University of London

Institutional audit

March 2011

Annex to the report

Contents

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the University of London (the University) from 28 March to 1 April 2011 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the University offers.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations the audit team's view of the University of London is that:

- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards
- **confidence** can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The University's understanding of enhancement is the sharing of the Colleges' collective knowledge and experience, with a view to improving the quality of provision; it acknowledges that the potential for enhancement is as yet not fully realised.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students largely, but not entirely, meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (*Code of practice*)*, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

Reliance can largely be placed on the accuracy of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards; but in the School of Advanced Study some aspects of version control and accuracy would benefit from management attention.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the University considers further action in some areas.

Recommendations for action that the team considers advisable:

- ensure that, through Collegiate Council, it discharges its collective responsibilities in respect of: the routine review of the currency of its Regulatory Framework (paragraph 7); the management of quality and standards in the School of Advanced Study (paragraph 12); the consistent monitoring of the performance of all central activities (paragraph 59)
- require the School of Advanced Study to: undertake regular reviews of the currency and scope of its Quality Assurance Framework (paragraph 10); develop and implement an approach to annual monitoring that ensures an holistic evaluation of

each taught and research programme (paragraphs 19 and 68); adopt a consistent and effective approach to periodic programme review (paragraph 20); develop a reliable means of assuring itself that it complies with its Regulatory Framework, with particular regard to the QAA Academic Infrastructure (paragraph 22); prescribe common assessment practices for all taught programmes, permitting variation only after consideration of an academic rationale and approval at School level (paragraph 26); use, as a matter of routine, student management information in assuring itself of the quality and academic standards of taught and research degrees (paragraphs 28 and 32); ensure that all staff involved in the admission of students to taught and research programmes receive timely information, support and training (paragraphs 45 and 65); ensure the accuracy and consistency of all information for students published by the institutes (paragraph 73)

- require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to: collecting, considering and responding to feedback (paragraph 34); training representatives (paragraph 37); making available and ensuring awareness of informed and impartial advice about School procedures (paragraph 48); making available and ensuring awareness of information about English language support (paragraphs 49 and 66).

Recommendations for action that the team considers desirable:

- encourage the School of Advanced Study: consistently to share external examiners' reports with student representatives (paragraphs 36 and 74); to develop a systematic approach to enhancement (paragraph 61)
- assign overall responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of information published by the University of London (paragraph 71).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   The University of London (the University) was granted its first charter in 1836 and is the third oldest University in England. Its mission emphasises public benefit, the advancement of knowledge and learning, and achieving and maintaining the highest academic standards. The University has never been a unitary institution, and, since major governance changes in 1994, has functioned both as an equal member of a federated institution with the 19 Colleges comprising the Federation, and as directly responsible for the work of a number of Central Academic Bodies (see paragraph 5); it also provides facilities (central activities: see paragraphs 40-42) for eligible members of the University.

2   At the time of the previous audit, the University was in the early stages of developing a revised governance model, in good part to clarify and better operationalise the primacy of College interests within the federal institution: this process was formally completed in 2008, when the Privy Council approved the consequential revised Statutes. The model placed responsibility for institutional governance in the hands of a Board of Trustees with majority independent membership, abolishing the Senate and instituting the Collegiate Council (the Council) as the University's senior academic body. The Council is constituted of the heads of the Colleges and the Dean of the School of Advanced Study (the School): it is chaired by the Vice-Chancellor, not from a position of superiority or even as first among equals, but as an equal stakeholder in the collective discharge of institutional-level responsibility for academic quality and standards. Hence, within the University Federation (the University's preferred nomenclature) the Colleges and the University collectively, not the University as a separate or superior body, lie at the heart of decision-making and strategic planning.

3   The Council is supported by an Academic Quality Advisory Committee constituted of quality practitioners from the Colleges, the School and the University of London International Academy (the Academy). The Committee replaced the Quality Practitioners Forum, retaining, however, much the same membership; but whereas the Forum's activities largely involved overseeing the production of the University Quality Overview Report, collating information and providing routes for the sharing of good practice, the Committee is additionally charged with quality enhancement (see paragraph 13). At the time of the audit, a Research Degrees Committee was also in existence, but it is likely soon to be abolished (see paragraph 64). None of these bodies has student representation.

4   The previous audit report expressed concern that, as a degree-awarding institution, the University corporately lacked the power to safeguard the academic standards of awards made in its name. With all Colleges legally autonomous and directly funded, the new model clarifies but does not alter this position. Nevertheless, the Colleges are all separately audited by QAA, and constitutionally required to ensure that a response to audit reports containing anything less than a judgement of confidence is brought to the attention of the University, as embodied in the Council. The fact that, short of recommending to the Trustees that a College be required to leave the Federation, the Council lacks direct power over the Colleges**,** most of which award University of London degrees, is clearly of central relevance to the present audit. Accordingly, so far as the federal institution is concerned, the audit gives particular consideration to the effectiveness with which the University discharges its academic responsibilities in a context in which it has collective moral and professional authority but no enforcement powers.

