

# Birkbeck University of London

## Institutional audit

**JUNE 2010**

### Annex to the report

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## **Introduction**

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Institutional audit of Birkbeck University of London (the College) from 7-11 June 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the College's management of the academic standards of the awards it offers and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## **Outcomes of the Institutional audit**

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the College is that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards it offers
- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

## **Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

The College's approach to quality enhancement is to integrate enhancement as far as possible into routine quality assurance procedures. Enhancement is prominent in the College's Quality Strategy 2009-12, and in its procedures for programme approval, annual monitoring, peer observation of teaching, external examining and periodic review.

## **Postgraduate research students**

The College has succeeded in establishing and sustaining a vibrant research environment for its research students, underpinned by a Code of Practice which fulfils the expectations of the relevant parts of the Academic Infrastructure.

## **Published information**

The audit team concluded that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information the College publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

## **Features of good practice**

The audit team identified the following features of good practice:

- the integrated advice, support and guidance provided by My Birkbeck
- procedures for the peer review of teaching
- the integration of the former Faculty of Lifelong Learning into the restructured schools, and the attendant benefits to progression, pedagogy and curricula across the College.

## Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the College considers action in certain areas.

It would be advisable for the College to:

- ensure that it adheres to the University of London's regulations regarding the University's approval of collaborative provision
- ensure that all collaborative links are underpinned by a signed written agreement whose contents are informed by the guidance in Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*)
- ensure the full implementation, with regard to collaborative provision, of the College's policy and guidance on the role of external examiners
- achieve full implementation of the College's policy on the annual monitoring of programmes as it is described in the Quality Assurance/Enhancement Code of Practice 2009-10.

It would be desirable for the College to:

- resolve those issues associated with the implementation of the Common Awards Scheme which remain outstanding
- establish minimum standards for the use of the virtual learning environment by teaching staff
- reflect on the operation of the new programme approval process and consider if the overwhelming use of the fast track procedure in 2009-10 will continue to be appropriate in the future
- develop an explicit definition of a minor amendment to a programme
- pursue the systematic use of quantitative data in internal review
- expedite the production and publication of definitive programme specifications
- assess the needs of all postgraduate research students who are engaged in teaching and provide appropriate training where necessary
- consider introducing student membership of school teaching quality and enhancement committees
- develop comprehensive support for the training of student representatives.

## Section 1: Introduction and background

### The College and its mission

1 Birkbeck was founded in 1823 as the London Mechanics' Institute. It was incorporated into the University of London in 1920 and continues to award degrees of the University.

2 The College's longstanding evening teaching pattern enables students to attain an undergraduate degree in four years. It also offers programmes of a variety of lengths and levels, including taught and research degrees, certificates, diplomas and short programmes, in the daytime, evening and weekend.

3 The College's principal aims are to provide part-time higher education programmes to adults, in particular those who live and work in the London region; enable adult students from diverse social and educational backgrounds to participate in its programmes; maintain and develop excellence in research; and to make the results of research available through teaching, publication, partnerships with other organisations and the promotion of debate.

4 Most of the College's provision is located on its campus in central London. It also has provision in Stratford, East London, launched in 2007, which the College plans to augment through the construction of its own teaching accommodation there.

5 Teaching takes place across a broad range of disciplines which are organised into five schools: Arts; Business, Economics and Informatics; Law; Science; and Social Sciences, History and Philosophy. The schools comprise a number of smaller units, most of which are called departments. The schools also host 30 research centres.

6 In 2009-10, the College had around 14,000 students (equating to approximately 7,500 full time equivalents). Of these, about 900 were on research degree programmes.

## **The information base for the audit**

7 The audit team had access to the reports of the following QAA reviews: the Institutional audit of Birkbeck, June 2005; and the QAA Review of postgraduate research degree programmes for Birkbeck, July 2006.

8 The College provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper outlining its approach to managing quality and standards, supporting information (as cited in the Briefing Paper) and sets of documents relating to the sampling audit trails selected by the team.

9 The College's Students Union produced a student written submission (SWS) covering the accuracy of the information provided for students, the experience of students as learners, and students' involvement in quality assurance processes.

10 The audit team was given access to the College's internal documents on the intranet. It met groups of staff and students according to a programme agreed with the College.

## **Developments since the last audit**

11 The most significant development since the last Institutional audit in 2005 has been a strategic review and subsequent restructuring of the College's deliberative and academic framework (including the replacement of faculties with the five schools described in paragraph 5). The review was prompted by the withdrawal, in 2007, of funding for equivalent and lower qualifications, which was followed by the provision to the College of significant new student numbers. This led the College to initiate a portfolio review with the aim of identifying areas for expansion, and breaking down the additional student numbers into achievable targets for each school, department and programme.

12 QAA's last audit of the College resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the quality of its academic programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The report noted one feature of good practice, made six recommendations where action was considered advisable and four where action was considered desirable. The advisable recommendations related to: the expedition of the planned review of the College's committee structure; clarification of the location of ultimate responsibility for quality management and academic standards; the implementation of a college-wide procedure for managing late submissions and extenuating circumstances in student assessment; the expedition of the implementation of the common awards framework; a review of the programme approval process; and the clarification of responsibility for actions arising from annual monitoring, internal review and external examiner reports. The desirable recommendations related to: a review of the College's understanding of quality enhancement; an analysis of generic college-wide issues arising from monitoring and review; a minimum standard of virtual learning environment use for all courses; and the achievement of more coordinated provision of academic and personal support services for students.

13 The introduction to the Briefing Paper summarised the College's response to the advisable recommendations. The most significant development has been the strategic review and subsequent restructuring outlined above, which had had the effect of streamlining committee business and clarifying the location of ultimate responsibility for standards and quality. The College had also implemented its Common Awards Scheme, which includes regulations on late submissions and mitigating circumstances, and introduced a new programme approval process from the beginning of the 2009-10 academic year.

14 In general, the audit team regarded the College's response to the advisable recommendations as satisfactory. It noted, however, ongoing discussions within the College about the clarity, and consistency in the application, of the regulations on late submission and mitigating circumstances, which were reflected in comments in the SWS. The Common Awards Scheme is discussed in more detail in Section 2. A new programme approval process was approved by the Teaching Committee for implementation in 2009-10, providing for a staged 18-month process. The process had been introduced too recently for the team to take a definitive view of whether or not it met the concerns of the last audit team. Programme approval is also discussed in more detail in Section 2.

15 With respect to the desirable recommendations from the 2005 audit report, the audit team noted the considerable progress which the College had made in the coordination of personal support services for students. This is discussed in Section 3. The team also noted that the College had successfully adopted new software for its virtual learning environment, which was regarded positively by students and staff. However, the College had not agreed a minimum standard of virtual learning environment use for all programmes. This is also discussed in Section 3.

16 Any particular comments on other areas touched on by the recommendations of the last audit appear in the relevant sections that follow.

17 Overall, the audit team concluded that, while the College had responded appropriately to the recommendations of the last audit, progress had been slower than might have been expected. Indeed, in many cases, new processes and procedures had been implemented so recently that there was very little evidence available about their operation. The new structure might well offer a more dynamic environment for change and fewer schools should lead to greater consistency across the College.

