Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies

Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight

Review by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

February 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 Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies. The review took place on 23 February 2012 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Ms Fiona Crozier
- Mrs Rebecca Ditchburn
- Professor Diane Meehan.

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 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]

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[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 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 QAA panel formed the following judgements about the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies:

- **confidence** can be placed in the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies' management of its responsibilities for the standards of the awards to be conferred by its awarding bodies
- **confidence** can be placed in the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies' management and enhancement of the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

Conclusion about public information

The QAA panel concluded that:

- **reliance can** be placed on the public information that the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies supplies about itself.

Good practice

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

- there is good communication and close links between the Centre and the students' home institutions that underpin the selection process (paragraph 1.3)
- there is a highly supportive learning environment, both pastoral and academic, that allows and encourages students to benefit fully from their experiences at the Centre (paragraph 2.12).

Recommendations

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

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

- continue to formalise and document procedures for the management of quality and standards, including further consideration of external reference points (paragraphs 1.6 and 2.4)
- find a more formal mechanism for involving tutors, other than full-time staff, in the day-to-day management of quality and standards (paragraphs 2.5, 2.7, 2.13 and 2.15)
- clarify the responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of all public information (paragraph 3.4).

Context

The Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies (the Centre) is a small study centre with charitable status, based in Oxford. It was founded in 1975 to 'establish a permanent institute for the interdisciplinary study of the medieval and early modern periods and to provide an academic training for overseas students in Oxford who are not members of the university'. It works exclusively with a number of accredited US higher education institutions, the majority of which are in the CMRS Consortium of Colleges and Universities formed in September 2010. The Consortium aims to foster the Centre's relationships with a network of US academic institutions. The Consortium provides information to prospective students and supports the Centre's activities, such as faculty conferences and research fellowships. Degrees from the Centre's partner institutions are accepted by NARIC (National Academic Recognition Information Centre) as equivalent to UK undergraduate degrees.

Formal agreements exist with colleges and universities in the Consortium and for a number of, but not all, the Centre's other partnerships (see also paragraph 1.1).

The academic programme is aimed mainly at undergraduate students in their junior and senior years. These students attend the Centre as part of the degree course that they are enrolled on in the USA for one, and sometimes two, semesters. Internships are not offered as part of the Centre's programme. Primary responsibility for standards and the award of credit remains with the US academic institutions (the awarding bodies).

While the Centre has a close working relationship with Keble College Oxford, the latter being a trustee and director in the Centre, the College does not have any responsibility for the Centre's academic programme. The Centre's students are associate members of the College and have access to its resources.

At the time of the visit, the Centre was undergoing a period of transition with the founding Principal in the process of retiring and the Centre's Senior Tutor gradually assuming the role of Principal. In addition, the Centre was in the process of obtaining approval for new constitutional documents and had recently established an Academic Board (see also paragraph 1.4). A long-term aspiration for the Centre is to conform to the University of Oxford's norms for Recognised Independent Centres by 2015.

The Centre was accredited by the British Accreditation Council in April 2009.

Detailed findings

1   Academic standards

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

1.1   Ultimate responsibility for the award of credit rests with the US academic institutions with which the Centre works. The Centre has some flexibility in the design of courses within its programme, but all courses have to be approved by the partner institution as being suitable for credit. In its self-evaluation document, the Centre notes that despite this, 'its commitment to quality assurance in the management of academic standards is reflected in internal policy and procedures'. The Centre works closely with the US academic institutions partners to meet their individual requirements, including the one in relation to formal agreements. Senior staff at the Centre acknowledged that, in the past, there had been less emphasis on formal written agreements with its partners. The Consortium Participation Agreement has introduced some formality into arrangements with the institutions within the Consortium but, as noted by the Centre, the agreement does not require the setting out in any detail of the arrangements for quality assurance. In addition to the Consortium Participation Agreement, the panel was provided with an example of a formal written agreement with a US academic institution outside of the Consortium, which provides details of the treatment of applications, grading of work and reporting to the partner and promotion of courses, as well as other matters, such as insurance and housing. The panel also saw evidence of serious scrutiny of the Centre by prospective partners, including site visits, and of the approval of the Centre's programme as suitable for credit.

1.2   The Senior Dean takes an overview of the design of courses, quality management and policy development. The Academic Committee, which comprises the Senior Tutor, the Senior Dean, the Academic Librarian and the Archivist, considers annual ongoing revisions to the courses offered and conducts a major course revision process once every three years (see also paragraph 2.5).

