



## Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of University College of Estate Management, September 2017

### 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 University College of Estate Management (UCEM) has made commendable progress with implementing the action plan from the September 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### 2 Changes since the last QAA review

2 UCEM continues to deliver online programmes for the built environment through its own degree awarding powers. There are 3,807 students. This includes 203 students on 'legacy' programmes validated by the University of Reading.

3 At the time of the HER (AP) visit in 2016, UCEM had 43 permanent teaching staff; this figure has risen to 60 (with two staff leaving and 19 staff joining) during the reporting period, representing a 40 per cent change. This increase is attributed mainly to long-serving associate tutors moving to permanent contracts.

### 3 Findings from the monitoring visit

4 UCEM has taken firm ownership of the Action Plan, which is fully integrated into its overall strategy. The action plan goes beyond the recommendations of the 2016 HER (AP) report, which it has addressed robustly and dynamically, basing actions on internal and external reviews. UCEM's high commitment to exceeding expectations in fulfilling the action plan has resulted in the many positive impacts. There is now an extensive formal system of mentoring, which is in response to the recommendation that UCEM formalises its peer review activities to systematically enhance teaching and learning practice. This improves and enhances learning and teaching practice (paragraph 5). The Academic Board, as the principal academic authority, has determined a coherent strategy to maximise the opportunities for students to engage in synchronous online activities (paragraph 6). Student representatives confirm their full participation in quality assurance procedures and the enhancement of their educational experience (paragraph 7). Moreover, there are examples of established good practices which have been sustained and further enhanced to make a positive contribution to UCEM academic quality and which may be worthy of wider dissemination (paragraph 8).

5 UCEM has established an extensive formal system of mentoring. An implementation team has appointed and trained experienced academic staff as Learning and Teaching Mentors, who track and record all activities of new staff members and associate tutors. Individual Academic Development Programmes support established staff. A weekly Practitioners Group and structured 'Show Me Sessions' formally identify and disseminate good practice. These procedures, enthusiastically described by staff, demonstrably enhance teaching and learning activities appropriate to the online learning environment. One example of the impact of peer review is the enhancement, at an early stage, of the design, development and approval of modules.

6 UCEM has adopted a thorough and comprehensive strategic approach to the timing of delivery of programmes that aims to maximise opportunities for all students to fully engage in synchronous online learning activities, such as webinars. The Academic Board reviewed students' synchronous online activities. It approved major revisions of the online curriculum within the complexities of international students' time differences and their need for flexibility because of full employment. UCEM will implement a standard model of synchronous learning activities in 2019. In the meantime, the Education Department provides clear guidance to staff on how to synchronise learning activities, including webinars, tutor office hours/surgeries and live tutor chat sessions. The students confirm their participation in webinars and peer group activities but say that time differences are difficult to reconcile.

7 UCEM has taken great steps to overcome the challenges of engaging distance learning students as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience. The students confirm the comprehensive arrangements that exist for the effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels. Student representatives actively participate in all deliberative committees. The Lead Student Representative (LSR) plays a pivotal role in student engagement. The LSR has contributed to the production of a Student Representative Handbook, a webinar and an induction programme for representatives. Students can access these in the dedicated page on the virtual learning environment. UCEM has revised its Code of Practice - Student Engagement to include these activities, with its effectiveness monitored and reviewed annually. The plans for further developments during 2017-18 include the role of student representative in the Programme Leader Certification course.

8 UCEM has further developed and embedded good practices that make particularly positive contributions to the quality of student learning opportunities and which may be worthy of wider dissemination. This includes the joint scrutiny of assessment tasks by professional and academic staff. The Learning and Teaching Enhancement Team contributes to assessment design and wording, which has reduced assessment queries. Students confirm that assessment briefs are easier to understand. The cross-functional 'No Student Left Behind' initiative is a major strategic initiative to enhance student achievement and retention. UCEM closely monitors students' engagement with their studies through learning analytics and so targets support at students who may be at risk.

9 UCEM's arrangements for the recruitment, selection and admission of students are comprehensive and robust. UCEM bases its Code of Practice: Admissions and Recognition of Prior Learning on the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code). A centralised admissions team uses the admissions criteria determined by Academic Board to consider applications. A recent enhancement to the admissions process is the development of a webinar and an applicant website portal to assist applicants in the application process. Students confirm that they received accurate information about admissions and that the admissions process made clear the commitment necessary to study online. There are explicit requirements for English language competence at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. UCEM admissions staff verify applicant certification together with photographic identification, both of which are externally validated. UCEM trains and monitors any international agents used for recruitment. Their role is to direct applicants to UCEM but not to make admissions decisions. UCEM reviews its admissions arrangements annually and submits the report to the Academic Board. The Recognition of Prior Learning Panel approves any credits or exemptions for prior learning.

10 UCEM has a well-established and effective annual monitoring procedure. The comprehensive Code of Practice - Programme Monitoring, Amendment, Review and Discontinuation fully describes the procedure and includes standard templates. UCEM monitors its programmes annually and undertakes a full periodic review and re-validation of

programmes, normally every five years. A detailed Programme Report provides data and analysis of applications, admissions, retention and progression, together with information from internal and external student surveys. This report also includes qualitative feedback from student representatives, external examiners' reports and module evaluations.

A Quality Enhancement Action Plan (QEP) explicitly incorporates areas for improvement. A Programme Review meeting, which includes a student member, considers these reports. The Board of Studies approves the programme report and monitors the QEP, annually and quarterly. Items of institutional significance are added to the institutional-level UCEM Enhancement Plan, which is accepted and monitored by the Academic Board and Academic Review Committee. Enhancement items specifically related to teaching, learning and assessment are referred to UCEM's Learning, Teaching and Enhancement Committee. Student retention and achievement, underpinning the 'No Student Left Behind' initiative, is a key institutional objective, and each semester UCEM thoroughly scrutinises student completion rates by programme, student engagement with first and last assessments, and retention rates.

11 UCEM monitors and analyses data regularly and systematically within its own quality assurance procedures, as described in paragraph 10 above. Recognising that low student retention can be a feature of online programmes, UCEM considers data a critical element in its support for students and the evaluation of organisational performance. UCEM's current overriding strategic focus is on student retention with the 'No Student Left Behind' initiative. It initially focuses on three key metrics: student completion, student engagement with the first and final assessment and returning students from one semester to another. Current retention data shows some programmes having low student enrolments, which makes statistical analysis less relevant. For example, BSc (Hons) Construction Management (cohort commencing April 2016) enrolled three students; with one withdrawal, a 67 per cent retention rate was achieved, whereas the MSc in Quantity Surveying (cohort September 2014) had 76 per cent retention. There is limited pass rate data for undergraduate programmes as students are still continuing on a number of programmes; however, the postgraduate two-year MSc Building Surveying (cohort September 2014) has a pass rate of 70 per cent.

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

12 UCEM has continued to engage positively with the Quality Code and makes reference to the relevant Expectations in the development of, and revisions to, its Codes of Practice. It uses an effective template to review and revise its processes to ensure that they continue to reflect the Quality Code, and has mapped each programme to Subject Benchmark Statements. In developing its recent apprenticeship provision, UCEM makes specific reference to QAA's *Quality Assuring Higher Education in Apprenticeships: Current Approaches*. This also refers to relevant professional, statutory and regulatory body requirements. A Professional Engagement and Advisory Forum that includes industry practitioners and experts meets annually to ensure currency of programme and module content.

#### **5 Background to the monitoring visit**

13 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.

14 The monitoring visit was carried out by Amanda Greason, Reviewer, and Catherine Fairhurst, Coordinator, on 20 September 2017.

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