



Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of The Interactive Design Institute Ltd, November 2018

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 Interactive Design Institute Ltd (the Institute) is making commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the November 2016 [monitoring visit](#).

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The Institute has 657 distance-learning students, mostly part-time, mature learners and 38 staff, including those in management roles. The Institute has recently entered into a new partnership with the University of Aberdeen, hence the rise in student numbers from 555 in 2017, up to 657 in 2018, when the first cohort commenced study. The Institute is now delivering online MBA (Global) and MSc Finance programmes on their behalf in a subcontracted arrangement under the University of Aberdeen's branding. There are eleven designated courses in teach-out mode as the Institute is not registered. Equivalent undesignated courses continue to run except for two programmes that are being closed due to low recruitment: BA (Hons) Photography and BA (Hons) Fine Art; and a third, BA Illustration, is being kept under review.

Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The team considered the Annual Return and data return, met staff and students at the Institute, had a demonstration of the distance-learning study site and received additional evidence in order to evaluate the progress the provider had made against the action plan from their previous report and, in particular, the progress they are making with actions identified through their internal quality improvement processes. The effective management of continuous improvement through their Company Action Plan (paragraphs 5 and 6), together with the significant step change in the learning infrastructure provided by their new study site (paragraph 9), leads to the conclusion that the Institute is making commendable progress.

4 All actions arising from the Review for Specific Course Designation 2013, have been completed or alternative solutions have been identified. The Institute is reconsidering the student representation systems following a recommendation by the University of Hertfordshire and they will consult students about how to make such a system work in an online learning environment. The Institute continues to actively address the challenge of supporting its distributed staff team with a range of materials, online and face-to-face events, routine team meetings, support from the University of Hertfordshire and the recent development of tutor drop-ins. The Institute continues to keep its action plan arising from the 2013 report updated. Some new developments are reported in the action plan, where relevant to the original issues.

5 The Institute's main internal quality monitoring process is through its weekly formal meetings for its different teams, including its Quality team, and the routine use by the teams of a comprehensive Company Action Plan. This Action Plan brings together in a live, detailed and well-organised manner, issues and actions from all sources of information

whether formal or informal, such as external examiners' reports, university partner requests, programme committees and feedback from students and staff. Examples of improvements in 2016-17 include: a range of improved guidance for Fine Art students on topics such as copyright and licensing; research and reflection; working with video; and actions to help students understand assessment requirements in terms of content and engaging with the process in a timely way to avoid failure or non-submission - all of which arose from programme committee discussions. Other examples include acting on: feedback from link tutors - involving actions to review learning outcomes or assignments; and feedback from external examiners - including actions to review the overall balance of assignments across a course, taking into account feedback from students. The Company Action Plan is a live document with the current status clear in terms of progress or completion and the team has confirmation from students that some of the completed actions went further than this, such as the new 'feedforward' section in assessment feedback. This level of integrated and responsive action planning is at the heart of a culture of improvement planning which has demonstrably enhanced the student learning experience.

6 The Institute uses the University of Hertfordshire's Annual Monitoring and Enhancement Reports (AMER) as a key mechanism for continuous development. These reports bring together issues raised through external examiner reports, link tutor reports, validations, reviews and other reports, data relating to enrolments, graduation and continuation, external examiner reports, link tutor reports and programme committee minutes. They are thorough, evidence-based reports which bring together all relevant data and documentation and lead to detailed action planning which is, in turn, monitored in terms of implementation. They consider and recommend actions on retention, progression and achievement, as well as on student experience, and contain in the appendices a useful co-location of external examiner reports and link tutor reports. The actions are all followed up in the Company Action Plan described above which has a column cross-referring to the relevant AMER to aid tracking. The partnership with Aberdeen is too early in its development for any equivalent reports to have been published. External examiners reports also indicate close and careful monitoring of assessment practices with the Institute responding with refinements and enhancements as appropriate.

7 Student learning forums, one of the tabs in the module pages on the study site, were improved in 2017 to generate more collaborative working and aid group cohesion, with tutors and students triggering topics for discussion. In response to student feedback, the Institute has introduced a Studio tab to the module pages where more formal peer critique of uploaded work can be undertaken which the students state is helpful. Students report that their experience of induction meets their needs with a helpful balance of information, videos, technical support and the ability to speak to staff about specific queries. The Institute has recently undertaken an overhaul of induction materials on the study site which is now clearer to navigate, more comprehensive and designed to put important information early in the induction pathway.

8 Following a review of appeals and complaints by the University of Hertfordshire, the Institute has updated their own processes to help students distinguish more clearly between complaints and appeals. The students met by the team report a good support and informal response system through their tutors, programme co-ordinators and the student support team. They report that, although distance-learning students can feel isolated, overall, they experience a good balance of independent study and group work, robust course materials and a clear pathway through their programme of study. The Company Action Plan includes improvements in the support tutors give to students to enable them to have greater success in their assessment.

9 The Institute launched a new study site in February 2018, which has a version adapted for each partner university. This is reported by students and staff to be a real

enhancement to the student's learning experience. The catalyst for the change was to create a clearer, more accessible study site following feedback from students on the old study site. The University of Hertfordshire and the University of Aberdeen have separate sites adjusted to their specific needs, including adapting the staff-facing assessment tracking functions to their respective assessment procedures. The new site has seen significant enhancements in terms of clearer and easier to access information and support for students. The Institute has systematically gathered feedback from students on the new study site through questions in student surveys and has been quick to respond to technical issues and suggestions, including developing a student dashboard, which students report as finding particularly helpful in tracking their progress. Staff and students also have access to their partners' virtual learning environments where they can access university library resources and university policies and procedures, such as assessment regulations. This review of the study site marks a deliberate and systematic improvement in the learning infrastructure which has had a positive impact on both the staff and student experience.

