Westlink College Ltd

Review for Educational Oversight by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

November 2013

Key findings about Westlink College Ltd

As a result of its Review for Educational Oversight carried out in November 2013, the QAA review team (the team) considers that there can be **confidence** in how the provider manages its stated responsibilities for the standards of the programmes it offers on behalf of ATHE and BCS, The Chartered Institute for IT (BCS).

The team also considers that there can be **confidence** in how the provider manages its stated responsibilities for the quality and enhancement of the learning opportunities it offers on behalf of these awarding organisations.

The team considers 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 team has identified the following **good practice**:

- giving students multifaceted pastoral support with depth and sensitivity (paragraph 2.5).

Recommendations

The team has also identified a number of **recommendations** for the enhancement of the higher education provision.

The team considers that it is **advisable** for the provider to:

- expedite and formalise its plans to separate responsibilities for the management of academic standards and overall college management (paragraph 1.1)
- develop a more formal annual monitoring process (paragraph 1.2)
- formally align teaching observations and staff appraisal to development activities (paragraph 2.3)
- strengthen systems for approving public information (paragraph 3.4).

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

- continue to develop its virtual learning environment to promote consistency across the provision (paragraph 3.2).

About this report

This report presents the findings of the [Review for Educational Oversight](#)[1] (REO) conducted by [QAA](#) at Westlink College Ltd (the College), which is a privately funded provider of higher education. The purpose of the review is to provide public information about how the provider discharges its stated responsibilities for the management and delivery of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students. The review applies to programmes of study that the provider delivers on behalf of ATHE and BCS. The review was carried out by Mr Seth Crofts, Mr David Jones, Ms Daphne Rowlands (reviewers) and Mr Christopher Mabika (Coordinator).

The review team conducted the review in agreement with the provider and in accordance with the *[Review for Educational Oversight: Handbook](#)*.[2] Evidence in support of the review included:

- policy and operational documents
- minutes of meetings
- meetings with management, staff and awarding representatives from awarding organisations, and students
- reports of inspections by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI)
- external examiner reports from ATHE.

The review team also considered the provider's use of the relevant external reference points:

- subject benchmark statements
- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ)
- the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code).

Please note that if you are unfamiliar with any of the terms used in this report you can find them in the [Glossary](#).

The College is situated in the town centre of Harlow, Essex. It offers courses in business, health care management, and information technology. Its students are predominantly from the Asian subcontinent. Teaching at the College started in February 2012, although it was established in 2010. It has 256 full-time students on its programmes and offers the following higher education programmes, listed beneath their awarding organisations with student numbers in brackets:

ATHE

- Level 7 Diploma in Healthcare Management (22)
- Level 7 Diploma in Strategic Management (20)
- Level 6 Diploma in Management (165)
- Level 6 Diploma in Healthcare Management (10)
- Level 5 Extended Diploma in Management (31)

BCS

- Level 5 Diploma in Information Technology (8).

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[1] www.qaa.ac.uk/educational-oversight
[2] www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/REO-designated-providers-handbook-13.aspx

The provider's stated responsibilities

The College has accreditations from ATHE, BCS and Pearson. However, currently it only runs courses awarded by ATHE and BCS.

Under ATHE, the awarding organisation provides assessment briefs. However, the provider changes these assessments where necessary, or may elect to develop its own. The College develops, marks and internally verifies all assessments, and deals with all issues relating to students. These include admissions, induction, performance evaluation, providing guidance, and teaching and learning. It shares the responsibility of processing appeals on assessments with the awarding organisation. The College is also responsible for all staff issues, including recruitment and selection, induction, and development.

BCS sets and marks all assessments; all its other responsibilities are similar to those under ATHE.

Recent developments

The College is currently phasing out its IT provision from BCS due to low demand. It is planning to widen its student profile to include students from the UK and EU. In line with this, the College is in the process of securing the relevant approvals to ensure that local and EU students can access funding through the Student Loan Company. It anticipates that the Pearson courses will be attractive to the local students. However, it states that these would also be available to international students.

Students' contribution to the review

Students studying on higher education programmes at the provider presented a submission to the review team. In preparing the report, the students received support from the College in the form of facilities, time and guidance in designing student questionnaires. The student representatives, some of whom were present at the preparatory meeting, attended a meeting with the review team. During both meetings, students participated actively in answering questions from the review team and giving their opinion on the College's provision.

