



# **The Washington International Studies Council**

Recognition Scheme for Educational  
Oversight Review by the Quality Assurance  
Agency for Higher Education

May 2016

## About this report

This is a report of a review under the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at The Washington International Studies Council. The review took place on 20 June 2016 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Professor A Jago
- Professor D Meehan.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about The Washington International Studies Council's delegated responsibilities for the management of quality and improvement of learning opportunities
- draw a conclusion about whether The Washington International Studies Council's public information is reliable
- produce a commentary on how effectively The Washington International Studies Council discharges its responsibilities for academic standards
- report on any features of good practice
- make recommendations for action.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 3. The [context](#) in which these findings should be interpreted is explained on page 4. [Explanations](#) of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>1</sup> More information about this the review method can be found in the [published handbook](#).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us)

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=202](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=202)

## Key findings

The QAA panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision at The Washington International Studies Council (WISC), both information supplied in advance and evidence gathered during the review visit itself. The review has resulted in the key findings stated in this section.

## Judgements

The QAA panel formed the following judgement on The Washington International Studies Council.

- **Confidence** can be placed in The Washington International Studies Council's management of its responsibilities for the quality of learning opportunities.

The QAA review panel also concluded that The Washington International Studies Council **satisfactorily** manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding partners.

## Conclusion about public information

The QAA panel concluded that.

- **Reliance can** be placed on the information that The Washington International Studies Council produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers.

## Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **feature of good practice** at The Washington International Studies Council.

- Close liaison with relevant colleges of the University of Oxford facilitates the institution's coherent and holistic response to student support and feedback.

## Recommendation

The QAA panel makes the following advisable recommendation to The Washington International Studies Council.

- Introduce a formal procedure to ensure that all contractual agreements with partner institutions are both current and subject to regular review.

## Context

The Washington International Studies Council (WISC) is a private educational foundation offering a study abroad programme that involves one-to-one tutorials with University of Oxford academic staff in four prestigious colleges. The colleges provide access to their facilities, while WISC provides non-academic services including accommodation, social and cultural events, advice giving, administration and liaison.

The programme, which has been offered since 1985, is undertaken primarily by students from accredited North American universities, who may or may not be accompanied by faculty from their home institution. While formal written agreements between WISC and students' home institutions are largely in place, they vary considerably in content and detail, and not all are current.

Most students are associate members of their College and are admitted by WISC, which makes arrangements for academic supervision. Around a quarter have the status of visiting students who have met the higher level of academic achievement requirement, pay a higher fee, are full members of their College, and enjoy the same privileges as degree students. Responsibility for the admission of visiting students, as well as for arranging their supervision and support, lies with the College concerned.

In most cases credit arrangements are effected by the home institution, supported by WISC's mark conversion scheme; a School of Record is available for the minority of institutions that require a formal US-style transcript. WISC's responsibility for academic standards is restricted to ensuring that students meet the requirements of home institutions; it does not extend to engaging with the external reference points familiar in the UK. Nevertheless, all tutors are academic employees of the University of Oxford, and teach and assess WISC students in the same manner and to the same academic level as they do their degree students.

## Detailed findings about The Washington International Studies Council

### 1 Academic standards

#### **How effectively does The Washington International Studies Council fulfil its responsibilities for the management of academic standards?**

1.1 The Washington International Studies Council (WISC) offers a study abroad programme for students from who come primarily from universities in North America. The programme is provided, in one-to-one tutorial format, by tutors in four prestigious University of Oxford colleges. WISC has agreements with a number of accredited higher education institutions in the United States and Canada, many of which (regular alumni colleges) have worked with WISC for ten or more years. These institutions provide the majority of students.

1.2 WISC has no direct responsibility for the management of academic standards, its role being to deliver a programme agreed with the home institution through its partnership with the Oxford colleges. Its admissions criteria are specified on its website and in its handbook. Students design their own academic programmes and complete a tutorial request form, on the basis of which WISC identifies and approaches a suitably qualified tutor. The home institution is responsible for the award of credit. In cases where there is no agreement with the home institution or where the institution requires a formal US-style transcript, students may be issued with such a transcript by the School of Record (the University of the Pacific). The panel scrutinised a sample of agreements with North American institutions, and noted that a number were out of date and therefore offer little legal protection to the parties concerned, including students. Therefore, it would be desirable for WISC to introduce a formal procedure to ensure that all contractual agreements with partner institutions are both current and subject to regular review.

