



# **Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies**

## Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight

Review by the Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education

**November 2013**

## 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 Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies. The review took place on 5 November 2013 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Professor R Harris
- Dr S Ryrie.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about the provider's delegated responsibilities for the management of quality and enhancement of learning opportunities
- draw a conclusion about whether the provider's public information is reliable
- produce a commentary on how effectively the provider discharges its responsibilities for academic standards
- 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 2. 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.<sup>1</sup> More information about this the review method can be found in the [published handbook](#).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/RSEO-Handbook-2013.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/RSEO-Handbook-2013.aspx)

## Key findings

The panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision at the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies (the Centre), 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 panel formed the following judgement about the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies:

- **confidence** can be placed on the provider's management of its responsibilities for the quality of learning opportunities.

The panel also concluded that the provider satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of its awarding bodies.

## Conclusion about public information

The panel concluded that:

- **reliance** can be placed on the information that the provider produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities it offers.

## Good practice

The panel identified the following **features of good practice** at the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies:

- effective and timely communication between tutors and students (paragraph 2.7)
- exceptional support for all aspects of the student experience, both academic and pastoral (paragraph 2.8).

## Recommendations

The panel makes the following recommendations to the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies.

It is **advisable** for the provider to:

- adopt a systematic approach to quality assurance processes, including moderation of assessment tasks, double-marking of assessed work, internal reviews of its courses and peer review of teaching (paragraph 1.5)
- implement a new management structure in a timely and effective manner in order to ensure continued quality of provision (paragraph 2.3).

It is **desirable** for the provider to:

- develop a proactive role for the Academic Board in offering constructive criticism of provision, in advising on the development and review of courses, and in ensuring externality in the oversight of academic standards (paragraph 1.2)

- establish an effective system for identifying and supporting students with disabilities (paragraph 2.9).

## Context

The Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies (the Centre), a small study centre based in Oxford, offers academic programmes leading to credit for overseas students undertaking one (or occasionally two) semesters of study. It works almost exclusively with higher education institutions in the USA, the majority of which are members of a Consortium of Colleges and Universities, and all of which are accredited by the appropriate regional bodies in the USA. Its relationships with awarding bodies are governed either by the overarching Consortium Partnership Agreement or by an alternative contractual arrangement. One institution, identified as the lead partner, has primary responsibility for overseeing the Centre's promotional and recruitment activities in the USA. At present, a member of this institution chairs the Centre's Academic Board.

At the time of the review visit the Centre was in a period of transition following recent and impending changes of senior staff, and was in the process of developing a new management structure.

## Detailed findings about the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies

### 1 Academic standards

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

1.1 Responsibility for the award of credit rests with the Centre's Consortium partners, all of which are accredited institutions in the USA. In the UK, their degrees have recognition from the National Academic Recognition Information Centre.

1.2 In 2011 the Centre established an Academic Board, comprised of academics from a selection of the Consortium colleges, as a vehicle for monitoring provision and offering external guidance on behalf of the awarding bodies. The panel saw evidence of the Board, which is responsible for overseeing all aspects of teaching, giving careful consideration to a wide range of issues. It noted also, however, that the fact that the Board's agenda is currently largely driven by the Centre means that its approach has thus far been largely reactive. It is **desirable** that the Academic Board take a more proactive role in offering constructive criticism of provision, in advising on the development and review of courses, and in ensuring externality in the oversight of academic standards.

1.3 The Centre has recently established a two-year cycle for the periodic review of taught provision. The first review, of the Integral Studies Course and the seminars, was conducted appropriately and professionally, with each outcome specified in the ensuing action plan subject to formal signing off by the Academic Board.

1.4 All assessment is carried out by tutors, using assessment and grading criteria set by the Centre and agreed with awarding bodies. Courses are delivered in a manner which broadly reflects University of Oxford tutorial practice, and therefore differs, sometimes radically, from that to which students were previously accustomed. Students stressed that they are familiar with the criteria; that academic standards at least match, and more frequently exceed, those of their home institutions; and that tutors are assiduous in preparing them to meet those standards. The panel confirms that most student cohorts achieve a 100 per cent successful completion rate.

