



Educational Oversight for Embedded Colleges: report of the monitoring visit of Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group), October 2018

Royal Holloway University of London International Study Centre

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the monitoring team concludes that Royal Holloway University of London International Study Centre (the Centre) is making commendable progress with implementing the action plan following the October 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Embedded Colleges\)](#).

Changes since the last QAA review

2 The Centre continues to offer pathways on the International Foundation Year (IFY) programme, and there has been no change since the Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) (HER (EC)) in 2016 other than the IFY programme being rewritten, approved and launched in September 2017. Royal Holloway International Study Centre (RHISC) is considering broadening its offer in the future by providing the International Year One (IY1) programme, but there were no specific plans at the time of the monitoring visit.

3 Student numbers are broadly stable with little change since the HER (EC) in 2016. Current teaching accommodation would be a constraining factor on significant growth in student numbers and ensuring the Centre has sufficient suitable teaching spaces is identified in the Centre Action Plan (CAP) as a key element in the development of the partnership with the University.

4 A significant change relates to staffing. The Centre has moved from a model where nearly all teaching staff were sessional to appointing six permanent staff, five on full contracts and one on a 0.8 FTE contract. The Centre evaluates this as having enhanced the quality of student support, and students rated the quality of staff support very highly. It has also enhanced the level of staff engagement with the academic governance of RHISC.

Findings from the monitoring visit

5 The Centre received a commendable judgement in its HER (EC) in 2016, and so this was the first monitoring visit to the Centre since then. There were no recommendations or affirmations in the 2016 HER (EC), and the report identified three areas of good practice. The Centre has shown commendable progress in building on, developing and broadening these areas of good practice (paragraphs 6-10).

6 The first area of good practice was the use of 'drop-in' observations of teaching by management to inform the annual appraisal process, leading to more focused staff

development. Actions to build on the good practice in teaching observation are contained in the CAP and RHISC has continued to follow the Study Group's Observation of Learning and Teaching Policy which requires all staff to take part in peer observation as well as the drop-in observations by management. Peer observations are carefully arranged so that staff undertaking the observation gain benefit from the process too, for example, Academic English Skills (AES) Tutors observing academic tutors and vice versa. Observation outcomes inform staff appraisal and the identification of staff development needs. An innovation has been the implementation of four cross-centre observations with three other international study centres (ISCs) (Kingston, Surrey, Istituto Marangoni), which the Centre evaluates to have been useful, allowing staff to see how tutors in other centres deal with the similar challenges and identifying different materials and approaches used in AES teaching. There is also the development of a 'Cluster CPD Strategy' drawing on the cross-centre good practice identified within the London-based ISCs, but localised to each centre's specific requirements. There is an intention to develop further the sharing of good practice in 2018-19. The Centre is also seeking to develop cross-teaching-observations with the University, and there has been some progress in the AES area with the University's Centre for the Development of Academic Skills (CeDAS) unit, and the extension of this to academic subject areas is anticipated.

7 The second area of good practice was the range of ways in which the Centre is engaging with its partner university to systematically enhance the curriculum. The Centre continues to engage with the University in a number of ways, notably through the University Link Tutors. There is one main Link Tutor and 15 subject-specific Link Tutors supported by a statement of the Link Tutor role and responsibilities. The Head of Centre meets with the main Link Tutor fortnightly to discuss student progression and experience. Subject-specific Link Tutors were reviewed and allocated prior to the commencement of the 2017-18 academic year. Subject Link Tutors were invited to speak to students about the degree programmes in their respective departments. While there is some variance, generally the level of engagement with University subject link tutors has increased, and they participate in the end-of-year module review process. The Centre has plans to further develop these areas of engagement with the University in 2018-19.

8 More broadly, the Centre has worked with the University to enhance partnership cooperation. The IFY Monitoring Group meets twice yearly, providing a forum for oversight of the effectiveness of the delivery of the IFY and to ensure the standards required for the progression to study at the University are met. In addition, there are monthly Partnership Meetings concerned with the management of the partnership, and the effectiveness of these has been enhanced by a key university appointment, as well as periodic Joint Steering Group Meetings. A particular issue has been 'student flight' - students eligible to progress to Royal Holloway who have preferred to go to a different university - with the proportion of students not choosing to progress increasing from 10 per cent in 2015-16 to 21 per cent in 2016-17. The Centre has worked with the University over the last year to reverse this trend. It was not possible at the time of the visit to evaluate the effectiveness of the measures being taken as the University had not completed its recruitment for 2018-19. There has been progress with gaining more and better information about the academic performance of Centre alumni on their University programme, and this has been overseen by the Joint Steering Group. Information at programme level is available, but RHISC would like to get down to module level student performance. The University has set up a working group, that includes the Administration Manager, to examine the possibility of sharing more granular information on student performance, while the Link Tutor has also provided useful data to the Centre which suggest IFY students perform better than either direct entry international students or those entering from other foundation programmes).

