



IES Abroad London

Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight

Review by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

May 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 IES Abroad London. The review took place on 5 March 2012 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Dr A Thompson
- Professor R Harris
- Ms B Dhillon.

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 and enhancement 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 6.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.¹ More information about 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 IES Abroad London, 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 judgements about IES Abroad London.

- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of IES Abroad London's management of academic standards
- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of IES Abroad London's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

Conclusion about public information

The QAA panel concluded that:

- **reliance can** be placed on the public information that IES Abroad London supplies about itself.

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **features of good practice** at IES Abroad London:

- the effective and developmental use of the Model Assessment Practice (MAP) tool for assuring academic standards (paragraph 1.3)
- the focused and systematic use of student evaluations for quality enhancement purposes (paragraph 2.4)
- the accuracy, quality and timeliness of the pre-arrival information provided for prospective students (paragraph 2.7)
- the support provided for faculty members to enhance their teaching quality by undertaking short study visits to consortium members in the USA (paragraph 2.10).

Recommendations

The QAA panel makes the following **recommendation** to IES Abroad London. It is desirable that IES Abroad London:

- develop a systematic method for class representatives to input their constituents' opinions and experiences to the quality management system (paragraph 2.5).

Context

IES Abroad London is a not-for-profit private provider of study abroad programmes for students from the USA undertaking part of their degree programme in England; it is the London operation of IES Abroad, which is located in Chicago and operates out of a number of locations worldwide.

IES Abroad is structured as an academic consortium comprising over 200 American universities, all of which satisfy specified minimum requirements, including being fully accredited by the appropriate regional body and being recognised by the National Recognition Information Centre for the UK. Member institutions' continuing compliance with these requirements is formally reviewed, though as all consortium members are top-ranked universities and liberal arts colleges, no accreditation problem is likely to arise. The respective responsibilities of IES Abroad and consortium members are formally articulated in IES Abroad's governance and legal structures.

IES Abroad London offers the following main types of study abroad programmes:

- **customised programmes** specifically designed for a particular American university. Most courses focus on British or European history, culture, business or the arts. Responsibility for academic standards rests with the home university in accordance with the regulatory requirements to which it is subject
- **direct enrolment programmes** in which an American student attends a UK university as a fully enrolled student of that university. In these cases home universities formally recognise the reference points applicable in the UK
- **hybrid programmes** combining courses taken in-house at the London Centre as well as single course options at British institutions
- **unpaid internships and service learning courses.**

All these options generate academic credit for students' undergraduate programmes. Consortium members accept IES Abroad transcripts; students from other universities receive School of Record transcripts from the University of Rochester, a consortium member.

In addition, all students undertake the CORE (Comprehensive Orientation and Re-entry Experience) programme as a specific component of the support package which complements the academic programme. This involves working with designated tutors and peers to establish clear goals for the study abroad experience as part of students' orientation to London, and culminates in supported re-entry and farewell activities to prepare them for return home. Within the CORE programme there is an option to complete the Certificate of Intercultural Learning designed for students who would like to deepen their understanding of intercultural issues during their time in London.

IES Abroad is a member of the Forum on Education Abroad; it has developed, and both utilises and publicly shares, the MAP (Model Assessment Practice) as an indicator of its commitment to continuous improvement and as a contribution to the development of the Forum's own standards of good practice. It has also undertaken the Forum's Quality Improvement Program for Education Abroad (QUIP) review process to show adherence to these standards.

IES Abroad London is subject to external inspection by the British Accreditation Council (its BAC accreditation expires in April 2012). The most recent BAC inspection report, a spot check undertaken in February 2011, confirmed that IES Abroad London 'continues to operate at a very high standard in pleasant premises, providing American undergraduates

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with a high-quality semester programme related to theatre, culture and literature'. While IES Abroad London has responded to changing student demand by both restructuring and downsizing, these twin processes were complete well prior to the present visit; no consequential turbulence was detected.

