



## Specific Course Designation: report of the monitoring visit of University of Buckingham, December 2018

### 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 the University of Buckingham (the University) is making commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the October 2017 [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).

### 2 Changes since the last QAA review

2 The University continues to offer and award a range of undergraduate, taught postgraduate and research programmes in subject areas including business, computing, education, humanities, social sciences, law, medicine, and psychology, as well as pre-degree foundation programmes. Undergraduate degrees are delivered in accelerated mode over two years. The University has six collaborative partnerships. The University's student numbers have remained broadly stable. There are 2,569 students enrolled across the various undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, a slight reduction of 34 on 2017-18 recruitment. Institutional performance on retention remains consistently high, though the University reports that completion rates are below its expectations. The University believes that this can be explained, in part, with reference to the pressures of undertaking an accelerated degree (for a University initiative to address this see paragraph 6). The University currently employs 679 staff, of whom 165 are full-time academic staff, including 31 professors, and 247 are visiting lecturers or fellows.

### 3 Findings from the monitoring visit

3 The University has made commendable progress against its action plan following its 2017 Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers). The University has continued the good practice identified in the last review (paragraphs 4-6) and fully addressed a first recommendation in regard to maintaining a definitive record of each programme as an accurate and complete reference point (paragraph 8). Progress has been made in dealing with a second recommendation relating to formalising processes and procedures for oversight of public information to ensure accuracy and completeness, and work on requirements for departmental handbooks is scheduled to be completed in the near future (paragraph 7). The University has continued to successfully develop its work on the affirmations of enhancing the quality and accuracy of management data through its Programme Data Dashboards (paragraph 9) and identifying a systematic approach for providing equitable teaching skills development opportunities for research students (paragraph 10).

4 The University has maintained the good practice of providing a comprehensive and sustained approach to personalised support for learning, including small-sized tutorial groups. To develop this, the University is focusing on an online booking scheme to ease tutorial access. Students consider individual tuition one of the University's key strengths and they value the academic support they receive.

5 The University continues to embed innovative pathways into higher education through its Foundation Programme (located within the Foundation Department), which enables international and home students to progress to degree-level study. The recent inclusion of an English language assessor helps promote good honours degree outcomes. The Foundation Department also enables all students to develop their ability to learn through individual and group skills sessions, which are appreciated by students.

6 The University continues to develop its Positive University initiative to promote and support the welfare of students and staff through a wide range of inter-related activities. This includes the Foundation Programme noted above, but also an increased focus on well-being and fully preparing students for the rigours of an accelerated degree programme.

7 The University has formalised its processes and procedures for oversight of public information to ensure accuracy and completeness. It has developed a published information policy, appointed a Data Protection and Information Management Officer and reviewed the systems by which it produces handbooks, resulting in an overhaul of University and school-level handbooks. Bulletins inform staff of key changes to ensure effective implementation. Students appreciate the new format, which staff regard as much clearer because the text is less cluttered, more current and accessible. The University has defined its requirements for its departmental handbooks and aims to have these implemented in January 2019.

8 To ensure it maintains a definitive record of each programme as an accurate and complete reference point, the University now audits all programme specifications and stores them to a designated computer drive as the definitive version. Curriculum bulletins ensure this is well articulated for staff and the central drive only allows staff viewing access to programme documentation, ensuring version control.

9 The University has continued to work on the affirmation of enhancing the quality and accuracy of management data through its Programme Data Dashboards which are fully operational, providing clear and succinct information. Simultaneously, the University has begun a scheduled plan to develop institutional understanding and use of sector-wide nomenclature enabling broader understanding of the value of data. Such internal benchmarking provides clearer indications of where areas are working well or need support, and also links to national benchmarking.

10 The University has continued to work on its affirmation to identify a systematic approach for providing equitable teaching skills development opportunities for research students. It has developed guidance for research staff to support research students undertaking teaching opportunities. A new 'Training and Development' section in the Research Degrees Handbook promotes the opportunities to students to expand their skills and a student conference fund enables students to present their work.

11 To adhere to the principles of fair admission, the University reviews and updates its recruitment and admissions procedures annually to ensure currency and effectiveness. For example, recent revisions of the University's Terms and Conditions reflected the guidance provided by the Competition and Markets Authority and the UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) guidance of May 2018. The University's Visa Compliance Committee oversees its compliance with its obligations as a Tier 4 sponsor.

12 The University's Director of Recruitment and Admissions and the newly created role of Admissions Process Manager aim to strengthen the integrity of the admissions process. They liaise with Schools Admissions departments to ensure transparency for prospective students and help them make well-informed decisions. The Dean of each School has oversight of admissions. The Director of Marketing appoints and monitors the use of

recruitment agents. This approach ensures greater consistency across the University and sharing of good practice

13 Central Admissions is the first point of contact and advises each school's Admissions Officer, who is trained by the central Admissions team. The Central Admissions Officer manages the University's link with UCAS and ensures a consistent approach across the Schools through monthly Admissions and Recruitment Good Practice meetings. Staff also receive NARIC training where required.