1.3   The Centre's Admissions Committee comprises the Senior Tutor, the Senior Dean, Academic Librarian, the Archivist and Assistant Librarian. The Centre has a robust admissions process, which includes the need for applicants to have achieved a high Grade Point Average (3.5-4.0), a completed application form, a copy of the student's transcript, a short essay and three references. Students are not accepted by the Centre unless it has secured agreement from the US academic institution regarding approval for granting course credit towards the applicant's degree programme. It was also clear from discussions with both staff and students that the good communication and close relationships between the Centre and its partner institutions helped in encouraging students to apply, who would benefit from the distinctive learning opportunities offered at the Centre. The team considers this to be a feature of good practice. Both successful and unsuccessful applicants receive a letter following application. Students commented that the application process had been clear and thorough and that the information supplied was useful and accurate.

1.4   The Centre has recently formed an Academic Board, which will have oversight of all aspects of its academic programmes, including the range of courses offered, course outcomes and academic standards. The Chair of the Board is a senior member of the lead college within the Consortium and it includes academics from across the Consortium colleges and universities, as well as two members from outside the Consortium. At the time of the visit, the Academic Board was in an embryonic stage and hence it was too early to assess its effectiveness. The new draft constitutional documents are unequivocal that 'overall responsibility for academic programmes rests with the Academic Board'.

1.5   From the evidence available the panel formed the view that, within its limited remit, the Centre is discharging its responsibilities for academic standards appropriately and conscientiously and is introducing more formality in its policy and procedures, which will increase further its effectiveness.

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

1.6   The main external reference points used by the Centre in design and delivery of its programmes are largely those of the partner institutions. The Centre cooperates closely with awarding institutions and is responsive to their requirements. It benchmarks its courses and its teaching methods against similar courses offered by the University of Oxford. In a meeting with senior staff of the Centre, the panel heard that the Centre has begun to further formalise and capture its policies and procedures and map these against the relevant QAA reference points, such as the new UK Quality Code for Higher Education and the International students studying in the UK - Guidance for UK higher education providers, and was pleased to find that they were generally aligned with their expectations. The panel formed the view that this was a positive development for the Centre and considers it desirable that the Centre continues to formalise and document its procedures for the management of quality and standards, including consideration of external reference points.

How effectively does the provider use external scrutiny of assessment processes to assure academic standards?

1.7   Credit is awarded by the US academic institutions. Tutors are familiar with the requirements of US grading systems. They are required to assess students' work and to submit detailed reports on their tutorial and seminar students against defined criteria and marking scales. The Senior Tutor provides moderation as appropriate, initially evaluating whether the correct criteria have been applied and whether the grade and the report are consonant. In cases of difficulty, the matter is discussed with the tutor concerned and/or referred to the Academic Committee. Blind marking, with extensive moderation, is applied to the assessment of the Integral Course component of the programme. Formal transcripts and the tutors' reports are sent to the US academic institutions where the courses are awarded credit in accordance with their published procedures.

1.8   Students who met the panel noted that in some cases they also have to send copies of essays and other work to their home institutions.

> The panel has **confidence** in the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies' 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   The Centre has a distinct strategy for the planning and delivery of its academic programme. To meet the requirements of its partner universities, the Centre's programme consists of four, four-credit taught courses. Students normally take an integral course, a seminar and two tutorials and, depending on their awarding institution, may specialise in medieval and early modern studies or follow a more general course in the liberal arts. Courses are delivered by a mixture of approaches, including one-to-one tutorials and small

group seminars. Students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning with the tutor acting as a guide and mentor. Through the integral course students are also exposed to a series of lectures and are taken on field trips. The Centre is also committed to employing tutors who are familiar with their distinctive approach (see also paragraph 2.9).

2.2   Students who met the panel had been made aware that the learning approach would be very different from the one experienced at their home institutions. All students were highly complimentary about the learning opportunities at the Centre, including the exposure to expert tutors, the support and encouragement they received, and the emphasis on self-directed learning. While it was a very different experience for them, it was something they valued highly, referring to it as an 'academic workout'.

2.3   The panel concluded that students are provided with a range of excellent learning opportunities and that the Centre fulfils its responsibilities for the management of these opportunities effectively.

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

2.4   Comments made about the use of external reference points in paragraph 1.6 also apply to this section. The Centre's approach to the use of external reference points, other than those of the US academic institutions, is currently informal and the panel formed the view that it would be desirable for the Centre to continue to formalise and document its procedures for the management of quality and standards, including consideration of external reference points.