Detailed findings about Westlink College Ltd

1   Academic standards

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

1.1   There is limited formal oversight of academic standards, with no transparent deliberative structure. The College relies on an informal structure, giving rise to blurring of responsibilities for the management of academic standards between the Principal and the College Director. There is, however, a developing plan to separate these responsibilities. The College has a small team of staff and there is considerable duplication of membership of meetings, with the Principal attending all of them. Most meetings are informal with no formal records. There is, however, a shared commitment from staff to maintain academic standards and the College has established a good working relationship with ATHE. It is **advisable** for the College to expedite and formalise its plans to separate responsibilities for the management of academic standards and overall college management.

1.2   The College does not evaluate systematically some of its delegated responsibilities for the management of academic standards. The College started to admit students in February 2012 and so far, only a small number of students have completed. Formal annual monitoring does not take place. College staff hold a number of informal meetings to discuss individual student progress and external verifier reports. The Principal and Director meet occasionally to discuss student achievement within the context of external examiner reports. It is **advisable** for the College to develop a more formal annual monitoring process.

How effectively does the College make use of external reference points to manage academic standards?

1.3   The College makes effective use of a range of external reference points. The main awarding organisation, ATHE develops the qualifications in accordance with FHEQ, which it clearly references. It awards these qualifications appropriate credits according to the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF). It also references materials to the relevant national occupational standards where applicable. This includes, for example, the health qualifications which it develops in accordance with the Health and Social Care National Occupational Standards. The awarding organisation confirmed that the College is seeking access to its national achievement database for benchmarking purposes. The College cross-references student materials and policies to the Quality Code, including the student handbook, Teaching and Learning Strategy, and quality management policies. The prospectus also incorporates appropriate references to the QCF.

1.4   The College has a programme of training for all staff on external reference points in general and the Quality Code in particular. Staff are familiar with aspects of the Quality Code that are relevant to teaching and learning with reference to formative assessment and in internally verifying assignments.

How does the College use external moderation, verification or examining to assure academic standards?

1.5   The College uses external verification effectively to assure standards. It maintains effective and regular email and phone communication with the awarding organisation. The awarding organisation carries out annual visits to the College, in addition to external verifier visits. The awarding organisation provides assignment briefs; teaching staff break these assignments into smaller parts for formative assessment purposes and to aid understanding. The College has an effective internal verification system in which each tutor

has received appropriate training. Tutors use internal verification forms to good effect to ensure appropriate standards and developmental feedback to students. External verification takes place at the end of the course. Reports cover the range of assessors and internal verifiers. External verifier comments show that the standard of the College's internal verification has improved. The College relies heavily on external verifier reports to evaluate its management structure, processes and student success rates, and to appraise its courses. It implements staff training in response to comments made by external verifiers, and uses external verifier reports to evaluate student success on each course. These reports are distributed to all teaching staff who discuss them informally. The College draws up action plans to address any issues.

> The review team has **confidence** in the provider's management of its responsibilities for the standards of the programmes it offers on behalf of its awarding organisations.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

How effectively does the College fulfil its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities?

2.1 The College fulfils its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities. External verification reports confirm this. It has systems in place to ensure thorough and accurate assessment and the systematic internal verification of student work.

How effectively does the College make use of external reference points to manage and enhance learning opportunities?

2.2 The College actively engages with a variety of appropriate external reference points, as stated in paragraph 1.3.

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

2.3 The College maintains oversight of the quality of teaching and learning in a number of ways. It examines reports from external verifiers, peer observations, staff appraisals and student feedback through management meetings. The College uses these to support, monitor and review staff performance, and partially inform the way in which the planning and assessment of teaching, deliberative meetings, teaching observations and student feedback are drawn together. Teaching staff are conversant with these policies and approaches. The College sources external training to support personal development of teaching staff including training on accredited courses to update staff pedagogy, improve performance and ensure that they stay in touch with current standards of practice. However, the College needs to make this process more proactive. It is **advisable** for the College to formally align teaching observations and staff appraisal to development activities.

2.4 There is a clear desire to involve students in the process of enhancing the teaching and learning through questionnaires and focus groups.

How does the College assure itself that students are supported effectively?

