



ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (London)

Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight

Review by the Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education

March 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 ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (London). The review took place on 27 March 2012 and was conducted by a panel, as follows:

- Dr C Dawson
- Professor R Harris
- Mrs M Pride.

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 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 ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (London) (ACCENT), 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 ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (London):

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

Conclusion about public information

The QAA panel concluded that:

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

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **features of good practice** at ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (London):

- the timeliness with which ACCENT provides students with constructive and high-quality feedback on assessed work (paragraph 1.5)
- ACCENT's responsive and student-centred approach to many areas of academic activity, including engaging flexibly and responsively with student course evaluations (paragraph 2.4)
- the personalised care with which ACCENT arranges, supports, monitors and evaluates internships (paragraph 2.7).

Recommendations

The QAA panel makes the following recommendations to ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (London).

It is **desirable** for ACCENT to:

- facilitate communication among faculty members in order to reduce the likelihood of students experiencing overlapping syllabuses in different courses (paragraph 1.3)
- systematise its arrangements for teaching observation (paragraph 2.9)
- formalise its policies, procedures and practices by careful minuting and follow-up of meeting decisions (paragraph 2.10).

Context

ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (ACCENT) is a third party study abroad provider and an associate member of the Association of American Study Abroad Programmes UK. It provides logistical and academic support for students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate degrees at accredited US higher education institutions listed on the US Department of Education website.

ACCENT's London premises are currently rented accommodation in Bloomsbury. ACCENT London employs a Centre Director and three supporting staff, whose supportive and logistical roles are clearly defined.

In collaborating with colleges and universities, ACCENT aims to create study abroad programmes of academic integrity and rich cross-cultural focus, and to encourage intellectual and personal growth by providing educational opportunities that foster an understanding of different cultures.

ACCENT London manages three types of study abroad programme, all of which contribute to students' home university award:

- island programmes: courses are taught at the ACCENT centre by locally employed adjunct faculty, sometimes working alongside visiting US faculty. Typically, these are semester-length courses
- faculty-led programmes: courses are taught by US faculty with ACCENT providing various levels of support from housing, classrooms and other logistical support to guest speakers, visits and academic enhancement. Typically, these are short summer programmes
- direct enroll programmes: students study at UK universities with ACCENT providing support as necessary.

For academic year 2011-12, ACCENT has written agreements with three American universities for nine semester-long programmes, and with 14 universities for 17 summer programmes. Meetings for the present scrutiny involved ACCENT staff, adjunct faculty, and faculty and students of the University of Southern California. Of the students, the postgraduates, but not the undergraduates, were undertaking unpaid internships: these were conducted in accordance with the requirements of the UK Border Agency.

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 ACCENT's academic partners, all of which are accredited US institutions recognised by the National Recognition Information Centre for the UK (NARIC). ACCENT therefore operates within the US framework for academic standards.

1.2 Procedures for course development, including guidelines on the development of courses and the requirements for course syllabuses, are specified in ACCENT's Academic Quality Control Manual and designed to ensure the quality of courses delivered in ACCENT centres internationally. Requests for new courses are made by American universities; ACCENT then discusses course and assessment requirements in terms of content, contact hours, delivery mode and credit. Once this information is collected, ACCENT appoints local faculty, normally with extensive experience of teaching study abroad students from the USA, to develop and potentially teach the course in question: the proposed syllabus and faculty curricula vitae are then forwarded for approval in principle to the university concerned. A syllabus is then developed and submitted for final approval; at this point, in a process managed by ACCENT's head office in San Francisco, a formal contract is drawn up and signed.

1.3 The panel confirms that assessment tasks for each course are clearly specified in academic handbooks: these contain details of learning outcomes, grade criteria and assessment weightings. In discussion, students stated that, while their overall satisfaction with their programme is extremely high, they experienced some accidental overlap in course content, which could be resolved by discussion among faculty members. It is desirable that ACCENT facilitates communication among faculty members in order to reduce the likelihood of students experiencing overlapping syllabuses in different courses.