Detailed findings

1 Academic standards

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

1.1 Primary responsibility for the award of credit rests with IES Abroad London's academic partners, all of which are accredited American institutions. It is the responsibility of these partner universities to oversee IES Abroad London's exercise of responsibility for the management of academic standards.

1.2 Within this context, the centralised control and management of IES Abroad is designed to ensure consistency and rigour in its educational portfolio in all locations. The panel confirms that accountability lines are clear and adhered to, and that the international operation, which allows only limited discretion to local centres, constitutes what might be termed a quasi-external environment for the management of both quality and academic standards. It is confirmed that the management staff in the London centre work well within this environment, which, while designed to minimise the risk of unjustifiable discretionary variations, is not inflexible. For example, IES Abroad permits adjustments to reflect local practices and pedagogy in respect of matters such as contact hours per credit.

1.3 IES Abroad has developed an operational framework, Model Assessment Practice (MAP), consisting of a set of guidelines and expectations for planning and assessing academic quality. This detailed document is fully described in a 32-page brochure designed to ensure that students benefit optimally from their study abroad experience. The panel found the MAP clearly embedded in the culture of the organisation, and used extensively and seriously by staff and faculty, who consider it an invaluable tool for maintaining and assuring both the quality of the overall experience and academic standards in particular. The panel identified the effective and developmental use of the MAP tool for assuring academic standards as a feature of good practice.

1.4 The panel confirms that IES Abroad London has robust and mature processes for maintaining the academic standards for which it has delegated responsibility. It also effectively ensures through its organisational procedures that it discharges all regulatory, accreditation and administrative responsibilities in respect of programmes where responsibility for academic standards rests with home universities.

1.5 IES Abroad London's internship programme was found to be well managed and to add value to students' study abroad. Clear and comprehensive processes are in place to support both employer and student: these in turn are explained and developed by good information packs, a formal monitoring system and an effective feedback system. The internship is complemented by an academic support course, which both explicates and develops the experience of the internship. The faculty member responsible for this course spoke clearly and confidently about both its intended learning outcomes and procedures for the award of credit.

1.6 As an alternative to the internship programme, IES Abroad London offers a well developed Service Learning Course involving students undertaking regular but brief (normally half a day a week) voluntary work in a community setting such as a primary school or social welfare agency. As with internships, a complementary academic course, this time focusing on social and welfare issues in the UK and using the voluntary placement as a context, is provided. Students who had taken this course spoke highly of it, confirming that

they had found it both a helpful and a motivating experience.

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

1.7 IES Abroad operates as a provider for its consortium members, the home universities. These institutions provide the external reference points against which IES Abroad approves syllabuses and credit can be measured. In the case of customised programmes, the United States universities concerned provide both syllabuses and credit ratings. IES Abroad engages comprehensively with the review and analysis of programmes in terms of assuring academic standards. Through its involvement with the Forum on Education Abroad, IES Abroad London completed in 2010 a review and evaluation process and received the Forum's Quality Improvement Program for Education Abroad (QUIP). It regards this as a benchmark for its maintenance of academic standards.

1.8 IES Abroad London deploys a number of methods to ensure that academic standards are aligned with external reference points. Firstly, a programme review, undertaken on an eight to 10 year cycle, involves an inspection and audit by a panel of external experts and consortium members. The most recent such review was undertaken in 2008: it demonstrated that IES Abroad London was effectively discharging its responsibility for academic standards. Secondly, IES Abroad undertakes a trend analysis of its centres, measuring performance both against organisational targets and against the performance of sister operations worldwide: it is, therefore, among other things designed to assure academic standards.

The panel has **confidence** in IES Abroad London's management of its responsibilities for the standards of the awards to be conferred by its awarding bodies.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

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

2.1 IES provides a diverse range of learning opportunities to students, both inside and outside the classroom. These include: lectures, visits from guest speakers, field and theatre trips, support for direct entry students to UK universities, and visits to places of interest relevant to each cohort's focus and background. The panel learned that most classes are interactive, and all faculty members are experienced in teaching students from (or in) the USA.

