



# Educational Oversight-Exceptional Arrangements: report of the desk-based analysis of INTO Queen's LLP, trading as INTO Queen's University Belfast, February 2021

## Outcome of the desk-based analysis

1 From the annual return and documentary evidence, the monitoring team concludes that INTO Queen's University Belfast (INTO Queen's) is continuing to maintain academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities since the February 2020 [monitoring visit](#).

## Changes since the last monitoring visit

2 As of 10 December 2020, INTO Queen's had a total student population of 199 enrolled students. 124 were studying on pathway programmes. Of these, 79 were studying at Level 4 or above, 45 at Level 3 and 75 were enrolled on Academic English or extended programmes. Due to the impact of COVID-19, and the delayed and uncertain start to the spring term 2021, numbers on the Levels 3 and 4 programmes have fallen. Safety concerns resulting from COVID-19 and greater acceptance of in-country English programmes have both impacted significantly on recruitment, with the number of enrolled students falling from 380 students for the final intake of 2019-20 to 243 in January 2021.

3 There has been a 10.5% reduction in teaching staff since the 2020 monitoring visit. Full-time staff have remained at 20 and part-time staff have reduced slightly from 18 to 14. The provider is monitoring the situation through its Continuous Action for Programme Enhancement (CAPE) at taught postgraduate level and, if necessary, will take action to increase teaching provision should student numbers increase.

4 Working together with Queen's University Belfast (the University), INTO University Partnerships (IUP) and the Northern Ireland Executive, INTO Queen's has had to adapt the delivery and assessment of its provision to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This has included moves both to blended and full online delivery. Support and access to additional guidance and resources has been provided by the INTO network and the University. Consideration has been given to global online accessibility, online pedagogies, timings of live sessions and communication with students. These are discussed further in Section 2.

## Findings from the monitoring visit

5 INTO Queen's is making progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision. The review team considered the updated INTO Action Plan - originally developed in response to the 2018 Educational Oversight-Exceptional Arrangements review report and revised in December 2020; and documentary evidence relating to the educational provision at INTO Queen's.

6 The 2018 report made two advisable recommendations - the first being quoracy for deliberative committees to be clearly defined. INTO Queen's had reviewed and updated the terms of reference for its deliberative committees before the February 2020 monitoring visit. The updated action plan of December 2020 indicates that further work is now being undertaken in conjunction with the University's Academic Affairs unit in relation to exam

board quoracy. INTO Queen's is also continuing to review the execution of its examination boards. Training has been provided by the University with the intention that is summarised for all programme managers before the next exam boards in 2021.

7 The second advisable recommendation was to develop a Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy. The action was originally intended to be completed by September 2019, but the new Teaching, Learning and Assessment Policy (TLAP) was not fully considered and approved until April 2020. The Policy, based on the University's Assessment Policy, has been in place since the start of academic year 2020-21, with ongoing actions to provide further training opportunities for staff and to review its effectiveness. Assessment regulations and other information are provided separately in the INTO Queen's Quality Manual. During 2020, the University produced a supplementary Handbook for Assessment Guidance and Support 2020-21 which is shared with all programme teams and informs INTO Queen's practices. The TLAP was discussed with students in April 2020. The effectiveness of the new Policy will need to be assessed in future annual monitoring.

8 INTO Queen's is continuing to monitor the International Student Representative Committee (ISRC), following its restructure from the Staff Student Consultative Committee in 2019. The ISRC meeting is attended by student representatives and an ISRC Liaison Officer, with feedback to students from meetings posted on a designated noticeboard. The ISRC provided feedback on the draft Learning, Teaching and Assessment Policy. Communication from the ISRC to students is effected through a 'You Said We Did' document. Online mechanisms are proving to be a more direct and, therefore, effective way for the ISRC officer to contact and communicate with students.

9 An online survey to gauge the effectiveness of the Committee was sent to all its representatives in summer 2020. Feedback from students has been largely positive although greater awareness of ISRC's operations and more gathering of student feedback for meetings was felt to be required. Students have other feedback mechanisms including personal tutorial meetings, regular question and answer sessions and drop-in meetings through video conferencing software. Participation rates in group sessions rose significantly during the periods of lockdown.

10 INTO Queen's is also monitoring how the ISRC works in conjunction with its Programme Coordination meetings which student representatives are invited to attend. Only half the student representatives reported that they felt it very useful to attend Programme Coordination meetings with some saying they found it harder to put their views across when staff are also present. The ISRC Liaison Officer has started to help prepare students in contributing to framing agendas for Programme Coordination meetings, and has attended meetings to support students. Staff felt that student contributions had increased following a move to online meetings.