1.3 Most students have associate member status within their College, although around a quarter have visiting member status. Associate students are normally required to have a minimum grade point average of 3.2; for visiting students, where admission is solely a College decision and full College membership is provided, the minimum is 3.7 out of a possible 4.0. In both cases the minima are frequently exceeded. An online application procedure is in place for associate students; for visiting students the requirements are two letters of recommendation and academic transcript from the home university, a tutorial request form, a personal statement from the student and a 2,000 word academic writing sample (related to the student's proposed course of study in Oxford). In the case of associate students, WISC reviews each application and makes a preliminary decision to accept or reject, the final decision being made by the Programme Director. In the case of visiting students the decision is made by the Visiting Students Admissions Committee of the College concerned.

#### **How effectively are external reference points used in the management of academic standards?**

1.4 The main external reference points for WISC are the requirements of the home institutions: these are established, often on the basis of detailed discussion about the preconditions for creditworthiness of a student's planned programme of study.

1.5 WISC translates, as clearly as possible and on the basis of an agreed conversion formula, the level of academic work and the corresponding credit transfer recommendations from the Oxford essay-based tutorial method to the more lecture-based American system.

### **How effectively does The Washington International Studies Council use external scrutiny of assessment processes to assure academic standards (where applicable)?**

1.6 Students submit a weekly essay for discussion and marking. Towards the end of each term, tutors are asked to submit a written report on their student's work and progress, and to provide an assessment. Grades are discussed with a WISC academic adviser, but are not subject to negotiation or appeal. The home institution receives and reviews the transcript and normally reviews the grades and report. In exceptional cases, additional assessed work may be required as a precondition for the award of credit.

1.7 WISC provides transcripts for associate students; the colleges provide transcripts for visiting students. Transcripts consist of a cover letter signed by the tutor, a grade report with course titles, tutor's names and grades, a grade conversion scale which sets out performance benchmarks as determined by the tutor, and individual tutorial reports.

The panel has concluded that The Washington International Studies Council **satisfactorily manages** its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding partners.

## **2 Quality of learning opportunities**

### **How effectively does The Washington International Studies Council fulfil its responsibilities for managing the quality of learning opportunities?**

2.1 Visiting students are taught by their college, which also makes appropriate tutorial arrangements. For associate students, WISC organises teaching arrangements in consultation with the Senior Tutor of New College, using only tutors employed by the University of Oxford and often holding college fellowships. WISC has reviewed its contractual arrangements since its previous QAA review in 2012, creating a formal letter of agreement specifying the duties of the tutor (which include reporting students who miss a tutorial or are not making satisfactory progress) and providing information about the prospective student's academic background and interest in the subject. In the light of this and preliminary discussion, the tutor may make suggestions and modify course content with the approval of the student, the WISC Academic Office and the home institution.

2.2 WISC's three academic advisers play a central role in approving each student's programme of study. Students design their academic programme within parameters set out by the College concerned and WISC. A tutorial request form submitted as part of the application process includes instructions and guidance on choosing appropriate tutorial courses. Students are aware that their proposed programme is subject to prior approval by their home institution, and academic advisers liaise directly with the home university in respect of programme approval.

2.3 WISC's Academic Board meets annually to oversee the process of course design and approval for each student. The Board consists of the President and two academic advisers including the Academic Director, as well as a senior representative from each of the four Oxford colleges with which WISC is partnered. Members of the Academic Board correspond throughout the year to discuss the effectiveness of tutorial arrangements by reviewing detailed tutor reports, student evaluation forms, and the mid-term quantitative survey for each student.

2.4 The panel concluded that WISC liaises closely with colleges and tutors to provide excellent learning opportunities for students and that it is effectively managing its responsibilities for the quality of learning opportunities.

**How effectively are external reference points used in monitoring and evaluation?**

2.5 While WISC is cognisant of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, its external reference points are the requirements of the home institutions as set out in consortium agreements.