## **Institutional framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities**

18 The College's chief academic and administrative officer is the Master. The Master is assisted by six pro-vice-masters, each with a specific strategic portfolio. The five schools are led by executive deans who also report to the Master; they are supported by assistant deans responsible for departmental subject groupings within schools, and/or for strategic portfolios which complement the portfolios of the pro-vice-masters.

19 The Academic Board is empowered constitutionally as the body responsible for the College's academic affairs. It is a large collegial body with some 200 members, including all professors and readers. The Academic Board Executive Committee (ABExCo) steers and manages the Academic Board's work and makes recommendations to it on academic policy, regulation and strategy. ABExCo is chaired by the Master and the executive deans, and pro-vice-masters are members.

20 The College Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Master for Learning and Teaching. It is responsible to Academic Board, through ABExCo, for the quality of the content and delivery of new and existing taught programmes, and for developing and delivering the College's Learning and Teaching Strategy and Quality Strategy. The assistant deans for learning and teaching are members of TQEC.

21 The College Research Committee is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Master for Research; it has oversight of the College's research activities, and is responsible for quality assurance mechanisms for postgraduate research students and for developing and delivering the College's Research Strategy. The assistant deans for research are members of the Research Committee.

22 Other committees of Academic Board with important roles in the management of standards and quality include: the Student Experience and Widening Participation Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Master for Student Experience, which is responsible for developing and delivering strategies for recruitment and retention; and the College boards of examiners, which are responsible for overseeing the work of the sub-boards of examiners and for approving awards.

23 Each school has a school executive, a school TQEC and a school research committee. The school executive is chaired by the executive dean and is responsible for overseeing the work of the school, its academic plan and the management of its budget. The assistant deans (for departmental subject groupings and strategic portfolios) are members of the school executives. The school TQECs and research committees report both to the school executive and to the counterpart college-level committee.

24 Under the College's previous structure, the provision of short and sub-degree programmes came under the purview of the Faculty of Lifelong Learning. The abolition of the faculties led to the integration of the Faculty of Lifelong Learning and its programmes into the new schools, meaning that taught programmes are now coordinated by subject as well as by level. The audit team noted the clarification which the new arrangement gave to progression routes from short and sub-degree programmes to higher study. The team also noted the pedagogical benefits of distributing the College's expertise in lifelong learning, which had previously been largely confined to the dedicated faculty, across the College as a whole. The team regarded the focus on pedagogic and curriculum advantage in the integration of the former Faculty of Lifelong Learning into the schools (with attendant benefits in inter-departmental working and progression) as a feature of good practice.

25 Operational responsibility for co-ordinating and ensuring the effectiveness of the College's internal quality assurance and enhancement structures and mechanisms lies primarily with the Quality Enhancement and Validation unit (QEV). The unit's website hosts the College's key sources of information about the policies and procedures underpinning the management of quality and standards: the Quality Assurance/Enhancement Code of Practice 2009-10 (hereafter, the College's Code of Practice), the Postgraduate Code of Practice and the Quality Strategy.

26 Overall, the audit team regarded the College's new framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, that is, the executive and deliberative structures, the principal policies and procedures, and the role of QEV, as robust in its design and effective to date. At the time of the audit, much of the new framework had been in place for less than a year and it was, therefore, not possible for the team to determine how these components might work together in the longer term. This is clearly something that the College will wish to keep under review.

## **Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards**

### **Approval, monitoring and review of award standards**

#### **Approval**

27 The College adopted a new programme approval procedure from the beginning of the 2009-10 academic year, which encompasses all new taught programmes (under the previous system, sub-degree programmes in the Faculty of Lifelong Learning followed a

slightly different approval route). The new procedure is described in the College's Code of Practice, the Guide to Developing Programmes, and the Programme Approval Guidance Notes. It is in two parts: the first part, known as 'Approval to proceed', culminates in approval by the College Programmes Committee for the proposal to proceed to full consideration by a Programme Development Panel; the second stage, 'Consideration and Approval', ends in full approval by Academic Board. Proposals for new programmes and major amendments to existing programmes must be signed off by an appropriate external subject specialist using a standard pro-forma attached to the proposal form.

28 Alongside the full procedure outlined above is a conflated 'fast-track' process, which may be invoked exceptionally where the proposal is being submitted in response to a new funding opportunity, a new and clearly defined market opportunity or strategic need, or an unexpected change in key staffing. All requests for consideration through this procedure must be submitted to the Academic Registrar for consideration and accompanied by the explicit approval of the Executive Dean. The proposal should be considered by the chairs of the school Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) and of the College Programmes Committee prior to consideration by a Programme Development Panel. Following the Panel's consideration, the Chair of the College Programmes Committee should make a recommendation, on behalf of the Committee, to the chairs of the College TQEC, Academic Board Executive Committee and Academic Board. All such action should be reported in writing subsequently to the relevant membership. Although the process was not described in detail in the evidence available to the audit team, the involvement of the same sequence of committees as in the main process, and the College's evident general commitment to following the QAA *Code of practice*, enabled the team to conclude that the College was aiming to follow the principles laid down in the normal approval process, including, for example, the involvement of external subject specialists.

29 The audit team noted that, in 2009-10, in response to the pressure to expand student numbers outlined in Section 1, the fast-track process had been invoked on 46 occasions. It had, therefore, in practice become the standard route for programme approval. The team acknowledged the special circumstances underlying the use of the fast-track process in the current session, and took into account that the process described in paragraph 27 would not have allowed new programmes to be introduced until 2011. The evidence demonstrated that the process had been effective in enabling the College to balance meeting a strategic need and maintaining academic standards. In this context, however, the team also found evidence which it felt would give the College itself some concern: for example, one school, following consultation with the Chair of the College Programmes Committee, declaring optional the involvement of external subject specialists where a new programme was largely based on existing material, and examples where the audit team felt that the use of Chair's action risked nullifying the checks and balances provided in the fast-track process. Against this backdrop, the team considered it desirable for the College to reflect on the operation of the new programme approval process and consider if the overwhelming use of the fast-track procedure in 2009-10 will continue to be appropriate in the future.

30 Module and programme leaders may make proposals for new modules or minor amendments to a programme to the school TQEC, which has authority to approve them and report to the College Programmes Committee. The audit team noted that the College did not have an explicit definition of a minor amendment to a programme; by default a minor amendment appeared to be anything below the threshold for a major amendment, which the College's Programme Amendment Form specified as over 50 per cent of the programme as a whole, or over 50 per cent of the assessment on the programme. Even allowing for the fact that the procedure requires school TQEC approval of a minor amendment to be reported to the College Programmes Committee, regulations which in theory allow for a programme to be fundamentally changed through two minor amendments approved at school level only would appear to be inconsistent with the College's responsibility for maintaining an overview

of the standards of the awards it offers. The audit team, therefore, considered it desirable for the College to develop an explicit definition of a minor amendment to a programme.

31 The audit team noted that the current Programme Withdrawal or Suspension Form does not ask about the implications of withdrawal or suspension for students. The team saw examples of completed forms which demonstrated that these implications were, in practice, taken into account. The team encourages the College to formalise this consideration to ensure consistency across the College.

