

UNIVERSITY OF ULSTER

REPORT OF A MEETING OF THE EVALUATION PANEL FOR THE INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION PROGRAMME LEADING TO THE AWARD OF A DIPLOMA IN FOUNDATION STUDIES (WITH NAMED PATHWAYS) (FT) (BT/JN/ME/CE) WITHIN PROVISIONAL UNIT 31B

7 September 2017

PANEL PRESENT: Prof P Bartholomew, Pro Vice Chancellor (Education), Ulster [Chair]
Dr S Dann, Associate Dean (Teaching), School of Science, Loughborough University
Dr W Kitchen, Head of Department of Lifelong Learning, University of Sheffield
Ms C Reid, Partnership Manager, Ulster University Business School, Ulster

IN ATTENDANCE: Mrs S Stewart, Academic Office, Ulster

CHAIR OF THE COURSE PLANNING COMMITTEE: Mrs A Scanlon, Head of the Centre for Flexible and Continuing Education, ADDL

1. BACKGROUND

The Diploma in Foundation Studies is proposed as a one-year full-time Level 3 programme to begin in January 2018. The Diploma's proposed title for marketing purposes is the International Foundation Programme (IFP). The programme is planned as pan-faculty provision and, for reasons of academic governance, it will be academically housed in the Centre for Flexible and Continuing Education (CFCF) within the central directorate of Access, Digital and Distributed Learning (ADDL).

The IFP is proposed in response to the Global Engagement objectives of the Five and Fifty Strategic Plan and the targets of the Academic Plan. It is intended that the IFP will increase the accessibility of Ulster's degrees, deliver study opportunities to a much wider global audience, and assist the University in moving closer to ambitious international recruitment targets (an initial doubling of international student numbers in five years).

The IFP proposals aim to provide non-EU/EEA international students with the foundation of academic knowledge, study skills and English language proficiency to allow them to succeed in a higher education environment and to meet the entry requirements for undergraduate study in linked progression Honours degrees at Ulster.

The IFP is therefore designed to provide a bridge between the existing academic and English language level of prospective students and the level required for Honours degree study and an IELTS score of 6.0. (For entry to the IFP applicants are expected to have a minimum IELTS score of 5.0.) The curriculum has been designed to prepare international students in a holistic way, and includes a supportive programme of cultural and study skills development.

The proposed IFP has two pathways – STEM and non-STEM. Each pathway comprises a common core of 60 credit points of English language development modules combined with 40 credit points of foundation pathway modules and 20 credit points of progression pathway modules. Students' choices for the foundation and progression pathway modules will depend on the undergraduate programmes to which they wish to progress. In summary:

STEM Pathway

Semester 1	<p>Core skills modules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE002 English for Academic Purposes 1 (20 credit points) • FCE006 Intercultural Communication and Competence (10 credit points) • FCE008 Vocabulary and Linguistic Accuracy Development (10 credit points) <p>AND foundation pathway module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE005 Foundation Mathematics (20 credit points)
Semester 2	<p>Core skills module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE003 English for Academic Purposes 2 (20 credit points) <p>AND foundation pathway module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE010 Introduction to Science & Technology (20 credit points) <p>AND one of two optional progression pathway modules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE009 Introduction to Computing, Engineering & the Built Environment (20 credit points) to progress to Computing, Engineering and the Built Environment programmes (CEBE). • FCE011 Foundations in Physiology and Chemistry (20 credit points) to progress to Life and Health Sciences (LHS) programmes.

Non-STEM Pathway

Semester 1	<p>Core skills modules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE002 English for Academic Purposes 1 (20 credit points) • FCE006 Intercultural Communication and Competence (10 credit points) • FCE008 Vocabulary and Linguistic Accuracy Development (10 credit points) <p>AND foundation pathway module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE004 Introducing the Creative Industries (20 credit points)
Semester 2	<p>Core skills module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE003 English for Academic Purposes 2 (20 credit points) <p>AND foundation pathway module:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE012 Entrepreneurial Leadership in a Global World (20 credit points) <p>AND one of two optional progression pathway modules:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FCE007 Britain and Ireland in a Globalised World (20 credit points) to progress to Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) programmes. • FCE013 Foundation Accounting & Mathematics for Business (20 credit points) to progress to Ulster University Business School (UUBS) programmes.

