Educational Oversight for Embedded Colleges: report of the monitoring visit of Kaplan International Colleges UK Ltd, April-May 2019

The University of Nottingham International College

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1   From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the monitoring team concludes that The University of Nottingham International College (TUNIC) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the March 2018 Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges).

Changes since the last QAA review

2   TUNIC opened in January 2017. The March 2018 Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) (HER (EC)) was the College's first QAA review. TUNIC continues to offer Foundation Certificate programmes in Business, Law and Social Sciences, and in Science. It also offers pre-master's programmes in Business, Law and Social Sciences, and Science and Engineering. All programmes lead to degree programmes at the University of Nottingham, subject to meeting the University's progression criteria.

3   Since the 2018 HER (EC), student numbers have increased significantly (53%), from 355 in February 2018 to 543 in February 2019. Additional space has been acquired for the College, and the size of its premises has thus been extended by around 37%. The permanent teaching staffing has increased from 2 to 10.

Findings from the monitoring visit

4   The College is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision. The HER (EC) in 2018 made three recommendations and identified three features of good practice which has been continued and taken forward (paragraph 5). All actions identified through the College's internal monitoring processes have been completed or are being progressed (paragraph 6). The actions in response to the 2018 review have either been fully or partially completed, and those not yet completed do not present any risk to academic standards or quality (paragraphs 7-10). Information produced by the College is fit-for-purpose, accessible and trustworthy (paragraph 11). The academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of the provision are being maintained (paragraph 14-19) and the College demonstrates effective engagement with relevant external reference points (paragraph 21).

5   The College has taken forward work on the areas of good practice identified in the 2018 HER (EC), concerning support for tutors to embed learning and teaching technology; the close working relationship with the University; and the student representative system. There has been continuing support for tutors in the use of learning technology; the consolidation and extension of the close working relationship with the University through formal and informal mechanisms such as the Joint Academic Board (JAB), the Academic

Link Tutor Group and workshops for staff and students; and the effective operation of the student representative system.

6   Enhancements identified by the College's own internal monitoring processes are completed or progressing. Most notable are the enhancements to student attendance monitoring, resulting in improved attendance rates; embedding of peer tutor observation; further enrichment activity; and the provision of targeted staff development, including sessions on peer observation and to support the roll out of the new curriculum in September 2019.

7   The 2018 HER (EC) included two recommendations concerning committees and annual reports: to ensure that the membership of the College's deliberative committees, the frequency of meetings and the format of minutes are in line with the terms of reference, to facilitate full staff and student participation in the governance of the College; and to ensure that annual monitoring reports are effectively considered by the appropriate committees and that staff views contribute formally to the process.

8   Programme committee meetings comprise two distinct parts: Part A between student representatives and staff members of the committee (but with no academic subject tutors present); and Part B staff, including tutors, without students present. Staff explained that this arrangement allows students to speak without constraint, that matters raised by students in Part A are effectively followed through to Part B (as was confirmed by meeting minutes), and that the feedback loop is effectively closed, as minutes are available to student representative meetings. The formal documented membership of programme committees does not include academic subject tutors, therefore actual attendance at meetings does not fully reflect the formally stated terms of reference. The minutes provide an appropriate record of meetings, which are convened separately for the two pathways.

9   Kaplan requires that programme committees be held ordinarily once per term, and that they consider and approve Annual Programme Reports (APRs). The College's 2018-19 meeting schedule includes several Part A meetings from December through to June; and Part B meetings in December and June. This schedule does not ensure the effective consideration of the relevant APRs by the programme committee in the current year. The 2017-18 APRs, to which staff had clearly contributed and which were completed in November and December 2018, were presented at JAB in March 2019. However, these reports had not been considered and approved by programme committees prior to the March JAB meeting. Therefore, the monitoring team concluded that although oversight by JAB ensures that there is no actual risk to standards or quality, the recommendations concerning deliberative committees and APRs have not yet been fully addressed.

10   The 2018 review further recommended that the College work with external examiners to ensure that they provide more detailed, informative reports. Three new external examiners were appointed during 2018-19. They were provided with extensive information on their role via the Kaplan External Examiner Handbook, and in meetings with the Academic Director and other staff. Recent external examiner reports were appropriately informative and detailed. The team therefore concluded that this recommendation was fully met.

11   Recruitment, selection and admissions processes are managed by the central Kaplan admissions team. Applicants to TUNIC have access, via the Kaplan and college websites, to extensive information about the programmes, progression degrees, entry requirements, and the application process. Links signpost the Kaplan International Pathways Guide, the college-specific prospectus and the university website. Clear Kaplan and college processes are in place for producing, checking and signing off externally published information, including sign-off by the University. Students confirmed that published

information is accessible and accurate. All the students whom the monitoring team met had used agents and were satisfied with their services. Some progression opportunities have additional requirements for guaranteed entry, for example, the Law National Admissions Test (LNAT) for LLB entry. The prospectus refers only to guaranteed entry to the University 'in most cases', subject to the required pathway grades and good attendance, and does not refer to any specific additional requirements. Offer letters, signed by College and University senior admission staff, are specific and set out all conditions attached to the pathway programme and the chosen progression degree. The accompanying pack for Law contains extensive, detailed information about LNAT; however, the requirement for LNAT is not clearly and formally highlighted until the offer stage.