### **Annual monitoring**

32 According to the College's Code of Practice, all departments or schools are required to complete annual programme monitoring reports using a template provided by QEV. This should be completed for all taught programmes, providing an opportunity to reflect upon changes made to the programme, in particular highlighting enhancements to learning and teaching practices, as well as flagging up any difficulties or challenges faced which could helpfully be brought to TQEC's attention.

33 The reports are prepared in the autumn following the academic year under review, and considered by a panel of TQEC (previously of Quality Assurance Committee) in the spring of the following year, before final review by TQEC in the autumn. The evidence indicated to the audit team that, in practice, programme teams generally respond to any problems raised by the reports well ahead of the final approval by TQEC. The team considered that there may be benefits to the College in developing a system to record the early action taken by programme teams in response to annual programme monitoring reports.

34 Annual monitoring draws on a raft of management data provided through the Birkbeck Student Information System. Programme directors are invited to provide a commentary on the data in four areas (applications, enrolments, progression, modular and award completion), highlighting any trends experienced over the academic session as well as evaluating the overall recruitment, retention and completion rates; but the commentary is not compulsory and, for the last few years, a significant number of directors have failed to provide one (peaking in 2006-07, when reports for more than half the College's programmes were not completed). There is evidence that the College is renewing its efforts to involve programme directors in annual monitoring in 2009-10 through revisions to the College's Code of Practice and the new report template approved by TQEC, which states that, '...the report should be compiled by the relevant Programme Director'. Nonetheless, given the scale of the problem and its longevity, the audit team considered it advisable for the College to achieve full implementation of the College's policy on the annual monitoring of programmes as it is described in its Code of Practice.

### **Periodic review**

35 The College undertakes regular periodic review of programmes, known as internal review. The present methodology for these reviews, undertaken on a four-year cycle, was introduced in 2007-08 under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC); panels are now convened, and reports reviewed, by TQEC. The process, specified in the Guidance Notes on the Process for Internal Review of Taught and Research Programmes, ensures that the views of students and external subject experts are considered.

36 The internal review reports seen by the audit team evidenced a faithful application of the method, with the exception of the review of the statistical data on student performance and progression. The audit team considered it desirable for the College to pursue the systematic use of quantitative data in internal review.

37 The audit team saw evidence that QAC exercised appropriate oversight of periodic review, including the tracking of recommendations and the dissemination of good practice, prior to the introduction of the new committee structure. Evidence from 2009-10 demonstrated that TQEC continued to provide appropriate oversight, though some review reports had only been considered in tabulated summary form.

38 The consideration of internal reviews represented a substantial part of QAC's business. TQEC has a wider remit than its predecessor, and may, therefore, find it hard to apply the same degree of scrutiny. Within this context, the audit team acknowledged the new role for school TQECs in supporting the consideration of internal review reports. The team encourages the College to monitor the relationship between school TQECs and the College TQEC in respect of the oversight of internal review over the coming years.

## External examiners

39 The College Policy and Guidance on the Role of External and Intercollegiate Examiners sets out clear rules on who may be nominated and appointed, how long they may serve as examiners, and their duty to report on what they find as they monitor assessment. The document also describes their role in terms of advising on awards and comparability of standards, and their formal responsibility for reviewing and approving examination papers or their equivalent; it also details the information that the College will provide that will enable the external examiner to come to his or her judgements.

40 On appointment, external examiners are provided with full information relevant to their work in the form of College policies and the record of the previous meeting of the Examination Board. The Chair of the Board has responsibility for briefing them, and boards are encouraged to provide a mentor for new appointees.

41 The College's procedures for reviewing and acting on reports from external examiners are robust. Reports are submitted to the Academic Registrar, who maintains oversight for the College, and then distributed to the chairs of the individual sub-boards, the assistant deans (heads of department), and the Chair of the College Board of Examiners. Prior to the recent restructuring, issues raised in the reports and the proposed responses were considered by the relevant degrees committee; this responsibility is being transferred to the College boards of examiners, ensuring issues are considered by an appropriately specialist committee. Responses are sent to the external examiners by heads of school.

42 The rigour of the process is further augmented by the obligation on the College to submit a report to the University of London Senate. The most recent report showed that external examiners did not highlight any systemic problems in the College.

43 Overall, the involvement of both intercollegiate and external examiners, and the effectiveness of the College's system for considering and responding to their reports, evidences a robust management of academic standards.

## Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

44 References to the Academic Infrastructure appear throughout the College's key quality assurance documents, particularly the Guide to Developing Programmes and the Guidance Notes on the Process of Internal Review of Taught and Research Programmes. The audit team noted that the College's new programme specifications, which aim in part to ensure that programmes were explicitly aligned with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements and any requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, have yet to be enacted for all programmes.

## Assessment policies and regulations

45 The regulatory framework for assessment in the College is a prominent feature of the Common Awards Scheme, and regularising assessment policies and practice across all programmes is regarded by the College as one of the most valuable results of the introduction of the Scheme. The audit team concurred with this view and saw, for example, the introduction of common pass marks at undergraduate level and postgraduate level as valuable elements in the assurance of standards. The team judged part four of the Common Awards Scheme to be helpful in setting out common principles and rules for the award of degrees, including thresholds for classification and formulae for calculating an overall programme score which takes appropriate account of performance at the different levels of study. The Common Awards Scheme has been reviewed in the light of experience; at the time of the audit this review was under discussion in committees, but its findings indicate by implication a general consensus on these main unifying principles.

46 Nevertheless, the audit team noted that discussions about the clarity, and consistency in the application, of the regulations on late submission, mitigating circumstances, capping for reassessment and double marking were still ongoing. The team considered it desirable for the College to resolve those issues associated with the implementation of the Common Awards Scheme which remain outstanding.

47 The regulatory frameworks for assessment are complemented by references in Section 4 of the College's Code of Practice, which are followed through in more discursive form in the Guide to Developing Programmes. The result is a comprehensive framework linking regulation and practice. The audit team noted, however, that here and elsewhere the language of the College's frameworks shifts from unambiguous obligation to clear preference - 'you must' becoming 'you should'.

48 Quality assurance of assessment and awards is strengthened by a system of checks and balances within which specialist oversight is exercised by a set of College boards of examiners, while detailed subject level scrutiny of awards is by sub-boards for individual programmes. The audit team heard that the process had been reviewed in conjunction with the restructuring of governance and a new structure for the College boards agreed by Academic Board in February 2010. The evidence suggested that the College boards of examiners would have a role in confirming membership of sub-boards, including external examiners, although the team noted that this was not within the Boards' Terms of Reference.

49 The conduct of assessment is governed by a comprehensive set of policies available on My Birkbeck, including a College Policy on Marking and Moderation, a College Policy on Late Submission of Coursework, and a College Policy on Assessment Offences (dealing particularly with plagiarism). However, the audit team noted calls in the student written submission (SWS) for consistency on matters including anonymous marking and plagiarism, which the College's policies are designed to provide. This raised concerns about the College's ability to implement its policies consistently across all schools. In addition, the team saw a proposal, Feedback on Assessment, which sets out a further valuable extension of the framework for assessment and also reiterates the College's policy that assessed work be returned within four weeks of the submission deadline. The team also noted, however, a comment in a recent internal review report that suggested some staff understood the norm to be that work be returned within six weeks of the submission deadline (and concern in the report that this longer deadline was only just being met).