2.2 Course development is undertaken in a systematic, centralised manner that ensures consistency of learning opportunities. Course developers are required to complete a template and produce a standard syllabus document which is reviewed in the London centre before submission to IES Abroad in Chicago for further analysis and a decision. Adjunct faculty spoke very positively about this process, noting in particular the high quality and level of detail of the feedback received from Chicago. It was clear to the panel, which confirms this positive view, that the enhancement potential of this process is considerable.

How effectively are external reference points used in monitoring and evaluation processes?

2.3 See paragraphs 1.7 and 1.8.

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

2.4 IES Abroad London's mechanisms for assuring the quality of learning and teaching were found to be sophisticated in design and effectively and consistently implemented. Student mid-class and post-class evaluations are reviewed by the Centre Director, numerically scored, analysed and submitted to IES Abroad for trend analysis and inter-centre comparison (see paragraph 1.8). The panel found that this is an effective quality enhancement tool: for example, the student evaluation was supportively deployed in the professional development of a new faculty member in a manner which achieved demonstrable results. The panel identified the focused and systematic use of student evaluations for quality enhancement purposes as a feature of good practice.

2.5 IES Abroad London has a system of class representatives, but the panel found there was little formal opportunity for these representatives to use the information supplied to them to contribute directly to quality management and enhancement at a strategic level. While acknowledging that students stressed that they would have no difficulty in approaching staff with issues which had arisen, the panel considers this a missed opportunity. It is desirable that IES Abroad London develop a systematic method for class representatives to input their constituents' opinions and experiences to the quality management system.

2.6 As noted in paragraph 1.3, where it was identified as a feature of good practice, the MAP coherently specifies the activities, roles and responsibilities operating within the quality assurance system in a manner which reflects the organisational mission to ensure the best student experience. As such, it constitutes a benchmark for all IES Abroad London's quality assurance processes.

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

2.7 IES Abroad London's communications, both printed and online, are of good quality and appreciated by students and their parents alike, not least prior to the former enrolling for the programme. This culture of high quality and current material provision continues throughout the programme, so students know what events and activities are and should be taking place at all times. Academic support for each student is provided by a dedicated academic adviser who intervenes or is available on request, should students seek or be identified as requiring academic support at any time. Pastoral support is equally of high quality: it begins at pre-departure stage with the provision of helpful and comprehensive information (which the panel found had been especially valued by parents) and continues to the end, in both the learning centre and the halls of residence. The accuracy, quality and timeliness of the pre-arrival information provided for prospective students were identified as a feature of good practice.

2.8 IES Abroad London has what it describes as a highly developed virtual learning environment, which serves as a form of academic support and learning vehicle. Appropriate training has been given to faculty in the use of this proprietary system and it is confirmed that helpful and relevant information is readily available on the relevant course pages.

2.9 IES Abroad London's commitment to direct entry students studying at UK higher education institutions involves making available pre-course information and guidance prior to enrolment, an extensive induction programme, and continuing support as required. While these responsibilities are clear, the panel did note that one student, who had experienced administrative difficulties with the higher education institution concerned had been reluctant to contact IES Abroad London to resolve them. While this is in no sense a failure on IES Abroad London's part, the organisation may find it helpful to review the proactivity of its support for direct entry students at the point of their initial contact with the institution.

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

2.10 The panel learned that IES Abroad invests heavily in training and professional development, bringing in experts or utilising staff expertise, to meet regulatory requirements, and share best practice and gain insight into the daily work of their colleagues worldwide. Permanent IES Abroad London staff members are provided with a customised staff development regime designed both to support them as individuals and to ensure that their performance meets expectations and requirements. Opportunities range from in-house training events to attendance at IES Abroad conferences. Academic faculty, who are all part-time hourly paid staff, have different opportunities, with funding assigned to IES Abroad London to enable them to attend appropriate educational events in the UK. The panel also noted that IES Abroad does, where the Centre Director deems it appropriate and beneficial to do so, fund short faculty visits to partner universities in the USA. Not only does this allow faculty members to gain some understanding of students' home college environment, but it also facilitates the sharing of teaching and assessment experience with home university faculty. The panel learned from faculty members of the value this can add to the quality of their teaching. The support provided for faculty members to enhance their teaching quality by undertaking short study visits to consortium members in the USA is a feature of good practice.

