Educational Oversight for embedded colleges: report of the monitoring visit of Navitas UK Holdings Ltd, April 2017

Plymouth University International College

1 Outcome of the monitoring visit

1   From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the monitoring team concludes that Plymouth University International College (PUIC) is making commendable progress with implementing the action plan following the April 2016 Higher Education Review (Embedded Colleges).

2 Changes since the last QAA review

2   There have been no significant changes to programmes offered, premises or staff at the College since the last review in April 2016. Student numbers have remained stable. The College and Plymouth University remain committed to growth. To address this ambition, agreement has been reached with the University to market the College's programmes to EU students, and new pathways, including nursing studies, are in development.

3 Findings from the monitoring visit

3   All actions identified following the 2016 review have been completed. Monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements are in place to ensure that the identified features of good practice remain strengths which can be further developed across the College's provision, and that the actions taken to address recommendations are effective.

4   The College has built on the four features of good practice identified at the last review. Students commented positively on the levels of individual support and encouragement provided by College and University staff, which contribute to their personal and academic development. On arrival, students are made aware of the College's expectations. Early diagnostic testing and regular monitoring of student performance is used to identify those students in need of additional support. Improvements to pre-arrival information and closer alignment of College term dates with those of the University have been introduced. The appropriateness and effectiveness of support for students is monitored through student feedback. Rates of progression and completion are reported to College committees and discussed in Annual Monitoring Reports.

5   The College and University continue to work together closely to manage and support student transitions, enabling students to progress effectively. A Transition Day has again been organised and it includes input from University staff and College alumni. Students state that their course prepares them for transition. Direct contribution to College programmes by University staff and opportunities to mix socially with University students are much appreciated. Meetings between the College and the University at faculty level and during annual monitoring are used to check on the effectiveness of transition plans.

6   The effective use of tracer data in reviewing existing curricula continues to enhance student learning opportunities. The tracer data feed into programme annual monitoring and are analysed annually by the College's Academic Advisory Committee. The College has asked the University to supply similar data at module level to get a more detailed picture of College students' subsequent performance. The first batch of such data is due to be available later this academic session.

7   The College's bespoke integrated information system is being used to monitor and enhance course delivery. The VLE hosts both student-focused and tutor-only areas. The latter are used to facilitate exchange of good practice. Since the last review, the College has benefited from a Navitas-wide upgrade of the virtual learning environment (VLE) and a new student management system. The upgrade included the installation of plagiarism-detection software. Staff training has been provided. Students commented that the VLE is now better organised and staff reported that the system is now more effective and provides more capacity for enhancing learning. Staff also commented favourably on the operation of the upgraded system.

8   The 2016 review included two recommendations. The report recommended that all staff engage routinely with end-of-module feedback. Student feedback forms are now collated centrally and a copy of the results is provided to every lecturer. Where feedback indicates significant problems, these are discussed with the lecturer concerned and further managerial action is taken. End-of-module feedback also feeds into management teaching observations. To further strengthen the process, class time is now allocated for students to fill out end-of-semester surveys. This has increased response rates. Staff also complete a reflective end-of-module survey which complements the student feedback. Both staff and student end-of-module feedback feed into annual monitoring. All staff who met the review team reported that they had engaged with the feedback provided by students.

9   The report also recommended that the College ensures consistency in its approach to the use of plagiarism-detection software by staff and students. The College has now adopted the University's policy on checking originality, and students are required to submit written coursework electronically via anti-plagiarism software. Training has been provided for staff. Policy documents and guidance on how to check for plagiarism have been issued. Students are enabled to use the software developmentally by uploading drafts. Originality reports can then be discussed with tutors. Students confirmed that they were taught and understood the principles of good academic practice as well as how to use and interpret the output from the software for different assignments. As a result of these actions the College has noted a reduction in cases of alleged plagiarism.

10   The College admissions policy and procedures, which are derived from the provider, Navitas UK's overarching admission policies and regulations, are agreed with the University. The College policy embodies key expectations of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and aligns with UKVI TIER 4 regulations. The policy is made available to all staff involved in admissions and to agents. The College's Admissions Office is responsible for all aspects of application handling but works closely with the Navitas UK Admissions and Recruitment Centre and the International Office at Plymouth University. Entry requirements are set out in its brochure and published on the College website. English language competence is measured using tests approved by UKVI. Applicants whose qualifications do not meet standard requirements are considered by College senior management and the University. Credibility interviews are conducted where an applicant's intention to study is in doubt. Students confirmed that the admissions process is efficient, effective and fair.

11   College policies for annual monitoring are aligned with those of the University. The College's Academic Manager compiles an Annual Monitoring Report for each programme area using a standard template. The reports include statistical analysis of student recruitment and performance, including tracer data, and qualitative data derived from staff and student feedback. The annual monitoring process has been enhanced by the introduction of end-of-module staff evaluation forms. Reports are widely discussed within the College, including by the College Enhancement Team (CET), which picks up opportunities for enhancement. Students are involved through feedback data and discussions at CET. Reports are available to staff and students on the VLE. The Academic Advisory Committee prepares an annual report for the College as a whole which feeds directly into the College Action Plan. Reports are signed off by both the provider and the University.

12   Student performance, measured by retention, completion, and progression, remains strong. Retention for the semester that finished prior to the visit was at 99 per cent. The pass rate across programmes was 86 per cent, down 7 per cent from the previous semester due to the impact of some small cohorts on the overall rate. Progression to the University remains healthy at 89 per cent.

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

13   The expectations of the Quality Code are embedded in the quality assurance systems, policies and practices of the provider, Navitas UK, and the University. Staff have ready access to the chapters of the Quality Code through the College's VLE. The College uses the Quality Code to foster enhancement. A recent example was the use of *Chapter B8: Programme monitoring and review* to change the College's annual monitoring process to elicit staff reflection on opportunities for continuous improvement and furthering student engagement. Pathway programmes in Engineering and Robotics, and Architecture and Design are reviewed annually in conjunction with the University in relation to the requirements of the relevant professional body.

5   Background to the monitoring visit

14   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.

15   The monitoring visit was carried out by Dr Neil Casey, QAA Officer, and Dr Carol Vielba, QAA Reviewer, on 4 April 2017.