**How effectively does The Washington International Studies Council assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced?**

2.6 WISC obtains formal student feedback through end-of-term evaluations; the President summarises each term's student evaluation reports and circulates this information to staff. WISC has recently devised an evaluation of the orientation programme to determine which lectures and events are most effective in helping students to adjust during their first two weeks in Oxford. Student feedback is also gathered through contact between tutors and WISC staff. WISC's senior staff meet daily to discuss and resolve issues arising; typically, these relate to academic and housing concerns. Students have access to all senior staff during working hours, and have emergency contact details for use if necessary. WISC has its own grievance procedure and students may also access the British Accreditation Council's complaints procedure.

2.7 The panel was provided with a wide range of evidence demonstrating that WISC, in liaison with the colleges, acts upon student evaluations to make improvements to the programme, to the support provided for students and to the wider student experience. Consistent with this, students provided examples of changes made as a result of their feedback.

2.8 The review panel concluded that the mechanisms in place are effective in enabling WISC to assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced.

**How effectively does The Washington International Studies Council assure itself that students are appropriately supported?**

2.9 Students receive a range of pre and post-arrival communications and information, including an arrival handbook and the comprehensive WISC handbook. On arrival, WISC arranges a mandatory orientation programme, which includes a contribution from the colleges and covers a range of activities aimed at supporting students' transition to both the UK and the programme. Visiting students also attend their College's orientation programme, which runs in parallel with the WISC orientation schedule. Students confirmed the helpfulness and accuracy of the information provided both pre and post-arrival and the supportive nature of the orientation programme.

2.10 At the start of each term, all students have one-to-one academic advisory meetings where they receive information about their academic programme; for associate students these meetings take place with WISC academic advisers and, for visiting students, with their College Tutor for Visiting Students. Associate students are provided with a tutor confirmation letter with details of their course and the name of their tutor. While some students would have liked to have had the letter prior to arrival, overall those who met the panel spoke very

positively about their experience as a whole and of the arrangements made by WISC, and confirmed that they were clear as to what was expected of them.

2.11 Under WISC's attendance policy, credits are recommended on the basis of the number of tutorials attended and essays submitted, and WISC's Academic Office maintains contact with every tutor, both informally and on the basis of teaching agreements. The Academic Office also monitors student progress through an online mid-term survey, which enables it to undertake a quantitative assessment of each student's programme.

2.12 The President of the College Junior Common Room concerned acts as the WISC students' liaison officer. While students have full access to the social and welfare facilities of their colleges, student evaluations suggest that they have not always taken full advantage of this facility. To address this problem, WISC revised and strengthened the duties of college liaison officers to encourage greater participation in college-based academic, cultural and social activities. Since recent end-of-term student evaluations indicate better integration into college life and greater usage of, and satisfaction with, college facilities, there is some reason to believe that this may have been a successful intervention.

2.13 A minority of students are graduates, whose membership is of the relevant College Middle Common Room. To assist such students in respect of academic life and college integration, at the start of the present academic year WISC established the position of Tutor for Graduate Students. It would be premature to evaluate this move, but it does signify a clear recognition of the distinctive nature of the graduate experience at the University of Oxford.

2.14 WISC's close liaison with relevant colleges of the University of Oxford, which facilitates the institution's coherent and holistic response to student support and feedback, is good practice.

### **How effective are The Washington International Studies Council's arrangements for staff development in relation to maintaining and/or enhancing the quality of learning opportunities?**

2.15 WISC employs four full-time and four part-time staff in Oxford. They are supported by an Employee Handbook and undergo an annual performance review, which is currently being replaced by a more informal three-monthly discussion. In discussion with the panel, senior staff confirmed that they receive few requests from staff for professional development, although staff do attend external events and conferences with particular reference to study abroad, and their frequent contact with their US counterparts provides opportunity for the informal dissemination of challenges and solutions.

### **How effectively does The Washington International Studies Council ensure that students have access to learning resources that are sufficient to enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programmes?**

2.16 Associate students have access rights to the Bodleian Library from the week before their tutorial course commences; orientation to its use is included in the induction programme. They have full borrowing rights from their college library, usage of the library and IT facilities provided by WISC itself, and online access to the facilities of their home institution. In addition to these benefits, visiting students are provided with a University email address and identity card, and may attend University classes on the same basis as degree candidates. Students spoke enthusiastically about these learning resources, which several compared favourably to their prior experience.