50 The College's Code of Practice lays down principles about assessment load and timing. These principles are echoed in the Guide to Developing Programmes in its advice on developing a teaching, learning and assessment strategy for programmes, and assessment norms for modules. This sets a tariff of 40-44 hours of contact and 5,000 to 6,000 words of assessment for each 30 credit points. Programme designers are guided to ensure progression within the programme. The College accepts that variety in assessment is

appropriate to meet varying learning outcomes, but monitors this variety particularly through the Programme Proposal Form. An evaluation of the effectiveness of the assessment strategy adopted then forms part of internal review. The internal review reports provided to the team showed that this evaluation was taking place.

## **Management information - statistics**

51 The College maintains a unified statistical system - the Birkbeck Student Information System (BSIS) - which collects information on student progression and achievement at programme level. Those involved in preparing annual programme monitoring reports and the self-evaluation documents for internal review are required to consult the reports from BSIS, which the Quality Enhancement and Validation unit (QEV) makes available as standardised data sets. QEV makes some of the data, for example on student annual completion at school and programme level, available on its own website.

## **Conclusion**

52 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

## **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

### **Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points**

53 The College's Code of Practice stresses in its preamble that it should be read in conjunction with the QAA *Code of practice*. The College's Code of Practice is updated annually to ensure that it remains congruent with the QAA documents. TQEC has primary responsibility for making sure this happens, and the audit team saw several examples in committee minutes of the Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) and its predecessor discharging this responsibility effectively. The team did, however, have concerns about the College's engagement with parts of Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice*. These are discussed in Section 5 of this annex.

### **Approval, monitoring and review of programmes**

54 The College's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and periodic review, described in Section 2, each expect College staff, and external experts where they are involved, to consider the availability of appropriate learning opportunities for students alongside academic standards. Salient features of these processes include: the early consultation between departments and central support services (including the library and Information Technology Services (ITS)) about the learning resources required by a possible new programme before the programme is proposed to the school TQEC; the participation of students in the construction and critique of the self-evaluation document for internal review; and the indicative agenda for internal review panels' meetings with students, which includes sections on teaching and learning, student support and learning resources.

55 The audit team's scrutiny of a range of documents associated with these processes confirmed that they were each contributing to the sound management of learning opportunities. However, the team had some reservations about both the use of the fast-track programme approval process in 2009-10, and the failure of a substantial number of programme directors to contribute to annual monitoring reports. These reservations are described in more detail in Section 2.

## **Management information - feedback from students**

56 TQEC recommends that all departments should provide taught students with opportunities to comment formally on their learning experience through programme-unit or module questionnaires and an end of year survey (the latter is also open to research students). Departments are expected to summarise action taken in response to student feedback in their annual programme monitoring reports to TQEC. The audit team noted that although reference to student feedback from surveys is made in these reports it is sometimes unclear what action has been taken in response. The team also noted the low response rate for several end of year surveys, the lowest being a 10 per cent response for 2008-09. College staff suggested that the low response rates may reflect Birkbeck students' proclivity for providing feedback informally and directly to teaching staff, and this was supported to some extent by students who spoke positively about the availability of teaching staff for informal discussions. However, the team remained concerned that an over-reliance on informal, direct feedback might prevent the College from detecting institution-wide problems or examples of good practice. In this connection, the team noted that the end of year survey ran from June to October and concluded that response rates might be improved by running the survey during term.

57 The College runs dedicated annual surveys about library and IT facilities, and the results are reported to the Library and IT Advisory Groups respectively. The College is also in the process of developing a new online Library and IT Services Student Forum, which the audit team agreed was likely to bring further benefits.

58 Feedback from students forms an important part of the evidence base for internal review. Review teams meet with a representative group of students as a matter of course, and departments are required to involve students in the construction and critique of their self-evaluation document. The audit team read several internal review reports and were satisfied that student feedback was properly considered.

59 The College has participated in the National Student Survey (NSS) since 2005 and has enjoyed consistently good results: in 2005 it was ranked number one nationally for the quality of teaching, and every year since then the College has been ranked number one in London among multi-faculty, non-specialist institutions for overall satisfaction. The NSS results are analysed by the Quality Enhancement and Validation unit (QEV) and then distributed to departments. Departments are asked to provide a response to any issues highlighted; the responses are considered by TQEC with matters of concern highlighted for possible action by other College committees. The audit team saw evidence that this procedure was happening as specified, although it also noted that some departments reacted rather slowly to evidence of potential problems.

## **Role of students in quality assurance**

60 Students are represented on the College's central committees, including TQEC, mainly through the officers of the Students' Union. At departmental level, departments or schools determine precisely what means of student representation are appropriate and realistic for students on programmes within their remit, and should provide all students with accurate information about these arrangements. According to the College's Code of Practice, the normal arrangement should be for the programme director to offer at least one Student-Staff Exchange Committee (SSEC) meeting to cover each degree programme and/or subject area each term, at times convenient to full-time and part-time students. At the intermediate level - the school TQECs - there is no provision for student representation, which the audit team regarded as anomalous, particularly given that the College TQEC and its school-level counterparts performed similar functions, albeit with different levels of authority. The audit team, therefore, considered it desirable for the College to consider introducing student membership of school TQECs.

61 The College's Code of Practice states that the membership of SSECs should include student representatives covering all the programmes or subject areas under the committee's purview. The audit team noted, however, that the student representation on some SSECs was not complete; in one case cited by the College as good practice, only one student seemed to attend an SSEC encompassing more than 10 different programmes. The College may wish to reflect on the challenge of encouraging more student representatives to attend SSECs.

62 The College's Code of Practice further states that departments should refer student representatives to the Students' Union for training and support. However, students whom the audit team met were not aware of any such training, leading the team to conclude that the Students' Union was not providing comprehensive support. The team considered it desirable for the College, working in partnership with the Students' Union, to develop comprehensive support for the training of student representatives.

63 SSECs at Stratford operate in the same way as those on the main campus. Students from the Stratford campus whom the audit team met spoke positively about the effectiveness of their SSECs and gave examples of problems they had raised in their committees which the College had addressed promptly. The Students' Union looked forward to having a greater physical presence in Stratford within the College's planned new building.

## **Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities**

64 Research-led teaching is one of 12 quality enhancement priorities in the College's Quality Strategy. The College has established a working group to take this agenda forward, which includes examining what is meant by research-led teaching at the different levels of the FHEQ. A questionnaire to gather information on research-led teaching activities in undergraduate curricula has been circulated throughout the College and the findings collated for the working group. The group's intention is to use the findings to identify, and then to disseminate, good practice.

65 The relationship of research and teaching is alluded to in internal reviews, but does not appear to be a major aspect of these reviews' deliberations and reports. However, students whom the audit team met expressed enthusiasm about the vibrancy of the intellectual environment within which they were learning, though they were also somewhat unclear about some of the distinctions that might be drawn between different approaches to the linkage of research and teaching.

