



Washington International Studies Council

Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight

Review by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

June 2012

About this report

This is a report of a review under the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the Washington International Studies Council. The review took place on 14 June 2012 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Professor Colin Raban
- Dr David Gale
- Ms Mary Rivers.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about the provider's delegated responsibilities for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities
- draw a conclusion about whether the provider's public information is reliable
- 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](#) and its mission.¹ More information about this the review method can be found in the [published handbook](#).²

¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx

² www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/eo-recognition-scheme.aspx

Key findings

The QAA panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision at the Washington International Studies Council (WISC), both information supplied in advance and evidence gathered during the visits of the review itself. The review has resulted in the key findings stated in this section.

Judgements

The QAA panel formed the following judgements about the Washington International Studies Council:

- **confidence** can be placed in the Washington International Studies Council's management of its responsibilities for academic standards
- **confidence** can be placed in the Washington International Studies Council's management of its responsibilities for the quality of the learning opportunities.

Conclusion about public information

The QAA panel concluded that:

- **reliance can** be placed on the public information that the provider supplies about itself.

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **features of good practice** at Washington International Studies Council:

- the arrangements between WISC and the Oxford colleges that ensure students participate fully in the social and academic aspects of the Oxford learning experience (paragraph 2.10)
- the care taken by WISC to ensure that the information provided to students, both prior to arrival and in their orientation programme, prepares them for the challenges of the study abroad programme (paragraph 3.1).

Recommendations

The QAA panel makes the following recommendations to the Washington International Studies Council.

The panel considers that it is **advisable** for the provider to:

- ensure that the rights and responsibilities of staff and students are clearly specified in all contracts and agreements between individual tutors, colleges and WISC (paragraph 2.2).

The panel considers that it would be **desirable** for the provider to:

- consider the scope for extending the role of academic advisers to include approval of programmes and formal monitoring of student academic progress (paragraphs 1.3 and 2.11).

Context

The Washington International Studies Council (WISC) was originally founded in 1983 by the current President. It is a private educational foundation employing four full-time and four part-time staff in its UK office. Its purpose is to offer the Oxford Study Abroad Programme (OSAP or the Programme) in which students are afforded the opportunity to 'study...in one-to-one tutorials with Oxford University scholars and achieve substantial integration with Oxford students'.

The Programme, which has been offered in Oxford since 1985, is taken primarily by students from North American universities. Staff from these institutions from which these students are drawn may visit Oxford for 'on-site inspections', and there is an opportunity for staff from these institutions to attend the recently established annual series of WISC Faculty Seminars. The panel noted that in some, but not all, cases there are formal written agreements between WISC and students' home institutions, and that these agreements vary considerably with respect to their content and detail.

WISC has established partnerships with four Oxford colleges: Magdalen, Trinity, New College and Christ Church. For all students, WISC is responsible for providing a range of non-academic services and for advising host institutions and colleges on matters relating to assessment and credit. The colleges, on the other hand, provide the student social community, including access to college facilities.

The majority of the students recruited by WISC have the status of Associate Members of the University of Oxford colleges. WISC arranges for Associate Members to be taught by Oxford tutors, and these students are both admitted and supervised by WISC. Each Oxford term, WISC recommends students for 20 Visiting Student places offered by Magdalen College and New College. Visiting Students are full members of their college and enjoy the same privileges as Oxford undergraduates. The responsibility for the admission, teaching and supervision of these students lies with the colleges.

In addition to its provision for Associate Members and Visiting Students, WISC hosts a number of summer programmes. These programmes are typically led by members of faculty in WISC's partner institutions, with WISC assisting its partners in determining the content of these programmes. Responsibility for the assessment of the students who attend these programmes lies with their home institutions.

Detailed findings

1 Academic standards

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

1.1 WISC has limited responsibility for the management of academic standards. Degrees and credit are awarded by students' home universities and, on the basis of reports prepared by tutors and (in the case of Visiting Students) the Oxford college, they evaluate the academic work completed by their students during their period of study abroad. In the case of Associate Members, WISC's main responsibilities are the admission of students, the negotiation of tutorials and the issue of transcripts. WISC also provides students, their home universities, tutors and colleges with guidance on assessment requirements and on the conversion of UK to US grading scales and credit.

1.2 The criteria for admission to the Programme are published on the WISC website. These state that a minimum of 3.2 Grade Point Average (GPA) is required for admission as an Associate Member, and a GPA of at least 3.6 for Visiting Students. All candidates for admission apply initially to WISC. The information that they are required to supply includes details of their performance and academic programme in their home institutions and, in the case of prospective Visiting Students, a sample of their written work. Faculty members from applicants' home institutions are also required to write a letter of recommendation. WISC is responsible for the subsequent selection of candidates for Associate Member status, with its Academic Office in Oxford making the final admissions decision. Applications for admission as Visiting Students are forwarded to the relevant admissions committees of Magdalen College or New College, Oxford. The review panel considered that the procedure governing WISC's responsibilities for student admissions is both rigorous and effective.