5   In addition, the University exercises direct responsibility for the quality and standards of provision in the Central Academic Bodies. These are: the School, which is

constituted of 10 institutes (of which seven offer postgraduate taught and research programmes) and some 350 postgraduate students, of which slightly over half are taking taught master's programmes; the University Marine Biological Station Millport; the University of London Institute in Paris; the University of London International Academy. Of these, the Biological Station, the Paris Institute and the Academy are excluded from the present audit: the first because it no longer makes University of London academic awards; the second because it is included in the Royal Holloway University of London audit; and the third because it is subject to separate audit. Of the Central Academic Bodies, therefore, only the School is included in this audit.

The information base for the audit

6   The University provided the audit team with an institutional briefing paper, which incorporated a separate briefing paper from the School. Supporting documentation included material related to the sampling trails selected by the team. The briefing paper contained references to sources of evidence to illustrate the University's approach to managing the security of its awards and the quality of its educational provision, and the team had access to electronic or hard copies of all documents referenced therein, as well as access to the School intranet and the Central Secretariat web document service for all relevant committees. The team also had access to the report of the University's previous Institutional audit (June 2005); the report of the special review of research degree programmes (July 2006) and a range of internal documents. Members of the School's Student Representatives Committee produced a student written submission setting out students' views on the accuracy of the information provided, their experience as learners and their role in quality management. The team thanks the authors for their submission.

Developments since the previous audit

7   The major changes since the previous audit are the constitutional revisions outlined above. In addition, while at the time of the last audit the Council's collective responsibility for maintaining the academic standards of University of London awards required it to confirm that such standards were comparable, following a separate revision to Ordinances the Council is now required only to confirm that they meet the appropriate academic standard specified in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). In doing so, while drawing reassurance from the fact that all Colleges are separately audited by QAA, the Council relies largely on the Academic Framework specified in University Regulation 1 (hereinafter the Regulatory Framework). This prescribes: formal requirements covering all awards; the boundaries of University (as against College) responsibilities; that each College must report annually on specified topics, address matters raised by external examiners (and action ensuing where a possible threat to academic standards exists) and identify items of good practice; and that affirmation be provided that quality assurance arrangements meet University requirements. The Council is empowered to seek reassurance on any unresolved matter identified in reports, but on the understanding that remedial action is a College responsibility. The audit team, while noting the thoroughness of aspects of these responsibilities, noted also that no procedure exists for the routine review of the Academic Framework's alignment with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points. It is advisable that the University ensures, through the Collegiate Council, that it discharges its collective responsibilities in respect of the routine review of the currency of its Regulatory Framework.

8   The University's previous Institutional audit resulted in a judgement of limited confidence in the soundness of its present and likely future management, as a corporate institution, of its specific responsibilities as an awarding body. The audit identified one feature of good practice and made one essential, three advisable and three desirable

recommendations. Of these, the feature of good practice is no longer relevant; the essential recommendation (that the University should develop means by which it could better demonstrate accountability for the use made of its degree awarding powers) was addressed to the satisfaction of QAA under the previous governance arrangements, as were the remaining six recommendations. Of these, the three advisable recommendations related to different aspects of the constitutional relationship between the University and the Colleges (and in one case the Central Academic Bodies); of the three desirable recommendations one related to federal programmes (which have since been discontinued) and two to the School, which responded generally appropriately to them, in particular increasing the levels of externality involved in its academic management systems.

Institutional framework for the management of academic standards and learning opportunities

9   As will by now be clear, the present audit falls into two largely but not wholly distinct parts: the University as a central body and as a federal institution. In the former guise the audit team's focus of attention was primarily on the effectiveness of the University's management of the School's quality assurance system, for which it has direct responsibility. In the latter it focuses on the activities of the Council (in overseeing the work of the Colleges) and of the Academic Quality Advisory Committee.

10   In the case of the School, the Dean, as principal academic officer, acts under delegated authority from the Vice-Chancellor, to whom, unlike the heads of College, he reports directly. The Vice-Chancellor also chairs the School Board, the School's senior deliberative body. The School describes itself as an umbrella organisation sheltering 10 distinct institutes, and consolidating and coordinating their different activities, with the aim of increasing opportunities for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching, research and scholarship. The audit team, noting that the School's Quality Assurance Framework for Postgraduate Teaching (the Framework) is critical to the process of consolidation and coordination, noted also the absence of any procedure for routinely reviewing the Framework as a whole. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to undertake regular reviews of the currency and scope of its Quality Assurance Framework.

11   In the case of the Colleges, some award their own degrees, some are empowered to do so but do not exercise that power, and some are only authorised to award University of London degrees. The University does not distinguish these categories as members of the Federation, nor does it exercise separate oversight from a position of superiority over the academic standards of awards made by the Colleges in its name. It does, however, impose more stringent annual reporting requirements on Colleges, which award University of London degrees than on those which do not. These requirements take the form of an annual reporting system, discussed in greater detail below and demanded only in modified form of Colleges not awarding University of London degrees (see paragraph 13).

