Educational Oversight for Embedded Colleges: report of the monitoring visit of Kaplan International Colleges UK Ltd, April-May 2019

Glasgow International College

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1   From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the monitoring team concludes that Glasgow International College (GIC) is making commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the 2017 annual monitoring visit.

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2   Student numbers overall increased by 37% from 870 at the time of annual monitoring in 2017 to 1196 in 2019. However, this is not significant in the context of fluctuations in student numbers over time, as total numbers in 2016-17 were 1002, falling to 882 in 2017-18, due to planned recruitment to fit with partner university goals, and then increasing again in 2018-19. There have been no significant changes in staffing, premises or programmes since the 2017 annual monitoring visit.

Findings from the monitoring visit

3   The College is making commendable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision. All elements of the action plan have either been completed or are being actively progressed to successful completion, achieving significant enhancement of students' learning opportunities (paragraphs 5-9). The academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of the provision are being maintained (paragraphs 14-19). The College demonstrates highly-effective engagement with relevant external reference points, including the Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) (paragraph 21). Information produced by the College for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy (paragraph 10).

4   The last review of GIC, Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) (HER (EC)), in 2016 made no recommendations and highlighted two areas of good practice. The annual monitoring visit in 2017 found that the College was making commendable progress in implementing the action plan following the HER (EC) and had continued to build on the good practice relating to student support and staff induction. The outcomes of annual monitoring, external examiner reports, and feedback from stakeholders (students, staff, agents, college services and central admissions) are used effectively to inform action planning and are explicitly referenced in the College's action plan. The current action plan identified three key development areas: teaching and learning, the student experience and staff engagement.

5   Since the 2017 monitoring visit, pre-arrival support, and student registration and induction have been enhanced. The practice of Skype meetings for pre-entry students continues to develop (increasing in number and size), with participation by staff, students

and alumni. Students and alumni met at the visit confirmed they had participated in such meetings. Registration is attended by University staff who issue student cards giving access to library, IT and other university services; and College alumni attend to welcome new students. Induction for late arrivals has been reviewed and extended. These aspects of the College's provision were clearly valued by students.

6   After the initial success of its strategy to enhance student representation (highlighted in the 2017 annual monitoring visit report), the College noted lower levels of representative engagement in 2017-18 and acted swiftly in response. The recruitment period for representatives was extended, with multiple training opportunities, and the representative pool increased. The programme-focused Academic Forum was established to complement: the existing Student Forum (now focused on non-academic matters); the more formal programme committees (which meet at different points in the year); and the Student Executive Committee (which comprises representatives elected from the wider student representative body and meets with the College Director on a bimonthly basis). The College also adopted a policy, first proposed by student representatives, of removing from the role student representatives who fail to engage. Recent meeting minutes indicated good levels of attendance and engagement, and the success of these measures was confirmed by students and staff at the monitoring visit.

7   In response to student feedback and the outcomes of internal monitoring, additional English and skills support was introduced for students showing weaker performance as they progress from pre-sessional English. The College introduced weekly small group tutorials, which include subject-based learning, together with a series of online tutorials (available to all students), and set up weekly 30-minute one-to-one sessions for students identified in a final term test as needing further support. Student feedback was very positive, and spring 2018 data shows that 45% of students classified as high-risk and below attainment target (5% of total students) progressed to degree study.

8   Staff induction has been enhanced and reworked into a termly three-day all-staff induction comprising a full-day event specifically for new tutors, followed by a two-day programme for all tutors, with college updates, module meetings and technology enhanced learning (TEL) focused sessions. The first event in January 2019 was well attended and well received by staff. The College has embarked on a review of its TEL provision, with a view to its further development and integration into all modules, where appropriate. This project, led by the College TEL champion and the TEL forum, will be informed by feedback from recent student and staff surveys. The primary aim is to extend the available TEL packages to suit different teaching styles and subject content, supported by associated staff development. Students clearly valued the TEL already on offer and would welcome its wider use across the provision.

9   The College's continuing close and productive relationship with the University is exemplified by the recent development of the Foundation Certificate in Business programme, ongoing work for launch of the new curriculum in September 2019, and collaboration on transition preparation support for students.

10   Recruitment, selection and admissions processes are managed by the central Kaplan admissions team. Prospective GIC students have access, via the Kaplan and college websites, to extensive information about the programmes, the wide range of progression degrees, entry requirements, terms and conditions, and the application process. Links signpost the generic Kaplan International Pathways Guide, college-specific prospectus and university website. Clear Kaplan and college processes are in place for producing, checking and signing off externally published information, including sign-off by the University. Students confirmed that published information is accessible and accurate. Most of the students whom the monitoring team met had used agents and all who had done so were

very satisfied with their services. Entry requirements are determined by the College and Kaplan Pathways Admissions team, in agreement with the University, and signed off by the Joint Academic Management Board.