1.3 Successful candidates are sent an acceptance letter, setting out the terms of admission in a manner that is helpful to the student and his or her home institution. Responsibility for the approval of a Visiting Student's tutorial programme is shared between the Oxford college and the student's home institution. In the case of Associate Members, the Academic Office is responsible for identifying and appointing tutors and, although it advises students on their choice of tutorials, WISC is not formally responsible for the approval of a student's programme of study. In view of the Academic Office's knowledge and understanding of the differences between the UK and US higher education systems, the panel concluded that WISC should consider whether its Academic Office could usefully undertake a more active role in the approval of the tutorial programmes proposed by students with Associate Member status (see also paragraph 2.11).

1.4 Responsibility for the assessment of students lies with individual tutors and, in the case of Visiting Students, their college. At the end of their period of study, students and their home institutions receive a transcript. In addition to setting out the respective responsibilities of tutors, the University and its colleges, the transcript provides details of a student's grades, and an evaluation of his or her performance in each tutorial subject. The transcript includes a detailed explanation of the relationship between Oxford numeric and Greek grades, degree classifications and the American grade and point values. Transcripts are signed either by the College's Tutor for Associate Members or, for Visiting Students, by the College Secretary or other senior member of college staff. The panel considered the transcript to be a comprehensive and informative report.

1.5 WISC's responsibilities for the management of academic standards are limited to the admission of students with Associate Member status, the negotiation of their programmes of study and the issue of transcripts. WISC also provides guidance on

assessment requirements, the completion of transcripts and the conversion of UK to US grading scales and credit.

The panel has **confidence** in the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

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

2.1 WISC has agreements with the four colleges, but there is no standard contract. At the time of the review panel's visit, one of the agreements appeared to have run out and only two of the agreements comprised a set of terms and conditions that were signed by both parties. For Associate Member students, WISC's primary contractual relationship is with individual tutors. WISC's expectations of tutors are set out in a standard email requesting that they provide tutorial support and assessment for an individual student.

2.2 The review panel was assured that WISC's relationships with both the tutors and the four colleges were both long-standing and successful, and that these relationships were based upon mutual trust and understanding. The panel considered that, although a default or dispute had not arisen in the past, trust and relationships with key individuals may not always be relied upon to secure the interests of students. For this reason, the panel concluded that it is advisable that WISC ensures that the rights and responsibilities of staff and students are clearly specified in all contracts and agreements between individual tutors, colleges and WISC.

2.3 WISC's responsibilities for managing the quality of students' learning opportunities vary according to the status of students on the Programme. Visiting Students are full members of their college and enjoy the same university privileges as degree candidates. Students who are admitted as Associate Members have access to their college's social facilities (and library) and to the University library (the Bodleian). WISC arranges their tutorial programme.

2.4 WISC is responsible for the pre-arrival briefing of all students and the orientation programme that is delivered once they have arrived in Oxford. WISC also arranges accommodation, a social programme, pastoral support and it provides a small library for student use.

2.5 The students met by the panel praised the service provided by WISC and the opportunity afforded by the Programme for them to experience the Oxford tutorial system. Students felt that they had been well prepared for the experience of studying in Oxford, and they spoke appreciatively of the various ways in which they were supported by staff at WISC. The panel also met with a small group of college tutors who commented favourably on WISC's arrangements for supporting students, and its prompt and effective resolution of any problems that occasionally arise.

2.6 The panel concluded that WISC, through the colleges and its network of tutors, provides excellent learning opportunities for students on the Programme, and that it is effective in discharging its responsibilities for managing the quality of these opportunities.

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

2.7 WISC obtains formal student feedback through an end-of-term evaluation form. While in the view of the review team this was in itself unlikely to be a rich source of information on the quality of students' learning opportunities, student feedback is also captured on a continuous and informal basis by personal contact and email correspondence between students, tutors and the academic advisers, and through the routine contact that students have with WISC administrative staff and the Housing Manager. Students are also supplied with emergency contact details that they can use if an urgent problem was to arise. WISC's senior staff meet on a daily basis to discuss matters that need to be addressed. The review panel was provided with evidence that demonstrated that student evaluations had been acted upon to make a number of improvements. The team considered that both these formal and informal mechanisms were an effective and appropriate way of assuring the quality of students' learning opportunities.

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

2.8 WISC students have full access to the personal support facilities of their college. In addition, Visiting Students receive academic supervision and support from their colleges and the academic programmes of Associate Members are overseen by their WISC Academic Adviser.

2.9 At the start of every term, WISC provides an orientation programme and the Visiting Students also attend the orientation programmes offered by their colleges. The WISC programme is designed to meet the personal, social and academic needs of students as they embark on the Programme. Associate Members meet with their academic advisers in order to complete the tutorial placement process, and to ensure that they understand the tutorial system and how their performance will be assessed. This process is complemented by the written guidance that is produced by WISC on the Oxford tutorial and its assessment and a comprehensive Arrival Handbook. Students said that they felt that they had been well prepared for the demands of the programme.

