to students.

11   To ensure academic integrity, the Institute follows its Academic Honesty policy. The low student to staff ratio enables staff to be involved in the development of practical assessments, which are delivered through supervised tutorials and workshops which ensure originality. The Institute also uses plagiarism-detection software and similarity reports are generated for written work submitted through the virtual learning environment. Students had a clear understanding of how the software can be used to ensure work is correctly referenced. There have been a small number of instances of academic malpractice raised in the current academic year. In compliance with the Academic Honesty Policy these have been dealt with informally by the relevant Academic Coordinators, with no cases this year being raised to formal proceedings.

12   Assessment grading takes place at campus level, with all work at Levels 5 and 6 moderated by a second assessor and some work, including major projects, is double marked. Moderation and second marking also take place cross-campus to ensure consistency in the grading process. The Institute has introduced an assessment tracking system, which monitors submitted work and its progress through the marking system. This identifies problem assignments or modules and guides the Institute to ensure sufficient time and staffing is given to meet marking turnaround deadlines. Students state that feedback is detailed, linked to learning outcomes, and helps prepare them for the next assessment. Grades are presented to each Campus Assessment Panel. Operating in partnership with the awarding body, a panel of three University Link Tutors attend meetings of Content Specialist Panels which ensures consistency across campuses. External Examiners are provided with samples of work across all campuses, programmes, modules and grade classifications, from which they review up to 20 pieces of assessed work and provide an annual report to the Institute and the awarding body. The external examiners comment that the standards at the Institute are comparable to similar programmes at other institutions.

13   The Institute makes good use of data to monitor all aspects of its activity. For the 2015-16, cohort retention was 78 per cent (328 of 420 students). Although many programmes had low numbers meaning that single withdrawals make a large percentage difference. However, for the BA/BSc (Hons) Interactive Animation and the BA/BSc Audio Production (Hons) (September), which had significant enrolments, the retention rates were 71 per cent and 78 per cent. Of those students who completed their programme 90 per cent achieved their qualification (243 of 274 students). For the 2016-17 cohort retention overall was 81 percent (340 of 418 students). The BA/BSc Audio Production (Hons) May enrolment had retention rate of 72 per cent with 11 out of 39 students withdrawing. Of those students who have completed their programme 89 per cent achieved the qualification (226 out of 252 students). For the 2017-18 cohort retention was 80 per cent (333 of 417 students), however, the three groups of the BA/BSc Audio Production (Hons) programme are now averaging 84 per cent retention with 31 out of 193 students discontinuing their studies. A comprehensive plan has been put in place by the Institute to measure and improve retention and continuation. Software tools, which track student retention on a weekly basis are in use across all campuses.

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

14   The Institute uses a number of external reference points when managing its provision. Policies and procedures of the Institute have been mapped against the UK Quality Code for Higher Education. The FHEQ and the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements are used in the development of the programmes and have been used in the early stages of development of the revalidated programmes. The Institute supports staff in achieving Fellowship of Advance HE. Nine academic staff now hold HEA fellowships, with a further two currently preparing applications, this represents approximately 20 per cent of the current academic staff. The Institute has no formal affiliations with professional bodies or accreditation for its programmes. Audio staff have individual membership of the Audio Engineering society, and staff and students engage with activities held at the British Film Institute and the London Film Hub.

Background to the monitoring visit

15   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.

16   The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Peter Hymans, Reviewer, and Mr Kevin Kendall, QAA Officer, on 6 June 2019.