1.5 The panel noted that, while assessment strategies are sound overall, some aspects of practice, while in keeping with the Centre's small-scale and closely focused ethos, are less than systematic. The team acknowledges the immense value of the Centre's student-centred tutorial practice; the legitimacy of internal debate about how to ensure a consistent approach to assessment; and the awarding bodies' satisfaction with the Centre's work. Nonetheless, in the interests of ensuring consistency, it is **advisable** that the Centre adopt a systematic approach to quality assurance processes, including moderation of assessment tasks, double-marking of assessed work, internal reviews of its courses and peer review of teaching.

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

1.6 The Centre's primary external reference point is the requirements of its awarding bodies. The Centre's staff do, however, engage in dialogue with the universities and colleges concerned, based in part on tutors' awareness of the expectations of the University of Oxford, which they adapt to meet awarding body requirements. The Centre regards the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code) as an increasingly useful

reference point, and has undertaken a detailed mapping of aspects of its own provision against all relevant indicators. The reviewers found this approach, which takes place in the context of the primacy of awarding body requirements, a constructive form of engagement with the Quality Code.

### **How effectively does the provider use external scrutiny of assessment processes to assure academic standards (where applicable)?**

1.7 Credit is awarded by partner institutions in the USA, and the Centre's tutors, drawn from UK universities, and primarily from the University of Oxford, are made aware of, and are competent to meet, the requirements concerned.

1.8 Consistently with practice in the USA, there is, at present, no externality in the scrutiny of student work. The reviewers concur with the view of the Executive Director that the planned sampling activity to be undertaken by members of the Academic Board will strengthen the Board's oversight of standards (see paragraph 1.2).

The panel concludes that the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies satisfactorily manages its responsibilities for academic standards in accordance with the requirements of 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 Students undertake four, four-credit taught courses, including an integral course. The wide range of specialisms available permits them to follow either a specialist course in medieval or early modern studies, or a more general programme in the study of the liberal arts. The Centre monitors the quality of provision largely through the levels of satisfaction expressed by students and awarding bodies, both of which contribute to periodic review. Students' end-of-term course evaluations are the subject of discussion with individual tutors where appropriate, and in particular where issues of concern arise (see paragraph 2.5), and are otherwise available on request to the relevant tutor; there would be merit in making this a routine procedure.

2.2 Students benefit considerably from the Centre's engagement with the University of Oxford and the academic ethos surrounding it. Most tutors are University of Oxford staff members and many are college fellows. As noted in paragraph 1.4, the Oxford tutorial system is utilised in modified form in teaching, and students spoke particularly highly of the meticulous attention provided. They have access to the Bodleian Library and, as associate students of Keble College, have reading rights at the College Library and membership of the Junior Common Room.

2.3 The Centre is currently establishing a new management structure; this process is due for completion in 2014. While the reviewers consider current arrangements suffice to ensure the effective delivery of a high quality service to students, they note also that decisions as to the future shape of the Centre have yet to be finalised. It is **advisable** that the Centre implement a new management structure in a timely and effective manner in order to ensure continued quality of provision.

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

2.4 The Centre benchmarks its provision against the best practice guidance offered by the Forum for Global Education. It acknowledges that its activities would be strengthened by increased externality, and intends the issue to be addressed by the Academic Board, the monitoring activities of which are currently informed mainly by the reference points of Consortium universities and colleges (see paragraph 1.2).

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

2.5 The Centre assures itself of the quality of teaching and learning by student evaluation surveys at the end of each semester, and by the continuing high satisfaction of its awarding bodies. The panel found the survey forms to be suitably focused and comprehensive, and heard that the Executive Director receives all outcomes, identifying any necessary action in respect of negative feedback with the tutor concerned. While accepting that this is consistent with the size and ethos of the institution, survey outcomes would be better addressed were they routinely supplied to, and discussed with, the tutors concerned (see paragraph 2.1). The Centre has recently enhanced student support by means which include mid-semester and final progress reviews, and strengthening communication with home universities and colleges.

