BRITISH ACCREDITATION COUNCIL INSPECTION REPORT

INTERIM INSPECTION
(International Centre)

INSTITUTION:	The Independent Institute of Education (Pty) Ltd
ADDRESS:	ADvTECH House, Building 3, Block 7 Inanda Greens 54 Wierda Road West Wierda Valley Sandton 2196 South Africa
HEAD OF INSTITUTION:	Dr Felicity Coughlan
Accreditation status:	Accredited
Date of inspection:	17 and 18 March 2016

ACCREDITATION COMMITTEE DECISION ON ACCREDITATION: 14 April 2016

PART A - INTRODUCTION
1. Background to the institution

The Independent Institute of Education (The IIE) delivers further and higher education programmes as well as short courses in South Africa, offering qualifications from Higher Certificate to Masters. It was established in its current form as a single registered provider in 2005 and is registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training as a private provider of higher education and training under the Higher Education Act, 1997. The IIE is a wholly owned subsidiary of ADvTECH Ltd, which is a publicly listed company in South Africa and focuses on education and resourcing.

The IIE is one of three operating divisions of ADvTECH Ltd, and delivers its programmes through four primary brands.

These primary brands are Varsity College, Rosebank College, Vega School of Brand Leadership (Vega), and Design School South Africa (DSSA). Each of these primary brands can have multiple campuses across the country, and focuses on a market segment within the overall strategy of The IIE. Currently 21 campuses exist, although these primary brands are separately used to market programmes to potential students. All of the awards granted are those of The IIE, and all campuses are registered with the Department of Higher Education and Training as IIE campuses.

All of the qualifications are registered on the Higher Education Qualifications Sub Framework of the National Qualifications Framework of the South Africa Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The IIE has approval to award its own Degrees, Diplomas and Higher Certificates for all of its 91 higher education programmes, under authority from the Council for Higher Education, through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC).

2. Brief description of the current provision

The IIE offers a range of higher education programmes, ranging from non-accredited short course provision to higher certificates, degrees, honours degrees and masters degrees. Some of the programmes offered are generalist such as those with a business component. In such cases, the central parts of The IIE take a lead in the design of the programme and its teaching materials and assessment, with the designated brands having the ability to customise the delivery of the designed package. Hence each academic staff member customizes the designed package to reflect the individual situation of a specific class. The other programmes may be considered as more specialist in nature. In those cases, the staff in the brand in which such programmes are located take a much stronger lead and have a greater 'ownership' of the programme. The outcome is a structure in which both approaches are managed within the same set of policies and procedures, reflecting the strengths of the institution, whilst retaining sufficient flexibility to allow academic focus to be located at the main point of expertise.

The IIE has four faculties to support its academic provision: Commerce, Humanities, Social Sciences and Information and Communications Technology. Currently there are approximately 29,000 students enrolled on programmes across all the brands, with 12794 students within the Varsity College brand, 11696 within the Rosebank College brand, 1791 within the Vega brand and 409 at DSSA.

3. Inspection process

The interim inspection was undertaken over a two-day period by one inspector. That was structured as a half day visit to the centre of the organisation at Sandton, followed by three half day visits to Varsity College Midrand, Rosebank College Sunnyside and the newly combined Vega/DSSA campus at Pretoria. Each of the four primary brands received a visit, and in each case the centre and the campus team provided an update and progress report on the current position.

4. **Inspection history**

First inspection: 10 to 15 March 2014

PART B – JUDGEMENTS AND EVIDENCE
The following judgements and comments are based upon evidence seen by the inspector(s) during the inspection and from documentation provided by the institution

1.   Significant changes since the last inspection

There are several significant points to report since the first inspection. There has been significant growth in student numbers in both the Varsity College and Rosebank brands compared to the first inspection, with numbers moving from 7394 to 12794 at Varsity and from 6903 to 11696 at Rosebank.

Looking at the physical infrastructure, Rosebank has an additional building in Braamfontein with a capacity of 8500 students, and a new digitally enabled campus at Polokwane. Vega and DSSA in Pretoria have now moved to a new building offering a shared campus environment.

On the academic front, The IIE has now graduated one student from the master's degree, with additional provision in this area planned. Also distance learning provision has now commenced, along with a significant increase in the number of programmes offered. The structure of the academic provision is now centred around 4 rather than 3 faculties. Also, the Blackboard VLearn system is now being rolled out with approximately 100 modules being supported this year 159 modules next year, with a strategy to put all modules within the VLE over the coming years.

