Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of St Patrick's International College Ltd, September 2017

Section 1: Outcome of the monitoring visit

1   From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that St Patrick's International College Ltd (the College) has made acceptable progress with implementing the action plan from the September 2016 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) Partial Re-review.

Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review

2   The College had a total of 2,039 full-time students enrolled on nine BTEC Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) at the time of the visit. This is an increase of 231, or nearly 13 per cent compared to 2016. The College has no Tier 4 sponsored overseas students. There are 44 full-time, and 33 part-time and occasional academic staff teaching the provision. Significant changes since the 2016 review visit include a new Interim Principal, who, along with the Registrar and the acting Chief Operating Officer, serves on the senior management team. This arrangement is in place while senior appointments are being made to implement a new management structure. A new key post of Vice Principal Teaching Excellence and Student Success has been created and is currently being advertised. Recruitment to the HND Law and HND Fashion and Textiles programmes has ended. A new HND in Travel and Tourism Management will recruit its first students in February 2018.

Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit

3   QAA completed a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) at the College in 2015 followed by a Partial Re-review in 2016. The Partial Re-review considered the good practice and recommendations from the 2015 review and concluded that they had been addressed satisfactorily. This monitoring visit focused primarily on the new areas of good practice and the recommendations arising from the Partial Re-review.

4   The overall outcome of the monitoring visit - that the College has made acceptable progress - has been informed by the following findings. Actions in response to the two areas of good practice and five recommendations arising from the 2016 Partial Re-review have been implemented in line with the action plan schedule. The good practice has been maintained and enhanced, with more individualised support and the enthusiastic engagement of students in the assurance of their educational experience. The College has made substantial progress in addressing the five recommendations, although some actions are still being embedded. The arrangements for the admission of students meets the expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) and is being strengthened as part of a concerted strategy to improve student retention, progression and achievement. A range of useful mechanisms is in place for annual quality monitoring, but these do not yet provide an in-depth review of individual programmes. The use of relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code, is understood and embedded in College procedures.

5   The two areas of good practice identified in the 2016 review have been sustained and enhanced. The individualised support for students now operates within a more formal

structure, with new features that include Individual Learning Plans and the introduction of Learning Coaches and Mentors. Learning Coaches are designated staff who offer one-to-one support for students deemed to be at risk, while Mentors are recent College alumni who offer more general support to groups of learners. Student representatives enthusiastically endorse the wide range of opportunities available for students to engage in the assurance of their educational experience. Formally, students are represented on key committees at various levels, including the Academic Board. The Student Council provides a valuable forum at which elected student officers meet regularly with the Principal and other senior managers. Students have easy access to staff, which allows issues to be raised and resolved promptly outside of the formal structure. Student representatives are well informed about a wide range of operational and strategic matters within the College.

6   The actions taken in response to the five recommendations from the 2016 review have been effective overall, although some work is still ongoing. Communication has been improved between academic staff and those responsible for the website to provide prospective students with accurate and timely information about new programmes. One of the improvements involves the senior member of staff with responsibility for the website sitting on the Programme Development and Enhancement Committee. A document outlining the grounds and procedures for complaining about admissions decisions has been prominently located on the College website.

7   The College has improved the way it analyses student data at a cross-College level, which supports its plan to improve student retention and progression. The recent acquisition of specialist commercial software will further facilitate the collection and interrogation of data. A more coordinated approach is being taken to providing students with guidance on progression opportunities for further study. The Student Experience Department has introduced set office hours for providing information and responding to student enquiries, while a composite list of institutions offering suitable top-up degrees is being developed. The College is in the process of implementing a formal procedure for the monitoring and evaluation of academic appeals. Academic administrators within each School maintain the records of appeals, with information collated centrally.

8   The College admissions process is clearly aligned to the Quality Code, *Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education*, as reported in the 2016 review. The process is described in different internal documents and is managed by a designated admissions team. A comprehensive new admissions policy statement, currently in draft form, makes explicit reference to the Quality Code. The stages of recruitment and admission are carefully recorded for each applicant, a point noted in the awarding organisation's Academic Management Review Report 2016-17. The College has addressed issues raised in the same report, including inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the entry criteria published for Higher National programmes.

9   The College recruits largely mature, non-standard entrants. The stages of admission include documentation checks; tests of listening, reading and writing; and an academic interview. The College's commitment to improving retention and progression has resulted in a review and further adjustments to the admissions process.

10   The College utilises a range of mechanisms to inform annual quality monitoring, which are described in the quality handbook. The monitoring arrangements are focused around the Term Management Process Model. Other key elements include annual School Audit reports, which, though evaluative and informative, do not provide explicit actions to address issues and recommendations that are raised in the text. Annual Monitoring Review was introduced in 2016 to provide a useful College overview report. Statistical data relating to admissions, retention and progress are monitored separately through the College committee structure. Collectively, the elements of quality monitoring and reporting generate

useful information at unit and School levels, but are not currently used to provide an in-depth and evaluative review of individual programmes.

11   The College is responsive to external scrutiny, including the requirements and reports of its awarding organisation, Pearson. It has developed a comprehensive action plan to address issues raised in the Pearson Academic Review Report for 2016-17. The College is now reflecting on Pearson's new Annual Programme Monitoring Report Template, which offers a working model for the detailed self-evaluation of programmes.

12   The College has prioritised the need to improve student retention, progression and achievement. The newly constituted Board of Governors recognised the need for urgent action on the issue in 2016 and the senior management team is vigorously pursuing a strategic action plan. The plan seeks to strengthen admission arrangements, including tightening the language competence tests and introducing a new category of 'conditional admission', which will offer a preparation programme to improve students' readiness for study. The plan also includes initiatives to monitor student data more tightly within the quality monitoring procedures and increase individual support for students. It introduces Individual Learning Plans for students and a target-based incentive scheme for staff. The ambitious action plan involves significant investment and offers a concerted set of initiatives to address student retention issues, although is too early to measure its success.

13   Statistical data for the past three years of student intakes was provided with the Annual Return and updated by the College during the visit. Although the analysis of data is complicated by multiple admission points, the figures confirm that the College is facing serious issues with student retention, progression and achievement. These issues are being actively addressed, as described in paragraph 12. The data return indicates retention for the 2014-15 cohorts at about 50 per cent, but updated data from the College raises this to 73 per cent (343 of 472) when discounting students who failed to take up their places. College data suggests that 39 per cent (135 of 343) of retained students from this intake have achieved their qualification after two years, although the others are listed as still pursuing outstanding credits with a view to gaining the qualification. The figures for 2015-16 intakes show a retention rate of 51 per cent (715 of 1,399). The data return shows improved retention for 2016-17 intakes at 93 per cent (541 of 585), although this measurement is taken less than a year from the start of the programmes.

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

14   The use of relevant external reference points is understood and embedded in College policies and procedures. However, staff understanding of the Quality Code and its implications for their practice, is inconsistent. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Handbook and the strategies underpinning the College's approach to enhancement are aligned with, and make references to, the expectations of the Quality Code. All College programmes are Pearson BTEC Higher National awards, which ensures alignment to *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

Section 5: 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 Catherine Symonds, Reviewer, and David Lewis, Coordinator, on 12 September 2017.