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

2.6 Prior to students' arrival, the Centre's website is an effective gateway to information. Students reported that they were fully briefed before departure both by the Centre (the staff of which responded readily to email or telephone enquiries) and by their university or college. On arrival, a week-long induction programme, which included an introduction to the Bodleian Library, had been of great value.

2.7 Tutors were described as supportive, accessible and helpful: students found communication with them excellent, and both their specialist expertise and the immediate feedback they provided in tutorials were highly valued. The effective and timely communication between tutors and students is identified as **good practice**.

2.8 At a pastoral level the willing support of Centre staff is supplemented by junior deans (normally DPhil students), who are readily available to give advice and help, contributing to what students described as a very positive and collegial environment. The Centre's exceptional support for all aspects of the student experience, both academic and pastoral, is identified as **good practice**.

2.9 While the panel acknowledges the sensitivities surrounding this issue, there is scope for the Centre to strengthen its arrangements for identifying and supporting students with disabilities. Though both staff and tutors expressed confidence in their ability to deal with the full range of disabilities, and no evidence was found that this was other than justified, the team considered that their efforts in doing so would be strengthened were systematic guidance provided within a clear policy framework. It is **desirable** that the Centre develop an effective system for identifying and supporting students with disabilities.

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

2.10 A Staff Handbook provides newly-appointed tutors with a detailed description of staff facilities and working practices. Teaching staff reported themselves well informed in consequence, and appropriately updated by oral and written briefings. A voluntary scheme for the peer observation of teaching is soon to be introduced as a potentially beneficial contributor to maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching (see paragraph 1.5).

### **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 In addition to having access to the Bodleian and Keble College Libraries (see paragraph 2.2), the Feneley Library, based in the Centre, aims to provide all standard works and reference books required for students' studies; it also contains a number of distinctive archives, to which students also have access. Students reported very positively on these resources, and staff commented on the responsiveness of the Feneley Library to their booklist requests.

2.12 The panel noted that the Centre monitors the provision of learning resources by hearing the views of teaching staff and students on an informal basis, consistent with the small scale of its provision, and concluded that this is effective in assuring a high level of quality.

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 content of publicity material is determined and managed by the Executive Director, and is subject to an annual review which involves all members of staff.

3.2 The Centre regards its primary means of communication with the public as being its printed materials, including a prospectus and mini-brochures. Its website includes information to assist prospective and new students, including details of courses, tutors and learning resources. Students found the information available on the website sufficient, reliable and helpful.

3.3 Students spoke highly of the level of information provided by individual tutors to support learning on taught courses, including syllabuses, reading lists and recommended avenues of research. The panel noted that the Centre provides useful generic information to guide students in the level and style of work expected of them, including guidance on essay style, academic writing and the use of academic libraries. The team concluded that an appropriate level of information on the Centre's courses is made available to students and is subject to regular monitoring.

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.

## Action plan<sup>3</sup>

Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight, November 2013						
Good practice	Intended outcomes	Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes	Target date(s)	Action by	Reported to	Evaluation (process or evidence)
The panel identified the following areas of <b>good practice</b> that are worthy of wider dissemination within the Centre:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>effective and timely communication between tutors and students (paragraph 2.7)</li> </ul>	Opportunities to share good practice, or discuss challenges or questions, to be available routinely, formally and informally, both between Senior Tutor and the tutor, and also between tutors themselves	List of tutors each semester in similar/related subject area to be shared between tutors	Spring 2014	Senior Tutor	Executive Director	Discussion between tutors during semester
		Encourage tutors who have a particular example of good practice, or challenge or situation, to share their experience in tutor meetings	Spring 2014	Senior Tutor	Executive Director	Minutes of tutor meetings
		Establish routine tutor meetings twice a semester, at beginning and end of each semester	Spring 2014	Senior Tutor	Executive Director	Minutes of tutor meetings
		Continue to encourage and develop	Spring 2014	Senior Tutor	Executive Director	(i) review of tutors' handbooks to

<sup>3</sup> The Centre has been required to develop this action plan to follow up on good practice and address any recommendations arising from the review. QAA monitors progress against the action plan.