2.   Response to actions points in last report

The first accreditation visit raised four actions, and the response to these is presented criteria by criteria:

5.5 The brands of The IIE should share best practice in the process of assessing learner strengths and weaknesses prior to entry.

After careful consideration of how the practice used at one campus could be shared, it was determined that the national approach of implementing the National Benchmark Test (NBT) should be deployed. It is too early at this stage to determine the effectiveness of this approach, but The IIE will continue to keep this under scrutiny.

6.1 The IIE should adjust the trigger point to 80% for investigating poor attendance with respect to the 'At risk ' list.

At the time of the first accreditation visit in 2014, The IIE had a policy stating attendance should be 80%, and the inspectors were informed at some branch campus locations that action was not triggered until a 70% attendance rate had been recorded. Hence, the BAC required 'action' of raising the trigger point to 80% to achieve alignment with The IIE policy implementation with the BAC criteria. The IIE, after reviewing this 'action' point took the decision that attendance per se, was not the key criteria, noting that attendance monitoring was not the normal approach in South Africa. Instead, The IIE considers that recognizing students who are not actively participating in their programme of study to be a more effective in identifying students at risk. With the recent increase in the contribution of marks in each module arising from the integrated curriculum engagement component of assessment (ICE) from 5 to 10% and a related increase in monitoring contributions through ICE activities plus a variety of other inputs such as monitoring coursework submissions, reviewing grades gained on a very frequent basis and taking the lecturer inputs through the regular staff meetings, The IIE belief they have a direct equivalent to the 80% attendance monitoring, which is more effective than simple attendance monitoring. Varsity and DSSA have continued the practice of attendance monitoring with an 80% requirement as an input, given the size and scale of those two brands. There is no doubt that The IIE place a big emphasis on seeking to support students at risk, and it would seem appropriate to review the effectiveness of the approach now being implemented at the next accreditation visit.

16.2 The IIE should offer additional guidance for examiners on marking masters theses, particularly external examiners.

Extensive work has been undertaken by the centre, resulting in a series of policy documents which detail the approach and responsibilities of all concerned. Whilst the masters programme area is currently small scale, and the independent examination board chair is likely to be one of the team who generated the policy, as and when the student numbers scale up significantly, it may be appropriate to ensure that all independent chairs have been trained in the requirements. However, the work undertaken to address this action point has been commendable.

18.4 An out-of-hours emergency contact number should be issued.

The management has had many deliberations on how they might address this point, and have not yet reached a point where they are able to establish an implementation plan. Given the importance to international students of having such a contact number for emergencies, this action should remain in place and be reviewed at the next accreditation visit.

Response to recommendations in last report

The IIE should make more explicit in its procedures the detail of its final external contribution to its programme approval process.

Each programme must have accreditation from the HEQC, and therefore has an external input as a mandatory requirement, it had not been deemed necessary to explicitly state this in the procedures. It is proposed to state this externality in an updated flowchart within the procedure.

A centrally managed process should operate in the use of international recruitment agents.

This has not yet been actioned, but was discussed again during this interim visit. The advantages that may be accrued from such an approach were discussed, and The IIE will reflect one more time on this issue. The inspector advised the institution that UK good practice are to be found on the website of CVU.

Training should be introduced for student representatives.

There is a set of procedures in place for student representation. Meetings with student representatives confirmed that a partial orientation had taken place for representatives. The inspector left a copy of a typical UK programme endorsed by the UK's NUS for the institutions consideration.

The IIE should develop a more reflective approach to module review in the Rosebank and Varsity College brands.

There is good evidence of how this is including inputs from staff at these brands. Additionally, The IIE is appointing 5 programme managers whose role to enable a holistic oversight of the wide range of inputs received across the programmes, and once appointed should make a further step change.

The timelines for ordering required texts at the start of each semester should be improved.

As noted earlier, a new procedure is in place, with students being required to purchase themselves, with direct support from the institution through appointed suppliers. A corresponding change to the fees was made to reflect this change.

Best practice on the implementation of the integrated curriculum engagement (ICE) approach should be shared.

As noted earlier, the contribution of ICE has been raised from 5 to 10%, and a corresponding focus on implementation has been rolled out. Staff at the brand campuses confirmed this support had been welcome, and a mechanism to share best practice through electronic platforms is fully operational.

The IIE should ensure resources match the student numbers and approach to teaching, in particular with respect to IT and Wi-Fi provision and power points facilities.

