Educational Oversight: report of the extended monitoring visit of South Chelsea International College Ltd, April 2015

Section 1: Outcome of the extended monitoring visit

1   From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the South Chelsea International College Ltd (the College) has made acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the previous monitoring visit in April 2014.

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2   Student enrolments have increased by 23 per cent since the last monitoring visit. This has been due mainly to the introduction of a new level 7 programme in Business Management, awarded by the Association of Business Executives (ABE), which builds on the existing lower level programmes and accounts for 34 per cent of total student numbers. There are 76 students enrolled on the Business Management programme of whom 45 are level 7 students. The Association of Business Executives is also the awarding organisation for the Travel, Tourism and Hospitality Management programme on which there are five students, three at level 5 and two at level 6. In Information Technology (Computer Studies) there are 21 students, six at level 4, two at level 5 and 13 at level 6. The awarding organisation is BSC, The Chartered Institute for IT.

3   Staff numbers remain small but have increased from 3.4 full-time equivalent (FTE) to 5 FTE, or by 47 per cent. At the time of the last annual monitoring review, the College employed six permanent part-time teaching staff on hourly contracts. There are currently four full-time teaching staff and two permanent part-time teaching staff. Staffing has been strengthened by the appointment of one new full-time member of staff and the increase in the hours of other part-time staff.

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

4   Progress completing the actions identified by the Review for Educational Oversight (REO) of 2012 and the monitoring visit reports of 2013 and 2014, has slowed. Although the College has clarified its processes of academic deliberation and management, limitations remain in the application of these processes. The Study Board and Academic Board conduct the deliberative processes of management. The Academic Board meets twice a year focusing on policy, processes and strategic direction, whereas the Study Board deals with programme and College management issues on a more informal basis. College management and teaching staff describe clearly the respective functions of the committees and cycle of business. However, minutes of these meetings showed a degree of overlap and lack of focus, with limited attention to the cycle of business. Minutes of the Quality Assurance Committee show it to be primarily concerned with ensuring consistency in the website, prospectus and handbooks. The small scale of the College allows detailed operational management through weekly management team meetings. However, the growth in student numbers since the last annual monitoring review requires increased emphasis on the formal, rather than informal, structures.

5   Effective processes of annual reporting and action planning continue at whole-College level. The annual report for 2014 considers issues of teaching quality, examination results, learning resources, student support and staff development. The College updates the action plan from the REO and uses its own detailed operational action plan for managing all aspects of College business. Regular programme monitoring takes place through the committee system and through meetings between teaching staff and the Principal in his quality role. Students' views feed into the process through Study Board and Academic Board meetings and end of module surveys. However, the College does not as yet produce formal programme monitoring reports to feed into the overall College annual report and action plan. The College is developing a Quality Handbook as a useful staff guide for quality policies and procedures, but it remains incomplete. The College maintains a comprehensive set of policies, regularly updated, but with limited guidance on procedures in the Quality Handbook.

6   Student representation and support for study are particular strengths. Student representatives are members of the Study Board and Academic Board, and acknowledge the responsiveness of the College to their views. Students praise the College's open-door policy and can provide examples of how the College continues to improve the student experience. Improvements in resources, teaching, the virtual learning environment (VLE) and extracurricular activities remain the main areas where progress is ongoing. Students value the additional support workshops to improve academic writing and examination practice. Pastoral support and support for the wider student experience through extracurricular activities remain strong. The College has maintained effective processes for monitoring student achievement and progression, and for information management.

7   The College continues to make progress in improving teaching and learning. The College Principal observes teaching, identifying development priorities and delivering workshops to improve practice, for example, in the use of ice-breakers, warm-up activities and raising cross-cultural awareness. The induction of new staff is coordinated by the Principal and includes the observation of teaching to assess performance. Teaching staff attend external training with awarding organisations and others. Although not all staff make full use of the VLE, staff and students provided examples of how it supports learning. Of particular note is the use of the monitoring facility for staff to check that students have completed pre-sessional reading. A staff member now has responsibility for improving usage of the VLE by colleagues.