2.5 The College implements systems to support students effectively. These include induction processes and multifaceted pastoral support, which it gives with significant depth and sensitivity. At induction, students complete a learner-profile diagnostic task,

which advises teaching staff about the classroom support mechanisms that individual learners require. Students also fill in an induction checklist. Teaching staff take time to run through the student handbook with their groups. The Handbook contains advice on plagiarism and assessment, and extensive information for new students on settling in the UK. Pastoral support includes advice about how to cope with the possible cultural shock during the settling process. The College organises trips to facilitate team bonding. The Principal, teaching and student welfare support staff operate an open-door policy for students. Giving students multifaceted pastoral support with depth and sensitivity is **good practice**.

2.6   The College supports the students further through detailed course handbooks providing specific advice on programme content and assessments. It embeds elements of tutorial support into its Student Welfare Policy. Staff are conversant with these approaches, and the students themselves testify that they feel very well supported in their learning and with pastoral matters. Staff provide additional personal learning support to students on an informal basis. Both formative and summative feedback to students is thorough and detailed, offering constructive criticism, which is in line with the College's Assessment Strategy. Teaching staff and students testify that assessed work is returned to students promptly, very often within one week, which is well within the 10 working days outlined in the Assessment Strategy and the student handbook. Students confirm that the feedback on their work is informative and developmental, and enhances and develops their understanding. However, some external verifier reports suggest that in a minority of scripts such annotation is somewhat limited. Management team meetings address such issues and develop action plans, which the College implements in the form of continuous personal development activities of staff.

How effectively does the College develop its staff in order to improve student learning opportunities?

2.7   The College has a detailed staff handbook that supports the induction of new staff. The College takes advantage of its small size to offer informal peer support. Management observes classes, and offer teachers additional support and constructive criticism on their teaching. The comments and action points raised during these observations are insightful and relevant. The College has no formal mechanism for disseminating good practice, relying on peer observations and external examination reports to highlight good practice. This is discussed informally. Tutors and the Principal share ideas and initiatives for improving teaching.

2.8   The College has both an Assessment Policy and Learning and Teaching Strategy. These set out the key expectations of teachers, both in terms of teaching and assessment, as does the staff handbook. Formal mechanisms, external verifier reports and student feedback, also inform the evaluation of teachers and teaching.

How effectively does the College ensure that learning resources are accessible to students and sufficient to enable them to achieve the intended learning outcomes?

2.9   The teaching staff and college management both recognise that the college library taken as a resource on its own is very small and is, as such, inadequate to support the programmes offered. However, relevant and sufficient resources are available at the nearby Harlow library, which is also able to obtain books through the inter-library loans system. The College maintains membership to this library. In response to the feedback from student questionnaires the college management has allocated a budget to improve the on-site library facilities. The College has recently developed a virtual learning environment (VLE), which also provides students with copies of all of the learning materials produced by their

lecturers, together with online articles and a small number of e-books for some units. Detailed course handbooks and programme specifications are available to students both in hard copy and on the VLE.

The review team has **confidence** that the provider is fulfilling its responsibilities for managing and enhancing the quality of the intended learning opportunities it provides for students.

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3 Information about learning opportunities

How effectively does the College communicate information about learning opportunities to students and other stakeholders?

3.1 The College communicates information about learning opportunities effectively to prospective and current students and other stakeholders. It has developed a framework of policies and strategies to provide detailed guidance to students and staff. It also applies a systematic approach to develop information for all its stakeholders. The College has a coherent and proactive strategy to deploy resources for the transmission of its information. Its policies are clearly written and user friendly. They are also easily accessible to students and staff, and discussed in detail during induction.

3.2 The College transmits effectively most of its information through its website and the VLE. It disseminates some information in paper form. The website provides a wealth of information on academic, pastoral and social support through the student handbook, course guides, prospectus and a range of policies. It is well designed and easy to navigate. The College encourages prospective students to access the website following their initial enquiry and to maintain a direct relationship using internet video contact. This helps to ensure that they receive a detailed account of the realities of studying at the College. The VLE provides a diverse range of content including course guides and learning materials such as case studies and video clips to support formal lectures and enhance independent learning. The academic team and students highly value the VLE. The academic team is ambitious about its potential to enhance learning and student support. However, the VLE is still at an early stage of development and is limited in its content. The College reported that it is in the process of improving the level and consistency of materials available on the VLE. It would be **desirable** for the College to continue to develop its VLE to promote consistency across the provision.