12   Entry requirements are determined by the College in consultation with the University. Assessment against any additional requirements, such as interviews and the 'statements of purpose' required for some of the TUNIC programmes, are handled by the Kaplan admissions team. Applicants are asked to declare any disability or support requirements. Such cases are referred to the Head of College Services for decision on the support that can be offered. Procedures for handling borderline and non-standard applications require scrutiny by senior central admissions staff, including assessment against any university-agreed tolerance band; and a decision may be sought from the University. Robust, clearly-documented processes ensure that students have sufficient English language competence to complete their programme, entry level is tested to determine length of study requirement and additional support needs. Kaplan has appropriate procedures in place for dealing with cases where pathway or degree programmes are closed before enrolment and for programme closures following admission.

13   The college pre-arrival guide - which includes useful and practical information on next steps, arrangements on arrival, welcome week activities, and the programme and college contacts - reminds successful applicants to bring with them to enrolment all original qualification certificates, with certified translations as appropriate. College staff check original certificates against e-copies already seen and approved by the central admissions team. Students found the pre-entry information to be helpful and comprehensive, enjoyed welcome week and confirmed that admissions and registration processes ran smoothly. Applicants can access an online feedback, complaints and appeals facility, and there is a clear process for handling and responding to complaints and appeals.

14   The Kaplan Academic Standards and Quality Manual (ASQM) sets out the definitive framework for assessment, including the assessment regulations, and the Assessment Development Guide details Kaplan requirements and processes. Assessment and feedback strategies and programme learning outcomes are incorporated into the programme specifications, and module specifications specify module learning outcomes, assessment methods and weightings. Grade descriptors for each pathway are accessible on the virtual learning environment (VLE), and clear and detailed tables set out marking criteria referenced to learning outcomes. Students confirmed that assessed learning outcomes and marking criteria are provided on the VLE with individual assignment briefs. Although students did not appear to be aware of the centrally-produced student-facing assessment regulations, which are clearly displayed on the VLE and which the students are introduced to during their induction, they understood the rules on pass marks, grading, resits and repeats.

15   Tutors refer to module specifications to ensure that learning outcomes are effectively incorporated into assessment design. Briefs are signed off by module leaders following peer review and all assessments are submitted to external examiners for approval before being finalised. Rigorous standardisation, marking, double marking and moderation processes are in place. External examiners receive sample student-assessed work for review and confirm that standards are maintained at the appropriate level and that assessment boards are conducted professionally.

16   The VLE provides helpful, student-friendly information to support students as they prepare for examinations, including exam guidelines and an engaging mind map on staying healthy and prepared, with links to further information on university web pages. Students submit completed assignments electronically via plagiarism-detection software, and feedback is provided online and in class. For examinations, feedback is available on request. Students were generally satisfied with the feedback they receive.

17   The College applies Kaplan processes to deter, detect and penalise academic misconduct which are clear, appropriate and formally documented. Suspected cases are handled in accordance with Kaplan requirements. College staff receive information and training on identifying and dealing with suspected academic misconduct, including examination invigilation procedures, at induction and in staff development sessions. In addition to using electronic plagiarism-detection software, tutors apply their knowledge of individual students' capabilities to identify malpractice in assessed assignments. Students have access to information about academic misconduct and how to avoid it on the VLE, in Skills for Study sessions (including case studies and guidance on referencing), and through feedback on formative assessments.

18   College practices to secure fairness and equity in assessment for students with a disability are implemented in line with Kaplan guidelines. These students may self-identify during the application process or be identified by tutors in the course of their study. Reasonable adjustments in assessment (as well as in learning provision) are put in place following discussions about individual needs. The College implements Kaplan exceptional extenuating circumstances processes, and associated information for students is clearly set out on the VLE.

19   The College offers recognition of prior learning to students for English language in accordance with the Kaplan criteria and processes.

20   In 2016-17, 94% of students successfully passed their programme and achieved the Kaplan Pathways Award, and 91% of students who successfully completed their programme met the requirements to progress to the University of Nottingham. The comparable data for 2017-18 was 97% and 84% respectively.

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

21   Kaplan standards and quality policies and processes, which are informed by the precepts of the UKQC and regularly updated, are implemented effectively overall by the College. Programmes are aligned with the relevant qualifications' frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements, including the CEFR for English, and assessment processes are designed and operate to ensure that academic standards are maintained in line with external reference points. College action planning is informed by, and explicitly mapped to, sections of the UKQC.

Background to the monitoring visit

22   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.

23   The monitoring visit was carried out by Ms Julia Baylie, QAA Officer, and Dr Sylvia Hargreaves, QAA Reviewer, on 14 May.