Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) of Kaplan International Colleges UK Ltd

Liverpool International College

June 2016

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About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Liverpool International College. The review took place on 22 and 23 June 2016 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

Mrs Alison Jones
Professor Graham Romp.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by Liverpool International College and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)[1] setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) the QAA review team:

makes judgements on
- the setting and maintenance of threshold academic standards
- the quality of student learning opportunities
- the information provided about higher education provision

provides a commentary on the enhancement of student learning opportunities
provides a commentary on the selected theme
makes recommendations
identifies features of good practice
affirms action that the embedded college is taking or plans to take.

In Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges) there is also a check on the provider's financial sustainability, management and governance (FSMG). This check has the aim of giving students reasonable confidence that they should not be at risk of being unable to complete their course as a result of financial failure of their education provider.

A summary of the findings can be found in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the findings are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on p

Key findings

QAA's judgements about Liverpool International College

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at Liverpool International College.

The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered on behalf of Kaplan International Colleges UK Ltd **meets** UK expectations.
The quality of student learning opportunities is **commended**.
The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following features of **good practice** at Liverpool International College.

The close working relationship with the partner university, which enables highly effective and regular processes for developing, monitoring and reviewing of programmes (Expectations B1 and B8).
The high quality pastoral and academic support that enables students to achieve success (Expectation B3).
The personalised approach to staff induction and development, which supports high quality learning and teaching (Expectation B3).
The proactive approach to identifying student needs and supporting students to enable them to progress to their preferred university (Expectation B4).
The systematic approach to personalised learning that supports students to achieve their full potential (Expectation B4).
The proactive and inclusive approach to the engagement of students in quality assurance and enhancement activities (Expectation B5).

Enhancement of student learning opportunities

Liverpool International College Directors are members of the College Executive Management Board (CEMB), which meets regularly and provides a forum for sharing best practice and discussion of matters relating to quality improvements. These matters are captured within College action plans. There are examples of good practice at the College being identified by the CEMB and best practice for other colleges being adopted by the College. The College actively promotes and encourages staff to share good practice both within the College through project groups and also across the network.

Theme: Digital Literacy

The College has used the Kaplan International Colleges UK Ltd-level Blended Learning Strategy and Learning and Teaching Framework to inform the development of its own action plan and Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, and has sought to embed blended learning into the planning and delivery of the curriculum. Staff are supported in this area by the College Learning and Teaching Lead. Digital literacy is being used to enhance the curriculum to the benefit of students, and the College has identified areas for further development to support student learning and IT skills.

Financial sustainability, management and governance

There were no material issues identified at Liverpool International College during the financial sustainability, management and governance check.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges).

About Liverpool International College

Liverpool International College (the College) was established in 2007. It is an embedded college within the Kaplan International Colleges UK Ltd (KIC) pathways framework, in a partnership with the University of Liverpool. Students achieving the agreed requirements proceed directly to a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes offered by the University. In 2014-15, over 900 students were enrolled at the College.

The College was reviewed as part of the Embedded College Review for Educational Oversight of KIC in March 2012. The review found: confidence that academic standards are managed appropriately and in accordance with the policies and procedures of KIC and the University of Liverpool; confidence that the quality of learning opportunities is assured and enhanced appropriately, and in accordance with the policies and procedures of KIC and the University of Liverpool; and reliance can be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that KIC is responsible for publishing about itself, its embedded colleges, and the programmes that they deliver.

The 2012 review report contained two recommendations to the College. There was an advisable recommendation to ensure that there is provision in all programmes for an external scrutiny of examination questions and summative assignments before these are used in student assessment. The College had responded

Explanation of the findings about Liverpool International College

This section explains the review findings in more detail.

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a brief glossary at the end of this report. A fuller glossary of terms is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the review method, also on the QAA website.

1 Judgement: The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered by the provider

Expectation (A1): In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) are met by:

- **positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications**
- **naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications**
- **awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes**

b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics

c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework

d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

Quality Code, *Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards*

Findings

1.1 The College

Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.

Quality Code, *Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards*

Findings

1.11 The College is required to maintain definitive programme and module specificat

Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:

> **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
> **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*

Findings

1.21 The ASQM sets out KIC's assessment principles including the responsibility of College-level Programme Committees for ensuring that an effective assessment strategy is in place for all programmes that meets the KIC aims and principles of assessment, and supports the KI UK Pathways Learning and Teaching Framework.