12   Despite the Council's different responsibilities for quality and standards in the Colleges and the School, largely the same mechanisms for collective responsibility apply to both. But whereas each College is required to have approved quality assurance procedures, the School is not. While procedures for the management of School awards exist and are specified in the Framework, the Framework itself, as revised in 2006, although central to the management of academic quality and standards, has not been formally approved either by the University or the School. It is advisable that the University ensure that, through Collegiate Council, it discharges its collective responsibilities in respect of the management of quality and standards in the School of Advanced Study.

13   The reporting system requires Colleges to report annually to the University on specified areas of activity, drawing attention in particular to the outcomes of any engagements with QAA, including how any adverse findings have been addressed. The audit team confirms that the system operates as intended: the Academic Quality Advisory Committee receives College annual reports and produces a University Quality Overview Report (the Report). The team notes, however, that the Council has: neither commissioned nor received any collective analysis of Colleges' Institutional audit reports in connection with themes emerging; given little attention to making features of good practice visible for wider benefit (a matter also noted by the Academic Quality Advisory Committee); and has not explored, other than individually, the fact that since the University's previous Institutional audit three Colleges have received judgements of limited confidence in respect of some aspect of their provision and a small number of others, while receiving a judgement of confidence, have been found to have significant shortcomings in quality management.

14   In the light of factors such as these, the University has recently instituted a joint Council-Committee Working Group to consider the fitness for purpose of the annual reporting system as a whole (see also paragraph 57). The audit team found the Working Group's initial analysis an apposite assessment of the limitations of the present system, and one with the potential to make future annual reports more reflective of the current statutory position and more helpful to the University. At the time of the audit, however, the Group's inaugural meeting had yet to take place.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

15   For ease of reference all aspects of external examining, programme approval, monitoring and review and institutional engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points are described and discussed in this section.

External examiners

16   The School requires each programme to have at least one external and one intercollegiate examiner: the term external examiner is here used to include both. The procedures for nominating, approving, inducting and supporting external examiners were all found to be satisfactory. External examiners' reports are comprehensive in scope, and include comment on the comparability of standards with those in equivalent programmes elsewhere in the United Kingdom (including within the University Federation). The Dean solicits responses to reports from institute directors, on the basis of which the Registry prepares an overview report for the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. While the audit team confirms that this procedure operates reliably and is an effective means of enabling the Committee to assure itself that matters requiring attention receive it, there is scope for improving the consistency with which items of good practice are progressed, and with which institutes provide feedback to external examiners themselves.

17   The audit team confirms that the external examiner system broadly meets the expectations of the *Code of practice*, *Section 4: External examining* and contributes effectively to the management of academic standards.

Programme approval, monitoring and review

18   Proposals for the approval of new programmes originate within institutes, progressing through the higher degrees committee of the institute concerned and the Academic Quality and Standards Committee to the School Board: all these bodies have

external and student representation. The procedure, which involves scrutiny of a wide range of information about academic and business matters and requires inclusion of a programme specification, was found to be thorough, robust and fit for purpose.

19   Annual programme monitoring, a responsibility of institute higher degrees committees, is informed by inputs which include student questionnaires, the minutes of staff-student liaison committees and individual student progress reports. This procedure was found to operate generally, although not wholly, satisfactorily. Minutes and other relevant papers are forwarded to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee; higher degrees committees are not, however, required to report on the outcomes of monitoring, by focusing, for example, on programme specifications, or by providing the Committee with an overview based on the totality of evidence available. It follows that the system as a whole does not wholly meet the expectation of the Quality Assurance Framework that the School provide the University with such evidence as would enable it to have confidence in the overall effectiveness of programmes and courses. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement an approach to annual monitoring that ensures an holistic evaluation of each taught and research programme.

20   According to the Quality Assurance Framework, programme review is conducted to an agreed, normally quinquennial, cycle by the higher degrees committee concerned (or a sub-committee convened to act on its behalf), always with student representation. The papers are submitted to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, which in this case considers them as a discrete agenda item. The purposes of review include engagement with external reference points. Its methodology involves a self-evaluation report and associated documentation being submitted to an external assessor who reports on strengths and weaknesses; innovative aspects of practice; whether aims and outcomes have been met; whether the programme remains valid; and possible areas for improvement. The audit team noted that while, in a recent review, the external assessor's report was wholly positive, the assessor concerned had had many previous and recent engagements with the institute concerned. The School may find it helpful to review the appropriateness and operation of its requirements in this area. The team also noted that, while the conduct of all reviews scrutinised conforms to the Quality Assurance Framework specification, the reviews themselves take a wide variety of approaches, both in focus (with some reviewing a single programme and some groups of programmes) and method (at least one involved an extended visit by the external assessor and a meeting with students; most were desk-based). No explicit rationale for these differences was discernible. The team, while noting that the School has recently agreed steps to strengthen and consolidate the process, believes that a specification which permits such variations in method and focus would benefit from further consideration. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to adopt a consistent an effective approach to periodic programme review.

