INTO Queen's LLP, trading as INTO Queen's University Belfast

Educational Oversight - Exceptional Arrangements

November 2018

About this report

This is a report of a review under the Educational Oversight - Exceptional Arrangements method conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at INTO Queen's University Belfast. The review took place on 21 November 2018 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Mrs Catherine Fairhurst
- Professor Graham Romp.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner
- make judgements on the provider's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities
- make judgements about the reliability of the information that the provider produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers
- 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](https://www.qaa.ac.uk) and its mission.[1] More information about this review method can be found in the Handbook for providers.

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[1] www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us

Key findings

The QAA panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision at INTO Queen's University Belfast, both information supplied in advance and evidence gathered during the review visit. The review has resulted in the key findings stated in this section.

Judgements

The QAA panel formed the following judgement about INTO Queen's University Belfast.

- **Confidence** can be placed in INTO Queen's University Belfast's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner.
- **Confidence** can be placed in INTO Queen's University Belfast's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.
- **Reliance** can be placed on the information that INTO Queen's University Belfast produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers.

Recommendations

The QAA panel makes the following recommendations to INTO Queen's University Belfast.

It is **advisable** for the provider to:

- ensure that quoracy for deliberative committees is clearly defined (paragraph 1.3)
- develop and publish a learning teaching and assessment policy to assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is consistent, to ensure that existing good practice is further enhanced and to enable international students to achieve their full potential (paragraph 2.12).

It is **desirable** for the provider to:

- develop its strategy for improving student engagement to ensure the student body is fully involved in all quality processes (paragraph 2.3).

About INTO Queen's University Belfast

INTO University Partnerships (IUP) is one of the largest pre-entry to higher education institutions. INTO Queen's Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) (INTO Queen's) was established in 2009-10. This was a strategic initiative to support Queen's University (the University) international student recruitment by giving the University access to a global agent network. The Partnership operates as a joint venture with the University.

In 2017-18, there were 222 higher education students, 98 at Level 3 and 124 at Level 4 and above. There is a total of 22.6 academic staff made up of 15 full-time and 14 part-time staff.

INTO Queen's is responsible to the University for the maintenance of academic standards relating to its qualifications, the design and approval of new programmes and modules, the assessments of modules, programme monitoring, and review and external review. INTO Queen's is responsible for assuring and enhancing academic quality. It is also responsible for learning and teaching, enabling student development and achievement, student engagement, external examining, programme monitoring and review, and academic appeals and student complaints. It is also responsible for information provided to students. There is a signed agreement, a business plan and quality assurance agreement.

The recruitment, selection and admission are joint responsibilities with the University, although the University has delegated operational responsibilities for these to INTO Queen's and IUP.

In addition to the academic pathways validated by the University, INTO Queen's provides a range of English Language programmes. Academic English is centrally designed and developed by IUP.

INTO Queen's is an accredited provider of English Language provision by the British Council under the Accreditation UK scheme. The British Council undertook inspections in March 2010 and reaccreditation was achieved in March 2014 and May 2018.

Detailed findings about INTO Queen's University Belfast

1   Academic standards

How effectively does the provider fulfil its responsibilities for the management of academic standards?

1.1   INTO Queen's has effective processes for maintaining academic standards which are overseen by both INTO and the University. The University has ultimate responsibility for assuring academic standards of its awards. The Joint Venture (JV) Board has oversight of academic standards with responsibility for quality assurance arrangements and the quality of the student learning experience delegated to its Academic Sub Group (ASG). The ASG meets quarterly and is chaired by the University Pro Vice-Chancellor (Education and Students) or nominee with membership comprised of senior management staff of the University and INTO Queen's, and academic and non-academic staff.

1.2   Programme Coordination Committees manage the operational quality assurance arrangements for each programme chaired by the programme manager or a programme coordinator and are comprised of the teaching and support staff associated with that programme. These committees approve minor changes, and recommend major changes, in programme design and delivery through the Annual Programme Review (APR) process.