3.3 The student and course handbooks are well designed and comprehensive. These documents are readily available through the VLE. The student handbook provides extensive information about studying at the College and student welfare and gives guidance on the transition to become a student in the UK. Course handbooks contain comprehensive programme specifications provided by the awarding organisation. The College uses course guides during the induction process and gives students a structured briefing to ensure that they make effective use of this resource. Students reported that the programme specifications and course guides assisted their induction and provided a structure to support their assignment work. The staff handbook contains comprehensive information about the role of staff at the College.

How effective are the College arrangements for assuring that information about learning opportunities is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy?

3.4 Overall, the College has adequate arrangements and policies for assuring that information about learning opportunities is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.

The College frequently reviews policies and strategies through discussion among key senior managers. The Director approves all policies. However, at the time of the review, some inaccurate information was available in the student handbook, which shows that the system for approving public information requires further strengthening. Management admitted that it had made an error in relation to version control of a revised student handbook. It is **advisable** for the College to strengthen systems for approving public information.

3.5 The College maintains a systematic review of its website, performed by designated senior managers. Management also carries out accuracy checks on a monthly basis. The college prospectus is similarly subject to a detailed review by designated senior managers. The College reaches a formal agreement with the awarding organisation representatives before publishing any information on courses. The Director and Principal review and formally approve all information. The Director, who has ultimate responsibility for published information, signs off final copies of all publications.

3.6 There is a systematic and effective approach to managing student learning which the VLE supports. The senior management team carefully monitors the use of the College's VLE by academic staff and students, and reviews all content to ensure accuracy and consistency.

3.7 The College obtains feedback on the student handbook and course handbooks from current students to ensure that they are appropriately designed and meet the students' needs. It achieves this through informal interaction with the student body.

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

Action plan[3]

Westlink College Ltd action plan relating to the Review for Educational Oversight of 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 review team identified the following areas of **good practice** that are worthy of wider dissemination within the College:						
• giving students multifaceted pastoral support with depth and sensitivity (paragraph 2.5).	To provide high-level academic and non-academic support. Include, as part of the induction process, the establishment of the needs of individual learners and record these in individual learning plans Provide a comprehensive student handbook including information on possible 'culture shock' associated with a new study/living environment Facilitate team bonding using trips and other activities through the publication of an annual schedule	Review and revise student handbook to ensure adequacy and currency of support material Review and revise Induction process to ensure adequacy of support detail and identification of individual learning needs Provide remedial action Promote a feeling of belonging to the course and the College	July 2014	Principal	Director	Effectiveness of student handbook and Induction evaluated in revised post Induction questionnaire Effectiveness of learning needs identified/met and student participation evaluated in student data analysis (retention and progression) as part of annual monitoring process

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[3] The College 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, in conjunction with the College's awarding organisations.

Advisable	Intended outcomes	Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes	Target date(s)	Action by	Reported to	Evaluation (process or evidence)
The team considers that it is **advisable** for the College to:						
• expedite and formalise plans to separate responsibilities for managing academic standards from overall College management (paragraph 1.1)	Develop clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the Director (focused on operational and strategic general management) and Principal (focused on all academic activities) roles	Develop new discrete job descriptions for roles (College Director and Principal) that provide refined focus and lines of reporting.	May 2014	Principal and Director	Board of Governors	Clear separation of ownership and academic management (control) Staff feedback identifies clarity of understanding regarding academic issues and overall College control
• develop a more formal annual monitoring process (paragraph 1.2)	Develop a detailed annual report format to evaluate systematically the effectiveness of the College's delegated responsibility of all academic activities Establish additional focus with programme reviews evaluating programme fitness for purpose, through staff and student feedback mechanisms Formalise meeting structure with standard agenda and	Develop and implement a formal annual monitoring and evaluation process that embraces Academic Standards and Learning Opportunities Utilise student achievement data (also progression, retention) and staff feedback alongside awarding organisation feedback to evaluate quality of provision (and enhancement opportunities)	July 2014	Principal (and external consult)	Director	New Annual Monitoring and Evaluation process established within College evaluative structure Action based approach Evidenced by minutes Staff and student participation

