



**Navitas UK Holdings Ltd
International College at Robert Gordon
University**

**Educational Oversight
- Exceptional Arrangements**

November 2020

About this report

This is a report of a review under the Educational Oversight - Exceptional Arrangements method conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at Navitas UK Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University. The review took place on 10-12 November 2020 and was conducted by a review team, as follows:

- Dr Terence Clifford-Amos
- Barbara Howell.

The main purpose of the review was to:

- make judgements about the provider's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner
- make judgements on the provider's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities
- report on any features of good practice
- make recommendations for action.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission. More information about this the review method can be found in the [Handbook for providers](#).

The impact of COVID-19

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the review of Navitas UK Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University in 2019-20 was subject to an interim outcome in April 2020 and was concluded in 2020. The review was conducted online and included meetings with senior management teams, teaching staff and students. The scope of the evidence considered, and the nature of the judgements and operational milestones have remained the same but with some adjustments due to the online format. A risk assessment was carried out prior to the review to identify and mitigate any potential risks. Annual monitoring will resume again in 2021-22.

Key findings

The QAA panel considered evidence relating to the educational provision at Navitas UK Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University ('the College'), both information supplied in advance and evidence gathered during the review visit. The review has resulted in the key findings stated in this section.

Judgements

The QAA panel formed the following judgement about Navitas UK Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University.

- **Confidence** can be placed in Navitas UK Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner.
- **Confidence** can be placed in Navitas UK Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

Good practice

The QAA panel identified the following **feature of good practice** at Navitas UK Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University.

- The innovative and creative systems developed in collaboration with students to deliver collaborative blended learning utilising a range of technologies including those with which students are more familiar.

Recommendations

The QAA panel makes the following recommendations to Navitas UK Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University.

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

- ensure that the proposed review and development of the action plan takes place and is documented
- ensure that the Compass programme operates under one title and is made known to all students at the start of their studies and prior to any individual needs' assessment.

About the International College at Robert Gordon University

The International College at Robert Gordon University (ICRGU) is a Navitas University Partnership Europe (UPE) pathway college, located in Aberdeen, Scotland. ICRGU is an affiliated college of Robert Gordon University (RGU) and embedded on the campus site with students studying University-approved programme elements.

The partnership is underpinned by a Recognition and Articulation Agreement (RAA), originally signed on 29 April 2010 and an extension agreement signed on 2 August 2018, for an additional five-year period from 2020-2025.

The number of students studying at the College in March 2020 was 86, split across 11 courses. Current staffing levels comprise the College Principle and Director, Senior Manager Marketing and Admissions, International Partnerships Officer, Student Recruitment Coordinator and nine lecturing members of staff.

Detailed findings about the International College at Robert Gordon University

1 Academic standards

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

1.1 The College is affiliated to Robert Gordon University and operates through a Recognition and Articulation Agreement, extended for a further five years to 2025. The model is that the College is embedded on the University campus and students study University-approved programme elements at the College. ICRGU is a Navitas pathway college located in Aberdeen, Scotland and Navitas has partnerships with more than 35 universities in Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Netherlands, United Arab Emirates, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

1.2 The Navitas Board of Directors has ultimate oversight of the Navitas colleges, with the University Partnerships Europe Academic Board reporting to the Board of Directors as the principal academic body of the company. The Navitas University Partnerships Europe Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee is responsible to the Academic Board and takes oversight of the operational elements of teaching, learning and assessment, quality assurance and standards, support and guidance, student performance and progression. The University Partnership Europe Learning and Teaching Forum is a subgroup of the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee to share good practice and inform on the Navitas Learning and Teaching Strategy.

1.3 The Navitas University Partnership Europe Quality Manual (2019) sets out the framework through which the academic Quality and standards of the provision of Navitas University Partnership Europe Colleges are assured. The manual takes into account relevant chapters of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) and provides a source of reference on policies, regulations and associated documents for all stakeholders including staff, students, university partners and external reviewers.

1.4 The University also has in place a robust committee structure for the oversight of the College, comprising the Joint Strategic Partnership Management Board (JSPMB), Academic Advisory Committee (AAC), Marketing Advisory Committee and the Operations Advisory Committee. The JSPMB, which meets three times a year, operates in accordance with the formal Recognition and Articulation Agreement between the parties.

1.5 The AAC, which also meets three times a year, reports to the JSPMB, overseas academic matters and supports the quality assurance and enhancement of the programmes on behalf of the JSPMB. Each meeting of the AAC receives an Academic Report from the College that details qualitative and quantitative quality information derived from standard reporting processes within the College.

1.6 The College governance structure comprises the College Senior Management Team, the College Learning and Teaching Board, Student Forum and College Enhancement Team.

1.7 The College Senior Management Team has oversight of all operational aspects of the College; the College Learning and Teaching Board is responsible for the maintenance of academic quality and standards. The team noted that the forums and boards have been meeting virtually via Microsoft Teams during the pandemic with recent meetings held for the College Learning and Teaching Boards and Student Forum.

1.8 The team found differences in the terms of reference of the Quality Manual Navitas UPE 19 and the Navitas Policies and Regulations (NPRs) NPR Q24 Learning and Teaching document with regard to the objectives of the Teaching Board and also the Student Forum. The team heard that the College Learning and Teaching Board has a broad remit and the scope is outlined in the terms of reference in the Quality Manual. However, the team learned that the Quality Manual is currently being reviewed and differences between the College agendas and the manual are expected to be reconciled on 27 November 2020.

1.9 The team confirmed that the College Learning and Teaching Board fully discharges its duty to take oversight of operational elements of the academic experience including learning, teaching and assessment, the student voice and academic feedback, standards and enhancement, student academic matters, and teaching staff management and development. The College Learning and Teaching Board also considers the College Action Plan as a standing item. However, the team noted that the plan needed updating and several of the most recent minutes indicated that it would be reviewed at subsequent meetings with no action being taken. The review team therefore considers it **advisable** for the College to ensure that the proposed review and development of the action plan takes place and is documented.

1.10 The College Admissions Policy outlines the requirement to undertake transparent and equitable admissions. The requirements of ICRGU to undertake transparent and equitable admission of potential/new students is reviewed annually and approved by the Navitas UPE Academic Board. The policy also includes a summary of the Code of Ethics that all Navitas agents, Navitas UK representatives and College staff must agree with and abide by when considering applicants for entry into the UK according to UKCISA's guidelines. A stable admissions staff resource, overseen by an experienced Senior Manager of Marketing and Admissions (SMMA), follow the College policy and work closely with the University admissions team to manage College admissions.

1.11 The retention and progression rates are high and show improvement on the previous reporting periods as reported in the UPE Learning and Teaching Annual Report.

1.12 Based on the self-evaluation document, additional documentation, responses to both submitted, and questions asked during a virtual team meeting, the review team was satisfied that, overall, the College fulfils its responsibilities for the management of academic standards. The review team did, however, note a delay in the review of the College action plan and consider it **advisable** for the provider to ensure that the proposed review and development of the action plan takes place and is documented.

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

1.13 The Navitas Policies and Regulations (NPRs) are reviewed on a regular basis by the Academic Registry to ensure they remain in line with external reference points such as the QAA Quality Code, Office for Students' regulatory guidelines, OIAHE guidelines and Home Office regulations.

1.14 The Navitas University Partnership Europe Quality Manual (2019) sets out the framework through which the academic quality and standards of the provision of Navitas University Partnership Europe Colleges are assured. The Manual takes into account relevant sections of the Quality Code and provides a source of reference on policies, regulations and associated documents for all stakeholders including staff, students, university partners and external reviewers.

1.15 The course approval process is a key element in the management of academic standards. The College has a relatively small number of pathway courses, and the team

observed that the introduction of a new pathway in Nursing was carefully considered by external scrutiny as set out in the Quality Manual.

1.16 The team was therefore satisfied that the College makes effective use of external reference points in the management of academic standards.