11   Borderline and non-standard applications are scrutinised by senior central admissions staff and a decision may be sought from the University, via the College Director. Applicants who declare any disability or support requirements are referred to the College, which receives copy application documents and, in liaison with the University, determines the support that can be offered. Robust, clearly documented Kaplan processes ensure that students have sufficient English language competence to complete their programme and Kaplan tests are used to determine the length of any English study requirement on the programme. All applications are for both the Kaplan programme and the chosen progression degree. Offer letters, which set out all relevant conditions, are signed by college and university senior admissions staff. Kaplan has appropriate procedures in places for dealing with cases where pathway or degree programmes are closed before enrolment and for programme closures following admission.

12   The college pre-arrival guide (which includes useful and practical information on next steps, arrangements on arrival, welcome week activities, the programmes and college contacts) reminds successful applicants to bring with them to enrolment all original qualifications certificates, with certified translations as appropriate. College staff are appropriately trained to carry out the relevant checks. Students found the pre-entry information to be informative and comprehensive, and said how helpful it had been to receive the information in a staged way, in three separate pdf booklets. They described a very full welcome week programme of sessions, events and trips, and valued, in particular, the opportunity to meet university students at the University's students' union.

13   Applicants can access an online feedback, complaints and appeals facility, and there is a clear process for handling and responding to complaints and appeals. Students said that they had provided feedback on the admissions and registration processes, which had worked smoothly and efficiently.

14   The Kaplan Academic Standards and Quality Manual (ASQM) sets out: the definitive framework for assessment, including the assessment regulations; and the Assessment Development Guide details Kaplan requirements and processes. Assessment and feedback strategies and programme learning outcomes are incorporated into the College's programme specifications, and module specifications specify module learning outcomes, assessment methods and weightings. Assessment overviews provide students with information on the mode of assessment, weighting and assessed learning outcomes. Assignment briefs set out marking criteria, together with submission guidelines, a plagiarism warning and a reminder of the rules on late submission.

15   The centrally-produced student-facing assessment regulations are included in programme handbooks on the virtual learning environment (VLE). Students clearly understood the rules on pass marks, grading, resits and termination of studies. In designing assessments, tutors work within both Kaplan and university quality assurance frameworks. While external examiners are not asked to view draft assignment briefs, appropriate external scrutiny is provided by university subject moderators, and drafts are revised by college teams in the light of their feedback. Detailed marking criteria referenced against grade bandings, extensive marking guidance to tutors, and clear mark schemes are used to ensure fairness, consistency and the maintenance of academic standards. Standardisation and moderation processes operate in accordance with Kaplan requirements. Students told the monitoring team that tutors mark work and provide feedback directly against the assessment criteria, and that feedback is timely and helps them improve their work. Feedback on examinations is available from tutors on request.

16   External examiners scrutinise sample assessed work and attend final assessment boards. Their reports confirm that assessment is varied, at the appropriate level, aligned with external reference points and tests learning outcomes. University subject moderators maintain an overview of academic standards through end-of-year review of samples of student work. In response to external examiner feedback (and in order to ensure closer alignment with Kaplan requirements) the College has reconfigured its formal reporting of assessment boards, an enhancement which could be further built on by the production of more extensive and detailed assessment board minutes which include, for example, full reporting of external examiner comments.

17   GIC applies Kaplan processes to deter, detect and penalise academic misconduct. Suspected academic misconduct (which may be identified through: electronic plagiarism detection software, work that is out of line with a student's usual standard or exam invigilation) is handled in accordance with Kaplan processes. GIC students have ready access to the Kaplan user-friendly student guide to academic misconduct on the VLE. Information is also provided through student induction, academic skills modules, tutorials, and at the start of every examination session. Students confirmed that they receive extensive guidance on academic misconduct and how to avoid it.

18   Students with a disability receive learning support appropriate to their needs, and reasonable adjustments in assessment are determined on a case-by-case basis, in line with Kaplan guidelines on alternative assessment arrangements. Final decisions on exceptional extenuating circumstances submissions rest with the assessment board.

19   The College offers recognition of prior learning to students for English language in accordance with the Kaplan criteria and processes.

20   Over the period 2015-16 to 2017-18, in each academic year, the successful completion rate (the proportion of students that started the course and successfully completed their award) has remained at 92%. The proportion of students who successfully completed their Kaplan award and met the requirements to progress to their chosen degree at the University of Glasgow has incrementally risen from 81% in 2015-16 to 82% in 2016-17 and 85% in 2017-18. The College attributes strengthened student performance to the success of its enhancement strategy, including developing technology-enhanced learning provision, increased diagnostic support especially for language skills, and reviewing assessment hand-in dates.

The embedded colleges' use of external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

21   Kaplan standards and quality policies and processes, which are informed by the precepts of the Quality Code and regularly updated, are implemented effectively by the College. Programmes are aligned with the relevant qualification's frameworks and Subject Benchmark Statements, including the CEFR for English, and assessment processes are designed and operate, with rigorous oversight by the university subject moderators, to ensure that academic standards are maintained in line with external reference points. College ongoing action planning is informed by, and explicitly mapped to, sections of the Quality Code.

Background to the monitoring visit

22   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.

23   The monitoring visit was carried out by Ms Julia Baylie, QAA Officer, and Dr Sylvia Hargreaves, QAA Reviewer, on 8 May 2019.