The IFP is proposed to be offered initially at the Belfast campus but is expected to expand thereafter to other Ulster campuses. The wider cultural awareness programme for the IFP and certain individual taught modules within the programme will include visits to the North West from its inception.

Similar programmes are offered by other UK institutions; in Northern Ireland the sole provider is QUB through an academic partnership with INTO as an on-campus provider. There is

anecdotal evidence that the FE sector in NI is also moving into the International Foundation space. Whilst Ulster's IFP is proposed initially to be delivered directly as in-house provision, the potential to scale through a third party provider may be reviewed as the programme matures.

MEETING WITH SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

The Panel met with the Chair of the Course Planning Team, the Director of ADDL and the Director of Internationalisation.

2. MARKET RESEARCH

a) Market Demand

Market research on the international demand for first degree courses by source country of student indicates geographical demand for Ulster in the Far East, Middle East and South America, and that students from these countries often require a bridging programme to study at undergraduate level in the UK.

The Team reported that market research had also found that there is most demand for Business courses, followed by Engineering, and this had informed the decision to offer the STEM and non-STEM pathways.

Applicants will be required to enrol on a particular pathway at the beginning of the programme and will be advised closely on their options relevant to each pathway. Acceptance onto the IFP will be accompanied by a conditional offer of a place in the First Year of a specified Ulster progression degree.

b) Target Market

The Panel said that many institutions target their IFP-type programmes at students aged 16-17 years of age and asked why it was planned that Ulster would target only students who are over 18 years of age. Panel members suggested that under this policy there was a possibility that students at age 16 or 17 would choose another institution, and that other institutions may have 'creamed off' top performing students before Ulster gets a chance to target them when they reach the age of 18.

The Team explained that the decision was made because of legal obligations and requirements for guardianship arrangements that are associated with under-18s. Ulster did have policies in place at its branch campuses in London and Birmingham with its partner QAHE for recruiting students aged under 18 but the Team said that Ulster would need a stronger policy and mechanisms in place for recruitment of under 18s at its home campuses.

The Team said there was a substantial pool of potential applicants aged over 18 to recruit from. The Team felt that this feature distinguished Ulster's IFP programme from others in the sector, and that it may therefore be an attractive USP for mature students. However, the Team welcomed comments from the Panel and said that the policy to recruit only applicants aged 18 or over would be kept under review as the programme would mature.

c) Title of Award

Panel members said that similar programmes in the sector usually carried a Certificate title and asked why the IFP was proposed to be a Diploma. The Team explained that the composition and credit point composition of the proposed IFP would categorise it as a Diploma under Ulster's regulations, and that the Diploma title would help to distinguish it from similar

programmes in the sector. They highlighted, however, that the programme would be marketed as the 'International Foundation Programme and students may not be so interested in the formal academic award.

3. PROGRESSION TO DEGREE-LEVEL STUDY

The Panel noted that it was proposed that acceptance onto the IFP would be accompanied by a conditional offer of a place in the first year of a specified progression degree. The list of progression degrees in the programme document was substantial and the Panel asked if Schools could give assurances that they would accept IFP graduates onto all the programmes listed.

The Team said that there had been extensive consultation with Associate Deans (Global Engagement) who had all been keen to offer broad ranges of potential progression programmes for their respective Faculties to attract international students.

The Team explained that in designing the IFP they had identified key knowledge and skills students would need to achieve by the end of the IFP to satisfy entry requirements for degree-level study. The Team had therefore developed a broad range of generic learning outcomes that the shared core modules would address (including English language requirements). Additional, more specialised, learning outcomes unique to each of the STEM and non-STEM pathways were embedded into the foundation and progression pathway modules. Faculties had established key skills required at Level 4 and had adapted and integrated them into Level 3 progression pathway modules to facilitate easier transition from the IFP to undergraduate-level study.