8   The newly appointed full-time member of staff teaches at level 7, having experience of the programme in previous employment. The College relies heavily on this new appointee for the level 7 teaching although students receive tuition from a range of staff. Expansion in numbers of level 7 students would be likely to necessitate a further increase in staff. The College manages small numbers for its Travel, Tourism and Hospitality Management programme by merging classes with Business Management programmes for common units.

9   The College has paid particular attention to aligning recruitment and admissions to the Indicators of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). To improve the process, the College has replaced a system of rolling admissions with an admissions cycle with clear deadlines. Rigorous checking procedures ensure that students provide evidence of English language competency, appropriate qualifications, finances, and registration with the awarding organisation. Potential students who fail to meet all elements of the checklist do not proceed to interview stage. A further check on English language competency is through the use of a personal statement by the applicant and an interview with the College Principal. The interview also serves to confirm students' knowledge of the programme, commitment to study and career aspirations. The College maintains detailed records of applications with evidence supporting the admissions decision.

College admissions processes adhere to the principles of fair admission, supporting the selection of students who are able to complete their chosen course of study.

10   The College relies largely upon the awarding organisations to secure academic standards. Awarding organisations' written examinations apply to all programmes delivered at the College for levels 4 to 6. The new level 7 programme in Business Management has one examined module and four assignment-based modules. Although the College sets assignments, the awarding organisation moderates and marks them. Examination processes and close monitoring of assignments ensure that students' work is genuine and authentic. The operation of awarding organisation processes in assessment safeguards academic standards.

11   The College has made limited progress in improving the processes of assessment supporting the quality of learning opportunities. Due to poor results in some modules, the College has reviewed assessment processes, strengthened teaching on the modules and introduced more mock examinations and further support workshops. The introduction of an assessment pro forma standardises written feedback to students. Internal assessment activities prepare students for external examination and identify students' progress in-year. However, assessments are not subject to internal moderation to ensure that they are appropriate in level and scope. Although the College has a detailed internal moderation policy, it does not apply it to standardise internal assessments. Students support the steps taken by the College to prepare them for external examination and praise the quality of teaching and support provided.

12   The change from rolling admissions to academic year entry allows closer support for cohorts of students throughout their study and will facilitate measurement of cohort performance in future years compared with existing module-based measures of performance which are reported in the College Annual Report. Current performance on computing and information technology modules is in excess of 40 per cent and in some modules 100 per cent. However, the pass rate for many modules in business management has been less than 30 per cent, partly owing to students attempting four instead of two examinations in any one session. The College has advised against this practice in future. Students enter at all levels from other institutions but the majority of level 7 students in the first cohort came from outside the College to join the very few who have so far progressed internally to this level.

13   Although the small scale of operations currently allows effective management of quality, the College has yet to implement fully the formal processes for internal moderation, programme monitoring and deliberative management necessary in the context of future increases in student numbers. Most actions have led to improvement. Areas not addressed fully do not have the potential to put academic standards or quality at risk.

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

14   The College continues to make effective use of the National Qualifications Framework and the Qualifications and Credit Framework. It ensures that the programmes are fully in line with the syllabus descriptions, learning outcomes and assessment requirements published by its awarding organisations.

15   The College continues to be accredited by BSC, The Chartered Institute for IT and by the British Accreditation Council (BAC). The Association of Business Executives (ABE) approved the College to deliver level 7 classes in December 2014 and has granted full reaccreditation of the College to December 2015.

16   Progress continues to be made at managerial level in mapping College policies and practice to the Expectations and Indicators of the Quality Code. This has led, for example, to the effective revised arrangements for the recruitment, admission and induction of students. Other areas of the College's work are broadly in line with the Expectations and Indicators of the Quality Code but there is limited and variable staff awareness of the significance and use of the Quality Code in informing and reflecting on professional practice. Current managerial action planning indicates a commitment to raising awareness on these issues. This remains work in progress.

Section 5: Background to the monitoring visit

17   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.

18   The extended monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Richard Wheeler (Coordinator) and Dr Glenn Barr (Reviewer) on 15-16 April 2015.