

Review of UK transnational education in the Republic of Ireland: University of Chester and the National Training Centre

July 2017

Executive summary

The University of Chester (the University) established a partnership with the National Training Centre (NTC), based in Dublin, in 2004. The partnership, initially set up under an Agency Agreement, used NTC's physical resources in Dublin to deliver the MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science programme by University staff, which was followed by an additional programme, an MSc Obesity and Weight Management. The NTC was established in 1988, and is a private professional training organisation that offers part-time educational courses in the areas of Health Fitness and Bodywork Therapy. Following several years of successful operation of the Agency Agreement, the University approved NTC's application to become an academic partner of the University, and an Organisational Agreement was signed in 2011 between the two institutions. NTC's application was for the purpose of obtaining permission to deliver several University programmes directly: an MSc in Neuromuscular Therapy and a BSc (Hons) in Osteopathy. Other than the MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science, however, the other programmes failed to recruit sufficient students to remain viable, and following a periodic review, the respective programme agreements lapsed. During this period, the Agency Agreement for the delivery of the MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science continued and currently has 34 students registered on it.

The MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science programme has six taught modules delivered in block mode plus a Research Project. One of the taught modules is delivered at the University in Chester. The University is responsible for student recruitment and assessment, and assessment boards are convened under the remit of the University. Students spoke favourably about the mode of delivery of the taught component of each module, which occurs over a long weekend (Friday through to Sunday), which facilitates their work and family commitments.

Provision awarded by the University and delivered through a collaborative partner is subject to the same standard monitoring and review processes applied to all University programmes, in accordance with the University Principles and Regulations and the Quality and Standards Manual.

Overall, the programme is well managed and students are effectively supported in the achievement of their academic award. The University considers the arrangement with the NTC to be an effective partnership, with potential for further development.

Introduction

1 The University of Chester (the University) originated as the Chester Diocesan Training College for school teachers in 1839. Until the late 1980s teacher training remained its principal activity, when the University, then Chester College, began to broaden its range of programmes, including nursing and midwifery from 1991. The Chester Business School was established in 2000. Previously accredited by the University of Liverpool, the then Chester College received taught degree awarding powers in 2003, followed by the conferral of university title in 2005, and research degree awarding powers in 2007. At the time of the review, the University had 1,880 staff and just under 20,000 students.

2 The University's Vision and Partnerships and International Strategy (2016-20) articulate its ambitions to 'build and maintain strong and sustainable partnerships in regional and international arenas' in line with its educational ethos, and where mutual benefit would be derived.

3 The University differentiates between different types of collaborative arrangements, including:

- **academic partnerships** - a strategic collaboration with another education or training provider whereby the organisation delivers provision that is validated and awarded by the University - approved partner organisations may offer provision that has been franchised from the University
- **Associate Colleges** - existing academic partners of at least three years standing may apply for the enhanced status of Associate College
- **agency** - an agency is defined as an organisation that provides physical resources, administrative or academic services in support of the University's off-campus activities.

4 In 2004 the University entered into an Agency Agreement with the National Training Centre (NTC), based in Dublin. The NTC was established in 1988, and is a private professional training organisation that offers part-time educational courses in the areas of Health, Fitness and Bodywork Therapy. The Agency Agreement with the NTC was for the provision of the University's MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science, to be taught by University staff at NTC's premises and administered locally in Dublin by NTC's internal National College of Exercise and Health Studies. This programme was followed by the MSc Weight Management (retitled MSc Obesity and Weight Management in 2014-15) and then, through an academic partnership arrangement, the MSc Neuromuscular Therapy programme.

5 Decisions on whether to admit students to the MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science programme remained with the University. Following several years of successful operation of the Agency Agreement, the University approved NTC's application to become an academic partner of the University, following a partner analysis visit for due diligence purposes in 2010. Upon University Senate approval, an Organisational Agreement was signed in 2011 between the University and NTC. Under the academic partnership agreement, NTC was to deliver an MSc in Neuromuscular Therapy and a BSc (Hons) in Osteopathy. During this period, the Agency Agreement for the delivery of the MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science and the MSc Obesity and Weight Management programmes continued.

6 A periodic review of the partnership in November 2013 discussed the disappointing student recruitment to the BSc Osteopathy programme, which resulted in the Osteopathy Programme Agreement lapsing. While NTC wished to continue the partnership in order to recruit further cohorts to the MSc Neuromuscular Therapy programme, NTC failed to recruit students in 2014, 2015 and at its final attempt in January 2017. Following this, the University's Partnerships sub-Committee and the NTC took the decision not to renew the

partnership arrangement concerning the MSc Neuromuscular Therapy. Both partners, however, continue to honour obligations to oversee the teach-out of the three remaining students on the MSc Neuromuscular Therapy programme. This decision was endorsed by the University's Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee and the Senate.

7 The MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science programme continues to recruit in Ireland under the Agency Agreement. The programme is delivered in part-time mode over two years, but may extend to delivery over six years; there are currently 34 students registered, which includes the most recent intake of 15 students. The programme has provision for two interim exit awards: a Postgraduate Certificate (three modules) and Postgraduate Diploma (six modules). The MSc requires 180 credits (six taught modules and a research project); the PgDip and PgCert require 120 credits and 60 credits respectively. Each module is delivered over a long weekend (Friday to Sunday) followed by eight weeks of self-directed learning, culminating in the submission of a 4,000 to 5,500-word assignment or equivalent.

Developing, agreeing and managing arrangements for setting up and operating the link

8 As stated above, the University differentiates between different types of collaborative arrangements, which are set out in the Quality and Standards Manual. The University operates two levels of approval and monitoring of collaborative arrangements: organisation and programme. A prospective collaborative partner must be approved by the University Senate before programme approval is considered. The University Development Advisory Group (DAG), has overarching responsibility for considering proposals relating to new collaborations as well as new curriculum developments. A proposal for a new collaboration must initially be endorsed by the relevant Faculty Dean and Faculty Management Group. Additional advice and support may be sought from the Principal Assistant Registrar (Partnerships and Academic Strategic Support).

9 Authorisation to progress a proposal for a new partnership to the DAG is based on there being a strong strategic and academic rationale for the proposal, which is consistent with the University's Corporate Plan and the relevant Business Plan of the Faculty. The DAG will consider a proposal and prepare a commentary for the Senior Management Team on relevant specific issues. Unless authority is delegated by the Chair of the Senate in respect of any particular issue, the DAG's functions are advisory, not executive. If Senior Management Team approval is given to progress the proposal, a two-stage Partner Analysis Report will be initiated. Stage 1 comprises a desk-based analysis to establish legal, financial and reputational issues relating to the prospective partner, which is undertaken by the Principal Assistant Registrar (Partnerships and Academic Strategic Support) or nominee. Stage 2 normally involves a fact-finding visit to the prospective partner. A template for the Partner Analysis Report, including areas to be explored, is set out in the University's Quality and Standards Manual (Collaborative Arrangements).

10 Following completion of the partner analysis, the report is considered by the Partnerships sub-Committee, along with a risk assessment detailing how any identified risks may be managed. After reviewing the report, the Partnerships sub-Committee will make a recommendation regarding approval to the Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee, which in turn will make recommendations to the Senate on the proposal to establish a new academic partnership. Following approval by the Senate, a draft Organisational Agreement is prepared. When the Agreement is finalised and signed, the original Agreement will be held by Academic Quality Support Services.

11 The Partnerships sub-Committee also oversees annual monitoring reports for each partnership. The University has in place a standardised system of periodic review of academic partnerships that focuses on overarching organisational aspects of the

arrangement. Such reviews take place at the end of the Organisational Agreement approaches, normally every three years. The University's clear policy and procedural framework governing collaborative arrangements and the thoroughness of its application is a **positive feature**.

12 Normally, each partnership has a University Link Tutor, who acts as the primary contact with the partner institution's programme leader(s). This facilitates easy communication between institutional teams, allowing any identified issues to be addressed quickly. The partnership Link Tutor is expected to provide support, advice and guidance on matters relating to the delivery of the programme and the application of the University's quality assurance processes.

13 In the context of the arrangement with the NTC, however, as the programme is delivered under an Agency Agreement, there is no University Link Tutor role, as the University is responsible for teaching the full MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science programme. There is, in line with the University procedures, a University Programme Leader. The roles and responsibilities of University Link Tutors and Programme Leaders are clearly documented in the University quality framework and this clarity of documentation is a **positive feature**.

14 The supporting evidence examined by the review team provided clear evidence that the University's procedural guidance was followed for the approval, monitoring and periodic review of the partnership and that the procedural framework facilitated effective oversight. The documents indicate that appropriate consideration was given to the comprehensive reports generated as part of the due diligence and ongoing monitoring and review of the collaborative arrangements. Evidence considered by the review panel also confirmed that the University's oversight of the collaborative arrangement is effective, as reflected in documented programme validation events, periodic review of the partnership, and a review of the delivery of University of Chester Awards by University Staff at the NTC. Minute evidence from the University Partnerships sub-Committee and Module Assessment Board indicates constructive consideration of the monitoring and review reports. The sample agreements reviewed by the review team clearly set out the respective rights and obligations of each party in accordance with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), *Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others*.

Quality assurance

Academic standards

15 Validated provision awarded by the University and delivered through a collaborative partner is subject to the same standard monitoring and review processes applied to all University programmes, in accord with the University Principles and Regulations and the Quality and Standards Manual. An Annual Programme Monitoring Report is submitted for each programme to the relevant Board of Studies, using a report template specifically for collaborative programmes.

16 At the beginning of each academic year, the University compiles a data set for each academic partner relating to the previous year. The data sets include: recruitment, retention and progression information; the number of academic appeals; overall income and details of any new programmes. The partner is required to prepare a commentary on and the overall effectiveness of the partnership. The University Partnerships sub-Committee considers the data set and commentary, along with relevant information provided by the Faculty concerned. Students are asked to complete an anonymised evaluation of each taught module, which forms part of the annual programme monitoring process. Copies of annual

monitoring reports are available to students on the University virtual learning environment (VLE). This is a **positive feature**.

17 The Partnerships sub-Committee reports on the process, via its minutes, to the Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee. The Partnerships sub-Committee also receives the minutes of the Link Tutors' forum.

18 The University also operates a standardised periodic review process of partnerships, which focuses on overarching organisational aspects of each arrangement. Such review events typically occur every three years. The purpose of these periodic reviews include: revisiting due diligence aspects; confirming that the learning environment remains appropriate; confirming that the partner continues to meet the University's requirements and expectations relating to quality and academic standards; assessing the effectiveness of the partnership arrangements; and identifying areas for further development. The coordination of the review is the responsibility of the Partnerships and Development team within Academic Quality Support Services. The review is usually undertaken at the partner organisation.

19 The partner organisation is asked to respond to the issues raised in the report; the report from the review panel, including the partner's response, is then considered by the Partnerships sub-Committee, which then makes a recommendation to the Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee regarding the renewal of the partnership. The Committee in turn makes a recommendation to the Senate. If the Senate approves an extension of the partnership a new agreement is prepared.

20 Students have access to the University Student Support and Guidance team, which offers a wide range of services, including welfare support, counselling, disability support, financial assistance and student mentoring schemes. In meetings with students, the review team confirmed that students were generally aware of the support that is available to them, should the need arise. The MSc Programme Leader acts as the Personal Academic Tutor for students and can be contacted via email, the VLE, or by telephone. Students who met the review team were positive about the accessibility of both University and NTC staff.

21 The University sets out its expectations concerning student engagement and feedback in several sections of the Quality and Standards Manual, as well as providing an outline in the programme handbook for the MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science. Typically, for University programmes, each student cohort is encouraged to nominate two student members to take part in meetings with the Programme Leader and other staff once a semester, at a Student Staff Liaison Meeting, in order to discuss matters relating to modules and the programme of study generally. However, given the size of the MSc module classes (approximately 15) delivered at the NTC, Student Staff Liaison Meetings usually take place on an annual basis with the full student cohort over a lunch-time meeting. Feedback and action points are recorded in the meeting minutes and considered by tutors at the University's Faculty of Clinical Sciences and Nutrition staff meetings as appropriate. The review team confirmed the effectiveness of these arrangements through the examination of liaison meeting minutes and direct feedback from students.

22 The review team noted that the programme handbook for the Dublin-based programme contained student representation information that related to the University generally, for example, 'minuted meetings should take place once per semester'. The current arrangement is for the Student Staff Liaison Meeting to be held in July; however, if there were issues arising from, for example, the admission/registration process in the preceding September/October period (several students who met the review team indicated that they had problems gaining access to the University VLE, which took a number of weeks to resolve), there would appear to be a potential time lag before matters could be raised in this particular forum. The review team acknowledges, however, that the evidence provided for

the review demonstrated the accessibility and responsiveness of University and NTC staff to issues raised by students on an ongoing basis, which was also confirmed by the students who met the review team. The review team **recommends** that the University review the number of Student Staff Liaison Meetings held each year for the Dublin-based MSc, and if practical, bring in line with normal University practice. The programme handbook should also reflect the actual arrangements that are in place for liaison meetings for the Dublin-based MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science programme.

23 Reports from annual monitoring and periodic review of the collaborative arrangement with the NTC, as well as relevant committee minutes, including the Academic Quality and Enhancement Committee and Partnerships sub-Committee, indicate appropriate oversight by the University and consideration of report findings and planned actions.

24 The systematic approach to monitoring and periodic review of the University-NTC partnership facilitates a consistent and robust approach to the maintenance of academic standards and the effectiveness of collaborative arrangements. Reporting is thorough and transparent and is a **positive feature**.

Assessment

25 The Agency Agreement stipulates that the University has responsibility for the academic standards of its awards and that annual programme monitoring, annual academic partnership reports and external examiner reporting will take place as specified by the University. The University will also appoint external examiners. The University Framework for Assessment is operationalised within the context of the University's overarching Principles and Regulations. The University Quality and Standards Manual contains a section on assessment regulation and guidance, including Accreditation of Prior Learning, grading, assessment feedback, external examiners, examination boards and appeals.

26 Taught modules on the programme are assessed by a 4,000 to 5,500-word written assignment or its equivalent, such as a case study or poster presentation. There are no formal examinations. A research project follows the completion of the six taught modules. One of the taught modules is delivered at the University. Students are responsible for their travel costs, however, the University covers accommodation and other incidental costs. Each module has a module handbook that covers in detail aspects relevant to that module, including assessment and module content. There is an opportunity for students to be given formative feedback, if they submit a 500-word outline and draft section of their assignment at least four weeks prior to the submission date of the assignment. Students who met the review team expressed mixed views about the timeliness of the feedback on draft assignment submissions. It was also noted by the review team that when students were asked if they had raised this issue at Student Staff Liaison Meetings or with the Programme Leader they indicated that they had not. The review team **recommends** that the University monitor the timing of feedback to students who have submitted draft assignment sections, to ensure that there is a consistent response timeline to allow students sufficient time to process the feedback prior to final assignment submission.

27 The programme handbook for students provides a range of information including: grading schemes, learning outcomes, guidelines for written assignments, staff contact details, module descriptors and student supports.

28 NTC-based students are introduced to the role of the Programme Leader at their induction at NTC, which is delivered by University staff and NTC staff. The overall function of the Programme Leader is to oversee the management of the programme as it operates in the partner organisation, including updating programme documentation, monitoring and review, assessments and students supports.

29 The University operates a two-tier system of Assessment Boards, with subject-specialist external examiners who operate through Module Assessment Boards and chief external examiners appointed to Awards/Progression Assessment Boards.

30 External examiners are appointed by the University to oversee assessment and student progression. There is clear information to inform examiners about their roles and a formal induction process for new examiners. All external examiners appointed by the University must have substantial experience of examining in higher education in the relevant academic discipline. The University also offers a mentoring system for external examiners who may have limited or no prior experience of the external examining role.

31 Assessment boards are convened under the remit of the University, and external examiners for the NTC-based MSc programme comment positively on their effectiveness. External examiner reports are comprehensive for the programmes delivered at the NTC and are responded to, and actioned, appropriately. External examiner reports comment positively on the quality of the assignment briefs and endorse the academic standards of the collaborative provision delivered at the NTC. One external examiner, for example, recently commented that 'All assessment tasks are appropriate, at level 7 standard and many demand the application of knowledge to real world settings and/or the assessment of employability skills'.

32 Although students who met the review team were unaware that they could access annual programme monitoring reports and external examiner reports relating to their programme, explicit links to these documents are provided in the MSc Exercise and Nutrition Science programme handbook. The review team also noted that students were reminded that they could access external examiner reports via the VLE portal at a Student Staff Liaison Meeting in July 2016. This is a **positive feature**. Students were aware, however, of the general assessment criteria against which their assignments would be graded, which was also in the programme handbook.

33 Arrangements for the assessment of collaborative provision delivered at the NTC in Dublin are clear, rigorously applied and consistent with the Expectations of the Quality Code.

Quality of learning opportunities

34 Under the current Agency Agreement (2015) between the University and the NTC concerning the delivery of the MSc in Exercise and Nutrition Science, responsibility for student recruitment and admission is retained by the University. The NTC acts as the local contact for the University and undertakes a range of services prescribed in the Agency Agreement, which include: programme promotion; provision of venues for marketing and promotion; attending induction events; maintaining a database of student contact details; providing a reading room and bespoke library materials for the programme; and making arrangements for the collection of student assignments for onward transmission to the University.

35 The University's responsibilities under the Agency Agreement include: arrangements for quality assurance, teaching and assessment on the programme, including the provision of course materials; and student complaints and appeals. The Agency Arrangement also makes provision for the Recognition of Prior Learning.

36 The programme specification provides appropriate information, including the location of delivery, programme structure, admission requirements and relevant Subject Benchmark Statement references. Five of the six taught modules are delivered by University staff at the NTC in Dublin. The sixth module, as referred to above, is delivered in Chester. The opportunity for students to attend the University for a module and to have access to

specialist equipment on site, with the University meeting all incidental costs aside from travel, is a **positive feature**. Students indicated that the facility to attend the University also reinforced their sense of 'belonging' to the University of Chester.

37 A programme handbook is available to students, which provides comprehensive information, including for example: the partnership link, details of staff contacts, the programme structure, assessment criteria, and module descriptors. Students are informed of the support and services available to them in the programme handbook and in the induction presentation and associated material. For example, the handbook also provides links to a range of University policies and procedures including: academic appeals, the examination schedule, and regulations governing progression. Student complaints and appeals are considered under standard University procedures. Students who met the review team were generally aware of the complaints and appeals procedures and had a reasonable idea of where to obtain help if needed.

38 In the meeting with students, the review team noted that they were generally positive about the University/NTC information day and the application and admission process. Students indicated that they had been drawn to the programme based on the flexibility of the mode of delivery and the relevance of the programme content for future employment opportunities, although some students considered the programme to be more theoretical than they had anticipated. Further, the students indicated that the course and module handbooks provided accurate and helpful information to enable them to progress in their studies.

39 Overall, students are effectively supported in the achievement of their academic award through a range of mechanisms aligned with the Quality Code, *Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement*, which includes pre-entry activities, induction, programme and module handbooks, study skills guidance, personal tutors and student engagement opportunities.

Information on higher education provision

40 The University and NTC Agency Agreement sets out the expectations concerning promotional material, which both parties must approve before publishing. The University also has brand guidelines for partners that provide a reference for the development of promotional materials. The University at all times remains responsible for the approval of material relating to its award delivered through any form of partnership, including the NTC. The partner's web pages are reviewed two to three times per year, by the University, to ensure that programme information and marketing material is accurate.

41 In other types of collaborative arrangement (excluding Agency Agreements), the role and responsibilities of the University Link Tutor include the provision of support and guidance to the programme team at the partner organisation on the production and annual updating of appropriate programme documentation, including the programme specification and programme handbook, in order to ensure consistency with University guidelines and relevant aspects of the Quality Code. The University Programme Leader for the NTC-based programme monitors the programme handbook to ensure the information is accurate and up to date.

42 Programme specifications are updated annually with any changes being approved by the relevant University Board of Study.

43 The University has responsibility for awarding certificates and transcripts for collaborative provision. The diploma supplement for the MSc Exercise and Nutrition

Science specifies the location of delivery as being the University of Chester in Dublin. The programme specification also specifies the location of delivery.

44 Overall, the University has a systematic and effective approach to engagement with the partner concerning the oversight and approval framework for information relating to the institutions and programme.

Conclusion

Under an Agency Agreement, the University delivers postgraduate provision, in partnership with NTC, in Dublin. A positive feature of the collaboration is the excellent working relations between University and NTC staff. The University has robust quality assurance procedures in place for the oversight of academic standards and the student experience. Students who met the review team were positive about their experience of the programme, in particular the opportunity to attend the University for the delivery of one of the modules. It was evident to the review team that the Link Tutors played a pivotal role in the success of the programme delivery, the provision of support to students, and the partnership generally. Both the University and NTC consider that there is potential for further programme developments under the partnership arrangement.

Positive features

The following positive features are identified:

- the University's clear policy and procedural framework governing collaborative arrangements and the thoroughness of its application (paragraph 11)
- copies of annual monitoring reports are available to students on the University virtual learning environment (paragraphs 16 and 32)
- the roles and responsibilities of University Link Tutors and Programme Leaders is clearly documented in the University quality framework (paragraph 13)
- reporting is thorough and transparent (paragraph 24)
- the opportunity for students to attend the University for a module and to have access to specialist equipment on site, with the University meeting all incidental costs aside from travel (paragraph 36).

Recommendations

The University of Chester is recommended to take the following action:

- review the number of Student Staff Liaison Meetings held each year for the Dublin-based MSc, and if practical, bring in line with normal University practice (paragraph 22)
- monitor the timing of feedback to students who have submitted draft assignment sections, to ensure that there is a consistent response timeline to allow students sufficient time to process the feedback prior to final assignment submission (paragraph 26).

University of Chester's response to the review report

The University welcomes the commentary in this report, and is happy to endorse the positive features and recommendations detailed in the conclusion.

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