1.3   The membership of these committees and Boards of Examiners are clearly defined in their term of reference but these do not specify the requirements for quoracy. As these committees have an important role in the management of academic standards, it is **advisable** for the provider to ensure that the quoracy of deliberative committees is clearly identified.

1.4   Programme managers work closely with subject-level University appointed moderators to assure academic standards and the quality of the student learning experience. University moderators advise on new programme development, making substantial changes to existing programmes, approving module assessments and contributing to the APR process. Annual programme and module reviews are produced which analyse and respond to quantitative and qualitative data including progression data, student and external examiner feedback.

1.5   The collaboration between the University and INTO Queen's provides an effective quality assurance framework that ensures academic standards are appropriately set and maintained across the academic programmes.

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

1.6   INTO Queen's academic programmes are validated by the University and it is also accredited by the British Council to provide a range of English language programmes which have been designed centrally by INTO University Partnerships (IUP).

1.7   All academic programmes (and major changes to existing programmes) are approved through the University validation process which is overseen by its Collaborative Provisions Group (CPG). A proposal for a new programme (including a business case, a marketing plan, and a programme specification), or a major change to an existing programme, is initially made to ASG. If approved the proposal is then further developed and considered at a validation meeting, which involves an external assessor, to ensure the appropriateness of the specified academic standards. A recommendation, subject to

possible conditions, is then made to the University CRG for final approval. There is a similar process for the revalidation of existing programmes.

1.8   External reference points are effectively used in the design, approval, assessment and monitoring of programmes. This includes reference to *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and Subject Benchmark Statements. English language courses are benchmarked against *The Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) descriptors with British Council accreditation. These are reflected in course specification module guides and programme handbooks.

1.9   Other than specific exemptions, students on its academic programmes are subject to the standard University policies, procedures and regulations. INTO Queen's makes effective use of external reference points in the management of academic standards through its implementation of the University's procedures.

How effectively does the provider use external moderation, verification or examining to assure academic standards?

1.10   Programme specifications give the level of the programme consistent with the FHEQ, provide a link to Subject Benchmark Statements and state the course learning outcomes and the approved learning, teaching and assessment methods, and weightings within each module.

1.11   Summative assessments are set by INTO Queen's staff and then commented on and approved by the relevant university moderator and external examiner. First marking and internal moderation of summative assessments is undertaken by INTO Queen's staff prior to a sample being reviewed by the external examiner appointed by the University. Assessment marks are considered and approved though Boards of Examiners. External examiners produce reports which are considered and responded to through the APR process.

1.12   Through its use of internal moderation and external examiners, INTO Queen's effectively assures that academic standards are maintained.

The review team concludes that **confidence** can be placed in INTO Queen's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner.

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2   Quality of learning opportunities

How effectively does the provider fulfil its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.1   INTO Queen's shares the responsibility for managing and enhancing the quality of students' learning opportunities with Queen's University Belfast (QUB). The Quality Assurance Agreement details these responsibilities. The JV Board is ultimately responsible for academic oversight and the quality of the student learning experience which is delegated to the Academic Sub Group (ASG).

2.2   Programme Coordination Committees manage delivery and the Programme Managers report to the Academic Management Committee, chaired by the Academic Director. In order to support and enhance the quality of student learning opportunities a QUB moderator advises INTO Queen's on new programme development, approves assessments and contributes to the Annual Programme Review (APR).

2.3   INTO Queen's collects student views individually and collectively through surveys and the Staff Student Consultative Council (SSCC). However, there are not comprehensive arrangements for the effective representation of the collective student voice at all organisational levels. For example, there are no student members of the Programme Coordination Committees or the ASG. The University has responded to expectations from its student body for greater participation in decision-making processes with the Student Partnership Project and the Student Partnership Framework. INTO Queen's say they recognise the limited opportunities for its students to participate in decision-making processes and is collaborating with these university projects. Therefore, it is a **desirable** recommendation that INTO Queen's continues to develop its strategy for improving student engagement to ensure the student body is fully involved in all quality processes so as to enhance and improve the quality of learning opportunities.