14 Given the accelerated nature of the two-year degrees, Admissions Officers ensure that applicants' personal statements indicate a motivation for study and that profiles demonstrate a clear academic and/or work history that accounts for all years prior to the proposed entry-date at the University. Admissions staff invite international applicants to visit the University's relevant online resources. Admissions Tutors interview each applicant, in person where possible, or through a video link. Standard interview templates and forms record the outcomes of each application, including English language ability, in line with UKVI requirements. Once accepted, students receive personalised fee and enrolment information, programme specifications and checklists for international students. The University's Visa Support Officers assist international students applying for Tier 4 visas. Students describe a highly efficient, timely and clear admissions process from first point of contact, through to interview and letter of offer. Foundation students must achieve an IELTS score or equivalent of 5.0, and other students a minimum of 6.5, with medical students requiring 7.5.

15 The University sets and maintains the academic standards for each award through a series of quality documents, processes and procedures that align with *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications* (FHEQ), the Qualifications Descriptors, the Academic Credit Framework and, where applicable, the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. The process of programme approval involves externality. The appropriate School Learning & Teaching Committee scrutinises documentation before progressing the programme for approval by the School Board of Study, then to the University Learning & Teaching Committee for institutional-level scrutiny and then final ratification by the Senate. This ensures the maintenance of academic standards both internally, but also in line with national benchmarks.

16 The University awards credits and qualifications based on demonstrable achievement of learning outcomes. Its collaborative partners must demonstrate equivalence with this approach. The external examiners' report template requires confirmation that assessment aligns with the FHEQ. Examiners also approve key assessment tasks. Staff double-mark, or anonymously second mark all such tasks, for which students receive clear marking guidance and criteria during induction. For research degrees the Research Degrees Handbook clearly defines the appointment and responsibilities of external examiners. Students confirm that staff upload assessment criteria to the virtual learning environment at the outset of each module that these are clear and supported with plentiful advice.

17 The University informs applicants of its procedure for accreditation of prior learning at the time of application, with admissions tutors mapping any transcripts and/or experience personally or through desk-based processes. Boards of Examiners approve any recommended credit exemptions and transfers. Deans chair these Boards, which comprise of all members of the internal and external examining team. A senior member of Registry and/or Quality Assurance staff attends the boards to offer advice and guidance. The review team was not made aware of any examples of accreditation of prior learning.

18 Staff and students review assessment practice regularly to ensure a balanced workload and clear and relevant marking criteria. Students confirm that staff provide feedback on assignments within a three-week timeframe. Students can access external

examiners' reports, assessment regulations and the Academic Misconduct Policy and Procedures online. The Academic Misconduct process has developed since a 2014 QAA review and now features a central database of cases raised and possible sanctions. School Academic Misconduct Officers oversee the initial enquiry with the Chair of the Board of Examiners overseeing the full investigation, as appropriate. The University Learning & Teaching Committee and Senate receive summary reports and minutes from the Central Academic Misconduct Officer. With comprehensive handbook guidance and an online quiz, the students are clearly aware of academic misconduct.

19 The University's Executive Committee considers admissions data on a weekly basis. For the University, the comparatively small size of the institution, two recruitment cycles and two separate methods of application (UCAS and direct) make weekly analysis critical to sustaining recruitment. It enables courses to be responsive to market trends. Overall, the University considers that its retention, completion and good honours degree data are in step with national benchmarks, however it continues to address issues particular to the nature of its two-year programmes. On the whole, programmes for the completed cohorts vary between 100 and 80 per cent, but with some dropping below that figure, but only where programme numbers are in single figures and, therefore, the sample is very small.

20 The Deans' Executive Committees lead the scrutiny of retention and completion data. Retention has remained consistently high, which the University explains with reference to tutorial groups of no more than eight students. Completion rates are below the University's own expectations, but still within national averages. The University ascribes this to the nature of the accelerated degree. The Deans' Executive Committee and Senate require Schools to report any actions taken to improve completion and retention rates. The University performs consistently well in the National Student Survey for its quality of teaching and academic support. The University's collaborative admissions were higher across most partners. Once enrolled, students rarely fail to complete their programme of study and most partners have excellent retention rates and good degree outcomes.

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

21 The University uses various external reference points in setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of student learning opportunities. The University uses the UK Quality Code for Higher Education to develop and monitor its approach to setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of student learning opportunities. It has mapped its academic governance and management processes against the Quality Code and reviews these regularly. All programmes align with the relevant level descriptors, the FHEQ and Subject Benchmark Statements. External examiners make explicit comment about the alignment between assessment and the FHEQ.

22 The University engages with many Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies to provide subject-level accreditation for its academic provision, such as the British Psychological Society and the General Medical Council. Programme approval processes require programme directors to outline the relationship with any such body. If PSRB accreditation informs the approval of new provision, the proposers meet with the QA Manager to discuss how these align with University procedures.

## 5 Background to the monitoring visit

23 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.

24 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Mark Langley, Reviewer, and Dr Neil Casey, QAA Officer, on 6 December 2018.

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