2.10 Throughout their studies in Oxford, students are encouraged to participate in a social programme organised by WISC. The Programme also emphasises the importance of active student engagement with college life. To this end, each college has a liaison officer (an Oxford University undergraduate, usually the current president of the college's Junior Common Room) for Associate Members. Their duties include the provision of a tour of their colleges' facilities, attending a question-and-answer session with liaison officers from other colleges, and welcoming their Associate Members to the college. The review panel concluded that the arrangements between WISC and the Oxford colleges that ensure students participate fully in the social and academic aspects of the Oxford learning experience are a feature of good practice.

2.11 Responsibility for monitoring the progress of Associate Members lies with WISC academic advisers rather than with the college liaison officers. The Academic Office periodically requests by email a progress report from both the student and his or her tutor. The panel learned that this takes the form of an open-ended enquiry, and that, although students are encouraged to maintain contact with their academic advisers, there is no formal requirement that they should do so. While recognising that the intensive nature of the tutorial system should result in the prompt identification of any difficulties that a student might have, the panel concluded that it is desirable for WISC to consider the scope for extending the role of academic advisers to include approval of programmes and formal monitoring of student academic progress.

How effectively does the provider ensure that students have access to learning resources that are sufficient to enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programmes?

2.12 WISC students have rights of access to the Bodleian and their college libraries, where they may borrow books. In addition to the colleges' library and IT facilities, WISC has its own collection of texts and a number of computers and workspaces for student use. The students met by the panel reported a high level of satisfaction with the learning resources available to them.

The panel has **confidence** that the provider is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

3 Public information

How effective are the provider's arrangements for assuring the accuracy and completeness of information it has responsibility for publishing?

3.1 The website is a rich source of information, and this is complemented by WISC's various pre-arrival communications with prospective students, and by its briefings for tutors and home institutions. On arrival, students are supplied with a comprehensive handbook and other documents designed to assist them in making the transition from the North American to the UK higher education system. The panel considered that the care that WISC takes to ensure that the information provided to students prepares them for the challenges of the study abroad programme is a feature of good practice.

3.2 The information published by WISC is produced in consultation with Oxford University academic and administrative staff, and its promotional material and website have been reviewed by a University committee. The students and tutorial staff met by the panel confirmed the accuracy and completeness of the information produced by WISC.

The panel concludes that **reliance can be placed** on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the provider is responsible for publishing about itself and the programmes it delivers.

4 Action plan

Washington International Studies Council action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight June 2012						
Good practice	Action to be taken	Target date	Action by	Success indicators	Reported to	Evaluation
The panel identified the following areas of good practice that are worthy of wider dissemination within the provider:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the arrangements between WISC and the Oxford colleges that ensure students participate fully in the social and academic aspects of the Oxford learning experience (paragraph 2.10) 	Liaise with the tutor for Associate Members/Visiting Students in each college to ensure that the WISC liaison officer is the serving Junior Common Room President in each term, and that said officers fulfil all of their obligations under the terms of their contract with WISC	October 2012	Academic Office	Evaluation feedback indicating increased use by WISC students of the college dining hall and other social facilities, including clubs and teams	WISC President Tutors for Associate Members/Visiting Students	Liaison contracts and job descriptions Student evaluations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the care taken by WISC to ensure that the information provided to students, both prior to arrival and in their orientation programme, prepares them for the challenges of the 	Review the orientation packet and pre-arrival instructions to ensure continued accuracy and completeness	November 2012	Administrative Director	Orientation evaluations	WISC President and tutors for Associate Members/Visiting Students	Welcome packets Orientation evaluation forms

study abroad programme (paragraph 3.1).						
Advisable	Action to be taken	Target date	Action by	Success indicators	Reported to	Evaluation
The panel considers that it is advisable for the provider to:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensure that the rights and responsibilities of staff and students are clearly specified in all contracts and agreements between individual tutors, colleges and WISC (paragraph 2.2). 	<p>Complete a review of contractual language in respect of tutorial arrangements</p> <p>Complete a review of WISC contracts with Oxford colleges</p>	December 2012	Academic Director	Creation of more formalised arrangements with tutors and colleges	Board of Directors and WISC General Counsel	<p>Tutor correspondence</p> <p>WISC contracts with Oxford colleges</p>
Desirable	Action to be taken	Target date	Action by	Success indicators	Reported to	Evaluation
The panel considers that it is desirable for the provider to:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> consider the scope for extending the role of academic advisers to include approval of programmes and formal monitoring of student academic progress (paragraphs 1.3 and 2.11). 	<p>Addition of more information on the WISC website in respect of credit transfer arrangements and access to WISC academic advisers prior to students' arrival in Oxford</p> <p>More regular check-ins with students and</p>	December 2012	Academic Office	A greater awareness by students and home college administrators of the nature of the tutorial system and credit transfer practices among study abroad programmes in Oxford	WISC President and alumni colleges	<p>Website</p> <p>Student progress forms</p>

	tutors during the course of the Oxford term			Creation of more formalised monitoring procedures of students and tutors during the course of the Oxford term		
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Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. For more details see the [handbook](#)³ for this review method.

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx.

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

academic standards The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

Code of practice *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

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.

feature of good practice A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

learning opportunities The provision made for students' learning, including planned **programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

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

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

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

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

³ www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/eo-recognition-scheme.aspx

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