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?

2.11 Learning resources were found generally to be of high quality and sufficient to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programmes. The students who met the panel confirmed that they fulfilled their expectations and spoke particularly positively about the access to external libraries and how the available cultural opportunities enhanced their learning.

2.12 In conclusion, it should be noted that IES Abroad London submitted a self-assessment document for the present review. The panel found it user-friendly, of high quality and self-critical, and established in the course of the visit that its evaluative and analytical approach accurately reflects IES Abroad London's culture, management, mechanisms and ethos.

The panel has **confidence** that IES Abroad London 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 IES Abroad London was found to be effective in ensuring the accuracy and completeness of information entering the public domain. Information online and in print is systematically reviewed and, where necessary, updated at least annually; the templates provided by IES Abroad are adhered to, and the IES Abroad London-derived documentation is accessible, comprehensive, helpful and accurate.

3.2 As noted above paragraph 2.7, prospective students and their parents found the pre-departure information helpful, honest and reassuring: in fact this information was identified as a contributing factor in students' decision to enrol and in some cases in the willingness of their parents to agree. The panel confirms that staff and faculty consider information for external consumption both intrinsically important and crucial to the success of the organisation.

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

IES Abroad London action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight May 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 effective and developmental use of the Model Assessment Practice tool for assuring academic standards (paragraph 1.3) 	Continue to train new centre directors worldwide in the use of the Model Assessment Practice tool and all update all centre directors on any new developments at the October conference	April 2013 (ongoing)	Programme Dean (Chicago)	Successful reviews of new centres in Rio de Janeiro and Costa Rica; centre directors conference attendance and receiving new information	IES Abroad President and Board members	IES Abroad academic governance committees approval of review; October conference minutes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the focused and systematic use of student evaluations for quality enhancement purposes (paragraph 2.4) 	Continue to conduct trend analysis across worldwide centres and share results at Centre Director conference in Chicago in October	April 2013 (ongoing)	Programme Dean (Chicago) and Centre Director	Feedback of student evaluation information to centres, resulting in continuous programme enhancement	Programme Dean (Chicago)	Annual Report Cycle
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the accuracy, quality and timeliness of the pre-arrival information provided for prospective students 	Continue to cross-reference information regularly with centre staff worldwide, especially as more information is moved	April 2013	Programme Associate (Chicago) and marketing department	Positive student evaluations of the new method of information delivery (online portal) and	Programme Dean and upper management	Trend analysis of student evaluations; monitor site traffic for new portal and virtual learning

(paragraph 2.7)	from hard copy brochures to an online student information portal (pre-departure) and to the virtual learning environment at centres worldwide			increased traffic to sites		environment pages
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the support provided for faculty members to enhance their teaching quality by undertaking short study visits to consortium members in the USA (paragraph 2.10). 	Determine future opportunities in conjunction with Chicago office, depending on available budget	April 2013 (ongoing)	Centre Director	Continued opportunities for London faculty to attend available training in the USA	Programme Dean and London Charity Board members	Annual Report and London Charity Trust report – includes a review of significant faculty development opportunities
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"> develop a systematic method for class representatives to input their constituents' opinions and experiences to the quality management system (paragraph 2.5). 	Consult with students as to wider questions we can use to gain feedback on their overall experience (not just teaching quality) and use this feedback to enhance the class representative feedback questionnaires	April 2013	Academic Administrator, Centre Director and Assistant Director	Wider range of feedback on suggested improvements to the overall student experience, as well as teaching quality, from class representatives	Centre Director	Undertake review of class representative feedback over the previous 18 month period and compare quality and range of information received

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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