



## Educational Oversight for embedded colleges: report of the monitoring visit of Bellerbys Educational Services Ltd (Study Group), May 2017

### University of Lincoln International Study Centre

#### **Section 1: 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 Lincoln International Study Centre (ULISC) is making acceptable progress with implementing the action plan following the 2016 [Higher Education Review \(Embedded Colleges\)](#).

#### **Section 2: Changes since the last QAA review**

2 There have not been any changes since the last review. Student numbers remain much the same.

#### **Section 3: Findings from the monitoring visit**

3 From documentary evidence and meetings with staff and students, the monitoring team concluded that ULISC has made acceptable progress in implementing its action plan following the Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) in May 2016. The review report identified 'the holistic and integrated approach to student support that enables learners to develop their academic, personal and professional potential' as good practice. There were no recommendations or affirmations.

4 ULISC has further enhanced student support, establishing and training a smaller, more focused tutorial team, further developing individual learning plans, and introducing supplementary interim student risk-tracking. The Centre Action Plan (CAP) and Staff Development Action Plan track enhancements to other areas referred to in the May 2016 review: implementation of provider minimum expectations on VLE content; e-learning staff development; embedding employability skills; and delivery of CareerAhead, a provider initiative, through tutorials. Module evaluation surveys and the Staff Student Committee (SSC) provide the principal mechanisms for evaluating such developments. The Quality Assurance and Enhancement Group (QAEG) monitors the CAP, and effective oversight is maintained by the Academic Management Board (AMB).

5 ULISC operates effective programme and annual monitoring processes, informed by external examiner and student feedback, and retention, completion and progression data. The annual monitoring report (AMR) sets out and analyses data, although data on progression to Years 1 and 2 of the University of Lincoln degree is not disaggregated. It reports actions completed from the previous year and actions taken or planned in response to external examiner and student feedback for the current year. QAEG minutes and the CAP evidence

ongoing monitoring and evaluation of action taken.

6 Following concerns raised by external examiners and students in 2015-16 about the quality of feedback to students on their work, relevant staff development and guidance was put in place, together with guidance to students on the effective use of feedback. Students and staff said that various feedback methods are utilised, and students expressed general satisfaction with these.

7 In 2015-16 an external examiner referred to the challenges, in one subject area, of recruiting tutors with sufficient subject expertise and teaching experience, and the desirability of permanent, as distinct from hourly paid, teaching appointments. Senior staff confirmed that current tutors have appropriate academic qualifications and teaching experience; as to future recruitment, LINCISC intends to extend the permanent staff base, where possible.

8 ULISC's analysis of 2015-16 data identified a significant drop, as against previous years, in the percentage of IY1 Business and Management and Engineering students achieving the grades required for progression to the University of Lincoln, and high IY1 failure rates in these subjects and in English. The large number of failed IY1 modules in Engineering and English were also raised as concerns by external examiners. Staff considered that the introduction in 2015-16 of a 60 per cent progression requirement (for pathway subjects, for IY1 progression to Year 2 of the degree, previously set at 40 per cent), which was initiated by the University to improve overall student degree outcomes and agreed with LINCISC, had an undoubted negative effect on student performance. IY1 students became demotivated and tended to concentrate their efforts on the pathway subjects to the detriment of English.

9 With University agreement and in limited, clearly defined circumstances, LINCISC sought to mitigate the effects of the new progression requirement by offering students the opportunity to sit supplementary assessments mid-programme to 'upgrade' their marks. Following meetings with LINCISC staff over the summer of 2016, the University introduced a rule permitting University link tutors to exercise discretion at the August 2016 Progression Assessment Board (PAB) to allow progression to Years 1 and 2 of degree study for IY1 students achieving grades within five per cent below the relevant progression requirement. Steps were also taken to achieve fair treatment for students who had already completed their programme in June 2016, through retrospective application of the discretionary progression rule at the August 2016 PAB. However, senior staff acknowledged that some June completers had already made arrangements, based on their ineligibility to progress to the University of Lincoln.