		<p>communication between tutors and students in the following ways:</p> <p>(a) emphasise to all new tutors the importance of the first tutorial meeting as establishing the ways in which students can contact the tutor during the semester, and to encourage direct communication</p> <p>(b) emphasise to new students the importance of direct communication with their tutors, and to encourage them in this endeavour, by providing support through beginning-of-semester reception for tutors and students; and initiating Senior Tutor forum for academic questions/issues</p> <p>Sharing feedback from students with tutors, including holding, wherever possible, meetings with each seminar leader during the semester</p>	Spring 2014	Senior Tutor	Executive Director	<p>ensure expectations are clearly and expressly stated</p> <p>(ii) review of all academic orientation materials and presentations</p> <p>(iii) introduction of Senior Tutor Q&amp;A forum/surgery, as well as mid-semester reviews and maintenance of office hours</p> <p>Generally in tutors' meetings, otherwise on individual basis with Senior Tutor</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• exceptional support for all</li> </ul>	Provide regular and current training for junior	Appropriate courses to be identified and attended.	Spring 2014	Junior deans/ Senior Tutor	Senior Tutor/ Executive	Attendance at training courses

aspects of the student experience, both academic and pastoral (paragraph 2.8).	deans and Senior Tutor in pastoral matters				Director	
	Develop links between the Feneley Library Trust and students/tutors	Ensure that tutors and seminar leaders provide their reading lists in good time to the Feneley Library Trust	Ongoing	Senior Tutor/ Feneley Library Fellow Librarian	Executive Director	Semester reviews of relationship
	Develop and facilitate links with Keble College Junior Common Room	Continue to provide opportunities for students to eat in Hall (for example, by paying for drinks); continue to look for opportunities to bring the Centre to attention of students - for example, invite Junior Common Room to visit, attend College Fresher's Fair events, ensure students are made aware of wide range of activities and clubs at Keble	Ongoing	Senior Tutor	Executive Director	Reports from students in evaluation forms and anecdotally
<b>Advisable</b>	<b>Intended outcomes</b>	<b>Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes</b>	<b>Target date(s)</b>	<b>Action by</b>	<b>Reported to</b>	<b>Evaluation (process or evidence)</b>
The team considers that it is advisable for the Centre to:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>adopt a systematic approach to quality assurance</li> </ul>	Produce a one-page 'policy document' which describes the manner in which courses are reviewed and proposed;	New/revised course proforma will be used routinely	Immediately	Senior Tutor	Executive Director	Completed proforma provided for each course review/proposal

<p>processes including moderation of assessment tasks, double marking of assessed work, internal reviews of its courses and peer review of teaching (paragraph 1.5)</p>	<p>how learning outcomes are recorded and monitored both for each cohort and across academic years</p>	<p>Continue to compare GPA at entry and grade awarded at departure</p>	<p>Immediately</p>	<p>Senior Tutor</p>	<p>Executive Director and then Academic Board</p>	<p>Semester grade tracking report</p>
		<p>Routinely introduce peer observation of seminars</p>	<p>Continuing</p>	<p>Senior Tutor</p>	<p>Executive Director and then Academic Board</p>	<p>Peer observation reports</p>
		<p>Explore the feasibility and utility of appointing 'adjunct tutors' (specified tutors whom the Centre can turn to for advice and development in relevant curriculum area, but who are not members of staff)</p>	<p>March 2014</p>	<p>Senior Tutor</p>	<p>Executive Director</p>	<p>Appointment of Adjunct Tutors</p>
		<p>Explore and encourage, where feasible, the 'swapping' of marking essays once a semester between tutors who are in sufficiently close enough academic fields to ensure that academic rigour is maintained</p>	<p>April 2014</p>	<p>Senior Tutor</p>	<p>Executive Director</p>	<p>Review of double-marking or sampling, or swapping marking essays to be prepared for Academic Board</p>
		<p>Consider in conjunction with the Academic Board the appropriateness of double-marking (again</p>	<p>Summer 2014 (at next Academic Board meeting)</p>	<p>Senior Tutor/ Executive Director</p>	<p>Chair of Academic Board</p>	<p>Academic Board minutes</p>