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

2.5   The Centre reviews its courses on an annual basis and conducts a major review once every three years. The review is undertaken by the Academic Committee. Evidence provided to the panel showed that the major course review process is extensive and includes input from external experts. The review covers a range of items, including student numbers, the operation of the current courses, teaching methods, field trips, and proposals for new courses. While issues arising from the review may be referred to or discussed with the self-employed academic tutors there are no mechanisms for involving them formally in this and other quality assurance processes within the Centre (see also paragraphs 2.13 and 2.15).

2.6   Student feedback is sought both informally and formally. Informal feedback comes through the close interactions between staff and students and the Junior Common room 'committee'. Formal feedback is sought by means of the end-of-term student evaluations, which are analysed by the Senior Tutor and Administrator and acted on as appropriate. Student feedback is fed into the course review process described in paragraph 2.5. A formal student grievance procedure is also in place.

2.7   Overall, the panel formed the view that the Centre has appropriate means in place to assure itself that the quality of teaching and learning is being maintained and enhanced, which may benefit from further, more formal input from its academic tutors. The panel considered it desirable that the Centre finds a more formal mechanism for involving tutors in the day-to-day management of quality and standards.

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

2.8   Students receive a range of information and support from the moment they apply to the Centre. On arrival, they undergo a detailed orientation programme, which covers both the academic content and approach of the programme and also an introduction to the City of Oxford and the UK. The students who met the panel confirmed that the orientation programme had been useful.

2.9   As indicated in paragraph 2.1, the Centre's approach to learning and teaching puts considerable emphasis on one-to-one tutorials and small group seminars. It was clear to the panel in discussion with the Centre's staff and academic tutors that they provide extensive support to students at the Centre, both within and outside of formal scheduled contact time. Students who met the panel consistently praised the support they received from all staff at the Centre, and the open door policy operated by all staff. Students receive appropriate handbooks, reading lists, and supporting materials for the courses they undertake.

2.10   The Senior Dean and Academic Librarian has overall responsibility for the pastoral care and health and safety of students. The Senior Dean is supported in this role by two Junior Deans, which are residential posts. The Junior Deans are responsible for pastoral support, health and safety and discipline out of hours. The students who met the panel were highly supportive of their role. Student attendance is also monitored carefully.

2.11   Students also have access to a Junior Common room. This provides physical resources, such as a common room, kitchen and study facilities, as well as student-led social events and activities.

2.12   The panel concluded that the Centre provides a highly supportive learning environment, both pastoral and academic, that allows and encourages students to benefit fully from their experience. This is considered to be a feature of good practice.

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

2.13   The Centre has a small number of full-time staff, namely the Principal and Senior Tutor, the Senior Dean, Academic Librarian, and the Administrator. In addition, there are several part-time members of staff, including the Archivist and Assistant Librarian and the two Junior Deans. Tutors work on a self-employed basis and formal staff development opportunities are not offered to them.

2.14   The majority of the tutors teaching on the courses at the Centre are experienced, including in terms of the required teaching approaches. New tutors are recruited by the Senior Tutor, usually on the recommendation of appropriate experts. In particular, if the potential tutor has not taught at the Centre before, the Senior Tutor checks they have appropriate tutorial experience and training. The Senior Tutor also has responsibility for briefing the tutors on the programme, what is required of the students, and expectations of reporting and grading.

2.15   Tutors who met the panel felt that they were well supported. Communication was extensive and they were made aware of what was going on through email or personal contact. Although the panel heard that the Centre was in the process of organising an end-of-year meeting for all staff, there are currently no formal staff meetings where the self-employed academic tutors can come together or have a formal input into the Centre's quality assurance arrangements (see also paragraph 2.5).

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?

2.16   Students at the Centre have access to excellent library facilities, including the Centre's own Feneley Library, which contains some 20,000 items. The stated aim of the library is to have 'the standard works and reference books required by undergraduates for the subjects taught at the Centre, as well as several specialised collections mainly for graduates and faculty members'. In January 2012, the library of the Foundation for Medieval Genealogy was also placed on deposit at the Centre. Students at the Centre are also readers in the Oxford University Bodleian Libraries network, which allows them access to around 11 million items as well as considerable e-resources.

2.17   If any issues regarding library resources arise, students are encouraged to bring them up with the Academic and Assistant Librarians to allow any shortcomings in library holdings to be rectified quickly. Students who met the panel were unanimously complimentary about the library facilities made available to them and the associated staff support. They were also highly appreciative of having the ability to access the Bodleian library.

2.18   IT facilities are also made available to students at the Centre. The Centre has recently invested in its IT network, particularly to meet the demand from the many students who bring their own laptop computers. Students who met the panel were again highly satisfied with the IT resources available.