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

1.4 ACCENT's programmes are designed to meet partner universities' academic requirements and are subject to approval on this basis. Hence, the main external reference points involved are those of the partner universities, which have themselves been subject to accreditation in the USA. In addition, ACCENT monitors course grading profiles to ensure comparability with partner university norms. While different partner universities adopt different procedures, these profiles are normally signed off by the partner university's UK representative (or comparable individual) on behalf of the home university.

1.5 There are typically four modes of assessment for each course, with ACCENT ensuring that the load is reasonably distributed. Students are entitled to receive some feedback by mid-semester, and spoke in particularly positive terms about the timeliness and quality of the evaluations they receive. Most assessed work is returned within one week, with extensive and constructive formative comments and advice designed to support future learning and improve performance. The panel identified the timeliness with which ACCENT provides students with constructive and high-quality feedback on assessed work as a feature of good practice.

The panel has **confidence** in the provider'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 Responsibility for managing the quality of learning opportunities and delivery of academic courses rests with ACCENT's London Director, who follows the policies and procedures specified in the Academic Quality Control Manual and the relevant contract.

2.2 ACCENT London delivers several island programmes, in which courses are taught by locally employed adjunct faculty, sometimes alongside visiting faculty from the home university. Course delivery takes a variety of forms, including classroom-based lectures and seminars, film screenings and site visits, any of which may be complemented and enhanced by social and cultural activities. These arrangements are efficiently and effectively delivered and student satisfaction levels are high.

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

2.3 See paragraphs 1.4-1.5.

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

2.4 ACCENT makes extensive use of student evaluations at both course and programme level; the evaluation templates were found to be extensive in scope but appropriately focused. Evaluation reports are sent to partner universities and discussed in faculty meetings. In addition, mid-semester meetings are held between the Centre Director and students to discuss their academic experience, and periodic meetings take place between student representatives and ACCENT staff. The panel identified ACCENT's responsive and student-centred approach to many areas of academic activity, including engaging flexibly and responsively with student course evaluations, as a feature of good practice.

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

2.5 Student support takes a variety of forms. Prior to students' arrival, ACCENT provides extensive general information for dissemination by the home university, communicating directly with potential students as appropriate. The students who met the panel reported that they had been extremely well briefed prior to departure, and the panel confirms that ACCENT's communications appear fit for purpose. On arrival, an orientation programme covering such non-academic matters as accommodation, food, money, safety and transportation is provided. ACCENT has overall responsibility for this programme, which may be delivered by its own staff alone, or in conjunction with visiting faculty from the home university. In either case, the arrangements were found to be satisfactory.

2.6 A high level of continuing pastoral care is provided, including an emergency telephone number. Students are provided with housing, access to health care, and a wide

range of extra-curricular activities. Academic support is available through comprehensive course handbooks and directly from tutors. Although faculty are employed on a sessional basis, they are contracted to make time available before and after sessions for student tutorials: students confirm that this commitment is honoured, and also that such faculty regularly and promptly respond to email enquiries. Overall, robust policies and procedures to monitor and control the academic quality of the student experience are in place and routinely and rigorously deployed.

2.7 Student interns are similarly well supported professionally and academically, both by an expert consultant charged with arranging and supporting internships and by ACCENT's very approachable staff. The panel identified the personalised care with which ACCENT arranges, supports, monitors and evaluates internships, ensuring in particular that they match students' interests, skill sets and career aspirations, as 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?

2.8 Island programmes are taught by locally-recruited academics, each of whom normally holds (or has held) an academic post in a UK higher education institution and has experience of teaching visiting American students. The procedures and protocols in place for the hiring of faculty were found to be rigorous, the market is favourable to employers (most current faculty hold PhDs and have significant publication records), and all appointments are subject to the approval of the partner university. Newly-appointed faculty are briefed to ensure that they are aware of such issues as the culture of the university concerned, student expectations (which are frequently high) and grading methods; this information is complemented by end-of-programme meetings, which faculty members who met the panel found invaluable in respect of quality assurance and enhancement.