1.22 Grade descriptors are used by the College to define success and the extent to which learning outcomes are met. Programme Committees ensure that assessments are designed and considered in the overall context of the programme and module learning outcomes and include an appropriate volume and balance of assessment methods. The Annual Programme Report (APR) is completed by the Programme Leader, in conjunction with the Programme Committee, before final approval is given by the Senior

1.27 KIC processes for the assessment of learning outcomes are appropriately communicated and applied at the College. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*

Findings

1.28 The College has devolved responsibility for the monitoring and review

Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:

> **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards*

Findings

1.36 The College follows the KIC Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) which sets out the requirements for the appointment of external examiners to each award-bearing programme, or cognate group of programmes in line with university-level agreed procedures. In addition, an external examiner is appointed by KIC to the credit-bearing Languages for Study module operating across the network of colleges. The College also draws upon the expertise and support from the University of Liverpool to ensure that the programmes remain aligned with their progression routes and exploit opportunities to enhance the students' learning experience.

1.37 Feedback from external examiners is used to inform the APRs produced by Programme Leaders at College level and the overarching institutional-level ASQP report. PPR also draws upon the feedback provided through external examiner reports.

1.38 The review team found that the design of the arrangements for using external and independent expertise in the setting and maintenance of academic standards would enable the Expectation to be met.

1.39 The review team tested the Expectation by reviewing external examiner reports, APRs, the PPR report and Programme Committee minutes, and holding meetings with staff and students.

1.40 There is evidence that consideration of external examiner reports was reflected in APRs and Programme Committee minutes, together with the responses to external examiners and the summary provided to students.

1.41 The College-written external report seen by the review team was completed in full, noting strengths and raising any concerns. The report dealt appropriately and robustly with matters relating to standards, with examples of recommendations being followed up by the College through the APR and Programme Committees. Students confirmed awareness of the external examiner process and advised that the external examiner reports were considered at the College Programme Committees.

1.42 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low, because appropriate rules, policies and processes are in place and are appropriately communicated and applied.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

The maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered by the provider: Summary of findings

1.43 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.44 All seven of the Expectations for this judgement area are met and the associated level of risk is low in each case. There are no recommendations or affirmations in this judgement area.

1.45 The College has rigorous policies and procedures for maintaining academic standards, which are in accordance with KIC's academic frameworks and regulations. The College works effectively with the University of Liverpool in the quality management of programmes.

1.46 The review team concludes that the maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered by on behalf of Kaplan International Colleges UK Ltd at the College **meets** UK expectations.

effective and regular processes for developing, monitoring and reviewing programmes, is **good practice**.

2.8 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low, because appropriate rules, policies and processes are in place and are appropriately communicated and applied.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

Professional Development seminar series each term. Support is made available to staff to seek Higher Education Academy Fellowship status. These opportunities and activities are overseen by a college-level Continuous Professional Development Group. The personalised approach to staff induction and development, which supports high quality learning and teaching, is **good practice**.

2.19 In summary, the College has developed an overall framework and processes that support high

Higher Education

Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.

Quality Code, *Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning*

Findings

2.36 The College follows the KIC policies and regulations for assessment as set out in the ASQM. The ASQM provides comprehensive information on KIC assessment processes and regulations, including internal and external moderation, marking and feedback. Chapter 12 of the ASQM also sets out the minimum requirements for successful completion of modules and programmes and how individual module marks are awarded and the calculation of the final programme average mark.

2.37 The College also provides assessment information to students during induction, which is supported by written guidance provided by CLIQ such as academic misconduct. Individual feedback on assessment is provided to students through tutorials, which students found beneficial in helping them to improve for the next assessment and enhancing their skills.

2.38 Responsibility for the development of all module formative and summative assessments has been delegated to colleges, with the exception of the summative assessments for the Language for Study 3 module which remain centrally managed by the KIC Learning Measurement and Evaluation Team. The College draws upon the KIC Assessment Development Guide produced by the KIC Learning Measurement and Evaluation Team which outlines the fundamental principles underpinning the development of assessment strategies to enable the achievement of aims and objectives of KIC's assessment. Module Coordinators design assessment requirements in line with the Alignment Validity Reliability Effects Practicality Standards (AVREPS) framework to ensure that assessments are fit for purpose, reliable and valid. KIC guidance is also available to Colleges in making reasonable adjustments to assessments for students with protected characteristics.