The Panel asked if the progression pathway modules would enable IFP students to reach the same level of knowledge as their peers entering Level 4 with alternative (more traditional) qualifications, particularly if the IFP students only pass modules at 40%. The Team responded by saying that further work was ongoing to pinpoint which programmes on the list set higher entrance requirements and therefore may require IFP students to pass the programme with higher marks or award classification. It was acknowledged that professionally accredited Ulster programmes may also require additional qualifications for entry.

The Panel said that it could be useful to monitor IFP students' progress to undergraduate study to find out which programmes prove to be more accessible and popular with IFP students, and it may present opportunities for further enhancement of the IFP's content by strengthening particular themes in the IFP to prepare students for their degree studies.

4. STUDENT VISAS

The Panel highlighted that because the IFP was proposed as a stand-alone award and not integrated with an undergraduate degree, Ulster will have to issue a double Confirmation of Acceptance of Studies (CAS) (i.e. the first CAS for the IFP and a second for the Ulster Honours Degree). This arrangement would present additional costs for students, and there was a risk that after completing the IFP students would go to study elsewhere.

The Team explained that a number of Ulster's undergraduate programmes have lower English language requirements so it may be easier for students to gain entry to study at Ulster. Ulster also offers an alternative English language test to IELTS to avoid the need for students to sit a second IELTS test. (This test is already used for programmes at the QAHE branch campuses.) The International Office would also offer help to students preparing visa applications and it was hoped that after spending a year at an Ulster campus, students would feel an affinity and identity with the University and would choose to stay. It was also

recognised that, as a new programme, Ulster's IFP may not be recognised by other institutions so students may find it difficult to apply to undergraduate programmes elsewhere.

5. MINIMUM COHORT SIZES

The Team believed that a minimum of ten students for each pathway was the appropriate minimum number that should be recruited in order to ensure a quality student experience and viable numbers for modules. If eight or nine students were recruited, the Team said they would liaise with the Course Team and Admissions Team and would consider the recruits' overall profile to decide whether to proceed and/or whether to offer both pathways.

6. LEVEL OF AWARD

The Panel queried the description of the IFP as a Level 3 programme because there were few relevant benchmarks to compare it with. It was suggested that consideration be given to categorising the level of the modules and the IFP overall as being of a level outside the University's level framework.

MEETING WITH THE COURSE TEAM

7. PROGRAMME SPECIFICATION

The programme learning outcomes within the specification were informative but it was noted that students would not achieve all the programme-level learning outcomes as they were presented in the programme proposals – a number of programme learning outcomes were specific to pathways. The Panel was of the opinion that overall programme learning outcomes should be presented in broader terms so they can be achieved by all students, with module learning outcomes providing more detail and contextualisation.

8. PROGRESSION TO UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES

The Panel referred to the substantial list of programmes within the IFP programme document that outlined the programmes that IFP students would be able to progress to on completion of the IFP, and asked whether all the programme would be available to all students completing the IFP at 'Pass' level within their respective pathways. The Course Team highlighted that Ulster enjoys a strong record of developing and managing a range of Access Diploma programmes within FE Colleges. This experience had been useful for determining key knowledge and skills for undergraduate study that must be developed in the proposed IFP to prepare students for Ulster's Degree programmes and to enable them to meet programme entry requirements.

Few programmes within the Faculty of CEBE require entry qualifications additional to the general University entrance requirements. However, the Faculty had found that students who performed better in Mathematics at GCSE level performed better at undergraduate level. The STEM pathway foundation module FCE010 *Introduction and Science and Technology* and progression pathway module FCE009 *Introduction to Computing Engineering and the Built Environment* therefore comprise additional Mathematics content to strengthen IFP students' Mathematics knowledge.