The IT concern raised at the first inspection was immediately rectified following the verbal feedback of the inspectors. Across all campus buildings, a major Wi-Fi expansion has been installed to support the roll out of the BlackBoard VLE platform.

The internship programme would benefit from a longer period than the current one week and a closer involvement of staff to monitor its effectiveness and embed the learning outcomes.

The current internship arrangements remain in place, which are typically one to three weeks. The IIE has now commenced an arrangement to receive students from the Netherlands on a study programme, and will explore the opportunities to consider the placement of its own students through such arrangements. The inspector reminded the institution that The BAC international newsletter may provide an opportunity to find other accredited institutions interested in entering such arrangements.

If the option to expand the number of international students is taken, The IIE would benefit from establishing an international strategy with a wider remit.

Expansion of international student numbers is not currently planned with the current visa challenges in place, but will be revisited in the event of any future plans to expand.

3. Compliance with BAC accreditation requirements – spot check

3.1 Management, Staffing and Administration

	Met	Partially met	Not met	NA
The standards are judged to be	✔			
Comments				

The strong features previously reported remain in place, and further developments have been evolving. A positive feature of The IIE remains its focus on monitoring and performance review. The student management information system, known as SAM, continues to provide a reporting tool across all the brands to enable an effective, central oversight to be maintained. Some areas are considered annually, but others on a more frequent basis. There is good evidence that action plans are developed and regularly reviewed.

The student representation system appears to be fully operational and some student representative training has been offered. It was reported by some of the students that this training was being slowly rolled out, like an extended orientation programme. However, there is a policy review for this area underway, and further refinements may materialise in the new future.

Whilst clear agreements with international recruitment agencies exists, the opportunity to have a common approach to working with such agents has not yet been taken, and hence this opportunity still exists.

3.2 Teaching, Learning and Assessment

	Met	Partially met	Not met	NA
The standards are judged to be	✔			
Comments				

Again good developmental activity has taken place such as the implementation of Blackboard (VLearn) and the integration of some systems through a portal, creating the opportunity to undertake more work on the portal system now becomes available.

The resource allocation issues at Rosebank have been addressed through the new building acquisition, and a different arrangement for the responsibility of text book purchasing has been implemented, with students more directly involved and suppliers committed to being responsive to supply dates.

The extended role of the integrated curriculum engagement (ICE), supported with a framework for sharing good practice and ideas, provides a structure through which various key skills which enhance employability etc can be delivered.

The provision of distance learning routes requires some additional support mechanisms, which will be timely to inspect at the time of the next accreditation visit.

3.3 Student Welfare

	Met	Partially met	Not met	NA
The standards are judged to be		✔		
Comments				

The one component missing is the provision of an emergency contact telephone number, and this has been and continues to be under consideration on possible implementation approaches. This should remain an action point.

Other areas remain very positive with good examples of student activities being witnessed, and strong student involvement in self-promoting some events now operating across the campuses seen in this interim inspection.

The student wellness support remains a strong feature.

3.4   Premises and Facilities

	Met	Partially met	Not met	NA
The standards are judged to be	✔			
Comments The IIE continues to enhance the facilities, with new premises being brought into play as noted earlier in the report. These facilities provide a platform for future expansion and development of the numbers and range of provision. WiFi facilities have been enhanced, and have largely addressed the student concerns raised at the first inspection in 2014.				

PART C – SUMMARY OF STRENGTHS AND ACTION POINTS

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Institution's strengths

The IIE is a well-managed private institution, attracting an increasing number of degree students to its programmes. The portfolio is also being extended to meet a wider range of needs, and distance-learning routes are being introduced to support a different learner community.

The peer review process remains effective and contributes to teaching improvements.

Each module is supported by a package of material to support delivery.

The 'At risk' procedures are still a positive feature in the monitoring of students who show symptoms of potential underperformance.

The use of Turnitin plus the equivalent provision on Bb, and the requirement for students to submit the authentication of their individual assessments remains a good feature, with students taking the responsibility at an early stage to self-submit the results of their use of the plagiarism detection systems.

The procedures for securing and reviewing health and safety at the range of premises remain robust.

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Actions required	Priority H/M/L
18.4 An out-of-hours emergency contact number should be issued.	M

COMPLIANCE WITH STATUTORY REQUIREMENTS

Declaration of compliance has been signed and dated.	YES
Further comments, if applicable	