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

1.17 The Navitas UPE Academic Board considered the use of external expertise across the colleges and a decision was made to strengthen external input with the appointment of external examiners to the UPE academic registry for external benchmarking purposes. The College received the first external examiner report in February 2020 for Mathematics 1. The report noted that good feedback was provided on each exam and that students were advised on how to improve. The level of the examination was considered to be appropriate, and scripts were marked fairly and appropriately. A similar external examiner appointment has now been made for English courses. Both roles are expected to review samples of moderated work, ensure there is fairness and equity in the marking process, and confirm that academic standards are consistent with higher education that is delivered at a similar level in similar UK institutions. The roles will initially focus as a moderator of level 3 standards across the Navitas UPE pathway college network and will report to Academic Board in June 2021.

1.18 Robert Gordon University also provides oversight of the academic standards through the moderation process. Assignment briefs and exam papers are moderated and verified by the relevant Robert Gordon University schools.

1.19 The team looked at the processes and procedures in place for the moderation, verification or examining to ensure academic standards are met.

The review team concludes that **confidence** can be placed in Navitas Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University's management of its responsibilities for academic standards, as set out in its contractual arrangements with its academic partner.

2 Quality of learning opportunities

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

2.1 The College internal bodies that have a direct bearing on learning and teaching are the Learning Teaching and Quality Committee, the Learning and Teaching Forum, the College Learning and Teaching Board and the College Enhancement Team. The Learning Teaching and Quality Committee is a review body responsible for the oversight of all operational elements of the academic experience. The Learning and Teaching Forum provides strategic and operational management of the quality and standards of the learning and teaching portfolio across the Navitas UPE colleges. The College Learning and Teaching Board considers the educational provision outside of normal business-focused meetings and includes in its membership the Senior Management Team. The College Enhancement Team includes staff and students and focuses on enhancing the educational experience.

2.2 Student satisfaction with teaching and learning is high. The provider is sensitive to the needs of individual learners and has developed a partnership-in-practice culture, in which students are able to share in pedagogical processes. Educational supplements, diagnostic tests and drop-in sessions for Mathematics and English have been introduced and appear to be helpful in improving overall results. The Student Forum is a body of elected students and provides a platform for discussing student survey results and areas of concern or good practice concerning teaching and learning. The College Enhancement Team has been designed to create a culture that facilitates empowerment, engagement and independent learning, and is part of the Navitas improvement agenda. The review team confirmed that both the College Enhancement Team and Student Forum report to the College Learning and Teaching Board as intended.

2.3 In June 2020, arrangements were being made for the up-skilling of staff in online technology and strategies to maintain regular contact with students for the encouragement of positive thinking and motivation. Plans were made for improvements in online learning. The year's progress has proved to be dynamic in concentrating on innovation and progressive practice for maintaining both standards and learning opportunities. A paradox of the pandemic, within its many restrictions, is that it has induced vigorous staff responses to learning and teaching. Staff have considered how to change delivery and adapt to using technology better, and use it more to enhance delivery and their own research. Staff have connected with other centres; they have held online seminars, shared good practice and worked closely together. The College considers that the new ways of delivery have been a huge success. Academic staff have developed a better balance between face-to-face, online and creative blended learning which, according to lecturers, otherwise would not have happened. Some problems have been particularly difficult to solve, notably in not being able to undertake proper laboratory work. However, despite these development some students expressed a preference for face-to-face teaching and learning.

2.4 As part of a number of projects, ICRGU has assembled a paper on 'learning-gains' which debates and suggests some prospective plans measuring actual achievement in student learning. The review team considers that the paper demonstrates strong academic analysis and possible forward planning in learning-gain measurement and enhancement. The Learning and Teaching Strategy, 2018-2023, continues with the transformation of students' lives, through the power of digital transformation, learning analytics, innovative approaches to the design of learning spaces, and the development of a culture of reflection. In the previous academic session (2019-20), the Learning and Teaching Forum brought forward several new initiatives, which included the further development of a 'Prevent' policy across colleges, new approaches to assessment in HE, and updating moderation processes.

2.5 ICRGU is continuously receptive in gathering and considering information, and applying staff development in managing and enhancing the quality of its learning opportunities.

How effectively are external reference points used in the management and enhancement of learning opportunities?