21   Overall, the audit team found that approval, monitoring and review largely meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*, and contribute to assuring the University of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of student learning opportunities.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

22   As noted in paragraphs 17 and 21, the School's external examining, and approval, monitoring and review arrangements are broadly aligned with relevant expectations of the *Code of practice*. The audit team confirms that amendments made to distance learning, research degrees and potential collaborative arrangements make reference to relevant sections of the *Code of practice*, and that in all cases programme specifications align academic standards with the level descriptors of the FHEQ. Since all programmes are

postgraduate, the School pays less attention to the expectations of subject benchmark statements. Nevertheless, in the absence of regular and formal means of establishing congruence between the requirements of the Quality Assurance Framework and the Academic Infrastructure, the School is not wholly compliant with University regulations. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop a reliable means of assuring itself that it complies with its Regulatory Framework, with particular regard to the QAA Academic Infrastructure.

Assessment policies and regulations

23   Within the University Federation, Colleges are responsible, within specified parameters, for making regulations for taught programmes of study. These arrangements are broadly mirrored in the School, where, however, responsibility for approving them rests with the Council. The School's Quality Assurance Framework specifies arrangements for dealing with such matters as late submission of assessed work, extenuating circumstances and the school-wide credit system, but leaves many matters to the institutes, requiring them only to publicise and use clear assessment and marking schemes.

24   The audit team found that this approach lends itself to a wide variety of practices. The minimum length for dissertations ranges from 10,000 to 20,000 words; there is a lack of consistency in applying the credit system: in spite of a school-wide policy of assigning 60 credits to the dissertation, different institutes weight them at 30, 70 and 80 credits. In the case of resit examinations, capping arrangements vary widely. For example, one institute permits one resit per module with no penalty, whereas another sets the resit mark at the mid-point between the mark achieved and the pass mark. Similarly, in the case of over-length work in one institute, the examination board determines penalties without recourse to regulation, whereas another leaves the matter to the discretion of the lecturer. In the case of late submission of assessed work, whereas the School requires a 10 per cent deduction per week, this is not systematically adhered to: for example, one institute imposes a three per cent deduction per day.

25   The audit team also found different understandings of the regulations across the School, particularly in respect of the boundaries of permitted discretion. Further, in one case where an institute examination board agreed a significant variation from the norm, the minutes in question were merely 'received and noted' by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee; whereas the institute took this as approval, no discussion or record of approval appeared in the minutes. The team found that this does not constitute a proper means of agreeing variations.

26   These practices do not meet the expectation of the *Code of practice, Section 7* that institutions should 'publicise and implement principles and procedures for, and processes of, assessment that are explicit, valid and reliable'. It is advisable that the University requires the School of Advanced Study to prescribe common assessment practices for all taught programmes, permitting variation only after consideration of an academic rationale and approval at School level.

27   It should be stressed that the audit team found no evidence of any student receiving an academic award for work which fails to meet the level descriptors in the FHEQ. Indeed, the evidence adduced from its enquiries, particularly from external examiners' reports, confirms that the institutes set their academic expectations considerably above threshold requirements. Nevertheless, at an operational level, in that they permit significant and seemingly unjustifiable variations, the assessment regulations neither set nor maintain a consistent set of expectations or methods across the School. This being so, the School's assessment framework, regulations and conduct of examinations, while contributing

effectively to each institute's maintenance of the academic standards of awards, do not currently ensure that a consistent standard is set and maintained at School level.

Management information (statistics)

28   The University Regulatory Framework specifies that annual reports from Colleges and Central Academic Bodies should include completion and classification statistics for annual analysis and submission to the Collegiate Council and/or Academic Quality Advisory Committee. Nevertheless, the University acknowledges that providing such an analysis has been problematic, and the Council has received no comparable datasets or statistical analysis in the past two years. Similarly, in the case of the School, the School Board has not received any summative data on progression or completion over the same time period, and the most recent annual report provided no analysis of student numbers, pass rates, admissions, withdrawals, or any such quality-related data. While subsets of such information are provided at award level, as noted above (see paragraph 19), annual monitoring is not reported in such a way as to provide a summary overview of all statistical indicators. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to use, as a matter of routine, student management information in assuring itself of the quality and academic standards of taught and research degrees.

29   Overall, and subject to the reservations about aspects of the design and operations of the School's procedures and processes, given the absence of evidence of any threat to the maintenance of threshold standards, confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its programmes and awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

30   All aspects of external examining; programme approval, monitoring and review; and institutional engagement with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points were described in Section 2.

Management information (feedback from students)

31   Within the University Federation all aspects of gathering and analysing student feedback are College responsibilities. In 2009 the Academic Quality Advisory Committee chose student surveys as its thematic enquiry within the annual University Quality Overview Report (see paragraph 13), with particular reference to the collection of student feedback. The Committee stated that at a later meeting it would identify examples of best practice from across the University for dissemination to Colleges: at the time of the audit this had still to be done. The audit team took the view that such thematic enquiries potentially form the basis of an approach to enhancement.