2.4   INTO Queen's effectively fulfils its responsibilities for enhancing student learning opportunities by systematically reviewing the quality of provision and enacting improvements at Board level. INTO Queen's programmes are included in the QUB Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement which requires annual reporting on enhancement activities. Evidence from Annual Programme Reviews, student surveys and meetings held by the review team, confirm that the enhancement of learning opportunities is duly considered. Recent examples of enhancement initiatives include the introduction of interviewing skills and the development of a new virtual learning environment. Field trips, visits to local businesses and opportunities to engage in English outside the classroom, enrich the students' learning experience.

How effectively are external reference points used in the management and enhancement of learning opportunities?

2.5   INTO Queen's makes use of external reference points to manage and enhance learning opportunities mainly through its partnership with the University. The programmes are designed, validated and monitored according to the university quality procedures as confirmed by the University Programme Evaluation/Validation process. The awards reflect *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the Programme Specifications are informed by the Subject Benchmark Statements. The English language courses are benchmarked against *The Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) descriptors with British Council accreditation.

2.6   There is robust scrutiny of programmes by external examiners appointed and trained by the University to ensure that standards are comparable with UK expectations. The external examiners use their report to comment upon any exemplary practice.

2.7   INTO Queen's students have access to the University's Academic Appeals and Students' Complaints procedures which are explained in the Student Programme Handbook where there are hyperlinks to the detailed policies. The University procedures refer to the Office of Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) and INTO Queen's students may also appeal to INTO University Partnership's Manager Accreditation UK.

How effectively does the provider assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced?

2.8   INTO Queen's assures itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced through various methods. These are the module and Annual Programme Reviews, managerial and peer observation, external examiners' reports and student feedback.

2.9   INTO Queen's appoints teaching staff who are then given university approval which grants them recognised teacher status. This gives access to university teaching and learning resources such as library and computing facilities. New teaching staff serve a probationary period which is not confirmed until after a successful observation. Established staff are observed annually together with peer observation which is developmental and facilitates the sharing of good practice.

2.10   The students express their views through comprehensive formal and informal methods. These are module and programme student surveys, personal tutorials and good access to staff. The student surveys indicate that students are generally satisfied with teaching although the sample of students, met by the review team, says that the teaching quality varies according to the teacher.

2.11   INTO Queen's thoroughly considers detailed Student Progression and Achievement Tracking and Comparison data at the Annual Programme Reviews. The ASG reports on student achievement suggest that INTO students do not achieve degree classifications as high as non-INTO international students.

2.12   The senior staff report that teaching is aligned with the QUB learning, teaching and assessment strategy, although the teaching staff are not able to give examples either of this or how the UK Quality Code for Higher Education informs their teaching. Therefore, it is **advisable** that INTO Queen's develops and publishes a learning, teaching and assessment policy to assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is consistent, to ensure that existing good practice is further enhanced, and to enable international students to achieve their full potential.

How effective are the provider's arrangements for staff development in relation to maintaining and/or enhancing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.13   There are effective arrangements for wide-ranging staff development activities to maintain and enhance the quality of learning opportunities. INTO identifies individual staff needs through induction, teaching observations, events and/or changes in operating practices.

2.14   Teaching staff are experienced and well qualified, and are able to access a range of opportunities for staff development which are reviewed biannually. This includes funding for higher degrees, internal coaching and courses such as teaching for international students at IUP. INTO staff have access to the extensive staff development programme at QUB

including completion of the University's teacher training course (Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education Teaching). Several staff have completed this programme and they say it is very useful. There is a structured induction scheme for new staff. Academic and student support staff confirm that they are included in the staff development activities. English Language teachers complete a course in English Language teaching.

How effectively does the provider assure itself that students are appropriately and effectively supported?

2.15   INTO Queen's assures itself that students are appropriately and effectively supported through the annual programme review process. A wide range of formal and informal student support mechanisms are available such as study skill support, personal tutorials and pastoral support. Students also have full access to the University support systems.

2.16   Pastoral care is provided by the Student Services team (including Admissions and Accommodation specialists, and a Chinese Language Liaison Officer) and by teaching staff through personal tutoring. Students with declared special education needs are referred to the Special Educational Needs Officer for assessment and referral so that the teaching and learning environment can be appropriately adapted.