10 The discretionary progression and 'upgrade' provisions, which were the subject of critical external examiner comment in 2015-16, have been withdrawn. The former provision was a precursor to an amendment to the progression rules effected in early 2017. Following Steering Group discussion, AMB agreed proposals to lower the IY1 progression requirement (to Year 2) to 50 per cent, subsequently confirmed by the University and the provider. Students were informed and handbooks and the website updated. As noted below, ULISC has taken action in response to 2015-16 data suggesting that IY1 Engineering students admitted on the basis of exceptional circumstances contributed to high failure rates.

11 Student achievement issues were compounded by a network-wide problem with the English Listening assessment, which had a negative impact on the IY1 cohort completing in August 2016. Study Group responded to the associated concerns escalated from a number of ISCs by approving a 10 per cent grade uplift to this element of the English assessment. Steps have been taken to enhance English provision across the network with the introduction of Academic English Skills (AES) in 2016-17, to replace English Skills for University Study (ESUS).

At this stage, the full impact of this remains to be determined.

12 Commenting on the current IY1 cohort, staff stated that student motivation and performance are significantly improved in 2016-17; in Engineering, the evidence so far shows a reduction in failed modules and higher average module scores.

13 ULISC operates effective mechanisms to engage students as partners in quality assurance and enhancement. Elected student representatives are members of, and actively participate in, the SSC and QAEG. The meetings provide the opportunity for representatives to consider the AMR and the CAP, including feedback from, and responses to, external examiners, and to raise any student concerns. Feedback from SSC and module evaluation is analysed and evaluated through annual monitoring and QAEG and informs Steering Group deliberations. AMB maintains an overview of student feedback through consideration of the AMR. Follow-up action is reported to students through SSC and QAEG and drawn together in a 'What You Said-What We Did' document accessible to students on the VLE. The CAP effectively monitors responses to the student voice.

14 Student admission processes, governed by documented policy and procedures and handled by the Study Group Admissions Centre, based in Singapore (application to offer-issuing) and Brighton (confirmation and CAS-issuing), operate fairly and effectively overall. Entry requirements, recorded in Centre Specifications, are maintained in a centralised database. Any amendments are approved by, or notified to, PAVC (approved /validated provision, respectively) and controlled by the Registry-based Academic Manager, who is a member of PAVC. Admissions practices must adhere to principles of fairness and inclusivity, with appropriate handling of student information. Decisions are based on documented evidence of academic qualifications, suitability for the course, genuine intention to study, and compliance with national regulations. Processes provide for identification of students with a disability or special needs.

15 Under the documented process for considering exceptional or borderline applications, final decisions rest with the College Principal/Head of Centre. LINCISC has acted in response to 2015-16 data suggesting that IY1 Engineering students admitted on the basis of exceptional circumstances contributed to high failure rates. For 2016-17 entry, stricter tests were applied to 'exceptional' cases in Engineering, resulting in a smaller number of 'exceptional' admissions. Study Group is to conduct a review of Sales, Marketing and Admissions, reporting to Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement Committee in November 2017. Describing their experience of the application process to the monitoring team, students confirmed that qualifications are checked, genuine intention to study is tested, including through telephone interviews, staff are helpful and processes operate efficiently.

#### **Section 4: The embedded colleges' use of external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education**

16 ULISC's programmes, which are Study Group-approved, are benchmarked against *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) for programmes set at levels 4-6 and the Regulated Qualifications Framework for those set at level 3. English language modules are set against the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR). External examiners confirm that the academic standards set for the awards accord with the FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. LINCISC's academic governance framework and quality assurance and enhancement processes are aligned with the precepts of the UKQC, and programmes and modules are designed to fit with

the University of Lincoln's academic framework in terms of credit-equivalence. In the meeting with the monitoring team, staff demonstrated understanding of external reference points, which are used effectively to inform practice, as is clearly evidenced in internal monitoring and review documentation.

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

17 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.

18 The monitoring visit was carried out by Mr Philip Markey, QAA Officer, and Dr Sylvia Hargreaves, QAA Reviewer, on 12 May 2017.

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Southgate House, Southgate Street, Gloucester GL1 1UB  
Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

Tel: 01452 557050  
Website: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)