32   Within the School, feedback procedures are governed by the requirement of the Quality Assurance Framework that: it should be secured through representation, staff-student liaison committees and other similar arrangements; student questionnaires should as far as possible be anonymous; they should be reviewed and passed on by the director of the institute concerned to the higher degrees committee; they should proceed to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee and thence to the School Board; and they should be used systematically within annual monitoring (see paragraph 19). While students confirmed to the audit team that they had completed course questionnaires, they could not recall having been told to what use they had been put. The team found evidence of such

questionnaires having been discussed at staff-student meetings but not by more senior committees; learned that informal discussions and regular contact with institute staff are perceived as critical to resolving students' concerns and answering their queries; and found that, in the absence of a common template, they are not necessarily included within the annual monitoring cycle. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to use, as a matter of routine, student management information in assuring itself of the quality and academic standards of taught and research degrees.

33   The School has not thus far participated in the national Postgraduate Taught and Research Student Experience Surveys (although it plans to do so from the present academic year), using instead a similar in-house survey. The audit team confirms that this survey takes place and its results are carefully analysed. The analysis reveals mainly high levels of satisfaction, albeit with some reservations expressed concerning language support, careers advice, social learning spaces and assessment (particularly in the timely return of work). While these outcomes have been discussed formally with student representatives, they have not been fully debated by the School Board, nor has an action plan been developed and students informed of progress. The team also noted the low participation rates, which the School will doubtless continue working to improve.

34   Overall, while the small size and collegial ambience of the School and the institutes mean that many student issues can be resolved informally, the audit team found that the School does not systematically collate, consider and respond to feedback garnered from student surveys. While such feedback is generally handled adequately at institute level, it is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to collecting, considering and responding to feedback.

Role of students in quality assurance

35   At federal level, students have little or no involvement in quality management. There are no student representatives on the Council or the Academic Quality Advisory Committee, although the President of the University of London Union receives non-confidential Council agenda items, and may request permission to attend for items directly related to students: this is an unusual arrangement, which the University may wish to keep under review.

36   Within the School, students are represented on the School Board; Research Committee; Academic Quality and Standards Committee; and the Students' Representative Committee, which is chaired by a student representative and the minutes of which are received by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. Students are also involved in programme approval and review activities, although the team noted a number of inconsistencies in the approach adopted (see paragraph 20). Within the institutes, students are represented on staff-student liaison, higher degrees, and research degrees committees. External examiners' reports are not routinely shared with students; when this issue was debated at the Academic Quality and Standards Committee concerns were raised about the preservation of confidentiality. In the light of the Higher Education Funding Council's expectation on this point, however, it is desirable that the University encourage the School of Advanced Study consistently to share external examiners' reports with student representatives.

37   Given that since the University's previous academic audit the role and remit of the University of London Union have been revised to focus on recreational and sporting activities (although see paragraph 42 for an apparent exception), the Union played no part in the present audit, and the written submission was prepared by members of the School's Students' Representative Committee. In connection with this task, and to give preliminary

consideration to the institution of a School Students' Union, meetings took place between the Union and the Students' Representative Committee, at which it emerged that the Union no longer provides support and training for student representatives. The audit team learned also that existing student representatives have not been trained for their role. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to training representatives.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

38   In addition to permanent staff, distinguished visiting fellows regularly join the institutes, further enriching the research environment. Students confirmed to the audit team that both research reputation and research environment had been influential in their decision to apply, and spoke in particular of the importance they attach to the research seminars, meetings, extra-curricular activities and events which they have the opportunity to attend, both within and across the institutes. While noting with interest the School's assumption that in a research-intensive environment it is axiomatic that the links between research and teaching are close and that, therefore, no explicit attempts need to be made to bring them closer, the audit team concludes that institutional arrangements for maintaining links between research, scholarship and teaching and the students' learning opportunities are effective.

Other modes of study

39   The large majority of distance learning programmes within the University are included in the separate audit of the Academy. Within the School one programme is offered by distance learning. The approval of this programme, which was for one session only (staff confirmed that recruitment has now ceased) and granted with reservations about the mode of delivery and whether an adequate infrastructure was in place, was found to meet all internal requirements. Nevertheless, in that the Vice-Chancellor chairs both key committees involved (School Board and Council), the University may consider it prudent to reassure itself that decisions of the two bodies are demonstrably independent of each other.

Resources for learning

40   The University's central activities include the Senate House Library, the Careers Group, the University of London Union, the University of London Computer Centre, the Residences and the University of London Housing Services. The Collegiate Council is responsible for all these services, and monitors the performance of most but not all of them, reporting on them to the Board of Trustees in a manner designed to integrate academic and financial planning. To the extent that monitoring takes place, these arrangements appear to operate satisfactorily, although a comprehensive approach on the part of the Council would provide added assurance as to the quality of service provided (see paragraph 59).

41   Senate House Libraries (the term embraces both the Senate House Library itself and the School's specialist institute libraries) constitute a resource of international importance. The Library Strategic Planning Board, which includes a student member and reports to the Council, recently revised its terms of reference to align College library strategies with those of the Central Academic Bodies. While the routine user surveys conducted by the Senate House Library have been suspended during major refurbishment, the Library has continued to use blogs and social network sites to monitor responses and facilitate communication: this was found to be a practical interim approach. Within the School, the specialist institute libraries constitute a key learning resource, complemented as

they are by the wide range of public and specialist resources available within the University and in London. Students acknowledged the importance of these resources, particularly within their own institute, in supporting and enhancing their learning.