2.6 ICRGU's policies and regulations are reviewed regularly to take account of the QAA Quality Code, Office for Students' regulatory guidelines, OIAHE guidelines and Home Office regulations. A detailed response has been made towards mapping the revised Quality Code. ICRGU also considers reference points from UCAS, as well as AdvanceHE annual refresher programmes. The professional body regulatory guidelines, RIBA and NMC, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework level 6, and guidelines issued by the University are essential authorities in external academic advice and direction. The first external examiner report for Mathematics (Level 3 Foundation) was received in February 2020. Comments were very favourable on the handling of, and care taken with, learning outcomes in particular. The Common European Framework of Reference for language is also used as a guideline in the language assessments of ICRGU. External consultants engaged in the validation process make an important contribution to maintaining standards, subject benchmarking and bringing contemporary thinking and developments. Navitas Europe-University Partnerships provide a valuable international dimension to academic practice.

2.7 Evidence clearly points to external referencing as a strong means of achieving comparative understanding in the maintenance of the Quality Code and a range of external standards and benchmarking.

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

2.8 There is a Learning and Teaching Strategy, which is supported by the UPE Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. Interactive learning and reflection are dynamic processes supported by student monitoring, surveys and feedback. A comprehensive International Student Barometer Survey provides feedback, and actions are included in the College Action Plan. Students met by the review team regarded the learning process as being 'straightforward' and referred to discussions, practical work and helpful information on assessment. It was reported that tutors take time to meet with students and can be contacted outside College sessions. Students whose first language is not English can sometimes struggle and feedback helps to address such problems. This has led to production of videos to help science students in equipment use, methods and protocols. Students feel confident with lecturers and are given good responses. Lecturers are highly valued for their knowledge of individual students. Concerning reflection on teaching, 22 staff members have been awarded the AdvanceHE Fellowship and 42 staff members were intending to submit their application in March 2020. This programme is strongly grounded in reflective practice. Through submission of evidence, and critical reflection of teaching practice and educational leadership, the Fellowship may be awarded. As the majority of ICRGU teaching staff (post-COVID-19) will be seeking this qualification, extensive and intensive reflective practice processes will lead to significant developments in learning and teaching College-wide. Good practice dissemination is likely to feature prominently. Various strategies, enhancements and on-going developments in teaching and learning assure the proactive future of ICRGU.

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

2.9 The College Principal formally meets all line-managed staff on a one-to-one basis, three times per year as part of the performance review process. Staff development is a funded and ongoing process - the Navitas Learning and Teaching Services sponsor professional development. The budget has been increased for the financial year 2020 and is based on the formal training requirements informed by one-to-one staff appraisals. The increase in the budget from FY19 to FY20 was based on a range of external staff development initiatives and formal training required for mental health first-aid training, counselling courses and Advance HE courses. Peer Observation of Teaching (POT) is a well-structured and valuable staff experience in College-wide staff development. Academic staff claim that peer observation helps to enhance teaching, explore ideas, share practice and develop pedagogy. Best practices gleaned from peer observation are shared. As a core academic process, the internal validation procedure conducted with the University is a rigorous external exercise which provides significant potential in staff development, as the validation process of May 2018 (Pre-Masters Engineering) confirms. The 'Your Voice Team Action Planning Tool' is a more socially-orientated means of identifying and carrying out staff development activities.

2.10 Navitas delivered the 'Exploring Creative Ways of Teaching' Seminar on 10 September 2020. It was well attended and included contributions from two ICRGU lecturing staff members. There are further plans for a Navitas UPE conference and the introduction of funded PhD opportunities to support individual endeavours in research and the pursuit of academic publications during the COVID-19 crisis. A European Dean/Executive General Manager, who began in June 2020, has been developing marketing and recruitment, has a direct link with management team, and is able to initiate new methods and invest in technology.

2.11 Since the impact of COVID-19, staff development has been far more collegial and tailored to meet new and demanding circumstances. Developments include initiating new skills in pedagogy to support changes in the environment and COVID-19 restrictions - namely more interactive teaching. New pedagogies are building effective partnerships with students and developing facilities with social media platforms that students normally use. All of these are currently enjoying a high level of success. Significant funds have also been made available for online technologies. A corollary of this is that students and staff are communicating well and considerable confidence is developing. Students are skilled in using technology, and in turn lecturers are learning from them and enhancing the collaboration. Teaching staff have enthusiastically embraced the challenges and new opportunities emerging from the current crisis. One teacher nearing the end of their career has succeeded in responding to challenging innovations hitherto unknown in her professional life. It has been an experience and outcome grounded in new thinking and new achievements.