2.9 Formal appraisals take place for ACCENT London's full-time staff but not for adjunct faculty. Observation of teaching is undertaken at least annually by at least one member of ACCENT staff, who provides informal feedback. These arrangements, while valuable, are, however, informally arranged, and it is desirable for ACCENT to systematise its arrangements for teaching observation.

2.10 A variety of development opportunities is available for full-time staff, including annual retreats and meetings with guest speakers. Directors have Europe-wide retreats; more junior staff are encouraged to share problems and good practice with their counterparts in other ACCENT centres through video conferencing and other forms of virtual communication. While staff attested to the fact that developmental meetings of this kind indeed take place, the panel was able to identify little documentary evidence to support this: in consequence, the opportunities for capitalising on the shared experiences of colleagues engaged in parallel activities are unnecessarily limited. It is desirable for ACCENT to formalise its policies, procedures and practices by careful minuting and follow-up of meeting decisions.

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 ACCENT's London Centre, which has 24-hour access, houses a library with an ACCENT reserve section, two computer laboratories, a student common room and a study area. While these arrangements were considered by students (and confirmed by the panel)

to be fit for purpose, renting shared premises has caused occasional administrative challenges, which have not, however, thus far proved insurmountable.

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 ACCENT has a robust approach to the accuracy and completeness of published information and works collaboratively with its partner institutions in the USA to ensure the accuracy of the information that it publishes. The Academic Quality Control Manual outlines key policies and procedures for the production of key documents.

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

ACCENT International Consortium for Academic Programs Abroad (London) action plan relating to the Recognition Scheme for Educational Oversight March 2010						
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 timeliness with which ACCENT provides students with constructive and high-quality feedback on assessed work (paragraph 1.5) 	Ensure that all students receive a mid-semester grade and that any students falling below an acceptable level have a tutorial meeting	October 2012	All faculty	Student feedback	Centre Director	End of autumn 2012 faculty meetings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ACCENT's responsive and student-centred approach to many areas of academic activity, including engaging flexibly and responsively with student course evaluations (paragraph 2.4) 	Continue to review the evaluation process and standardise evaluations across Europe to provide direct comparisons with other ACCENT centres	January 2013	Director for European Operations	Improved feedback to US partners	US university partners	The procedures will be reviewed at the end of the summer 2013

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the personalised care with which ACCENT arranges, supports, monitors and evaluates internships (paragraph 2.7). 	Consider ways of streamlining the internship process	Meeting arranged for late August 2012	Internship coordinator, Centre Director and US representative	Placements will take less time and the process will be more efficient	US university partners	The procedures will be revisited in August 2013
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"> facilitate communication among faculty members in order to reduce the likelihood of students experiencing overlapping syllabuses in different courses (paragraph 1.3) 	<p>Sharing syllabuses during faculty meetings</p> <p>Ensure all faculty receive the academic handbook which contains all syllabuses</p> <p>Encourage faculty to discuss courses' overlap and address the issues in advance of preparing final syllabus</p>	September 2012	Centre Director, faculty	Student feedback	Centre Director	Review in faculty meetings during the spring 2012 semesters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> systematise its arrangements for teaching observation (paragraph 2.9) 	Draw up a list of times and dates for teaching observation	September 2012	All staff	Student feedback, faculty feedback	Centre Director, Director for European Operations	Review procedure following the end of the academic year

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> formalise its policies, procedures and practices by careful minuting and follow-up of meeting decisions (paragraph 2.10). 	Draw up a master list of meetings and attach notes	June 2012	All staff	Prompt follow-up of decisions Clear and transparent decision-making processes	Centre Director, Director for European Operations	Review at Centre Directors meeting in February 2013 during best practise sessions
---	--	-----------	-----------	--	---	---

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](#) 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.

RG 939 06/12

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Email comms@qaa.ac.uk
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2012

ISBN 978 1 84979 590 6

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

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786