42   The Careers Group manages the on-site careers services in seven larger Colleges. Its Board, which reports to the Council and is chaired by one of its members, includes in its membership the President of the University of London Union and a student member nominated by a College students' union. The audit team found evidence of: the rigorous use of student feedback in making continual improvements to services; a wide range of events and activities; and a commitment to developing strong relationships with employers and throughout the University. The Specialist Institutions Careers Service provides a tailored service for students studying in smaller Colleges and Central Academic Bodies, including the School. Staff of the Service, who acknowledge that the small size of the institutes and their specialist focus present challenges requiring continuing engagement, offer specialist sessions, close employer liaison, and advice to academic staff on employability issues.

43   The School's virtual learning environment constitutes a resource for information and exchange for students, providing, in particular, information on research training sessions and events. The School's significant and growing web presence is increasingly central to both research and teaching, although a recent review concluded that significant investment is needed if it is to achieve a more structured and coherent interface.

Admissions policy

44   While within the University Federation admissions is wholly a College responsibility, the University supports the process through means which include: institution-wide open days; and a Taster Course Programme which allows potential applicants to acclimatise themselves to university life by sampling selected College courses. The University website's course finder link also enables students to navigate to programmes of potential interest.

45   Within the School, a procedural framework for the accreditation of prior learning has been approved but is not yet fully operational: until then there remains the possibility of inconsistencies across institutes. The School has a common admissions policy which does not meet all expectations of the Quality Assurance Framework or of the relevant section of the *Code of practice.* In particular, whereas the Framework requires all staff involved in admissions to be informed about policies and procedures, the audit team learned that not all such staff have received training: the School is unable, therefore, to be sure that it meets this requirement. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to ensure that all staff involved in the admission of students to taught and research programmes receive timely information, support and training.

46   While the School's attractiveness to academically well-qualified applicants enables it to set high expectations for applicants and achieve excellent completion rates, there is scope for it to achieve greater consistency across the institutes.

Student support

47   Within the University Federation, Colleges are responsible for providing day-to-day student support. The audit team, while noting that most but not all Colleges have and support a students' union, found uncertainty within some Colleges as to the representative responsibilities of the University of London Union. This uncertainty relates both to students in Colleges without a students' union and to those who, while having access to a College union, prefer to seek advice elsewhere. For example, whereas the University Union had been described to the team as having purely social and sporting functions, one College's

registration form states: 'Students at constituent Colleges of the University of London are entitled to representation, support and services from the University of London Union.' The University will wish to clarify this point.

48   Students of the School do not have access to a students' union, and the audit team found that the handbooks available to them, while explaining the procedures in respect of such matters as academic misconduct, do not offer consistent information on where independent advice, support and guidance can be obtained. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to making available and ensuring awareness of informed and impartial advice about School procedures.

49   Students of the School spoke positively of the information and advice they had received prior to arrival, although international students would have valued more detailed practical information and speedier confirmation of acceptance for visa purposes. On arrival, induction arrangements were generally valued, subject to some reservations concerning the responsiveness and helpfulness of the Registry. The issue of support for the use of English for academic purposes was raised with the audit team, which found that practice is variable across the institutes, with some students receiving such support as an integral part of their programme of study, some being referred to providers elsewhere in the University, some having paid for the service and some having received it without charge. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to making available and ensuring awareness of information about English language support.

50   In the absence of a school-wide policy on personal tutoring, practice varies across institutes, although students strongly and consistently emphasised to the audit team the value they place on the collegial opportunities available to them for informal as well as formal contact with academic staff. The School website and student handbooks provide links to the University's range of equality, disability and diversity policies, and to the School's Equality Scheme and Disability Statement. These latter confirm a strong commitment to a diverse entry and to supporting students with disabilities, although the annual report on disability activities in particular is not formally and systematically considered within the School.

Staff support

51   Within the University Federation, Colleges are responsible for all aspects of staff employment and support; for staff of the School and other Central Academic Bodies these responsibilities are borne largely by the University's Human Resources Department. Within the School the institutes have distinctive staff profiles, and the University states that newly-appointed academic staff members are likely to be experienced and well-established in their fields. Induction is undertaken at both School and institute levels. A postgraduate certificate programme delivered by a College is available to all newly-appointed staff as an opportunity, not an obligation: the audit team found that no policy yet exists for factoring time spent on it into workloads, and take-up is low.

52   Within the School, annual appraisal of academic staff is conducted by institute directors (who are in turn appraised by the Dean) on the basis of a competency framework, which the School believes has increased the clarity of the procedure. The School considers that appraisal assists the identification, support and monitoring of staff development needs: such needs are addressed by or through the University's Staff Development Unit. Peer observation of teaching is not undertaken systematically within the institutes, although school-wide plans are in place to encourage wider and more consistent usage.