66 The audit team noted that the working group appeared not to be drawing on the research of other institutions and groups into research-led teaching, such as that by the 1994 Group (of which the College is a member). There may be benefits to the College in raising its awareness of this other work.

## **Other modes of study**

67 The College has a small number of flexible and distributed learning programmes, which undergo broadly the same approval, monitoring and review processes as other programmes, but with particular consideration given to those areas, such as student support and assessment, where flexible and distributed programmes tend to differ from classroom-based provision. The audit team read an internal review of a department providing some flexible and distributed programmes, which demonstrated that the process paid appropriate, discrete attention to this provision.

## Resources for learning

68 Many of the students whom the audit team met commented on the limited capacity of teaching accommodation on the main campus, particularly at the start of term when classes tend to be at their largest. It is difficult for the College to increase capacity given the costs of renting new accommodation in central London and the planning restrictions on altering the buildings it already occupies. However, it has recognised students' concerns and has established a Teaching Space Project, led by the Pro-Vice Master for Learning and Teaching, to examine this issue. The Project has three sub-projects looking at external space procurement, teaching patterns and teaching planning. In addition, the College is undertaking a series of refurbishments and relocations associated with the creation of the five new schools, which should be mostly complete by the beginning of the 2010-11 academic year.

69 The College has an extensive library, whose provisions reflect a service level statement with the schools and a set of performance standards developed in consultation with library users. Performance against these standards is reported annually to the Library Advisory Group. In addition, students benefit from access to several other libraries in central London, including Senate House, and the students who met the audit team explained that these other facilities were essential to their studies. Provision at Senate House Library has been recently reviewed by the University of London and, in response to the outcome of this review, a working group of Birkbeck's Library Advisory Group has been established to work with schools in implementing some of the proposed changes. The audit team concluded that it was important that Birkbeck students continue to have access to other College libraries, in particular the Senate House Library, as these clearly form a major part of their library resource.

70 The College's accommodation in Stratford is rented from the University of East London (UEL). The College has an arrangement with UEL to allow Birkbeck Stratford students to use UEL library facilities. Students whom the team met explained that this agreement provided them with valuable study space. However, they were only able to borrow from a small collection of Birkbeck books and explained that, despite the provision of a book ordering service at Stratford, they often travelled to the central London campus for additional material.

71 The College intends to build new accommodation in Stratford by 2013, which will include improved library resources. The audit team was satisfied that these developments show the College taking forward plans for the Birkbeck Stratford campus with a clear concern for provision of adequate learning resources for the students there.

72 The ITS department is responsible for the maintenance and development of the College's central communication and information technology systems. ITS is guided by the College Communication and IT Strategy and the Learning and Teaching Strategy. The IT Advisory Group is responsible for monitoring IT provision and for maintaining an appropriate quality of service. Membership of the Group includes representatives from each of the schools as well as students. The audit team was satisfied that the College made adequate provision for student feedback on IT services and that overall IT provision was satisfactory.

73 The College provides a virtual learning environment for the use of teaching staff. It employs an e-Learning Coordinator who works with academic and support staff to support effective pedagogy. There is also an e-Learning Advisory Group to guide the Coordinator and disseminate information relating to developments in the medium.

74 The audit team discussed e-learning with staff, who praised the training on offer, and with students, who did not raise any concerns. It was evident to the team, however, that use of the virtual learning environment by teaching staff varied a great deal among different programmes and departments, which was perhaps inevitable given the absence of a College

policy on its use. The last QAA Institutional audit in 2005 led to a recommendation that the College agree a minimum standard of virtual learning environment use for all programmes. The current audit team concluded that the case for a minimum standard remained, particularly given that most Birkbeck students attend the College less frequently and for less time than their full-time counterparts in other institutions and may, therefore, have a greater need for learning materials that they can access remotely. The audit team, therefore, considered it desirable for the College to establish minimum standards for the use of the virtual learning environment by teaching staff.

## Admissions

75 The principles underlying the College's approach to admissions are laid out in its Code of Practice. The principles themselves are comprehensive and largely consistent with the precepts in the relevant section of the QAA *Code of practice*. Responsibility for ensuring that the principles are met is delegated to departments and schools, and the College appears to exercise little oversight. Evidence from internal review suggests that at least one department may have neglected parts of the Code of Practice in this area, and the College recognises this as a potential weakness. In response, it is developing a formal Admissions Policy, which it gave to the audit team in draft. The draft policy is more prescriptive than the Code of Practice. For example, under the draft policy, every school would be required to submit an Admissions Statement on the entry requirements and local procedures they intend to follow for each programme; admissions tutors would be required to undergo training provided by the College; and a standard format note of all interviews would be taken. Given the evidence from internal review, the team regarded the draft Admissions Policy as a prudent development and encourages the College to finalise and implement it.

## Student support

76 The College's Code of Practice states that all taught students should be allocated a personal tutor responsible for offering academic guidance, monitoring progress, and initiating the provision of additional support where this may be required. Personal tutors should also be prepared to fulfil a more generally supportive role and to discuss any matters affecting academic work which students may raise. Personal tutors should normally take the initiative in making arrangements to meet with their tutees at least once a term, although there will normally be additional contact with them in the classroom/laboratory or informally.

77 The College's Code of Practice pays particular attention to the needs of new students, and those admitted under special access provisions or through qualifying programmes, of which the College has a relatively high proportion compared to the wider sector. It suggests a range of metrics for personal tutors to track the progress of these students, including attendance at lectures and performance in seminars.

78 The audit team discussed personal tuition arrangements with a range of students. Experiences varied. Some students suggested that some personal tutors failed to initiate contact with their tutees, and students on certificate programmes appeared not to have been allocated a personal tutor at all. Other students commended the system, and the audit team noted from an internal review report an example in one department of personal tuition being closely tied to personal development planning, enabling the tutor and student to reflect on the student's progress in their first module, identify any additional support needed and set an action plan using SMART objectives.

79 Students with particular academic or pastoral problems may be referred to a range of specialised central support services. Before the strategic review and restructure, these services were distributed across the College. The restructure led to the creation of the My Birkbeck Student Centre on the College's main campus and an online counterpart. My Birkbeck provides a single first point of reference for all of the College's central academic and pastoral support services. The students whom the audit team met praised

the development of My Birkbeck for improving the accessibility of student support, and commended the level of service they had received from the individual services. The team identified the integrated advice, support and guidance provided by My Birkbeck as a feature of good practice.

80 The strategic review also led to the creation of a new Student Experience and Widening Participation Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice Master for Student Experience and reporting to Academic Board. The first job for the new Committee is to develop a student experience and widening participation strategy; it will also monitor the quality of student support provision across the College.

81 The College employs two central learning support officers who cover the central London and Stratford campuses, and an additional Learning Support Officer who supports technology enhanced learning and teaching across the College. There are also part-time learning support officers working in four of the five schools. The College has recently undertaken a review of learning support, led by the Pro-Vice-Master for Learning and Teaching, and is rolling out a new model, centrally and in each of the five schools, which will be explicitly linked to retention. The team heard from students that the work of the learning support officers was highly beneficial and greatly appreciated, particularly by those students at Stratford.

## **Staff support**

82 Three key departments provide staff training and development: the Centre for Learning and Professional Development, whose locus is the enhancement and support of teaching practice; Learning and Organisational Development, which performs a wider and more generic development and training role (for instance in management development or interview skills); and the Birkbeck Graduate Research School, which provides some training for research degree supervisors.

83 Initial pedagogic professional development for academic staff without substantial previous teaching experience is through the Postgraduate Certificate in Education: Higher Education, which is accredited by the Higher Education Academy. The Certificate reflects national expectations, but also emphasises areas of particular relevance to the teaching of mature part-time students. Early career staff whom the audit team met praised the programme.

84 The Centre for Learning and Professional Development also provides a short programme, The Fundamentals of Teaching, which aims to give research students who are involved in teaching an insight into pedagogic issues. The programme is also available to sessional lecturers with little or no HE teaching experience. The audit team discussed the programme with research students who taught undergraduates or otherwise supported their learning, and learned that some of them had not been through the programme, or any other kind of formal training or preparation, despite their having no higher education teaching experience. The team considered it desirable for the College to assess the needs of all postgraduate research students who are engaged in teaching and provide appropriate training where necessary.

85 The College encourages staff to engage with the Higher Education Academy, pays membership fees, and provides workshops to help staff consider their own experience against the criteria for Academy Fellowship.

86 The College has run the Birkbeck Excellence in Teaching Award since 2004, with the aim of supporting and encouraging excellence in teaching and learning by providing formal recognition of pedagogic achievement. The scheme has grown from a single award in 2004-05 to one award of £1,000 per school currently. Applications for the award must include an explanation of the implications of any findings for future academic practice elsewhere in

the College, and they are partly judged according to their potential to improve teaching and learning practice or the student learning experience. Case studies about award-winning work are posted on the Centre for Learning and Professional Development's website.

87 The Academic Progress and Development Review system provides an annual, formal opportunity for all staff to review, with their assistant dean or nominee, their achievements in research, administration and teaching. The system was initially launched in 2005, but has exhibited persistent low levels of participation. The latest version puts more emphasis than its forerunners on mentoring and personal development, rather than performance review; yet, although it is compulsory for all academic staff to be offered the opportunity to take part in a review, participation remains at their discretion.

88 The College operates a peer review of teaching process, which the audit team regarded as a feature of good practice. This is discussed in Section 4.

## **Conclusion**

89 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

## **Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement**

90 The College took the opportunity offered by the recent strategic review and restructuring to give quality enhancement greater emphasis in its framework for managing standards and quality. This is manifest in the College's Quality Strategy 2009-12, in which enhancement plays a central role, and in the new titles given to committees and support units, for example the Teaching Quality and Enhancement Committee (TQEC) and the Quality Enhancement and Validation unit (QEV).

91 The College defines quality enhancement as, '...institutional policies and practices to improve the student learning experience'. It aspires to integrate enhancement as far as possible into routine quality assurance procedures, in order to reinforce both the philosophy and the practice of quality enhancement. Thus, enhancement is prominent in the College's procedures for programme approval, annual monitoring, peer observation, external examining and periodic review.

92 The audit team saw evidence of the effective management of the peer review of teaching process, including cross-observation between the College and a further education college partner. Some inconsistencies of peer review practice had been noted by the College in the process of reviewing school-level peer review reports, and the team noted that measures to improve this aspect had been approved. The team heard evidence from a spectrum of junior and senior staff of their positive experience of the peer review process. The audit team regarded the College's procedures for the peer review of teaching as a feature of good practice.

93 The internal review process demands that schools present an example of enhancement to the review panel, and a selection of these are made available across the College on the QEV website.

94 Schools are primarily responsible for managing quality enhancement through school TQECs, overseen centrally by the College TQEC, and these are supplemented by regular meetings of the Pro-Vice-Master for Learning and Teaching and the assistant deans for learning and teaching. The audit team found that direct reference to matters of enhancement, rather than standards and quality assurance, were not always explicitly articulated in the matters covered by the school and College TQECs. Given the emphasis which the College

now places on enhancement, it may wish to consider ways in which activities which deal with enhancement are more clearly conveyed as such.

95 As well as seeking to embed quality enhancement in routine quality assurance processes, the College has also identified in its Quality Strategy a number of specific quality enhancement targets arising out of the mid-cycle follow-up to its last QAA Institutional audit and its preparations for degree awarding powers scrutiny. These targets include research-related teaching (covered in Section 3), transferable skills and employer engagement, and personal support and the strengthening and integration of the support and learning environment.

96 The College's Business Relations Office co-ordinates the College's links with employers and includes employability and knowledge transfer activities. This activity is supplemented by the recently established Institute for Professional Studies, which seeks to provide adaptable and bespoke programmes of study for specific employers. The audit team saw evidence of this being effectively managed. The Briefing Paper indicated that employers' opinions are sought on the currency and appropriateness of programmes, although the team found limited evidence to support this. Further development is planned in this area, and is underpinned by elements of the Learning and Teaching Strategy. The Research School features a number of employer and employment-related talks as part of its support programme for postgraduate students. In 2008, the College established a Foundation Degree Network to support the development of Foundation Degrees, with particular attention to employment issues, including work-based learning. The team heard clear evidence from students of the direct employability benefits (including promotion) that they had gained from their studies while still undertaking programmes.

97 Postgraduate research students are offered a series of generic workshops which include a focus on transferable skills. Both postgraduate and undergraduate students whom the audit team met were aware of, and had recognised benefit from, transferable skills training.

98 Student support arrangements have recently been reorganised into a one-stop-shop and supporting website, My Birkbeck, which the audit team recognised as a feature of good practice. This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.

99 For academic staff new to teaching, a Postgraduate Certificate in Education: Higher Education is obligatory. The College has instigated and is expanding an Excellence in Teaching Award to reward the active development enhancement activities.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

100 The College's collaborative provision register, March 2010, recorded 487 students registered on 19 collaborative programmes at 10 partner institutions. The programmes include taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and research degrees. Most of the College's partners are located in and around London; it has one link to an overseas institution.

101 The College regards its collaborative programmes as 'collaborative ventures' rather than validations, in which Birkbeck staff take a leading role and Birkbeck quality assurance processes are fully implemented. The definition enables the College to avoid the requirement of the University of London that the College seek approval from the University's Collegiate Council for validations (except for Foundation Degrees, which are exempt). The audit team noted, however, that several of the College's collaborative ventures appeared to meet the University's definition of a validation, described in the University regulations as, '...the process whereby the University judges a programme of study designed and offered by an external organisation (that is, colleges which do not award degrees, an overseas institution, or a commercial/industrial establishment) as being appropriate to lead to an award of the

validating institution.' The College's definition of its links as collaborative ventures does not, therefore, align with the intentions of the University's regulations. Within this context, the audit team considered it advisable for the College to ensure that it adheres to the University of London's regulations regarding the University's approval of collaborative provision.

