



# **Washington International Studies Council**

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

January 2021

## 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 Washington International Studies Council. The review took place on 24 July 2020 and 27-28 January 2021, and was conducted by a review team as follows:

- Dr Terence Clifford-Amos
- Dr Jenny Gilbert
- Mr Simon Ives.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- produce a commentary on how effectively the provider discharges its responsibilities for academic standards
- make judgements about the provider's delegated responsibilities for the management of quality and improvement of learning opportunities
- 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 2. The context in which these findings should be interpreted is explained on page 3. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 5.

## The impact of COVID-19

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the review of Washington International Studies Council, was subject to an interim outcome in July 2020 and was concluded in January 2021. The review was conducted online and included meetings with the senior management team, teaching staff, and current and former students. The scope of the evidence considered, and the nature of the judgements and operational milestones have remained the same but with some adjustments due to the online format. A risk assessment was carried out prior to the review to identify and mitigate any potential risks. Annual monitoring will resume again in 2021-22.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>1</sup> More information about 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/docs/qaa/guidance/rseo-handbook-for-providers.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/rseo-handbook-for-providers.pdf)

## Key findings

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

## Judgements

The QAA team formed the following judgement about Washington International Studies Council.

- **Confidence** can be placed in the provider's management and improvement of the quality of learning opportunities.

The QAA review team also concluded that the provider **satisfactorily** manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding partners.

## Good practice

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

- The ongoing support provided for students, including the comprehensive orientation programme, and close academic liaison with partner colleges of the University of Oxford.

## Recommendations

The QAA team makes the following advisable recommendations to Washington International Studies Council.

- Develop a more systematic approach to collecting, analysing and acting upon detailed feedback from students and use this effectively to enhance provision especially in the area of library resources, tutor feedback and social integration within partner colleges of the University of Oxford.
- Formalise the terms of reference, frequency, constitution and membership of the Academic Board and ensure that records provide confirmation of actions planned and reviewed.
- Ensure that students are provided at the outset of their studies with comprehensive assessment information, including the nature, timing and weighting of written and oral contribution to summative, credit-bearing assessment, and introduce tools to support the maintenance of academic integrity.

## Context

Washington International Studies Council (WISC) is a private educational foundation and is the legal company name of the organisation which incorporates the Oxford Study Abroad Programme (OSAP). WISC and OSAP offer a study abroad programme that involves placing students in three colleges of the University of Oxford: Magdalen College, New College and Trinity College. WISC is currently in contractual negotiation with Oriel College to establish a partnership. Students are provided with one-to-one tutorials with University of Oxford academic staff. 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.

Most students are associate members of their nominated Oxford college and are admitted by WISC, which makes arrangements for academic supervision. At the end of their studies they receive an academic transcript from WISC, signed by the tutor responsible for associate members in their Oxford college, confirming that they were taught by University of Oxford tutors in one-to-one tutorial courses.

Around a quarter have the status of visiting students who have met the higher level of academic achievement requirement and are eligible to become full members of their college, and enjoy the same privileges as undergraduate students. Visiting students are recruited to Magdalen College and New College, and normally stay in Oxford for up to a year. Responsibility for the admission of visiting students, as well as for arranging their supervision and support, lies with the college concerned. While visiting students are not degree candidates at the University of Oxford, they are full members of their college and have university privileges on the same basis as Oxford undergraduates. They have full use of the Bodleian Library and departmental libraries. Students with visiting student status receive a University of Oxford email address and identity card, and are also able to attend university lectures, seminars and classes on the same basis as undergraduates.

Visiting students receive letters from the Senior Tutor officially admitting them. Students are academically supervised by their college. At the end of their studies, students receive an academic transcript directly from their college, confirming that they were registered by the University of Oxford.

In most cases, credit arrangements are validated 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 model transcript. A School of Record relationship is when an accredited institution of higher learning in the United States documents and awards credit for programmes or institutions that are not accredited. WISC's responsibility for academic standards is restricted to ensuring that students meet the requirements of home institutions.

All WISC 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 undergraduates.

Students' home universities are responsible for the award of academic credit. The work completed in Oxford counts towards the student's degree at their home institution. WISC maintains a number of consortium agreements with US and Canadian universities. All WISC students who have enrolled since 2003 have successfully completed their academic programmes.

In November 2019, WISC was subject to a successful inspection by the British Accreditation Council.

Students studying in March 2020 were recalled to the US by their home university as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They completed the University of Oxford element of their programme online and students reported that this operated successfully. The WISC 2020 spring and summer term programmes were cancelled. Owing to college and university space restrictions during the pandemic, no students were permitted to arrive in the autumn term of 2020. A small number of students arrived in late December 2020, coinciding with the third COVID-19 national lockdown in England.

## Detailed findings about Washington International Studies Council

### 1 Academic standards

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

1.1 WISC is responsible for the management of academic standards on behalf of its US partners to whose awards its programmes contribute. The partner institutions are established US universities. Credit is normally allocated by the student's home institution. The home institution determines how students' study in the UK will map against their course prior to their arrival in Oxford. In rare instances, home institutions are either not satisfied with the format of the transcript provided by WISC or the relevant college of the University of Oxford, or are not prepared to agree credit matching. In this case, they require a standard format transcript from a designated School of Record. In November 2020, WISC signed a contract with Maryville University, St Louis, Missouri, to be the new School of Record. Each overseas university partner agrees a memorandum of cooperation with WISC detailing their relevant responsibilities.

1.2 WISC convenes an Academic Board annually including a meeting convened in September 2020. The Board's membership includes three WISC representatives and a tutor representing each partner college of the University of Oxford. Most of the tutors also act as a supervisory tutor for associate or visiting students. Consideration is being given to forming a student panel during the next academic year, and to including student representatives on the Academic Board. The Academic Board addresses matters, including recruitment, attendance, student feedback and satisfaction, accommodation, integration with the relevant college and resource issues. The most recent minutes are comprehensive and coherent with actions, and responsibilities clearly identified. However, the Academic Board lacks a formal constitution and has neither written terms of reference nor defined membership. It is **advisable** for WISC to formalise the terms of reference, frequency, constitution and membership of the Academic Board and ensure that records provide confirmation of actions planned and reviewed.

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

1.3 The main external reference points for WISC are the requirements of the home institutions. These are often established on the basis of detailed discussion about the preconditions for creditworthiness of a student's planned programme of study. The home institutions and the School of Record are the arbiters of academic standards as documented in the relevant memoranda of cooperation. Student grievances are handled under the WISC grievance procedure.

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

1.4 Individual students take responsibility for ensuring that, prior to travelling to the UK, their study at WISC maps against academic credit at their home institution. A course description from the home university, including learning outcomes and outline syllabus, often forms the starting point for agreeing a topic for study. Where this is problematic, students are able to gain accreditation through the formally-appointed School of Record. This matter is also addressed in paragraph 1.1.

1.5 Upon receipt of a request from a student applicant, WISC nominates a tutor to deliver weekly one-to-one tutorials, with students presenting weekly essays. A teaching contract is issued and signed by both parties. Although tutors are members of an Oxford college or department, the contract is a private arrangement between WISC and the tutor. The college tutors apply the University of Oxford standards and marking system. A copy of the assessment is retained to enable the home institution to moderate marks should they wish.

1.6 WISC provides transcripts for associate students and the relevant college provides visiting students' transcripts. These transcripts include a short description of the course of study, a brief commentary on the student's work, a final assessment grade, and a grade conversion scale converting University of Oxford grades to US standards. Students and staff informed the review team that students were not given the opportunity to check their work by generating an originality report through specialist plagiarism detection software. Students also reported a significant variation between tutors in their clarity about the nature and expectations of the summative assessment. It is **advisable** for WISC to ensure that students are provided at the outset of their studies with comprehensive assessment information, including the nature, timing and weighting of written and oral contribution to summative, credit-bearing assessment, and introduce tools to support the maintenance of academic integrity.

The team has concluded that 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 Washington International Studies Council fulfil its responsibilities for managing and improving the quality of learning opportunities?

2.1 Students at WISC will have the opportunity to be taught by highly-qualified specialists who are often leaders in their academic fields. Visiting students are taught by faculty from their designated college, through whom appropriate tutorial arrangements are made. For associate students, WISC organises teaching arrangements using only tutors employed by the University of Oxford and often holding college fellowships.

2.2 The University of Oxford one-to-one tutorial system forms the basis of the teaching approach. In its teaching agreement with Oxford tutors, WISC has adopted a more structured approach to student monitoring, including additional reporting responsibilities for tutors and an attendance monitoring record. Students have access to the Bodleian Library, and during orientation a University of Oxford tutor explains the weekly essay and tutorial system. Students who met with the review team were keen to mention the high-quality one-to-one tutorials which emphasise analysis and critical appraisal. Students' evaluations for the Hilary Term 2020 yielded very high scores for tutorial satisfaction.

2.3 Tutors are generally well-versed in the use of online teaching technologies. However, to provide additional support and guidance for tutors, WISC has decided that a dedicated remote-learning policy would be beneficial for future practice and development. A new guidance document on interactive virtual learning and virtual tours is being established for the 2021-22 academic year. All students are additionally encouraged to engage with the University of Oxford's online open lectures.

2.4 The entire Oxford placement programme works in close liaison with US home universities. This means that pre-approval is needed for the course offered. Cumulative learning outcomes are part of the learning process, which includes weekly monitoring of students' progress and attainment. The regular charting of academic progress and assessing students' learning needs is achieved through the weekly one-to-one tutorial. Throughout their academic placement, both WISC and students can adjust courses to meet the required learning outcomes of their home university.

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

2.5 The main external reference points used in monitoring and evaluation are the requirements of the home university partners, as set out in the relevant memoranda of cooperation. These requirements are supplemented by those of the British Accreditation Council and the Expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). In order to map its work to the Core and Common practices of the Quality Code, the WISC Academic Board has engaged external expertise and consultancy to formalise its engagement with its expectations.

2.6 Plans in place for mapping activity include an initial meeting and interviews with an external consultant during Hilary Term 2021. The outcomes of planning and deliberation are expected to include a policy document to further extend the quality assurance and enhancement activities at WISC. The process is intended to be an ongoing academic exercise, to be shared with tutors, students and administrators.

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

2.7 WISC obtains formal student feedback through end-of-term evaluations. The outcomes of these are evaluated and circulated to staff and have informed changes, including to the orientation programme. Student feedback is also effectively gathered through contact between tutors and WISC staff. WISC's senior staff meet daily to discuss and resolve issues.

2.8 Associate and visiting students benefit from the one-to-one tutorial teaching. Feedback from students shows their appreciation of the closely supervised tutorial experience. Students are provided with access to a wide range of college resources. There are opportunities to network with other undergraduates at the University of Oxford.

2.9 Tutorial content is negotiable and is informed by the credit value and level of study of the programme undertaken, and students use home university course descriptions to define this. Oxford tutors also use these expectations in delivering one-to-one tutorials. The process is pedagogically sensitive and dynamic with plenty of leeway to adapt and enhance. There is a reliance on the Oxford one-to-one tutorial process as the key learning methodology. In maintaining academic continuity and remote learning in response to the pandemic, WISC has recently updated its support and academic guidance policies.

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

2.10 The regular tutorials provide systematic and ongoing support. Reading and writing preparation tasks for the tutorials are appropriately demanding. All WISC students are registered with their Oxford college and have full access to the college dining hall, chaplain, welfare and counselling officers, and a Junior Common Room (JCR) President. The JCR President has a significant role as the WISC students' liaison officer. This arrangement



provides student support throughout the term. Colleges are close-knit and provide a strong stewardship for student needs. However, some students find difficulty integrating into college life or making connections with UK undergraduates, although WISC has been active in encouraging this engagement. Some students stated that a proactive social attitude proved helpful to supporting integration. Additionally, students are eligible and active in gaining membership of university sports teams. Support for students is generally highly effective. Colleges have their own health and welfare facilities, including psychologists.

2.11 There have been no formal complaints although appropriate procedures are in place if required and problems with tutors have been dealt with successfully on an informal basis. Recent changes in response to student feedback include the improvement of library networking across colleges, departments and the Bodleian. Subject-specific orientation across libraries is now much better. Academic adviser meetings recommended that the identity of Oxford tutors should be known in advance. An introduction now takes place by email six weeks prior to the arrival of students. General arrival orientation, pre-arrival guidance and office support have received a range of positive student responses. Students spoke positively about the effectiveness and thoroughness of the support arrangements. Michaelmas Term entrants are able to attend Freshers' Week. Progress in the good practice in student support has clearly been maintained since the QAA annual monitoring of 2019. The annual monitoring report of 2019 confirmed that orientation events and the support afforded to students on arrival in Oxford is invaluable. WISC has continued to build on the effectiveness of its orientation programme.

2.12 Throughout the pandemic, the WISC team has been responsive to student needs. WISC has endeavoured to be fully compliant with government advice. Additional accommodation has been made available should any student need to self-isolate. Students stated that they have a clear understanding that students in the UK must follow national guidelines. Students have been managing their own shopping and, although they were not always clear on all aspects of COVID-19 guidance, arrangements have generally worked well and to their satisfaction. The ongoing support provided for students, including the comprehensive orientation programme, and close academic liaison with partner colleges of the University of Oxford is **good practice**.

2.13 WISC's close liaison with relevant colleges of the University of Oxford, student support and feedback was considered good practice in the 2016 RSEO report. However, WISC is aware that obtaining systematic and detailed feedback requires that mid and end-of-term evaluations are enhanced, and that a more systematic approach to their evaluation should be undertaken. Improvement in mid and end-of-term data and evaluation of issues raised was an agenda item for the September 2020 Academic Board, and further work is being undertaken. It is **advisable** to develop a more systematic approach to collecting, analysing, and acting upon detailed feedback from students and use this effectively to enhance provision, especially in the area of library resources, tutor feedback and social integration within partner colleges of the University of Oxford.

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

2.14 As tutors all teach within the University of Oxford, most staff development remains the province of the relevant college or department. High levels of tutor scholarship remain the significant factors in enhancing the quality of learning opportunities. However, further WISC staff development around academic matters is planned following the outcomes of the current Quality Code mapping process, and to support the introduction of the remote learning policy. WISC administrative staff have received recent training in databasing and the use of spreadsheets, IT and first aid. Staff training on COVID-19 has involved team

discussions on compliance, including use of personal protective equipment and staff and student safety. Staff performance appraisals for WISC administrative staff take place biannually.

**How effectively does 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?**

2.15 The one-to one tutorial process ensures that there is regular charting of student progress and assessment of learning needs, and supports the achievement of learning outcomes. Beyond the standard academic programme, for associate or visiting students additional tutorials can be arranged. Oxford colleges are also flexible in approaches to adjusting their academic programme, even at short notice. WISC has assembled detailed student evaluations of the orientation programme to illustrate which lectures and events are most effective in the early settling-in weeks at Oxford.

2.16 The partner Oxford colleges are well-resourced with extensive library facilities and other varied resources. There is copious practical information detailing the Oxford academic system and tutorial etiquette. Although associate students cannot attend university lectures on a formal basis, such attendance is often informally arranged on guest basis. The teaching agreement between WISC and the relevant Oxford tutor has been updated to include more precise instructions on student oversight. WISC has the right to change a tutor where there is an unsatisfactory teaching relationship. The library at the WISC office, workstations, free printing and tutorial rooms have added new layers of resource for students. There is also the newly-renovated additional teaching room at WISC which takes up to 10 students. Students spoke enthusiastically about the range and variety of learning resources accessible to them.

The team has **confidence** that the provider is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and improving the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

**QAA2594 - R12010 - Apr 21**

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

Tel 01452 557000  
Web [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)