



Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of IES Abroad London, December 2023

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that IES Abroad London (the Centre) is making acceptable progress since the [December 2022 monitoring visit](#).

Changes since the last QAA monitoring visit

2 86 students are currently enrolled - 56 of these are on IES programmes, one on full-time placement and 22 on customised programmes. There have been no changes of awarding organisations in this period.

3 IES has completed the move to new premises. This is in a building previously used by a university and is specifically designed for higher education. The overall space has increased by 25% with an increase from four to 10 classrooms, and improved study and social accommodation. Teaching has now returned to pre-Covid levels of in-class delivery.

Findings from the monitoring visit

4 The review team carried out the annual monitoring process by reviewing the annual return and supporting evidence submitted by the Centre. The review team held online meetings with a small group of students and with teaching, support and administrative staff. The team also met with the Centre's senior staff.

5 Previous annual monitoring reports concluded that IES Abroad London had completed the actions immediately arising from the December 2020 Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight (RSEO) review. The review team concludes that the Centre has continued to make acceptable progress on issues arising through its own quality assurance and enhancement mechanisms. This conclusion was reached in view of the commendable progress in respect of staff training events and enhancements made in a number of areas, balanced against some initiatives which are yet to be fully utilised and the absence of formal action planning or minuted discussion of student feedback.

6 The Centre recommenced in-person teaching in September 2022. Senior staff reported that there were no significant difficulties in returning to in-person delivery and that coronavirus protocols had remained in place to limit any disruptions to teaching given the short duration of many students' studies. Teaching staff and students welcomed the return to in-person teaching and confirmed that this happened without significant problems.

7 The Centre moved into new premises during the summer of 2023. The facilities include 10 classrooms, a student lounge and library, and the layout is intended to better meet the Centre's space requirements. Students and teaching staff report high-quality facilities and teaching spaces that are well equipped and match their needs. Senior staff effectively

planned the relocation and a period of operation across both sites and report no significant issues with the new facilities.

8 A previous annual monitoring report noted that student feedback on orientation and pre-arrival information in autumn 2022 expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of information provided and the timeliness of communication. The issue has clearly been addressed and there is no evidence that this is an ongoing concern. Survey data from spring 2023 and fall 2023 shows significant improvement in student satisfaction with pre-arrival information and virtual orientations. Students met by the team described a comprehensive onsite induction and survey data, and a sample orientation suggests that this is both well-designed and valued by students more widely.

9 The Centre has continued to build on an advisable recommendation from its 2020 RSEO review by extending its programme of staff development to include organising several high-quality and relevant training events for staff. For example, recent staff training on artificial intelligence explained the key issues facing educators and usefully set these opportunities and challenges within the context of good assessment design practice and exemplar approaches. Previous high-quality training sessions - such as that concerning 'inclusive excellence' - have influenced staff approaches to teaching. The Centre supports all teaching staff to attend these training sessions by renumeraling them for the time. Alongside these sessions, IES Abroad has launched a new initiative for staff and faculty - the Centre of Excellence in Teaching & Learning Abroad. As well as newsletters containing pedagogic guidance and digital education advice, the Centre of Excellence offers workshops and a reading group.

10 A Faculty Development Fund supports academic staff members' continuing professional development and scholarship. An effective application form enables staff to request up to £500. Although, at the time of the visit, no applications had yet been received for the 2023-24 academic year, staff met by the team were familiar with the fund. Reports of previous projects indicate that the scholarship activities supported have the potential to enhance teaching delivery and ensure staff maintain currency of subject knowledge. Students report that staff are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their subjects.

11 IES Abroad London has also produced London-specific guides and checklists to support staff. For example, step-by-step guidance shows staff how to use the virtual learning environment (VLE) for assessment. Students met by the team reported some variation in the quality and completeness of VLE sites and spring 2023 survey data suggests use of the VLE and technologies are an area of relative dissatisfaction. However, senior staff report that they are bringing greater consistency to the design of VLE course sites through a common structure and the regular review of sites.

12 The Centre uses both mid-course and end-of-course evaluations, as well as surveying students about their wider experience and views on the field trips, support, housing, facilities and arrivals information provided. Staff provided examples of how teaching has been adjusted in response to student feedback and students reported that tutors were open to ways of improving their courses. Both survey data and the experience of students met by the team suggest that students appreciate the small group pedagogy offered by the Centre's courses and are very satisfied with their overall experience. Where past surveys have suggested areas of dissatisfaction or senior staff have been made aware of concerns through other routes, they have provided mentoring and other appropriately supportive interventions. Student views of accommodation are more varied: the Centre's survey results for fall 2022 and summer 2023 suggest issues with accommodation arrangements. However, the students met by the team did not report concerns and the spring 2023 survey data indicated a marked improvement.

