



## Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of Washington International Studies Council, June 2019

### Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review panel concludes that Washington International Studies Council (WISC) has made acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the June 2018 [monitoring visit](#).

### Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 The panel was saddened to learn that the founder of WISC died in September 2018. WISC will be established as a trust, and on that basis legal advice has confirmed that there is no change of ownership. The current senior management team remain in place. There have been no further staff appointments in the last year.

3 No other significant changes have taken place since the previous monitoring visit. WISC continues to work with four Oxford University colleges, and the arrangements for one-to-one tutorials with the University faculty remain the same. Student numbers have increased slightly from 174 for the academic year 2016-17 to 180 for 2017-18. All students enrolled by WISC during 2017-18 successfully completed their programme of study.

### Findings from the monitoring visit

4 WISC has completed the actions required to address the advisable recommendation to introduce a formal procedure to ensure that contractual agreements with partner institutions are both current and subject to regular review. WISC intends to review these memorandums of understanding in autumn 2019 to ensure they remain effective.

5 WISC continues to build on its action plan from the 2016 Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO) review, and the comments made in the 2017 and 2018 monitoring reports. Further work has been undertaken to assure the provision of detailed information to students in advance of their arrival in the UK. WISC now provides additional communications to inform and prepare students for their studies, give information about individual tutors, and to clarify arrangements for arrival and induction in Oxford. These emails assist students in communicating with their tutors in advance and, in some cases, to negotiate its content.

6 WISC has reviewed and updated the wide range of information which it provides to students with the intention of improving services. There is now clear information providing greater clarification of students' expectations, an updated teaching agreement for tutors, closer attendance monitoring (including for UKVI compliance), and reports on engagement in class. Additionally, processes such as registering with a doctor, and arrangements for housing are provided online through a dedicated website for students. Students who met with the panel reported positively that, while the advance information was appreciated, the orientation events and support that were afforded to them on arrival in Oxford were invaluable. These developments, together with ongoing actions and recent initiatives, assist

students to integrate academically and socially with their college and undergraduate life in Oxford, and support the quality of the student experience. However, students reported that those who join later in the year may not be able to benefit from the traditional introductory events provided by the colleges.

7 The 2018 monitoring report noted that, although WISC uses a range of methods to review its programmes, and is responsive to student feedback, a more structured approach to monitoring could provide a reference point for future enhancement. WISC has taken a number of actions to enhance its ability to gather feedback on student performance, including more detailed approaches to attendance feedback and performance in tutorials.

8 From discussions with the senior staff, it is clear that WISC remains highly responsive to student feedback. Senior staff gather and consider student comments and act upon them effectively. Summaries of student feedback are collated and presented to the annual meeting of the Academic Board. However, it is not yet evident that there is formal and systematic ongoing consideration of student and other feedback to allow for analysis of trends, and to provide evidence-based decision-making which can be audited by the Academic Board. There is little evidence of formal action planning or of ongoing review and analysis of the effectiveness of actions emanating from the previous year's Academic Board.

9 WISC continues to have a rigorous admissions process which is aligned to *Chapter B2* of the Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). Students are required to provide letters of recommendation, official transcripts, samples of their academic writing, and tutorial request forms. The majority of students are from US or Canadian universities which ensures that their level of English meets the requirements of the relevant Oxford college. One student in 2018-19 was not from an American or Canadian university but was admitted directly by the college. Associate students are required to have a grade point average (GPA) of 3.2 and visiting students a GPA of 3.7.

10 Students are able to contact WISC tutors during the application process. Students who met with the panel echoed the concerns expressed during the last monitoring visit about the length of time the admissions process takes. However, the timelines reported do not appear unduly long and nor do they present any significant difficulties to the applicants. Admission decisions ultimately remain with the relevant Oxford college with which WISC has ongoing and close working relations.

11 Student progress is closely monitored. The Oxford tutorial system provides close scrutiny of student engagement and this is reported to WISC through weekly tutorial attendance reports. Following the helpful amendments to the contractual teaching agreements these reports now capture students' pastoral as well as academic matters. Tutor feedback is positive, and students indicated that they are able to discuss all aspects of their programme with members of the WISC academic team. Student enrolment, progression and achievement data for academic year 2017-18 indicate 100% completion and achievement rates for the programme.

12 WISC students are assessed by their Oxford tutors during tutorials in the same way as home undergraduates. Tutors sign a teaching contract which details the assessment processes expected to be employed during the course of their teaching. 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.

13 WISC continues to send detailed academic reports (full transcripts of the student's academic work and status in Oxford, signed by the appropriate Oxford college official) to the home institution at the end of every term. The home university registrar assesses the student's coursework by evaluating the transcript (which includes detailed tutorial reports)

and awards credit hours towards the home university's four-year undergraduate degree accordingly. In this way, every academic programme arranged by WISC is both internally and externally assessed and approved.

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

## **Progress in working with the relevant external reference points relating to academic standards and quality for higher education**

15 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 location of students within an Oxford college and its tutorial and assessment system, continues to provide a UK reference point for academic standards and quality. Ongoing accreditation by the British Accreditation Council continues to provide an external reference point for confirming the quality of the student experience.

## **Background to the monitoring visit**

16 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.

17 The monitoring visit was carried out by Simon Ives, QAA Officer, and Professor Chris Maguire, panel member, on 18 June 2019.

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