2.19   The panel concluded that the arrangements in place for ensuring students have access to sufficient learning resources to enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes of their programme are highly effective.

The panel has **confidence** that the Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the learning opportunities it provides for students.

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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 Centre believes that the first step to ensuring the effective maintenance of academic standards is 'taking extreme care over public information both in printed form and on the internet' and states its commitment to ensuring that marketing and recruitment materials are clear and accessible, fair and accurate. In discussion with staff and students, it was made clear to the panel that both the Centre and the US academic institutions are conscious that the Centre's programme is suited to particular students who will benefit from the experience and mode of learning, and hence they ensure that students are as well briefed as possible before they make an application.

3.2   Until recently, the Centre has communicated with potential students and partner institutions mainly via a number of printed documents, including a prospectus and the schedule of courses. All written documentation is reviewed annually by the Academic Committee, along with the Administrator to ensure that it is robust, accurate, complete and up to date. The Bursar of Keble College is also given all Centre publications which mention

the College before they are published so as to ensure that they do not misrepresent the relationship between the College and the Centre to the public and in particular to students.

3.3   The panel heard that a major revision of the Centre's website in October 2011 has altered the relation between printed and electronic media, with the Centre moving to a more website-based method of communication, although checking of the material on the website still takes place in much the same way as outlined above. Students confirmed that the information made available to them about the Centre and its programmes was largely web-based and that this information had been both helpful and accurate.

3.4   The Centre also has a process by which it annually checks all awarding bodies' websites for what is being said about the Centre and if any errors are found correction is requested. This process is to be formalised in the summer of 2012. While the panel was satisfied that a process was in place to ensure that information published about the Centre by the US academic institutions partners is accurate and that the Centre took a conscientious approach to how it marketed itself, the panel formed the view that responsibilities for these tasks would benefit from further clarification. Hence, it would be desirable for the Centre to clarify the responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of published information.

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.

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4   Action plan

Centre for Medieval & Renaissance Studies action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight February 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**:						
• there is good communication and close links between the Centre and the students' home institutions that underpin the selection process (paragraph 1.3)	Review of all staff roles to ensure continued high priority of good communication with home colleges	May 2012	Principal with Company Secretary	Continued good engagement with home institutions	Board of Directors	Staff job descriptions
	Programme of visits to key 'new' colleges	May 2012	Principal (and working party of Board of Directors)	Number of applications and acceptances from each institution showing good understanding of the Centre High level of student satisfaction and academic success	Board of Directors	Student evaluations Examination of correspondence with home colleges
	Creation of mechanism for linking causes for concern in student reports and evaluations directly to communication with home colleges	June 2012	Principal		Academic Board	Monitoring of student grades and reports
	Review of communications strategy (including all printed materials and electronic media)	August 2012	All staff		Board of Directors	

	Visit by Consortium College Presidents and/or nominees	September 2012	All staff			
• there is a highly supportive learning environment, both pastoral and academic, that allows and encourages students to benefit fully from their experiences at the Centre (paragraph 2.12).	Review of all staff roles to ensure continued high priority of pastoral and academic support	May 2012	Principal with Company Secretary	Continued well being of students	Board of Directors	Staff job descriptions Student evaluations
	Review with key figures at Keble College of first year of revived associate student status	July 2012	Principal			
	To be included in terms of reference of Review of Academic Programme	August 2012	Academic Committee			
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:						
• continue to formalise and document procedures for the management of quality and standards, including further consideration of external reference points	To be included in terms of reference of Review of Academic Programme	August 2012	Academic Committee	Creation of more formal procedures for management of quality standards, including proper emphasis on documentation	Academic Board	Policy documents and student reports showing evidence of application

(paragraphs 1.6 and 2.3)						
• find a more formal mechanism for involving tutors, other than full-time staff, in the day-to-day management of quality and standards (paragraphs 2.5, 2.7, 2.13 and 2.15)	To be included in terms of reference of Review of Academic Programme	August 2012	Academic Committee	Better engagement of tutors in quality management	Academic Board	Policy documents Agenda and minutes of meetings
• clarify the responsibility for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of all public information (paragraph 3.4).	Review of all staff roles ensuring clarity on this point Formalisation of annual review of how colleges and universities refer to the Centre in publications and particularly online	May 2012 August 2012	Principal with Company Secretary Principal with assistance of Academic Board members and staff	Clearer line of management Continued elimination of misleading materials	Board of Directors Board of Directors	Job descriptions Policy document Correspondence Changed publications

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.

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

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk.