



BRITISH ACCREDITATION COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT

INTERIM AND SUPPLEMENTARY INSPECTION CHANGE OF MANAGEMENT (Online, Distance & Blended Learning)

PROVIDER: Further Learning Group

ADDRESS: 54 Merrion Square South
Dublin 2
D02 CX30
Republic of Ireland

HEAD OF PROVIDER: Mr David Willett

ACCREDITATION STATUS: Accredited

DATE OF INSPECTION: 16 November 2020

ACCREDITATION COMMITTEE DECISION AND DATE: Continued accreditation, February 2021

PART A – INTRODUCTION

1. Background to the provider

The Further Learning Group (the Provider) is a privately owned educational organisation. It offers a range of courses, either online or through blended learning, in areas such as Digital Marketing, Photography and Interior Design. It was established in 2004 by its current Executive Chairman (EC). Since its establishment, the Provider has grown to encompass a number of international academies offering a variety of courses to learners around the world.

The Provider's Head Office is located in Dublin, in the Republic of Ireland, with additional administrative offices in London, Portugal and Australia. The face-to-face elements of the courses are delivered at various university premises, such as those of the University of Westminster and University College Dublin.

The EC, who is also the proprietor, is based in Dublin, and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is based in London. Other senior leadership team members include the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) and Chief Operations Officer (COO), who are based in Dublin, and the Head of Finance (HOF), who is based in Portugal. Oversight of all aspects of the Provider's business is undertaken by the senior leadership team.

The Provider aims to provide high-quality online and blended learning courses that enable learners to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to develop or change their careers.

In recent years, the Further Learning Group has focused on the development of its own proprietary online learning system to manage and deliver online and blended learning courses to learners around the world.

2. Brief description of the current provision

The Provider offers part-time courses in Interior Design, Fashion Design, Photography, Garden Design and Digital Marketing in four countries, namely the United Kingdom (UK), Ireland, Australia and the United States of America (USA). Each subject area is marketed in each individual country under its own name, for example the British Academy of Interior Design, the Fashion Design Academy of Ireland, the Australian Academy of Photography, and the American Academy of Digital Marketing. The curriculum is the same for each academy, and the same online tutors and administrative team support learners regardless of location.

The courses offered include a Level 2 certificate, Level 3 diploma and Level 4 postgraduate diploma in Interior Design, Fashion Design, Photography, Garden Design and Digital Marketing, awarded by the International Approval and Registration Centre (IARC). A Level 4 Higher National Certificate (HNC) and Level 5 Higher National Diploma (HND) in Interior Design, Fashion Design and Photography are offered and awarded by Pearson. A Bachelor of Arts (BA) (Hons) degree in Interior Design and Photography that is awarded by the University of Chester is also available. The Provider also offers a Level 2 certificate, Level 3 diploma and Level 4 postgraduate diploma in Digital Marketing accredited by IARC and the Continuing Professional Development Standards Office (CPD Standards Office).

Learners who study online only can enrol at any time of the year, while those who opt to study through blended learning join one of three intakes in February, May or September. The blended learning courses include a series of evening or weekend classes at each teaching venue. Learners on diploma programmes attend ten Saturday classes or 20 weekday evening classes, while those on postgraduate diploma and HNC courses attend 15 Saturday classes or 30 weekday evening classes. HND learners attend 30 Saturday classes or 60 evening classes over a period of two years. Learners studying on the degree programme can study either online or attend classes at teaching venues in London, Manchester, Birmingham and Edinburgh. The degree can be completed in two and a half to four years. However, learners have up to six years to complete the course.

At the time of the inspection, a total of 9,374 learners were enrolled on courses across all locations in all countries. Of these, 638 were registered on blended learning courses and 8,736 were studying online only. All learners are over the age of 18 and the majority are female. The majority of learners are from the UK, with

others coming from a number of other European countries. However, no staff or learners were present at any of the Provider’s premises during the inspection.

3. Inspection process

The inspection was carried out over one day by one inspector making use of remote online communication methods. The inspector carried out discussions with the CEO, CAO and COO. In addition, there were further discussions with academic, administration and support managers and staff. A wide range of electronic documentation, including course materials and the Provider’s online learning platform, were scrutinised. The Provider was very well prepared for the inspection and gave full cooperation to the inspector.

4. Background to the supplementary inspection

Since the previous inspection, there have been significant changes to the senior management team. A new CEO has been appointed and the previous CEO has moved to the role of EC.

5. Inspection history

Inspection type	Date
Full Accreditation	26 October & 5-7 November 2019

PART B – JUDGEMENTS AND EVIDENCE

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

1. Significant changes since the last inspection

Since the previous inspection, a new CEO has been appointed and the previous CEO has moved to the role of EC.

The Provider's centre in Porto, Portugal has been substantially developed, with the intention of moving all tutor support and marking to the centre over the next few years.

The Provider is now offering a BA (Hons) degree in Interior Design and Photography, which can be studied either online or as a classroom-based course. Both these degrees are awarded by the University of Chester.

The Provider is also seeking to offer a qualification in Horticulture, which will lead to study for the award of Bachelor of Science (BSc) (Hons) degree in Horticulture.

2. Response to action points in last report

22.3 The Provider must follow up learner absences from blended learning classes more promptly to ensure learners complete assignment programmes on time.

The majority of learners have now moved to online delivery. However, new procedures to monitor learner absences from blended learning classes have been introduced. As a result, Student Services staff now contact learners who repeatedly fail to attend their scheduled classes in a timely manner.

3. Response to recommended areas for improvement in last report

The Provider should consider introducing a more formal process for tutors to reflect and report on what works well, or what could be improved, in teaching and learning practice.

The vast majority of tutors work from home. However, regular scheduled online meetings allow tutors to discuss, share and reflect effectively on what works well, or what could be improved, in teaching and learning practice.

The Provider must provide more rapid support to those learners who are making slow progress through their programme of assignments.

A comprehensive Student Management System is in place and is used effectively by managers and tutors to identify, in a timely manner, any learners who are making slow progress in their module or programme of assignments. Contact is then made with the learner and, where appropriate, additional support is provided or a revised programme of study is agreed.

4. Compliance with BAC accreditation requirements

4.1 Management, Staffing and Administration (supplementary inspection)

The numbers below refer to the standards as presented in the ODBL scheme document and main full inspection report.

1. The provider is effectively managed

- | | | | |
|-----|---|---|-----------------------------|
| 1.1 | The management structure is clearly defined, documented and understood, including the role and extent of authority of any owners, trustees or governing body. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 1.2 | Senior managers are suitably qualified and experienced, understand their specific responsibilities and are effective in carrying them out. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 1.3 | Senior managers have an understanding of the special requirements of online, distance and blended learning. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 1.4 | There are clear channels of communication between the management and staff, especially those working remotely. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |

This standard is judged to be: Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

The Provider is well managed and has a clear management structure, with well-defined and documented roles and responsibilities. The structure is appropriate for the size of the Provider and is fully understood by staff. As a result, the group is very well run and a high level of quality of education and learner welfare is provided.

Senior managers are well qualified and highly experienced and provide clear educational direction. They fully understand their responsibilities and are highly effective in carrying out all aspects of their role. They have an in-depth knowledge and understanding of the requirements of online, distance and blended learning and use this effectively to ensure that courses and their delivery meet learners' needs and that the learner experience is of a high quality.

There is good communication between managers and the Provider's staff, which includes a wide range of effective electronic methods so that those working remotely have easy access to managers and other relevant staff. Weekly online meetings ensure that staff are made aware of any operational changes and can ask any questions or raise any concerns.

2. The administration of online, distance and blended learning is effective

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|-----|---|---|---|
| 2.1 | Administrators are suitably qualified or experienced and understand their specific responsibilities and duties. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2.2 | The size of the administrative team is sufficient to ensure the effective day-to-day running of the provision. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2.3 | Offices are adequate in size and resources for the effective administration of the provider. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2.4 | The administrative support available to the management and learners is clearly defined, documented and understood. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2.5 | Policies, procedures and systems are well documented and effectively disseminated. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2.6 | Data collection and collation systems are effective, including the logging of tutor and learner submissions. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2.7 | Learner and tutor records are sufficient, accurately maintained and up to date. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2.8 | The provider has a robust security system and policies in place for protecting the data of its learners and tutors. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| 2.9 | Satisfactory procedures are in place for the administration of examinations and other means of assessment. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> NA |

This standard is judged to be: Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

Administrative support is effective. Administrators are well qualified and suitably experienced. They have detailed job descriptions that help them to understand their roles and responsibilities.

An appropriate number of administrators are in place to meet the needs of the Provider. As a result, a wide range of well-defined and documented support is available to managers and learners.

The administration offices are adequate to meet the current needs of the Provider and to support the day-to-day running of the organisation effectively.

A comprehensive range of administrative policies and procedures are in place. They are implemented, updated and shared effectively with staff and learners.

Systems for the collection of data and its collation are very good and support the administration of the provision. Systems for the logging and monitoring of tutor and learner submissions are highly secure.

Personal records for learners and tutors are very detailed, well maintained and up to date. Appropriate policies and security systems ensure that learner and tutor information and data are well protected.

Comprehensive procedures are in place for carrying out all required learner assessment.

3. **The provider employs appropriate managerial and administrative staff**

3.1 There are appropriate policies and effective procedures for the recruitment and continuing employment of suitably qualified and experienced administrative staff. Yes No

3.2 Experience and qualifications claimed are verified before employment. Yes No

3.3 There is an effective system for regularly reviewing the performance of staff. Yes No

This standard is judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

Policies and procedures for the recruitment and continued employment of managerial and administrative staff are good and effectively ensure that all staff are suitably qualified and experienced for their roles.

Experience and qualifications claimed are appropriately verified before employment.

All staff have a formal annual performance review with a member of the senior management team. The review process results in a personal development plan, with suitable opportunities for additional professional training identified.

4. **Publicity material gives a comprehensive, up-to-date and accurate description of the online, distance and blended learning offered**

4.1 The website and other publicity material give an accurate description of the online, distance and blended learning courses offered. Yes No

4.2 All advertising materials and images provide an accurate description of any training offered. Yes No

This standard is judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

The website and other publicity material are clear and provide accurate information about the courses offered by the Provider, including how courses will be delivered and all the costs that the learners should

expect to pay. As a result, prospective learners are able to access accurate and relevant information to inform their study choices effectively.

Text and images used in publicity material are accurate and provide a fair reflection of the range of courses currently on offer, as well as other relevant information about the Provider.

4.2 Teaching, Learning and Achievement (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

Programme management and course development are effective. The CAO is very experienced in managing, delivering and developing online, distance and blended learning courses. In addition, a small team of highly experienced academic managers, course leaders and developers supports the CAO to ensure the effective oversight of the delivery and development of the curriculum. As a result, the content and delivery of courses are regularly reviewed to ensure that all course materials are up to date and meet the needs of the learners well.

Tutors are sufficient in number for each course offered to ensure that they provide individualised instruction to each learner. They are well qualified, have relevant industrial experience in their subject area and are experienced in the delivery of online courses. As a result, the allocation of tutors to courses ensures a consistent learning experience for learners and ensures that they have the best possible chance of successfully completing their programme of study. Managers use course data and regular observations of lessons to ensure consistent delivery across the range of courses.

A comprehensive tutor recruitment process is in place and is used very effectively to recruit appropriate tutors to work with learners. The recruitment process includes a face-to-face interview, using a suitable online communication platform where necessary, as well as all required document checks.

Well-developed assessment strategies are in place and clearly linked to the achievement of defined learning outcomes. Assessment is well supported and guided by clearly published marking policies and grading schemes and fully reflects the assessment objectives and planned learning outcomes identified by the awarding bodies. Learners are given clear guidelines on timescales for submitting assignments and submissions are monitored on the Provider's online platform.

Assignments are well designed and provide clear instructions and guidance to ensure that learners fully understand what is required of them. Tutor feedback provided to learners on their assessments is highly developed and includes comprehensive feedback on what has been done well and which areas could have been developed more. Assessment grades are effectively monitored and moderated to ensure that they are accurate, fair and consistent. Learners are encouraged and enabled through the online course materials and assessment to develop their independent learning skills.

Learners are made aware of the level of digital literacy required to follow their chosen programme of study.

4.3 Learner Support (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

The provision of learner support meets the needs of the learners. The Provider's website includes a comprehensive overview of the courses on offer together with any prior language requirements and full details of how each course will be delivered.

All required enrolment and application documentation is easily accessible and simple to complete and submit. Course content and terms and conditions are clearly indicated and there is a fair refund policy.

Admissions staff are readily available to provide additional information prior to enrolment or at the start of the course. In addition, tutors are available to answer specific academic queries by e-mail or online. As a result, applicants are provided with enough information to enable them to make a judgment on the course's suitability for them and the delivery methods, and are able to discuss any concerns before enrolment.

An appropriate complaints policy is in place and communicated to learners at the start of their course. Learners are advised about the British Accreditation Council (BAC) complaints procedure. However, it is not referred to on the Provider's website, which would highlight its availability more effectively. Arrangements to protect learners from the risks of radicalisation and extremism are appropriate. Staff are suitably trained and an appropriate policy and risk assessment are in place.

The Provider's online platform is highly developed and effectively supports learning by encouraging peer interaction through a variety of communication channels, including social media. The system is easy to navigate and Information Technology support staff are available to provide advice and resolve any technology issues. The use of the platform is highly effective in monitoring learners' progress and is used by tutors and support staff to quickly identify learners who are falling behind with their assignments. These learners are quickly contacted and provided with relevant support to continue with their course.

Course materials are of a high quality and specifically designed for each course and level of study. They are well presented, accurate and sufficiently comprehensive to enable learners to achieve the programme objectives. Course materials are regularly reviewed, reflect current commercial knowledge and business practice, and are standardised across all programme areas. As a result, nearly all learners achieve the programme learning objectives and successfully complete their course.

The Provider uses readily accessible and up-to-date technology to ensure optimum interaction with learners.

4.4 Management of Quality (spot check)

The standards are judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met

Comments

Systems for the monitoring and reviewing of the Provider's performance are comprehensive. Quarterly and annual reports to awarding bodies and course reviews and action plans are compiled and regularly reviewed by senior managers. Key data, including that from the Provider's Student Management System, is effectively analysed and reviewed. As a result, detailed action plans are developed, implemented and regularly reviewed by senior staff.

Systems to monitor learner' progress are excellent. The Provider's Student Management System and online learning platform effectively monitor each learner's progress and alert managers and tutors where learners fall behind the expected progress. As a result, prompt intervention is made where appropriate.

Feedback from learners and other relevant stakeholders is regularly sought and reviewed in detail by senior staff and other relevant managers. This includes administration of formal questionnaires at the end of courses as well as informal feedback provided to tutors by learners. Appropriate action is taken where necessary and monitored to completion by a nominated senior manager. Any actions that have been taken in response are communicated to learners via their tutors or through online forums.

The Provider uses continuous assessment, by means of assignments, as the only means of assessment and no examinations are held.

4.5 Premises and Facilities – face-to-face component (supplementary inspection)

This standard is judged to be:

Met Partially Met Not Met NA

Comments

All staff are currently working from home. As a result, no staff or learners were present at the Provider's premises during the inspection.

A number of venues in Dublin, the UK, Australia and the USA are used on a regular basis for blended learning classes. These are booked at least one month prior to the classes being held. At the time of the inspection, no venues were in use.

Compliance is based on the findings of the previous inspection and no contrary indications were identified during this inspection.

4.6 Compliance Declaration

Declaration of compliance has been signed and dated.

Yes No

PART C – SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND ACTION POINTS

STRENGTHS

The Provider is very well managed, with senior leaders providing effective oversight and strategic direction.

Highly effective systems are in place to monitor learners’ progress and provide additional support where necessary.

Tutors are very well qualified and have extensive professional experience and experience in the delivery of online and distance learning tuition.

Quality assurance is rigorous and ensures regular and systematic monitoring of the Provider’s operations.

ACTIONS REQUIRED

None	<input type="checkbox"/> High <input type="checkbox"/> Medium <input type="checkbox"/> Low
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RECOMMENDED AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT *(to be reviewed at the next inspection)*

It is recommended that the Provider includes the BAC’s complaint procedure in a readily accessible location for learners.

COMPLIANCE WITH STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS – FURTHER COMMENTS, IF APPLICABLE

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