		where there are appropriately qualified tutors available each semester) Integral Research Essays, and Seminar Research Essays				
		Consider the feasibility of the Academic Board sampling tutorial and research essays in their areas of academic expertise	Summer 2014 (at next Academic Board meeting)	Senior Tutor/ Executive Director	Chair of Academic Board	Academic Board agenda and minutes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>implement an appropriate management structure in a timely and effective manner in order to ensure continued quality of provision (paragraph 2.3).</li> </ul>	Security of enrolment numbers on a regular and predictable basis, together with development of the Centre's academic reputation and activities	Board review and decision December/January 2014	Spring 2014	Board	Board	Enrolment numbers over two-year period
<b>Desirable</b>	<b>Intended outcomes</b>	<b>Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes</b>	<b>Target date(s)</b>	<b>Action by</b>	<b>Reported to</b>	<b>Evaluation (process or evidence)</b>
The team considers that it is desirable for the Centre to:						
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>develop a proactive role for the Academic Board in offering</li> </ul>	To ensure that the Centre maximises the benefits of the guidance of the renowned experts	Seek Academic Board review of all reports submitted to and received from regulators (including	As each arises	Reports ultimately prepared by Executive	Chair of Academic Board and Academic	Routine submission of new/revised course proforma

constructive criticism of provision, in advising on the development and review of courses, and in ensuring externality in the oversight of academic standards (paragraph 1.2)	who together form the Academic Board, so that it develops its reputation for academically appropriate innovation	this one)		Director	Board	and tabulation of evaluation forms to Academic Board in May each year
		Continue to develop course review of all elements of the programmes, circulating course reviews/proposals at least one month in advance of Academic Board Meeting	Spring 2014, Spring 2015 etc	Staff, tutors and Executive Director	Chair of Academic Board	Introduction of additional agenda items and discussion points which will be minuted in Academic Board Minutes
		Provide tabulated evaluation forms completed by students on each course to Academic Board	Within 6 weeks of the end of each semester	Administrator/Senior Tutor and Executive Director	Chair of Academic Board and Chair of the Centre's Board	Comments received from Academic Board throughout the academic year (via the Chair of the Academic Board)
		Discuss further with Chair of Academic Board to establish what may be feasible (ranging from inclusion of permanent agenda item 'Other developments/processes the Centre should be utilising or developing to sampling of essays to additional meetings)	Spring 2014	Executive Director	Chair of Academic Board	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>establish an effective system for identifying and supporting students with disabilities (paragraph 2.9).</li> </ul>	<p>Develop current system of identifying students who declare a disability further to ensure that all students have the appropriate support in place from the moment they arrive in order to optimise their experience here</p>	<p>Discuss with study-abroad contact at the Centre's Lead College (Middlebury)</p>	Spring 2014	Executive Director	The Centre's Board	Publication of revised policy and internal staff guidance
		<p>Review and develop the Centre's published policy with respect to Accessibility, and Student Support</p>	Spring 2014	Executive Director	The Centre's Board	
		<p>Consider feasibility of accessibility report</p>	Spring 2014	Executive Director	The Centre's Board	Ensuring that the Centre remains as accessible as possible to all students

## 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](#)<sup>4</sup> 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](http://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](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx).

**academic quality** A comprehensive term referring to how, and how well, higher education providers manage teaching and learning opportunities to help students progress and succeed.

**academic standards** The standards set and maintained by degree-awarding bodies for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

**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.

**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 QAA's review processes.

**good practice** A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's review processes.

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

**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.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/RSEO-Handbook-2013.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/RSEO-Handbook-2013.aspx)

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