

BRITISH ACCREDITATION COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT

INTERIM INSPECTION (College)

INSTITUTION: Washington International Studies Council

ADDRESS:
3rd Floor
Chester House
21-27 George Street
Oxford
OX1 2AY

HEAD OF INSTITUTION: Mr Tim Moore

ACCREDITATION STATUS: Accredited

DATE OF INSPECTION: 2 December 2019

ACCREDITATION COMMITTEE DECISION AND DATE: Continued accreditation 20 February 2020

1. Background to the institution

Washington International Studies Council (WISC/the Institution) was founded in 1983 and has, since 1985, arranged study abroad programmes in Oxford for undergraduates from universities in the United States of America (USA). The institution was founded by Robert Schuettinger who died in September 2018, after the last inspection in July 2017. The Institution remains in the sole ownership of the founder's estate and the Academic Director now serves as President of WISC. A second director, also based in the Oxford office, serves as Vice President. These are supported by the administrative staff of WISC. The Advisory Board is currently being reconstituted with the addition of an Academic Board which reviews student feedback and has oversight of academic affairs.

The Institution aims to provide its students with opportunities to study abroad with some of the best scholars and alongside some of the best students in the world, and to be as integrated as possible into the Oxford University college with which they are affiliated during their short-term study abroad course.

The large majority of WISC students are admitted to WISC's academic programme where they are taught by tutors who also teach for the University of Oxford or its colleges. These students become associate members of a college of the University, usually New, Trinity, Christ Church or Magdalen. A minority of WISC students are admitted to Magdalen or New College as visiting students. For these students, the academic programme and ultimately the verification of their studies, will be the responsibility of the Oxford college.

The WISC headquarters are on the third floor of an office building in central Oxford. A small satellite office of WISC in the USA receives and dispatches key documents, and undertakes a limited administrative role

2. Brief description of the current provision

Since its foundation, WISC has offered one-to-one tutorial programmes to students who have previously studied at over 650 universities or institutions, primarily in the USA. A majority of students currently come from 25 USA institutions, with each of which WISC maintains Consortium Agreements.

The academic programme of students attending as associate members of Oxford university colleges is arranged and overseen by WISC, which accepts students itself, and engages tutors directly. Associate members usually follow one primary course, with eight tutorials in the extended term, and one secondary course, with four tutorials. Students can study any subject which has the approval of the home university.

For visiting students, academic responsibility rests with the hosting Oxford college, which arranges all teaching. Acceptance as a visiting student is by the college concerned, with WISC collating and forwarding documentation. Visiting students are registered with the University of Oxford, are entitled to attend all university lectures and to use library and other facilities on the same basis as regular undergraduates. Visiting students usually study two primary courses, with a total of 16 tutorials, eight in each course, during the extended term. Like associate members, visiting students can study any subject which has the approval of the home university.

The students attend for periods of up to a year. Most stay for one or two extended terms of 12 to 13 weeks. Each term begins with an orientation period and incorporates the university full term of eight weeks, followed by a period for additional study and completion of tutorials.

Teaching is by one-to-one tutorials, almost exclusively with tutors who also teach at Oxford University. Teaching is arranged to individual student's requirements and interests and to enable them to obtain credit for equivalent courses at their home university.

During the academic year all students are offered a programme of social receptions, excursions to places of cultural and historic interest and educational tours.

WISC has run a total of 403 individual tutorial courses in the past year with a total of approximately 212 students. At the time of the inspection, there were 48 students enrolled. The majority were female. Students were from the USA, Canada, Japan, Germany, Ghana, China, Switzerland and Pakistan. All students are over the age of 18.

3. Inspection process

The inspection took place over one day with one inspector. The inspector had a tour of the premises and met with the management team, a selection of students and one tutor. One tutorial was observed. A range of documents were scrutinised. The institution cooperated fully with the inspection and all relevant information was made available on request.

4. Inspection History

Inspection Type	Date
Full accreditation	14-15 July 2009
Interim	29 October 2010
Re-accreditation	8-9 July 2013
Interim	23 September 2015
Re-accreditation	17-18 July 2017

PART B – JUDGMENTS AND EVIDENCE

The following judgments and comments are based upon evidence seen by the inspector during the inspection and from documentation provided by the institution.

1. Significant changes since the last inspection

The founder passed away since the last inspection, but the Institution remains in the sole ownership of the founder's estate. The Academic Director now serves as President. There has been little change in the everyday running of the Institution. The Institution has very low turnover of staff. The management staff are of very long standing and there has been only minor administrative staff change.

2. Response to actions points in last report

3.3 The Institution must work with staff to develop and implement a system of performance review that is suitable for operation within a small team.

WISC had developed a very detailed system of performance review. However, the implementation of the new system was problematic as the criteria used were not closely aligned to job descriptions. The Institution is now developing a more straightforward review based directly on assessing performance against job descriptions. This will provide a system that can be used effectively to review the performance of the Institution's staff.

4.2 5.1 The Institution must review its website to remove any inconsistencies in information, in particular in relation to admission requirements.

Admission requirements are now consistent throughout the website. Previously the website quoted different levels of required Grade Point Average for Associate Students in several places. This has now been rectified.

11.3 11.4 WISC must put processes in place to ensure that students are aware of appropriate routes to express any concerns that may arise about the tutorial teaching that is in place for them with the senior academic advisor.