102 The academic standards and quality of the College's collaborative programmes are assured through the same approval, monitoring and review processes as its home provision. The audit team saw evidence that these processes were generally operating satisfactorily, including appropriate responses to comments made by students and external examiners, and the suitable use of reporting mechanisms, with some evidence of documented transference of good practice apparent. The College places particular importance on a link tutor or programme director from the College in ensuring ongoing engagement with the collaborative partner, and the audit team heard and saw evidence of link tutors performing effectively.

103 Collaborative provision is co-ordinated by the Central and Collaborative Provision unit, which has a remit to oversee and coordinate the administration, promotion and development of provision. This unit was established in 2008-09 as part of the restructuring process.

104 Each collaborative provision arrangement is managed by a defined committee structure, including a joint steering committee. The audit team saw evidence of effective management at the programme level, including the sharing of good practice. Joint steering committees were found to be overseeing areas of quality and standards, including the consideration of external examiner reports, student feedback, and recruitment and progression, as well as general and strategic partnership issues.

105 The College expects each collaborative arrangement to be underpinned by a Memorandum of Agreement that is regularly reviewed and revised. The audit team noted that several of the College's partnerships had not had such agreements in place for at least part of their life, and there were other examples where a signed agreement was thought to exist but could not be found. The team also noted the minutes of the recent Collaborative and Flexible and Distributed Learning Review, which showed that an academic director of a collaborative programme believed that there was no agreement in place for the programme under their purview.

106 Furthermore, the structure, length and content of the agreements which were provided to the team were variable. The Briefing Paper indicated that the College was working on a pro-forma Memorandum of Agreement and guidance for collaborative provision; but at the time of the audit these were not completed, and the draft Memorandum of Agreement seen by the audit team did not clearly address all those matters which Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice*, under Precept A10, suggests may, with advantage, be borne in mind when considering the drafting of an agreement or contract for a collaborative partnership.

107 The absence of agreements for some partnerships, and the variability in the coverage of those agreements which were available, represent an avoidable risk to the College and to its students. The audit team considered it advisable for the College to ensure that all collaborative links are underpinned by a signed written agreement whose contents are informed by the guidance in Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice*.

108 Partly in response to the 2005 QAA Institutional audit, the College initiated a Review of Collaborative, Flexible and Distributed Learning Provision in 2007, and a working group met over 2007-08. The group developed a template for reviewing collaborative provision programmes and requested that this be applied to all links. A report was tabled at the Quality Assurance Committee meeting of April 2009, which made a number of recommendations to revise the College's Code of Practice and noted that the review template had not been

completed for a number of collaborative programmes. At the time of the audit, these recommendations had yet to be implemented and there was no ongoing intention to use the review templates. The College may wish to reconsider its plans for the review templates, which were positively received at the Quality Assurance Committee meeting.

109 Arrangements for external examining, described in Section 2, are common to home and collaborative provision. The audit team noted two examples from the College's collaborative provision where the College had apparently not taken account of the QAA *Code of practice*: one where an external examiner had a very clear and significant conflict of interest (the individual had been a head of department with managerial responsibility for the programmes concerned immediately prior to appointment), and another where the College had not concluded a formal agreement with an external examiner until well after the examiner had taken up the role. The audit team considered it advisable for the College to ensure the full implementation, with regard to collaborative provision, of the College's policy and guidance on the role of external examiners.

110 The College aims to ensure that responsibilities for public information are covered in collaborative agreements. However, this was not explicitly in place in the majority of agreements given to the audit team, and the draft model template did not cover this issue.

111 Responsibility for the oversight of partners' publications lies with the College link tutors. The audit team found several examples where programme descriptions or titles on partner websites differed from those approved by the College or did not clearly indicate the awarding institution. The team also found that the nature of the College's only collaborative arrangement with an overseas university was not fully explained on its website. These examples point toward a need for the College to review its processes for the management and oversight of published information in respect of collaborative provision

112 At the time of the audit, the College was expanding its collaborative activity: seven new partnerships were planned to begin in 2010-11. The audit team's review of the College's existing collaborative provision demonstrated that its arrangements for approval, monitoring, periodic review and programme management were broadly satisfactory. However, the team also noted that the College's definitions of collaborative provision, its oversight of written agreements, and the failure to follow its own guidance on external examining had the potential to put the standards and/or quality of collaborative provision at risk.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

113 The College offers a range of MPhil and doctoral degrees by research. In 2009-10 it had over 900 students registered on research degrees, around 40 per cent of whom were full-time.

114 The College awards research degrees of the University of London and is bound by the University's regulations, which are supplemented by the College's own regulations for research degrees. Within the College, responsibility for the standards and quality of research degree programmes is delegated by Academic Board to the College Research Committee. The College has developed its own Code of Practice for Postgraduate Training and Research which reflects the precepts of Section 1 of the QAA *Code of practice*.

115 There were no recommendations regarding postgraduate research students from the last QAA Institutional audit. In 2005-06, QAA conducted a special review of research degree programmes at all institutions in receipt of HEFCE funding for these programmes. The report found that the College's provision was appropriate and satisfactory for all aspects of the review. Areas of good practice were identified in the role played by the College Research School in the quality assurance of research programmes and the sharing of resources within the Bloomsbury Postgraduate Skills Network.

116 The College created a Research Student Sub-Committee in February 2010 in response to concerns about the volume of business at the Research Committee. The Sub-Committee will oversee the development of research student related policy and take responsibility for the development of appropriate quality assurance and enhancement processes. The College Research School has been renamed the Birkbeck Graduate Research School, and its responsibilities have been slightly enlarged to include enhancing the experience of the College's research students, promoting good practice across the College, and providing generic research and transferable skills training.

117 The student written submission (SWS) was informed by a survey and focus group of research students. Five of the six basic questions in the survey attracted substantially positive responses; the remaining question about pastoral support elicited slightly less encouraging views. In this connection, the audit team noted the Students' Union website does not have a section dedicated to research students, although My Birkbeck provides a comprehensive range of support. The research students whom the audit team met were satisfied with the pastoral support they received.

### **Research environment**

118 The general quality of the environment for research students is reflected both in the high proportion of eligible research outputs which the College submitted to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, and the results of that exercise, which showed that more than 75 per cent of those outputs were in units of assessment where the highest 4\* and 3\* rating was achieved by 50 per cent of staff or more.

119 According to the Briefing Paper, creating and sustaining a sense of intellectual and academic community among research students is the responsibility of departments and schools; this is regarded as particularly important for students working in fields where membership of a research team is not possible. Delivery of this objective is overseen by the Research Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Master for Research, which monitors strategies and performance at school level, and advises Academic Board on all matters relating to research. The audit team heard fulsome praise from students for the quality of the College's academic staff and the stimulating research culture which they helped to foster.

120 Much of the College's research is undertaken through research centres, of which there are 30 listed on the website. Many of these centres reflect interdisciplinary or collaborative research agenda, and they provide a dedicated research environment for students whose research interests also cross disciplinary boundaries.

121 The College library provides an extensive range of research resources, although its surveys of postgraduates and academics indicate some concern about the availability of materials, with 28 per cent of respondents in the most recent survey being, '...not particularly confident or not at all confident that they could find all the information they needed for their research'. However, there are many other alternative sources of information in close proximity to the College, and the research students whom the audit team met confirmed that these were easy to access.