2.12 In the maintenance and enhancement of learning opportunities, staff development has a mature and historic place in this forward-thinking College. Since COVID-19, collegial staff development lies at the forefront of student life. Research and publication could follow these contemporary developments.

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

2.13 Student support is delivered largely through small class sizes and more contact hours than university-equivalent courses. Student engagement and support classes assist individuals in their academic and professional goals and outcomes. Students stated that assessment is clearly linked to online learning and online submissions. They are allowed to

submit drafts prior to submission and ask questions about them. Following submission on anti-plagiarism software, drafts are returned with tutor comments in due time. Students are informed at the start of course about the range and amount of assessment. Learning outcomes are explained and students were clear in their understanding of them. Students stated that the Student Portal is very well developed, containing all the required elements such as the Virtual Learning Environment, News, Results, Finances and Email, and has all the information to support their learning needs. Student representatives are supported through the College Enhancement Team (CET) who ensure that they are provided with the training to fulfil their roles in educational enhancement and quality assurance. The student experience is at the heart of College operations and activities. Navitas UPE and its network support in learning and teaching is pivotal in this large and interconnected forum. Creating a community and sense of belonging are fundamental to the 'Student Engagement project'.

2.14 The Compass programme supports students who have attendance problems, academic performance issues or who those are classified as minors, that is, under the age of 18. Welfare matters are also covered by this programme. A student can be invited to the programme in more than one of the designated categories. The programme, formally known as 'Students in Jeopardy', is purposed to ensure the academic and pastoral wellbeing of all students. Students met by the team had not made use of the programme and, as such, were unfamiliar with it. Although retention rates are generally high, further improvement is an obvious and significant aspect of student support. Progression, retention and academic success are key performance indicators set annually by the Academic Registry. The objective is to limit attainment disparities as far as possible and improve academic performance. Internal responsiveness to student requests is acute and comprehensive, as the 'You Said/We Did' actions for 2019 attest. Student support is assured by ICRGU and its staff.

2.15 It is **advisable** that the Compass programme is made known to all students at the start of their studies and prior to any individual needs' assessment. Despite a preference for its previous nomenclature as expressed by one staff member, the Compass programme should operate under only one title.

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

2.16 Small group teaching, and the College's location in the heart of the RGU campus, provide students with a 'campus' experience and access to a full range of support resources. The Compass programme also assists students in the achievement of learning outcomes. Students are able to use RGU library resources. Client exercises are simulated in computing classes and there are sessions on resilience and time management. Critical thinking has been added to the pre-master's management course, and Physics 1 and 2 now have statics and dynamics and thermo-fluids as practical engagements. Other accessible resources and improvements include IT suite upgrades and students' access to Refworks, the web-based bibliography and reference manager. Education and training are provided in the enhancement of laboratory skills, and supported by the virtual learning environment that the college now operates. Through an in-house trainer, ICRGU holds training sessions for staff to enhance their skills in use of the virtual learning environment. Prior to COVID-19, training was scheduled for completion by end of April 2020. The Moodle VLE facility was upgraded with the latest software in October 2019.

2.17 External examiners for Nursing and Mathematics comment positively on the use and range of learning outcomes, designed to include a wide variety of learning and teaching methods.

2.18 It is clear that learning resources are manifold and highly accessible in the pursuit and achievement of learning outcomes. The most valuable accessible resource at this time is the lecturer, who provides online pedagogy, feedback and problem-solving to all individual students. The innovative and creative systems developed with students to deliver collaborative blended learning, utilising a range of technologies including those with which students are more familiar, are a feature of **good practice**.

The review team concludes that **confidence** can be placed in Navitas Holdings Ltd International College at Robert Gordon University's management and enhancement of the quality of learning opportunities.

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