2.17   Students have access to the INTO Queen's Student Support Services as well as the University Health and Counselling Services, Students' Union, specialised assistive technology provisions for students with disabilities, and University Careers Service. Students are introduced to them during induction.

2.18   Students confirm there is an academic personal tutor system to provide general academic and personal advice with additional academic and language support to improve student performance.

2.19   Students met by the review team, student surveys and the student submission confirm that the combination of support arrangements is effective and assists both their learning and the transition to higher education. Those students that had progressed to QUB considered that they were better prepared in study skills than their QUB counterparts.

How effectively does the provider ensure that learning resources are accessible and sufficient to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes?

2.20   INTO Queen's is responsible for the provision of students' learning resources and uses additional or specialised facilities from the University when necessary. There is a recently refurbished Learning Resource Centre. INTO Queen's students have access to all QUB learning resources such as library, information technology and internet access.

2.21   INTO ensures that learning resources are accessible and sufficient through the programme approval and review processes, the SSCC and by surveying students and staff each semester. For example, student requests for better printing facilities led to the installation of a new volume printer in the Learning Resource Centre. Staff informed the review team that they are satisfied with the access and quality of learning resources available and the students confirm that they have full access to learning resources which are sufficient to achieve the intended learning outcomes.

> The review team concludes that **confidence** can be placed in INTO Queen's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

3 Information

How effective are the provider's arrangements for ensuring that information about learning opportunities is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy?

3.1 INTO Queen's has effective arrangements for ensuring that information for students about learning opportunities is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. INTO and QUB provide reliable, clear and accessible information about INTO through a variety of media, including the INTO corporate website, INTO pages hosted on QUB website, the annual prospectus, information flyers and through social media channels. The websites contain full details of the admission process, explain the embedded nature of INTO and its partnership with QUB.

3.2 The Marketing Coordinator works with IUP to produce publicity material for INTO Queen's and consults with IUP editors who generate corporate recruitment materials. This is managed through a detailed brochure print schedule spreadsheet.

3.3 INTO Queen's provides prospective students with pre-arrival information to assist them in planning for their arrival at INTO. The Student Submission stated that students appreciate the email follow-up and reminders from the Academic Support Team. The printed brochure and the website clearly explain what applicants need to achieve to continue their study at QUB, this information is repeated at induction and during the programme. Enrolled students are issued with a programme handbook, which contains general as well as programme-specific information. Handbooks are reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that their content remains accurate and current.

3.4 INTO uses overseas agents to market its programmes and has extensive mechanisms in place to ensure agents are provided with up-to-date information about its programmes and partners.

3.5 Students collected a detailed official transcript from INTO Queen's. This detailed record of studies specifies the academic credit achieved on completion of the INTO programme which gives evidence to others of the students' academic achievement.

3.6 The Student Submission and students who met the review team reported satisfaction with the accuracy and completeness of the information received prior to making an application and throughout their studies.

> The review team concludes that **reliance can** be placed on the information that INTO Queen's produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers.

Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms that may be used in this report.

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer **Glossary** on the QAA website: www.qaa.ac.uk/glossary

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

Award
A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

Blended learning
Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced** or **enabled learning**).

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.

Degree-awarding body
A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

Distance learning
A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'.
See also **blended learning**.

e-learning
See **technology enhanced** or **enabled learning.**

Embedded college
Colleges, often operating as part of a network, that are embedded on or near the campuses of UK higher education institutions (HEI) and that primarily provide preparatory programmes for higher education.

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 our review processes.

Flexible and distributed learning
A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

Framework
A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

Framework for higher education qualifications
A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FHEQIS).

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

Operational definition
A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

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

Programme specifications
Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

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

Quality Code
Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the Expectations that all providers are required to meet.

Reference points
Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

Subject Benchmark Statement
A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to

bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

Technology enhanced or **enabled learning** (or **e-learning**)
Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

Threshold academic standard
The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student must demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **subject benchmark statements**.

Virtual learning environment (VLE)
An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include resources such as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

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