Similarly, few UUBS undergraduate programmes require higher qualifications than the standard University entry requirements, with the exception of Finance, Economics and Accounting programmes for which applicants must hold a minimum grade B in GCSE Mathematics. In response, the Faculty had developed FCE013 *Foundation Accounting and Maths for Business* within the non-STEM pathway to offer equivalence to grade B in GCSE Mathematics.

The Panel heard that, in contributing to developing modules for the non-STEM pathway, the Faculty of AHSS had focused on ensuring that students had sufficient exposure to a range of AHSS themes through the combination of modules offered for the pathway.

The Faculty of LHS had also contributed to the STEM pathway to ensure that IFP graduates were adequately prepared for undergraduate programmes in the Faculty.

The Team acknowledged that a number of programmes require applicants to hold higher entry requirements than the standard University regulations (e.g. MPharm Hons Pharmacy requires a minimum grade B in A-level Chemistry). It would therefore be necessary to develop equivalent entry requirements for such programmes in relation to the IFP qualification based on classifications of the overall IFP (Diploma) award and/or minimum pass marks for individual IFP modules.

9. CONTENT

a) FCE005 Foundation Mathematics

The Panel asked whether the IFP's Mathematics content was suitable for progression to BEng Hons Engineering programmes. The module coordinator for the STEM pathway foundation pathway module, FCE005 *Foundation Mathematics*, explained that undergraduate Engineering programmes (except the MEng Engineering programmes) require the standard grade C in GCSE Mathematics, and that FCE005 would provide sufficient preparation for students.

The Panel suggested that students from China may already have strong Mathematics skills and asked whether there may be challenges in maintaining their interest in the IFP Mathematics modules. The module coordinator for FCE005 said that, under a partnership arrangement, the Faculty teaches students from China for their final year for a joint undergraduate award. The students' Mathematics abilities are high so work is set at an appropriate level to maintain their engagement.

b) FCE012 Entrepreneurship Leadership in a Global World

Within the non-STEM pathway FCE012 is a foundation pathway module taken by all students wishing to progress to programmes within the UUBS or the Faculty of AHSS. The Panel suggested that the module seemed a natural fit for Business programmes and asked about its relevance to AHSS. The Course Team said that FCE012 was proposed to be offered to all non-STEM students in response to the University's aim to embed a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation in every student. The module would address concepts of entrepreneurship, leadership and global citizenship, which are generic themes relevant to both the subsequent progression pathway modules that follow it, FCE007 and FCE013, and level four undergraduate studies within the Faculty of AHSS and the UUBS.

c) FCE004 Introducing the Creative Industries

The module coordinator explained that for FCE004 students will attend and subsequently discuss cultural events and performances in seminars. Trips to a number of events will be shared with undergraduate students but discussions will be separate for IFP students. The Course Team believed this approach will help to support English language development within the context of the creative industries, immerse international students in the region's culture, and promote cohesion with the local student body.

Visits to venues throughout Northern Ireland and other Ulster campuses will also present opportunities to showcase the region and the student experience at each of the University's campuses as part of promoting further study at Ulster for international students.

d) FCE010 Introduction to Science and Technology and FCE011 Foundations in Physiology and Chemistry

The Course Team outlined the students' expected learning journey through the LHS STEM modules. Foundation pathway module FCE010 has been designed to fire students' interest and assess scientific writing. The subsequent progression pathway module FCE011 is more specialised and during it students will develop more advanced skills including titration and pipette techniques.

9. ENGLISH LANGUAGE MODULES

a) International Culture

The Panel asked how the global culture that the international students bring would be used to enhance the IFP. The Course Team responded by saying that the content and learning and teaching strategy for the English language modules (FCE002, FCE003, FCE006 and FCCE008) would support intercultural exchange, peer learning and fluency.

b) English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Modules (FCE002 and FCE003)

The Panel was of the opinion that the EAP modules took the format of IELTS modules – the content for the modules was presented week-by-week in speaking and listening, reading, writing and academic language awareness components. Panel members noted that this format was different from the format that is proposed for subject modules, and suggested that students may perceive a disconnect between the learning and teaching strategies for the EAP modules and subject modules. The module coordinator said that only assessment for the modules took the approach of IELTS modules by breaking assessments down into reading, writing, speaking and listening components.

c) Integration with Academic Subject Modules

English language content accounts for half of the proposed IFP (60 credit points). Panel members were of the view that the purpose of the English language modules within the proposed IFP was to underpin the academic subject modules, but that the learning outcomes and assessments for the modules did not effectively communicate links within the current IFP proposals.

Panel members heard that the EAP modules addressed study skills, and glossaries of terms relevant to IFP subject modules. Tutorials within the modules would segment the student cohorts to develop subject-specific skills relevant to groups of students (e.g. laboratory reports for STEM students planning to progress to LHS programmes). The Panel believed, however, that there was opportunity for greater contextualisation of the English language modules, which would facilitate a greater level of learning in subject modules.

d) Exemptions from English Language Modules

The Panel highlighted that there was a possibility that the IFP would attract students who already have a good level of English language and asked how their engagement with the English language modules would be maintained. The Course Team explained that the English language modules would also address cultural studies and study skills, which would be relevant to the remainder of their studies.

The Panel asked if it was possible that there was too much English language content in the proposed IFP structure. The Course Team said that they were exploring the possibility of offering exemptions from the English language modules to students with a good level of English and offering them alternative modules instead.

10. ASSESSMENT SCHEDULE

Panel members suggested that the exemplar assessment schedule was inconsistent in terms of timing and that there was a risk of over-assessment for a number of subject modules in semester two. In semester one modules had one or two assessment components with most assessments scheduled for the end of the semester, with the exception of two modules that planned submission of assignments in week six. In semester two there were a lot more assessments scheduled across the semester – ten assessment components for each of FCE010 *Introduction to Science and Technology* and FCE011 *Foundations in Physiology and Chemistry* modules, and six assessment components for FCE013 *Foundation Accounting and Mathematics for Business*.

The Panel highlighted that University guidance for module assessment loads recommends word counts of approximately 2,000 words per 10 credit points (or equivalent). The Course Team explained that a number of formative assessments had been included in the schedule for semester two and that for some modules summative assessments had been broken down into smaller components (e.g. MCQ tests) to allow students to better gauge their progress in preparation for summative assessments.

The Panel highlighted that, within the proposed assessment schedule, for each semester the EAP module assessments were scheduled for weeks 11 and 12 but students were scheduled to take assessments for subject modules mid-way through the semester (e.g. in week 6 of semester one STEM students are scheduled to submit an assignment for FCE005 *Foundation Mathematics* and non-STEM students are scheduled to submit an assignment for FCE004 *Introducing the Creative Industries*). It was not clear, therefore, how the EAP modules, as supporting modules within the IFP, would support the students with assessments for subject modules.

Panel members suggested that the assessment strategy and schedule could be revisited to be more consistent with more formative assessments in semester one to help students evaluate their progress.

11. SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

The Panel highlighted that there was variation in numbers of contact hours across the modules and members recommended that there be more consistency.

IFP students will attend personal tutorials with tutors and will be allocated peer mentors (international and home students) to help them settle at their home Ulster campus.

The Course Team planned to utilise the Ulster Confucius Institute's relations with local Chinese community groups and links with other international community groups in the region (e.g. the Northern Ireland Somali Association).

The business plan for the IFP included a budget to offer scholarships to IFP students.