9 The third area of good practice was the comprehensive and integrated support that enables students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential, and this has continued to be developed since the last HER (EC). A key change to the academic curriculum in 2017-18 was the inclusion of formal formative assessments. These are formally timetabled formative assessments which give students the chance to learn from assessment in a way which does not jeopardise their final grades, provides the Centre with useful data to track student progress and helps inform student progress reports through the Red, Pink, Amber, Green (RPAGs) traffic light system. The value of RPAGs has been enhanced by requiring staff to write comments directly to students and for their comments to be sent to students in the form of termly reports. The Centre has restructured personal tutor support locating it within the role of the Welfare Tutor, a new post since the HER (EC) in 2016. The Centre believes this has ensured more consistent and effective support for students, and students clearly identified the Welfare Tutor as the location of both academic and personal support. The Centre has also implemented several initiatives designed to develop students' personal and professional potential in line with Study Group's guidance regarding careers and employability (CareerAhead), and the appointment of full-time tutors has enabled lead tutors to be allocated to supporting employability initiatives.

10 Students are able to access the full range of learning resources of the University, and they have full access to the University's student support services including support for students with special education needs (SEN). The Centre has delivered its planned workshop on supporting students with SEN as part of staff induction in September 2018. The Centre had planned to launch an alumni-mentoring-scheme in 2017-18, whereby students who have progressed to the University would provide peer support to current students. However, while alumni expressed a willingness to participate in principle, their own work pressures meant the scheme was not successful. The Head of Centre is currently consulting with other centres where the scheme has been successful with a view to relaunching it in 2018-19. A completed action in the CAP was to ensure students who arrive late and miss the formal induction programme are supported and given the same opportunities as other students. However, some of the students who had arrived late said that they did not feel well supported and that their experience fell short of that enjoyed by students who had benefitted from the induction programme. The Centre explained the arrangements it had in place to support the induction of late arrivals. Responsibility for different aspects of the process lay with different members of staff, and the review team formed the view that there was no overarching responsibility to ensure every late arrival had the same opportunities as other students.

11 Student recruitment and admission is centrally administered by Study Group. Entry requirements are maintained in a centralised database and set out in each Centre Specification, published on public-facing websites, and within marketing material and communications. Any borderline or exceptional cases outside the entry qualifications criteria are referred to the Head of Centre for a decision. Most of the students with whom the review team met had been recruited through an agent, but a minority had done their own research using the Study Group internet site. Students said they had found the information they had received about RHISC and their programme of study had been accurate, and generally they felt the admissions process was supportive.

12 The Centre uses the annual monitoring report pro forma laid down by the Study Group, and which draws on module reviews as part of the process. For 2016-17, the module review involved staff evaluating the newly-introduced IFY programme by drawing on their own experience of delivering their module, and they were given guidance on how to do this, as well

as reflecting on feedback given by students through student surveys, external examiner reports and oversight and evaluation of the Centre's modules by Link Tutors from the University.

13 The proportion of students eligible for progression to Royal Holloway University increased by 22 per cent, from 60 per cent in 2015-16 to 82 per cent in 2016-17 and stabilised at 81 per cent for 2017-18. However, within the latter figure, there was a significant discrepancy between the September 2017 and January 2018 intakes with the former achieving an eligible-for-progression rate of 86 per cent and the latter (a much smaller cohort) at 64 per cent. Staff indicated it was not unusual for the January cohort to perform less well, not least because their English skills may have regressed waiting for entry. There was an intention to roll-out pre-arrival study materials to enhance English language competence. The Centre produces a very detailed analysis of student achievement which identifies overall student progression, an analysis of transition to the University and English language performance.

The embedded colleges' use of external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

14 Study Group is not a degree-awarding institution and its programmes are not credit-bearing, but it benchmarks its programmes against *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ) for Levels 4-6, and against the Regulated Qualifications Framework for preparatory programmes set at Level 3. English language modules are set against the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The IFY programme is approved by Study Group and endorsed by Royal Holloway University. There are programme specifications which contain standardised information, including clearly mapped learning outcomes and grade descriptors. The programme specifications identify external reference points including the UK Quality Code for Higher Education and the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements. While most ISC programmes of study do not lead to higher education institution credit, programmes and modules are designed to fit with the principles of the partner university's academic framework in terms of credit-equivalence.

Background to the monitoring visit

15 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's and its embedded colleges' 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 and its embedded colleges 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 Ms Sarah James, QAA Officer, and Emeritus Professor Brian Anderton, QAA Reviewer, on 4 October 2018.

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