13 The previous annual monitoring report identified the absence of sufficiently detailed action planning in response to the opportunities for enhancement the Centre frequently identifies. In response to an evidence request, the Centre explained that it did not create an action plan in response to issues raised from student feedback. Instead, points of concern were addressed via the Centre Director's meetings with department heads or in a weekly team meeting. However, these actions and the responsibilities assigned were not recorded in the minutes. The Centre does not, therefore, have a current (published) action plan that has been updated. As noted above, however, the Centre has created action plans to ensure that it moved premises effectively and commits to provide such evidence in respect of education actions for future reporting periods. The Centre now keeps minutes of weekly team meetings. Within the prose of these minutes, staff members are asked to complete operational tasks, although these are not captured in a separate action register or list for easy follow-up at a subsequent meeting.

14 In 2019-20, 713 students were enrolled at IES Abroad London, all of whom successfully completed their programmes. All programmes were closed in the academic year 2020-21. In academic year 2021-22, 292 students enrolled in and completed the Centre's programmes. In the following academic year, 2022-23, 600 students were enrolled, including 178 on the Centre's study abroad programme and 295 on its customised programmes. Thus far in 2023-24, the Centre has enrolled 469 students and forecasts that a further 270 students will join courses due to finish in April. The majority of students are enrolled on standard programme courses taught by IES Abroad London faculty, including the Study London programme, and the smaller Health Practice and Policy, and Theatre Studies programmes. Customised programmes, which last between two and 12 weeks and often run independently of IES term dates, make up the remainder of the annual student intake.

15 The Centre has introduced and has now operated an Extenuating Circumstances and late submissions process. Students are aware of the system and report that it is operating well. Staff confirmed that the system was generally being used appropriately and that the Centre had established a useful mechanism for quickly reviewing requests and retained sufficient flexibility for teaching staff to approve extensions for low-weighted assessments. Teaching staff value the greater objectivity associated with this system.

16 The Centre has made sustained efforts to improve academic and wellbeing support for students, and has adopted an early intervention approach that involves staff in both teaching and support roles. The Early Intervention procedure is designed to identify students who are alienated or who may not be engaging with their programme. The procedure utilises a well-designed self-evaluation questionnaire to encourage students to seek out support when needed and asks staff to report emerging concerns. Staff report that the Student Success Advocate role is working well as a primary point of contact for supporting students. The Centre has clear procedures for reporting and managing wellbeing concerns and a log of wellness cases shows clear case tracking and triaging. Staff and students met by the team were aware of who to contact if they have a concern or felt that they could easily access this information if required. The Centre has also reviewed its wider student affairs procedures, introducing clear and detailed protocols for dealing with housing complaints, field trips, emergency contacts, and providing information to third parties in the event of a crisis situation.

Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

17 The Centre has made further progress in aligning with external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education. The Centre has introduced new academic policies that attempt to bridge the academic norms of the American and British higher

education systems. In 2022-23, the Centre implemented these procedures as well as revising minor details of the policy, such as clarifying how grade points are impacted by penalties (deductions apply to increments rather than grade letters) and that evidence is required to support extenuating circumstance applications. Students met by the team felt that orientation had adequately briefed them on the norms of a different higher education system.

18 The Centre has introduced anonymous marking. This is a significant difference in practice from the Centre's wider organisation and is not common practice in the US higher education system. There is some evidence that the Centre has evaluated the impact of anonymous marking and has found the change to be a positive one, although senior and teaching staff acknowledge that anonymous marking is not appropriate for all types of assessments. Students report that there is some variation in whether submissions which would otherwise be appropriate for anonymous marking are made through the VLE (which assists with anonymity) or are requested through email. However, students valued the anonymous marking when in place and acknowledged that this was not appropriate for all assessment scenarios.

19 The Centre has also introduced 'second marking' or moderation, although neither are currently required as 'standard' in IES Abroad given their absence in the US higher education system. However, the Centre will ask or require staff to undertake second marking or moderation when staff members request a second opinion, where students raise concerns, or where courses are taught by multiple individuals and a common grading standard is required. No formal policy is yet in place, but a staff training slide and moderation form suggest progress in implementing this system. Teaching staff met by the team had not yet experienced second marking or moderation but senior staff described the practical steps taken when a second marker had been asked to agree a set of marks. Important details of a second marking or moderation policy have yet to be defined, such as what procedures would be followed if two markers could not agree a mark. Students met by the team were not aware of the second marking or moderation procedure but felt that they would be able to seek advice from staff if they were concerned.

Background to the monitoring visit

20 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.

21 The monitoring visit was carried out by James Freeman, Reviewer, and Millard Parkinson, QAA Officer, on 5 December, 2023.

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