10 At their last Review for Specific Course Designation (2013), the reviewers recommended that the Institute 'continues to explore ways to develop and implement a formal student representative system and an employers' and alumni liaison forum'. At the time, following feedback from students, the Institute decided that a slight refinement of their current approach to getting feedback from students was sufficient, which was considered an appropriate response by the previous review team. These refinements are continuing with feedback forums now open to students for longer periods and more frequently and the students met by the team made regular use of Module Feedback Questionnaires. Through the annual monitoring process, the University of Hertfordshire has recently asked for the Institute to revisit the establishment of a formal system for student representation and they will scope this in the coming months though both students and the Institute are aware that this will require a bespoke approach given the online nature of the programmes. The University of Aberdeen have asked for online forums to be the mechanism they want used to supplement the module questionnaires. Students are aware that they have access to the University of Hertfordshire's Student's Union and a representative for online students. While acknowledging the absence of a system for student representation, the Institute has a systematic approach to gathering formal and informal feedback from students capturing comments from staff, groups of students through the online forums, questionnaires, programme committee meetings and external examiners in their Company Action Plan and tracking through responses to completion. The collation of such diverse forms of feedback in one location, to allow the formation and tracking of progress with actions, is a distinctive feature of the Institute's approach to gathering feedback from students, and students feel that the Institute responds to their comments however they are made.

11 The Institute operates an admissions process which is in line with the entry requirements of its university partners and the Quality Code. The Institute generally uses direct digital marketing to publicise its courses though it does work through a small number of its own agents for whom it provides clear publicity information. Applicants whose first language is not English are required to achieve an overall International English Language Testing System (IELTS) score of 6.5 for postgraduate entry and 6.0, with no element being less than 5.5, for undergraduate entry. Equivalent Language qualifications are checked with its university partners and borderline cases have their language skills cross-checked through the application process. Students confirm that the information on the website accurately reflects the programmes that they are now studying and the admissions process, as outlined by the Institute, gives plenty of opportunities for them to have all their questions answered.

12 In addition to evidence of qualifications and other required documentation (such as visas, documentation, language proficiency), applicants to the University of Hertfordshire's creative programmes are asked to upload examples of creative work and to provide details of any work experience. Direct entry and applicants for postgraduate programmes are

provided with specific guidelines which set out how their applications and personal statements are presented. The Institute worked closely with the University of Aberdeen as they recruited to the new programmes and the University took the final admissions decisions. Interviews are completed for non-standard entrants where no equivalency of qualification can be identified. Applications are reviewed by an Admissions Adviser, who can seek guidance from a subject specialist or member of the Institute's management team if necessary. All the students met by the team had to present examples of their work as part of the admissions process and reported that their skills and experience had to be evidenced in order to gain access to the course at the level requested. The partner's procedure for advanced entry is followed where appropriate.

13 The Institute adheres to its university partner regulations and follows their procedures for moderation or second marking. The enhanced module guide and assessment briefs, which combine two previously separate documents to increase clarity and reduce overlap, are reported as being clear and helpful by students. Examples of student work at different stages of their creative development, are now provided on the study site for students on creative courses to help them with preparing for their own submissions. The students confirm that the dashboard is very helpful for tracking their progress. The student tracker used by staff enables student progress to be better monitored enabling students causing concern to be identified and supported. The Institute continues to manage academic misconduct cases effectively.

14 The student data return correlates with the Institute's evaluation in the Annual Return. 23 of the 35 reported courses, or iterations of courses, have below 10 students enrolled, leading to some exaggerated percentages in terms of retention and these have been discounted in the analysis. Numbers of students are not high so statistical analysis needs to be done cautiously, but the BA Interior Architecture and Design, part-time, has variable retention ranging from 20 per cent to 71 per cent. The Postgraduate Programme in Art and Design, part and full-time, has been identified in the University's annual monitoring reports as having low retention at 65 per cent but this has risen to 82 per cent over the last three years on cohort sizes of 6-11 FTE, demonstrating that improvement planning has had a positive effect. Early support and specialist tutors were brought in to support postgraduate students when the dip was first noticed, and the measures taken have yielded a steady improvement. Levels of attainment and pass rates for those achieving the target award indicate no additional concerns. The Institute considers that they have a high proportion of good degrees with 70 per cent of completing students achieving a 2.1 or above.

15 The data return reveals the high proportion of hourly paid or fractional staff, but provides reassurance that key roles, such as Programme Coordinator, are fulfilled by full-time staff. The tutors are part-time and work remotely but have access to a drive with resources and information for tutors, and are supported by full-time Programme Coordinators and the Head of Academic Quality.

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

16 There have been no significant changes made in relation to external reference points. The Institute's awareness and use of external reference points is present throughout their documentation, for example, in the Student Handbook. The 2013 document mapping the Quality Code to Institute policies and procedures, continues to be an additional clear reference for new and existing staff in relation to the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). The new study site provides the framework for the delivery of all programmes and facilitates a rounded student distance-learning experience which enables the Institute to meet *Chapters B3, B4 and B5* of the Quality Code. A regular annual quality

presentation updates staff on any changes to the Quality Code. The Quality team are preparing to update documentation and brief staff on the new Quality Code. No external reviews or accreditations have taken place since the November 2016 monitoring visit.

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 monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Sally Bentley, Reviewer, and Mr Kevin Kendall, QAA Officer, on 7 November 2018.

QAA2294 - R10311 - Dec 18

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2018
Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel 01452 557050
Web www.qaa.ac.uk