2.17 The University imposes restrictions on the usage of laboratory facilities by all visiting students. WISC has responded by giving advance notice of this fact. In some cases,



science students have undertaken the laboratory components of their programme at their home institution; in other cases, WISC has made ad hoc arrangements for laboratory use; in other cases again, students have withdrawn their application. Overall, WISC has responded effectively and professionally to a situation that affects only a small number of students.

The panel has **confidence** that The Washington International Studies Council is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

### 3 Public information

#### **How effective are The Washington International Studies Council's arrangements for assuring the accuracy and completeness of information it has responsibility for publishing?**

3.1 WISC's website includes a range of information for students and staff. WISC does not produce brochures but does send posters to alumni colleges. Material produced by WISC is scrutinised by a University of Oxford committee, and confirmed as accurate and acceptable.

3.2 Prior to arrival and in their orientation programme, students receive information that sets out the challenges of study abroad programmes. Students are particularly made aware of the nature of the University's tutorial system, which contrasts sharply with the teaching methods to which they have previously been exposed. The Arrival Handbook and WISC Handbook, both provided at induction, attract favourable comment from students; their contents are regularly reviewed by senior WISC officers in consultation with representatives of the University of Oxford.

The panel concludes that **reliance can be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of the information that The Washington International Studies Council is responsible for publishing about itself and the programmes it delivers.

## 4 Action plan<sup>3</sup>

The Washington International Studies Council: action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight in May 2016						
Good practice	Intended outcomes	Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes	Target date(s)	Action by	Reported to	Evaluation (process or evidence)
The review panel identified the following areas of <b>good practice</b> that are worthy of wider dissemination within WISC:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Close liaison with relevant colleges of the University of Oxford facilitates the institution's coherent and holistic response to student support and feedback.</li> </ul>	Greater student integration into the social and academic life of the Oxford college with which they are affiliated.	Review contract language with college liaisons representatives with a view to increasing the termly stipend and requiring a more proactive approach to facilitating student integration, especially in the first two weeks of the term.	27 September 2016 (contract review completed) and 10 January 2017 (evaluation summary of Michaelmas term feedback).	Tim Moore, Adam Brown.	Robert Schuettinger and members of the Academic Board.	Student feedback as recorded in the end-of-term evaluation forms.

<sup>3</sup> The Washington International Studies Council has been required to develop this action plan to follow up on good practice and address any recommendations arising from the review. QAA monitors progress against the action plan.

Advisable	Intended outcomes	Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes	Target date(s)	Action by	Reported to	Evaluation (process or evidence)
The panel considers that it is <b>advisable</b> for WISC to:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Introduce a formal procedure to ensure that all contractual agreements with partner institutions are both current and subject to regular review.</li> </ul>	To maintain a comprehensive record of current contracts/ consortium agreements between WISC and 'regular' partner universities/colleges that is subject to regular reviews by WISC and the affiliated universities/ colleges.	Revise and update existing consortium agreements to ensure that all agreements offer legal protection to the parties concerned, including students. WISC shall introduce a formal procedure to ensure that all contractual agreements with partner institutions are both current and subject to regular review.	May 2017	The WISC Academic Office in consultation with WISC alumni colleges and universities.	Robert Schuettinger and members of the Academic Board.	Legal advice and the agreement of overseas partner universities and colleges.

## Glossary

This glossary explains terms used in this report. You can find a fuller glossary at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/glossary). More details and formal definitions of key terms can be found in the [handbook](#)<sup>4</sup> for this review method.

**Academic quality** A comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, higher education providers manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed.

**Academic standards** The standards set and maintained by degree-awarding bodies for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

**Credit(s)** A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education programmes of study, expressed as 'numbers of credits' at a specific level.

**Enhancement** The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in QAA's review processes.

**Good practice** A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's review processes.

**Learning opportunities** The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

**Learning outcome** What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

**Programme (of study)** An approved course of study which provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

**Public information** Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

**Widening participation** Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

### QAA1728 - R5004 - Sep 16

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<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=202](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=202)