53   The audit team found that arrangements for the support and development of centrally-employed academic staff are generally effective.

54   Subject to the recommendations contained in this section, confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the School's current and likely future management of students' learning opportunities.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

55   The University's collective oversight of Colleges includes enhancing academic excellence by sustaining an enabling structure for general support and the sharing of good practice. The Council, supported by its Academic Quality Advisory Committee, is the main institutional vehicle for delivering this inter-collegial collaboration and co-operation; it aims to do so by dialogue, not policy. The Committee, the brief of which includes enhancement, discharges this duty mainly by devoting an annual meeting to discussing a topic of its choice, enabling members to take back examples of good practice for consideration by their Colleges.

56   The University Quality Overview Report (see paragraph 13) draws on College and Central Academic Body annual reports to provide assurance that these institutions are safeguarding the integrity of University awards. Following Council approval, the Report (which consists mainly of a digest of external examiners' comments, a summary of good practice and responses to an annual thematic enquiry), is circulated to promote the sharing of good practice. The University is, however, aware that the process, which has been little changed for some years, is, for reasons which include variable levels of College commitment, not optimally effective, and would benefit from revivification.

57   With such considerations in mind, shortly prior to audit the University established a working group to review not only (as was originally envisaged) the statistical basis of the Report but also, and more broadly, matters which include: the Committee's remit and effectiveness; annual reporting arrangements; the Report template's effectiveness in supporting quality assurance and enhancement; and the Report's fitness for purpose in respect of research degrees. At the time of the audit, the inaugural meeting of this working group had yet to take place; nevertheless, the audit team notes the frank analysis of the group's contextual paper: Committee discussion is sometimes bland and inhibits constructive criticism; obtaining feedback from Colleges on their use of reports is challenging; securing enhancement is distinct from garnering and sharing items of good practice; and it is difficult to develop a systematic approach to enhancement with little supporting data and no developed central infrastructure to analyse or synthesise reports or promote inter-College dialogue.

58   While the Regulatory Framework requires each College to provide the Council with all QAA reports and the response, the University does not take full advantage of the opportunity this presents to promote enhancement, since normally only reports containing an adverse judgement are discussed in detail. While the University provides an enabling framework for enhancement through intercollegiate initiatives, and numerous interesting examples exist of imaginative collaboration across the Federation, these arise more from dialogue than from deliberate or systematic planning.

59   The University is working to improve the quality and responsiveness of the central support services offered to Colleges, and the Council has recently discussed options for strengthening, expanding and systematising them, in part by standardising their management information systems. The audit team, while noting these discussions, is unclear how the Council currently exercises its remit of overseeing those central activities

which do not submit regular reports themselves and on which the Council does not systematically report. It is advisable that, through Collegiate Council, the University discharge its collective responsibilities in respect of the consistent monitoring of the performance of all central activities.

60   The School, which describes itself as an umbrella organisation sheltering a rich collection of distinctive institutes (see also paragraph 10), views quality enhancement primarily as an opportunity for interaction and networking, both among the institutes and with institutes' networks of partners and collaborators. Indeed, the School's draft revised Learning and Teaching Strategy refers to enhancement only in the context of a broad commitment to continued improvement in research, research degree supervision and staff training; and institutes' strategic plans seldom refer explicitly to enhancing learning opportunities. The audit team found little evidence of the enhancement opportunities available to the institutes being consistently and reliably utilised, transferred to other institutes, evaluated or reflected upon for the benefit of the School as a whole. It follows that the School has some way to go before it has in place procedures which draw effectively on its exceptional academic strengths, distinctive portfolio, and innovative learning and teaching to generate opportunities to enhance the quality of provision.

61   The audit team acknowledges that the School's agenda for change over the next two years includes initiatives with enhancement potential, notably: harmonising the student experience across institutes; revising school-level quality procedures; and providing the Academic Quality and Standards Committee with such data as will enable it to set objectives and plan action for continuous improvement. Nevertheless, in that this agenda has yet to be implemented, it is desirable that the University encourage the School of Advanced Study to develop a systematic approach to enhancement.

62   The University's understanding of enhancement is the sharing of the Colleges' collective knowledge and experience, with a view to improving the quality of provision; it acknowledges that the potential for enhancement has yet to be fully realised.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

63   In the context of the present audit, the University has no collaborative arrangements falling within the QAA definition of the term.

Section 6 Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

64   Colleges are responsible for all aspects of their research degree students' progress. Nevertheless, the fact that aspects of the administration of examinations were a central responsibility until 2010 meant that at the time of the audit the Council's Research Degrees Committee remained in existence to oversee residual examinations and contribute to the University Quality Overview Report. These transitional arrangements appear to have operated satisfactorily; the Council will wish to ensure that, following the demise of the Committee, research degrees are adequately covered in future reports.