12. STUDENT TRIPS

It was proposed that the IFP would begin at the Belfast campus and would expand to other Ulster campuses as it matures. For the first cohort, however, non-STEM foundation pathway

module FCE004 *Introducing the Creative Industries* was proposed to be delivered at Magee and STEM progression pathway module FCE009 *Introduction to Computing and Engineering and the Built Environment* was proposed to be delivered at Jordanstown. While it was subject to module choice, it was likely that the majority of students would therefore be required to travel away from their home campus (Belfast) for part of their studies and the Panel asked how this would be facilitated. The Course Team explained that for most modules staff would travel to Belfast with a number of trips planned to other campuses to use specialised facilities (e.g. to Coleraine to use the laboratories for LHS modules).

In addition to using specialised facilities at other campuses, the Course Team expected that such trips would enrich the students' experience and introduce them to staff and study opportunities available at all Ulster campuses at undergraduate level. The IFP Team would meet the costs for all trips associated with the IFP.

13. PROPOSED START DATE

The Course Team proposed that the IFP would begin in the third week of January 2018. Expert Panel members said that there could be challenges with January intakes including staff planning for teaching and assessment schedules, opportunities for re-sits and how the student experience can be affected with their semester two being a quieter summer semester on-campus with fewer social and sporting activities.

14. CONCLUSIONS

The Panel commended the following:

- i) Alignment with the University's Five & Fifty Strategic Plan and Widening Participation agenda.
- ii) Bringing forward a concept for an innovative programme for an identified market to 'feed into' and build non-MaSN provision and to expand international student numbers at Ulster.
- iii) The enthusiasm across the Faculties for the IFP, as demonstrated by the contributions of the Course Teams and evidence within subject areas of collaboration in developing modules.

The Panel agreed to recommend to the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee that the unit be approved for a period of five years (intakes January 2017/18 to 2021/22 inclusive), subject to the conditions of the Panel being addressed and a satisfactory response and a revised submission being forwarded to the Academic Office by 3 November 2017 for approval by the Chair of the Panel.

Conditions

- i) All issues identified by the Academic Office and detailed in the appendix to the Panel report are addressed.
- ii) English for Academic Purposes (EAP) modules FCE002 and FCE003 are revised to become more integrative with the programme's subject content and a reduced contribution to the overall programme is considered.
- iii) Programme documentation makes clear that an Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) route will be available for applicants, and that exemptions for the EAP modules may be available to students who have a higher level of English language

than is required for entry; such students may be offered (an) alternative module/s if necessary for visa purposes.

- iv) The programme specification is revised so programme-level learning outcomes are more generic to ensure that all students enrolled on both pathways will achieve the same overall programme learning outcomes; module descriptions will provide contextualisation and further detail.
- v) Module specifications are revised to demonstrate greater coherence across the programme, especially in relation to the development of a common style of language that will be accessible to non-specialist readers.
- vi) A greater emphasis is placed within the programme and the students' learning journey on addressing academic integrity, including plagiarism. The sequencing of the programme must ensure that advice and support has been given prior to the completion of assessments.
- vii) Teaching schedules are reviewed to take account of intensive day-long teaching sessions and visits off-campus.
- viii) A greater number of formative assessments are included for semester one.
- ix) Reading lists for modules are reviewed to ensure that they are appropriate for the profile of students on the programme.
- x) The title of FCE012 *Entrepreneurial Leadership in a Global World* is revisited to better reflect the 'softer' types of entrepreneurship, leadership and global citizenship that the module addresses.
- xi) Numbers of contact hours are revised across the modules to address inconsistencies across the programme.
- xii) In relation to the proposed January 2018 intake:
 - A minimum number of 10 students are recruited for each of the two pathways (STEM and non-STEM) to ensure viability and a quality student experience.
 - Assurances are secured from key University departments (including Registry and the Examinations Office) that mechanisms and processes are in place to facilitate registration of the mid-year intake, assessments and re-sits.
 - The Team supply a fully worked assessment scheduling document that shows the timing of all assessments, including resubmissions and resits, demonstrating how all successful students (including those not passing modules at the first attempt) can be progressed onto degree programmes.

15. APPRECIATION

The Chair thanked the Course Team and Panel members for their contributions to the evaluation process, and the Management Team thanked the Panel for their engagement with discussions.