	action based reporting	Programme reviews to assess relevance of the programmes to student needs, and career development prospects Carry out module reviews to establish inter-module achievement profile and standard deviation, also year-on-year comparisons Monitor contribution of learning resources to student achievement, through staff and student feedback				Measurable outcomes
• formally align teaching observations and staff appraisal to development activities (paragraph 2.3)	Develop a proactive approach to promoting the personal development of teaching staff Discrete continuous professional development organised for all new staff	Establish staff based continuous professional development request process linked to peer observations Provide annual continuous professional development schedule as initial (events) framework Link to Annual Monitoring and Evaluation reporting (see above) as needs identifier	August 2014	Principal and Director of Studies	Director	Revised peer observation form - identification of continuous professional development outcomes Staff handbook modified - continuous professional development request form included Annual continuous professional development (every

						two months) schedule in staff handbook
• strengthen systems for approving public information (paragraph 3.4).	Implement structured review of public information - two major checks every year on process and outcomes to correspond with student intakes Ensure that all 'information about learning opportunities is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy'	Systematise checking process for all public information Proofreading Provide clear expectations regarding information to ensure it is fit for purpose Revise and circulate Communications Policy	June 2014	Director of Studies	Director	Systematic evaluation of all public information now evidenced Error-free virtual learning environment New Communications Policy defines expectations of information
Desirable	**Intended outcomes**	**Actions to be taken to achieve intended outcomes**	**Target date/s**	**Action by**	**Reported to**	**Evaluation (process or evidence)**
The team considers that it is **desirable** for the provider to:						
• continue to develop its virtual learning environment to promote consistency across the provision (paragraph 3.3).	Develop a set of minimum expectations (consistency) for staff/managers on virtual learning environment content Continue to develop virtual learning environment as a learning resource, and as providing information related to pastoral and social support	Update staff handbook to establish consistent set of (course/module based) expectations Periodic (every two weeks) checks by Director of Studies Develop virtual learning environment as source of academic and non-academic information - staff and	June 2014	Director of Studies	Principal	Revised staff handbook Modules on virtual learning environment all meet minimum criteria Additional information shown on virtual learning environment - noted

			students				in feedback questionnaires

About QAA

QAA is the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. QAA's mission is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education.

QAA's aims are to:

- meet students' needs and be valued by them
- safeguard standards in an increasingly diverse UK and international context
- drive improvements in UK higher education
- improve public understanding of higher education standards and quality.

QAA conducts reviews of higher education institutions and publishes reports on the findings. QAA also publishes a range of guidance documents to help safeguard standards and improve quality.

More information about the work of QAA is available at: www.qaa.ac.uk.

More detail about Review for Educational Oversight can be found at: www.qaa.ac.uk/educational-oversight.

Glossary

This glossary explains terms used in this report. You can find a fuller glossary at: www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary. Formal definitions of key terms can be found in the *Review for Educational Oversight: Handbook*.[4]

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 standards**.

awarding body A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA .

awarding organisation An organisation authorised to award a particular qualification; an organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

designated body An organisation that has been formally appointed or recognised to perform a particular function. QAA has been recognised by UKBA as a designated body for the purpose of providing educational oversight.

differentiated judgements In a Review for Educational Oversight, separate judgements respectively for the provision validated by separate awarding bodies.

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.

external examiner An independent expert appointed by an institution to comment on student achievement in relation to established academic standards and to look at approaches to assessment.

framework for higher education qualifications A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The framework for qualifications of higher education institutions in Scotland*.

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.

highly trusted sponsor An organisation that the UK Government trusts to admit migrant students from overseas, according to Tier 4 of the UK Border Agency's points-based immigration system. Higher education providers wishing to obtain this status must undergo a successful review by QAA.

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[4] www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/REO-designated-providers-handbook-13.aspx

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 outcomes 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 that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

programme specifications Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of **programmes** of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

provider (s) (of higher education) Organisations that deliver higher education. In the UK they may be a degree-awarding body or another organisation that offers programmes of higher education on behalf of degree-**awarding bodies** or **awarding organisations**. In the context of Review for Specific Course Designation the term means an independent college.

public information Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

quality See **academic quality**.

Quality Code Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of reference points for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the Expectations that all providers are required to meet.

reference points Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured. Internal reference points may be used by providers for purposes of self-regulation; external ones are used and accepted throughout the higher education community for the checking of standards and quality.

subject benchmark statement A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

threshold academic standards The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks for higher education qualifications** and **subject benchmark statements**. See also **academic standards**.