Students are advised how to express concerns during the induction process and are introduced to the senior academic advisor. Each student also has a one-to-one meeting with the advisor during which any concerns can be raised. Students formally provide feedback to WISC about their academic programme including the tutorial teaching at mid-term. In addition, there are quick informal routes for students to raise concerns.

25.5 WISC must arrange for appropriate signage at the main entrance to its George Street premises, both outside and to direct students and visitors once inside the building.

Appropriate signage is now in place at the main entrance and inside the building.

3. Response to recommended areas for improvement in last report

The Institution is recommended to consider introducing a more formal approach to cataloguing and organising the materials in the library at WISC.

Good progress has been made against this recommendation. The materials are now catalogued and organised into general sections. Students confirm this is effective.

WISC should let students know which of the tutorial options they have put on their short list are going to be provided, as soon as these have been confirmed. This will enable students to organise any pre-reading they wish to undertake before arriving in Oxford.

WISC routinely and speedily informs students of their tutorial options as soon they are confirmed. In addition, students are given the contact details, including e-mail, of their tutors so they can make initial contact prior to

arrival. Students confirm they have all the information they need to organise any pre-reading they may wish to undertake.

More attention should be paid to maintaining standards of decoration in the residential accommodation.

The Housing Manager has regular liaison with the landlords. He has also set up a maintenance e-mail hotline through which the students can complain or communicate any maintenance issues. The Housing Manager also regularly seeks formal feedback. Students confirm that the standards of decoration in the residential accommodation are appropriate.

4. Compliance with BAC accreditation requirements

4.1 Management, Staffing and Administration (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

WISC is well managed. Members of the management team are experienced and well qualified for their duties. The team is well established and has a clear overview of all aspects of the institution which ensures its smooth running.

Policies and procedures are comprehensive, detailed and properly disseminated with the result that the Institution is effectively administered.

3.3 The implementation of a new performance review system proved problematic and the Institution is in the process of developing a more suitable system which it will then implement.

The attendance of students is very closely monitored resulting in very high rates of attendance.

The Institution takes great care to recruit and enrol suitable students onto the programme. Applications go through a very rigorous process both at WISC and at the home university to ensure the course is acceptable to both in terms of content. As a result, courses are closely aligned to students' needs.

The Institution regularly obtains detailed and comprehensive feedback from students to monitor and maintain standards. However, this feedback is not currently used systematically to inform action planning and to set targets.

4.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

The academic managers have a very firm understanding of the US university system as well as how Oxford University works. This enables them to provide proper guidance and clear academic support.

The teaching is excellent. WISC students take part in Oxford tutorials. These are one-to-one, student focused and encourage independent learning. They include very individual, timely feedback to develop the student's understanding well.

The tutors are current Oxford University tutors. They are very highly qualified and have a very high level of subject knowledge. Tutors are only used within their specialisms. As a result, success rates are outstanding.

All the programmes link directly to the students' home university credit requirements and so satisfy the students' academic needs.

4.3 Student Welfare (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

Students receive appropriate advice prior to and on arrival. They undertake a lengthy induction which includes both familiarisation with WISC and its policies and practices and familiarisation with the local area. However, students expressed a need for more information to be provided at induction regarding the everyday practices of their chosen colleges such as how to use the library and how to access the information technology to enable them to settle more quickly into their studies and feel part of the college from the outset.

Students are appropriately accommodated in Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs), properly licensed by the local authority. The Housing Manager regularly checks the accommodation and actively seeks out and responds to feedback. Students confirm that the accommodation is in a good state of repair and decoration.

WISC lacks a policy to address the threat of radicalism or extremism so students are potentially at risk. No risk assessments have been made. No training has been undertaken.

4.4 Premises and Facilities (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

The Institution has secure possession of and access to its premises. The premises are very conveniently located in the centre of the city.

Entrance is secure via a push-button entry system. There is lift access to the Institution suitable for wheelchair users. Signage is clear.

The rooms are large, and well decorated. Tutorial rooms are of a good size. They are well furnished and adequate in number. The lecture theatre, used for induction, is spacious and welcoming. Administrative staff have suitable offices.

The library is often used as informal work or leisure space.

As a result, the premises are safe, secure and conducive to learning.

4.5 Compliance Declaration

Declaration of compliance has been signed and dated.

Yes No

PART C – SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND ACTION POINTS

STRENGTHS

WISC has a very sharp focus on the needs of its individual students and programmes are highly responsive to these needs.

WISC has strong and enduring links to academic staff and institutions within Oxford and can, therefore, offer a very wide range of high-level courses.

The teaching at WISC is excellent. It is highly student focused and is appropriately challenging. As a consequence, success rates are excellent.

WISC has a good understanding of both the USA Higher Education system and how Oxford University works so it can guide and advise prospective students well.

ACTIONS REQUIRED

3.3 WISC must develop and implement a suitable staff performance review that enables the effective assessment of performance against job descriptions.

High Medium Low

WISC must put in place effective arrangements relating to preventing radicalisation and extremism to minimise any potential risk to students.

High Medium Low

RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT *(to be reviewed at the next inspection)*

It is recommended that WISC develops its action planning so that specific, timed and measurable improvement targets that are informed by student feedback are set.

WISC should consider reviewing the induction to ensure that students are fully able to access all the institution's facilities and to feel part of those institutions from the start of their studies.

COMPLIANCE WITH STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS - FURTHER COMMENTS, IF APPLICABLE