### **Selection, admission and induction**

122 The College's threshold for entry to a research degree programme is a second class honours degree, or the overseas equivalent. In practice, most programmes require an upper second class honours degree, reflecting the University of London's recommendation, and for some programmes a school may specify a master's level degree. However, the College has retained the flexibility to choose students in line with its inclusive mission and so maintains special procedures to take account of a variety of professional experience. The College states that special attention will be paid to relevant extra knowledge and/or skills obtained through work experience.

123 The College's Code of Practice contains a clear framework for admissions processes. Responsibility for selection and admission lies with the relevant school or department; it is conducted through scrutiny of the curriculum vitae, assessment of the research project, and interview (which may be conducted by telephone for overseas students). A school may permit staff to provide limited support to applicants with the development of their research proposals. Clear information for applicants is provided, including, where relevant, English language requirements.

124 Induction is provided through a combination of department or school-based activity, supplemented by the Research School. The students whom the team met commented positively about their experiences of induction.

## **Supervision**

125 Responsibility for allocating supervisors to students rests with schools. All students must have a second supervisor, or co-supervisor, and minimum levels of supervisory contact are specified in the College's Code of Practice. Students confirmed to the audit team that their experiences reflected the requirements of the Code of Practice.

126 All supervisors are required to undergo regular training; this extends to refresher training for experienced supervisors. Staff whom the audit team met commended the quality of training provided and its focus on the practice of supervision rather than the regulations and procedures. Staff also described informal networks of supervisors which served to disseminate good practice. Students whom the team met were very enthusiastic about the quality of supervision they received.

## **Progress and review arrangements**

127 The College's Code of Practice defines how the progress of research students is monitored through the regular meetings with supervisors and annually by departments. Although the SWS stated that students have requested more regular reviews, this was not the view of the students whom the auditors met. Comments in the SWS may reflect confusion between formal progress review and more frequent engagements with supervisors.

128 At the time of the audit, Annual review for research students tended to focus on issues relating to individual students, with assessment of their needs by the supervisor and department or school committee. The College has, however, recognised that this raises the potential for inconsistent practice among schools, and that there is a need for a framework for the identification of common themes and the sharing of good practice. As a result, changes to the central monitoring of processes are being proposed through the review of the Research School.

## **Development of research and other skills**

129 Subject-specific research training is provided by departments, while the Research School has responsibility for training in generic research and transferable skills. Departments' provision is considered during periodic review; the audit team noted that the recent internal review of English and Humanities commended the quality of research skills training in that department and, moreover, that other schools had been quick to recognise and learn from this example of good practice.

130 Research students may also benefit from Birkbeck's membership of the Bloomsbury Postgraduate Skills Network. The Network coordinates a wide range of courses in areas including presenting and publishing research, teaching skills, career management and research techniques. Birkbeck's membership allows its students to attend training provided by other Network members, and vice versa. Details of all the courses and how to apply are on the Network's website. However, it is not clear how the College monitors student views on

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the quality of the courses co-ordinated by the Network and how it might react to evidence of unsatisfactory provision, especially if this was presented by another member of the consortium.

131 The Centre for Learning and Professional Development provides a short programme, The Fundamentals of Teaching, which aims to give research students who are involved in teaching an insight into pedagogic issues. However, the team met some research students engaged in the teaching of undergraduates who were not aware of this programme and who had not been formally trained or prepared for teaching in any other way. This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.

### **Feedback mechanisms**

132 Feedback from students and supervisors is collated annually by schools. Before the recent restructuring of the College, this information seems to have remained within schools and it may not have been fully evident to students what actions resulted from any written comments. The College anticipates that the combination of the reorganisation into five schools and the establishment of the Research Student Sub-Committee will result in a better oversight of this process.

133 The College has participated in the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. The results were considered by the Research Committee in January 2010, which sanctioned further analysis of the questions relating to funding and to teaching opportunities.

### **Assessment**

134 The University of London's regulations contain details of requirements for PhD and MPhil theses, availability of theses, conduct of examinations, and the appointment of examiners. The College's regulations repeat the University's requirements and also provide a number of helpful supplements.

135 The College has recently reviewed its guidelines for appointing examiners.

136 Two examiners are normally appointed, one intercollegiate examiner from a different College of the University of London, and one external examiner from outside the University. Examiners submit their initial reports independently to the University's Research Degrees Examinations Office; after the viva, the examiners prepare a joint report which goes to the College's Master and to the candidate.

137 From 2010-11, the College's Registry will assume the responsibilities for assessment currently held by the University. The College has given the appropriate attention to ensuring a smooth handover.

138 In November 2009, Academic Board approved new arrangements for overseeing the appointment of appropriate examiners by schools through the creation of four separate panels for Arts; Business, Economics and Informatics; Science; Social Sciences, History, Philosophy; and Law. The chair of each panel is appointed by the Pro-Vice-Master (Research) and the membership includes the director of graduate studies from each department covered by the panel. There is provision for external representation and for cross-panel liaison for interdisciplinary topics. The panels report to the Research Committee annually with information on numbers of submissions and success rates.

### **Representations, complaints and appeals**

139 The College's Code of Practice specifies the process for appeals on academic grounds against decisions about transfers from MPhil to PhD, and for appeal to the Academic Registrar if there is reason to believe that this appeal has not been given appropriate consideration. With regard to representations arising from the examination

process, the Code of Practice refers students to the University of London procedures, under which representations must be addressed to the Head of the Academic Office of the University.

140 The College's Code of Practice does not set out processes for complaints, for example, about supervision arrangements; but the students whom the auditors met were confident that they knew what to do in such cases and that schools, for example through their postgraduate tutors, would respond promptly. The students remarked that the College culture is one that positively encourages constructive criticism.

## **Section 7: Published information**

141 Applicants derive information about the College's programmes of study primarily from online and print prospectuses, which are revised annually under the auspices of the External Relations Department. Students are given information about their programmes, as well as details of support and guidance arrangements, principally through student handbooks, whose contents are the responsibility of schools. The College currently exercises oversight of student handbooks through internal review; Registry is considering developing an institutional template for handbooks which will include a standard description of common resources and services. The audit team discussed prospectuses and student handbooks with groups of students, who regarded these documents as accurate and complete.

142 The College also publishes programme specifications for each of its programmes. The introduction of the new Common Awards Scheme in 2008-09, and the attendant changes to College regulations, meant that all programme specifications needed to be updated. Responsibility for overseeing these changes has been devolved to school Teaching Quality and Enhancement Committees with the support of the Quality Enhancement and Validation unit. By the time of the audit, some departments had successfully updated all of their programme specifications, but others continued to display old specifications alongside an update on the changes effected by the introduction of the new Scheme. The audit team considered that the presence of two documents could be confusing to students and other stakeholders. The team, therefore, considered it desirable for the College to expedite the production and publication of definitive programme specifications.

143 Institutional oversight of published information is the responsibility of the Director of External Relations. The audit team saw a paper, 'Approval process for published information', which gave full details of the oversight provided.

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