65   The School of Advanced Study registers some 150 research students annually for the seven institutes offering doctoral supervision. It has standard admissions criteria, accepts full and part-time students, and normally requires United Kingdom residency prior to writing-up. Prospective students are encouraged to make initial informal contact with the institute concerned, where they are put in touch with a potential supervisor; but at a formal level applications are independently assessed and forwarded to the relevant institute

research degrees committee (or its equivalent) for ratification and admission (to MPhil in the first instance). Nevertheless, while the administrative arrangements for admissions are clearly articulated and well-managed, the audit team notes that academic staff involved with admissions receive no training. Since a research proposal forms the major part of an application, the advice given is crucial, not only academically but also in the wider context of the applicant's preparedness for advanced study, and the School's current arrangements do not wholly meet the expectations of *Section 1* of the *Code of practice*. It is (see paragraph 45) advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to ensure that staff involved in the admission of students to taught and (in this case) research programmes receive timely information, support and training.

66   There are several possible entry points available to new students, and the School offers a formal structured, mandatory and comprehensive induction programme each October for new and recently-registered students. These arrangements were found to be satisfactory, although, as noted previously (see paragraph 49) it would be prudent for further thought to be given to: strengthening early support for international students; addressing the variability of provision for students requiring help with English language and communications skills; and improving the quality of information provided. While the audit team was told that suitable arrangements for language teaching can be made with a College, this information is neither routinely included in student handbooks nor universally known in the institutes. Since all these matters extend to research students, it is (see paragraph 49) advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to making available and ensuring awareness of information about English language support.

67   Supervisors are appointed by the institute research degrees committee or its equivalent; their status, qualifications, expertise and responsibilities are formally established and appropriately communicated. On the minority of occasions when an external supervisor is used, an internal monitoring 'supervisor of record' is also appointed. Subject supervisors are the normal point of contact for the student; in the case of interdisciplinary studies co-supervisors may have equal responsibility but one is identified as the main point of contact. The progress of supervision is closely monitored by the research degrees committee; clear requirements are in place for the submission of research and training plans, upgrading, submission of drafts, and final examination.

68   The audit team met research students, supervisors, and management and support staff, and scrutinised relevant School and institute documentation. Students spoke highly of the research environment, the availability of appropriate facilities, the quality of academic support and advice received, and the quality of research training. The team, while confirming that the monitoring of progress of individual students and the actions taken in the case of individual students are thorough and appropriate, noted that the Academic Quality and Standards Committee does not oversee postgraduate research programmes either collectively (in respect, for example, of admissions and completion data) or systematically. As before (see paragraph 19) it is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement an approach to annual monitoring that ensures an holistic evaluation of each taught and (in this instance) research programme.

69   The University's arrangements for its postgraduate research students largely but not entirely meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Section 7: Published information

70   Each College is responsible for the accuracy and completeness of the information it provides. The central University website publishes general information on the Federation and its activities, and provides links to all College prospectuses, thereby allowing enquirers to search for a specific programme across the Federation.

71   The University publishes a wide range of materials: the Information Team has main responsibility for online entries; the Information Management Group oversees the Publication Scheme and the Records Management and Archive Policy; and the Communications Office is responsible for embedding good communications practice throughout the central University. In addition, the Student Transcripts and Academic Records Office is the central repository of University of London academic awards. All certificates for such awards are issued centrally, although additional evidence such as transcripts and diploma supplements are normally issued by the College concerned. The audit team learned both that the University does not have an Information Strategy, and that each central activity is responsible for maintaining the accuracy of its own website. Self-evidently, risks of erroneous or outdated information being made publicly available are inherent in this approach. It is desirable that the University assign overall responsibility for assuring the accuracy of information published by the University of London.

72   Within the School, the Quality Assurance Framework requires all institutes to provide clear, accurate and up-to-date information to applicants and students. Online information is distributed between the School website and the various institute websites. The former aims to be both a comprehensive and authoritative information resource and a portal to the latter, not all of which, the audit team found, are equally assiduously maintained. The School website contains guidance on funding and research skills; programme handbooks; an online prospectus; course leaflets; and a full set of programme specifications and module descriptions.

73   Overall responsibility for the accuracy of information published by the School rests with the Dean, who delegates the management, maintenance and development of the website to appropriate officers and departments. Within this authority framework, institutes are responsible for their own websites and handbooks. The audit team found that they vary considerably in focus, format and user friendliness; some contain a wide range of information not primarily targeted at students; and some contain incorrect, outdated or conflicting information. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to ensure the accuracy and consistency of all information for students published by the institutes.

74   For the most part the externally available information required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England guidelines is published online, and the teaching quality information on the Unistats website was found to be accurate and complete. External examiners' reports are not, however, routinely shared with student representatives: while the Academic Quality and Standards Committee recently determined that they should be, this decision has yet to be fully implemented. It is (see paragraph 36) desirable that the University encourage the School of Advanced Study consistently to share external examiners' reports with student representatives.

75   Students who met the audit team endorsed the positive view expressed in the student written submission, and are generally satisfied with the published information available both before entry and subsequently. The results of the most recent internal graduate student surveys would justify a similar conclusion, although it is clear (see paragraph 73) that this view, while genuinely held, is not authoritative.

76   Reliance can largely be placed on the accuracy of the information the University publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards; but in the School of Advanced Study some aspects of version control and accuracy would benefit from management attention.