11 INTO Queen's had a well-established technology enhanced learning strategy prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, but rapid and significant changes were still required. Alternative forms of online and hybrid delivery and assessment have been implemented successfully. In April 2020, due to increased demands on its online systems, IUP installed a new virtual learning environment with a plug-in to host virtual classrooms. The system was further modified due to technical difficulties and to improve access for internationally-based students. At the start of the autumn semester 2020, INTO Queen's trialled a blended synchronous model of face-to-face and online delivery, but further lockdown restrictions necessarily ended the trial. Responding to consistent feedback from teaching teams, students at INTO Queen's were typically receiving around 20 hours of synchronous online delivery. Simulation-based tools have been used to replace course and laboratory work in science and engineering subjects. Using IUP's guidelines, consideration has been given to

the effects that a move to online delivery might have on students with Special Educational Needs and Special Learning Difficulties.

12 Online assessment was implemented in March 2020. At the start of the academic year 2020-21, all students were offered the opportunity to practise uploading a mock answer booklet to test for any technical issues. After the first online assessment period in March 2020, and in line with university requirements for the security of assessment, a significant number of online assessments were tightened from 24 hour to the original duration of plus one-hour assessments. Module impact statements were produced for all modules with any changes to assessment and impact on grading explored with external examiners. An increased number of academic misconduct meetings have been held following the introduction of online assessment.

13 A range of measures have been put in place to ensure that students are as well supported as possible during the national lockdowns. Pre March 2020, the majority of communications between students and staff took place during face-to-face sessions or through emails. While email remains the official means of communication, video conferencing systems and their chat and message functions, online question and answer sessions following institutional communication emails, and weekly personal tutorials have all been increased.

14 Deliberate steps have been taken to support students' mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic. It was recognised that students who were unable to return to their homes during periods of lockdown might feel lonely and isolated. A plan was devised to open the Centre for individual and small group meetings to take place by appointment, where permitted. Weekly check-ins are offered to help with wellbeing, and these were increased to twice-weekly during holiday periods. A virtual social programme was arranged during the Easter and Christmas breaks, and encouragement was given for students to join the University's online exercise classes. All full-time staff have been assigned a small number of students for whom they are responsible for checking in with, initially daily but reducing to bi-weekly. INTO Queen's continues to work with the University to provide information, materials and reassurance to students.

15 Staff at INTO Queen's have been well-supported, both in terms of training and resources, to manage the move to greater online delivery and assessment. Regular support to further the use of new technologies and approaches to online and blended learning has been provided. As well as regular seminars in connected learning, the University provides weekly opportunities for staff to share good practice and troubleshooting in online delivery. Staff have also accessed some of the QAA's COVID-19 support and guidance materials. Annual observations of teaching have continued, but online.

16 At the programme level, INTO Queen's undertakes monitoring for both taught postgraduate and undergraduate provision through the CAPE which includes the regular review of the Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) Core practices. Programmes, modules and assessments are all included within the scrutiny, as is feedback from internal and external stakeholders. At postgraduate level, recruitment, encouraging ambition for high attainment, language development and study skills were all identified in the CAPE as required actions for 2020. At undergraduate level, apart from English language and study skills, new module structures were identified as a required action. The CAPE reports also disseminate examples of good practice.

17 From the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, INTO Queen's has carefully monitored amendments to its delivery, assessment and support for students. More frequent and regular meetings now take place, within INTO Queen's itself, within Queen's University and with INTO IUP. These include a bi-weekly Major Incident Team Student Experience

Group meeting with the University. Feedback has been collected from student surveys, staff meetings, continuing annual appraisals and staff surveys and is instrumental in making changes. A periodic review of the Engineering and Science international foundation programmes was undertaken in December 2020.

18 INTO IUP produces guidance and information on practical and pedagogical matters for all its centres. It also produces a monthly Teaching and Learning Summary Report which provides an overview of student data across the INTO network. The July 2020 report placed a particular focus on attendance, progression and achievement during the first national lockdown period.

19 In 2019-20, the overall pass rate for students studying programmes at Level 4 or above was 94.5% - comparable to the 94% achievement rate in 2018-19. In 2019-20, nine intakes across four programmes achieved a 100% pass rate, representing a slight improvement on the seven intakes across four programmes which achieved the same in 2018-19. The average percentage pass rate across the Level 3 programmes, which allow entry to specified degrees, improved by 8% - from 85% in 2018-19 to 93% in 2019-20.

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

20 INTO Queen's continues to engage with the Quality Code. The Core practices outlined in the Quality Code inform all policies developed by INTO Queen's and those of its joint venture partner, Queen's University Belfast. In November 2020, INTO Queen's updated the mapping of its provision to the revised Quality Code. The detailed mapping instrument clearly sets out processes against the Core and Common practices of the Quality Code. The mapping acts as a complementary document to the processes set out in the INTO Queen's Academic Management - Quality Assurance Manual 2020-21.

## **Background to the desk-based analysis**

21 The desk-based analysis 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 annual monitoring. 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 process or review.

22 The desk-based analysis was carried out by Dr Helen Corkill, Reviewer, and Dr Neil Casey, QAA Officer, in February 2021. No meetings were held with students or staff, and the conclusions presented in this report are based on the analysis of documentary evidence submitted by the provider.

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