2.39 The review team found that the design of the arrangements in place for the assessment of students at the College would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.40 The review team considered documents relevant to assessment and external examiner reports and spoke to staff and students with regard to assessment. The review team saw a range of programme and module specifications and Student Handbooks that included appropriate assessment information.

2.41 Programme Committee minutes, APRs and examples of data made available for assessment boards demonstrated an appropriate approach to assessment that was in line with KIC requirements. The review team noted that ongoing monitoring of assessment results is managed through the Programme Committee which takes action to enhance the processes through module and programme review and in response to feedback from external examiners.

2.42 External examiner reports scrutinised by the review team were positive about the assessment process and commented on how assessment methods are diverse, useful and suitable for the learning outcomes, with a robust double-marking process. College staff

Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.

Quality Code, *Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review*

Findings

2.52 The College Programme Committees monitor and review programmes on an ongoing and annual basis. The APRs allow the College to ensure that the learning opportunities remain appropriate, drawing upon feedback from students, staff and external examiners. Recommendations arising from APRs are recorded within the College action plan. College action plans are reviewed by the College on a regular basis and support is provided by CLIQ with development of its

Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.

Quality Code, *Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints*

Findings

2.60 The College adheres to KIC policies and procedures relating to academic appeals and complaints, including those against admission decisions as specified in the ASQM. This would enable the Expectation to be met.

2.61 The review team examined programme handbooks issued to students and met staff and students to evaluate their effectiveness.

2.62 The appeals and complaints policies and procedures are communicated to students in the Programme Handbooks, Student Handbooks and on the VLE. Staff and students were aware of the relevant complaints and appeal processes, and there was a clear emphasis at the College on seeking to resolve issues as soon as possible. Informal complaints are logged within the College and reviewed by the College Management Group to identify trends and make improvements. Students at the College were able to identify where enhancements had been made to learning opportunities as a result of informal complaints being made known to College staff.

2.63 KIC has designed fair, accessible and timely processes for handling academic appeals and student complaints, and these are clearly communicated to students and effectively implemented at College level. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

Expectation: Met
Level of risk: Low

3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.7 In reaching its judgement, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.8 Expectation C is met and the associated level of risk is low. There are no recommendations or affirmations in this judgement area. KIC has comprehensive processes for managing its public information and operates robust procedures to ensure their effective implementation at College level. The College contributes effectively to the production of information and there is a close working relationship with the University of Liverpool to ensure that programme information is reliable and accurate.

3.9 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the College **meets** UK expectations.

5 Commentary on the Theme: Digital Literacy

Findings

5.1 KIC has developed both a Blended Learning Strategy 2013-17, and a Learning and Teaching Framework that outline key principles relating to embedding technology into learning and teaching. The College has used these documents to inform the development of its own action plan and LTAS and enhance the digital literacy skills of its staff and students.

5.2 As specified within its action plan, the College has sought to embed blended learning into the planning and delivery of the curriculum. The College Learning and Teaching Lead has undertaken a survey of staff and student awareness of digital literacy and organised training sessions to support staff development in embedding digital literacy. The College has also identified areas where students require further development in digital literacy. These include the use of software to support group and collaborative working, the collation of information, and the use of IT to enhance their time-management skills, and the College is seeking ways to enhance student development in these areas. Staff and students at the College were able to identify various ways in which IT is used to support learning and teaching.

5.3 Central resources have been provided to support blended learning and digital literacy across the colleges, including two dedicated Learning Technologists within the CLIQ who support colleges with digital initiatives. To share good practice and drive blended learning innovations at college level, KIC has established a Blended Learning Working Group. The Learning and Teaching Innovation Fund (LTIF) has also been used to resource local digital literacy and blended learning innovations undertaken within colleges. College staff found KIC-level events and resources to enhance digital literacy useful and gave examples of how they have enhanced their blended learning provision. Staff at the Liverpool College demonstrated particularly good knowledge and skills related to digital literacy which is being used to enhance the curriculum to the benefit of students.

Glossary

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

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.

Expectations
Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

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 has to 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 such resources 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.

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