London School of Economics and Political Science

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 London School of Economics and Political Science (the School) from 7 to 11 March 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 the School offers.

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the London School of Economics and Political Science is that:

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The School is committed to enhancing the learning opportunities of its students. In that its approach to quality enhancement is embedded in the overall framework for quality assurance, its capacity to evaluate the impact of its enhancement activities on the quality of provision is limited.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The School's procedures for postgraduate research students are soundly based, supervision and support arrangements are satisfactory, and the School has in place effective procedures for the management of its research programmes which meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Published information

Reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the School publishes about its educational provision.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:

- the integrated and proactive contribution of the services providing support for staff, graduate teaching assistants and students to the furtherance of student learning (paragraphs 58, 63)
- the quality and availability of information for staff and students (paragraphs 77, 83).

Recommendations for action

The audit team considers it would be advisable for the School to:

- establish a systematic means of assuring itself that departmental practices are fully aligned with its regulatory and other requirements (paragraphs 15, 37)

- ensure that the course and programme approval system addresses more explicitly, both in the information presented and in the consideration given to it, institutional expectations as to the levels, progression and academic standards of any proposed provision (paragraph 21)
- ensure the systematic inclusion of external assessors in periodic programme review (paragraph 22)
- ensure that the newly-adopted framework for monitoring and review includes a specification of, and a clear procedure for addressing, the evaluative outcomes it requires from departments (paragraph 23)
- develop further its utilisation of management information, the better to support its evaluation of award standards and the quality of learning opportunities (paragraphs 24, 40)
- require partnership agreements to specify procedures which enable it to assure itself of the academic standards of, and the quality of learning opportunities appertaining to, all programmes delivered as collaborative provision (paragraph 73).

The audit team considers it would be desirable for the School to:

- adapt its external examiner report form to ensure that it elicits evaluative responses from all examiners (paragraph 14)
- develop a systematic procedure for both identifying and disseminating good practice and for evaluating the impact of its quality enhancement activities generally (paragraph 69).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1   The London School of Economics and Political Science (the School) justifiably describes itself as one of the world's foremost centres for social science research; it identifies teaching excellence as a strategic priority, and has recently taken steps to support it. These include: building recognition of teaching performance into academic career progression; increasing contact time between students and academic staff; improving communication with students; and investing in student facilities.

2   As a specialist institution the School aims to have an intellectual and practical impact on public life by contributing to the analysis of international challenges and to policy development within its spheres of expertise. It is a particular institutional characteristic that the School operates on the basis of a decentralised academic structure consisting of 23 departments, institutes and major teaching centres, and 18 research centres, which it describes as intellectually autonomous, with no management layer intervening between them and the Director, to whom their heads report directly.

3   The School employs almost 900 full-time equivalent academic staff, all of whom are involved both in teaching and research. Its student population numbers some 10,300, of which 1,175 are research students, the remainder being almost equally divided between undergraduates and taught postgraduates. Two-thirds of all students are from overseas, originating in over 150 countries.

The information base for the audit

4   The School provided a briefing paper and supporting documentation. The briefing paper was referenced to sources of evidence to illustrate the institutional approach to

managing the security of both the quality of educational provision and the academic standards of awards. The audit team had access to: the confidential report on the School's successful application for taught and research degree-awarding powers of February 2005 (it now exercises these powers while remaining a constituent college of the University of London); the report of the previous Institutional audit (dated January 2006); the special review of research degree programmes (July 2006); and the School's mid-cycle follow-up report of June 2008. The team was provided with all documents referenced in the briefing paper and other documentation requested, in most cases in electronic form. The Students' Union produced a written submission setting out students' views on the accuracy of information provided to them, their experience as learners and their role in quality management. The team thanks the Union for its submission, to which members made frequent reference in the course of their enquiries.

Developments since the last audit

5   The School's previous Institutional audit identified three features of good practice, all of which have been sustained and in one case (concerning the Centre for Learning Technology and the Teaching and Learning Centre), enhanced (see paragraph 64). The audit made five advisable and five desirable recommendations: the audit team confirms that the School has responded to all five advisable recommendations, though further work is required for three of them (relating to external examiners, annual monitoring and collaborative provision) to be met in full (see paragraphs 14, 23 and 73); it has similarly responded to all five desirable recommendations: here the team found that further work is required on one (relating to the use of student-related data: see paragraphs 24 and 40) for it to be met in full.

6   In 2007 the School established a Teaching Task Force (see paragraph 43), in response to concerns about the results of the National Student Survey and as part of what it describes as an enhancement-led approach to quality. This Task Force has initiated significant developments in the realm of learning and teaching (producing a report containing 43 recommendations for implementation over a three-year period), including areas identified by the previous audit team as requiring remediation or development. These include: teaching contact and feedback; teaching and learning innovations; graduate teaching assistants; recruitment training and support; improved evaluation; and rewards and promotions. One significant output has been a compulsory cross-disciplinary course (module) for first-year undergraduates (see paragraph 50). This course, LSE100, has been successfully piloted and full implementation began in the Lent term of the present academic year.

7   Other developments have included changes to: the undergraduate marking scheme; the master's-level classification scheme; some student-facing regulations; the external examiners' report template; annual course monitoring; periodic programme review; tutorial support arrangements; and procedures for reviewing collaborative arrangements. The audit team confirms that these changes largely constitute significant improvements on previous arrangements.

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

8   The Director, as Chief Executive, is supported by a Management Team, comprising: the three pro-directors; the Secretary and Director of Administration; the Director of Finance; and the Chief Information Officer. The Pro-Director (Teaching and Learning) has responsibility for all aspects of academic quality assurance and enhancement, the School's approach to which is set out in a policy document which articulates a set of school-wide principles and minimum expectations.

9   The School's Council, responsible for institutional governance, takes an active interest in academic matters, but Academic Board, which comprises almost all academic staff and has, accordingly, a very large membership (only a small proportion of which normally attend meetings), is the final authority on academic matters. It is supported by a suite of strategic committees which include: Teaching, Learning and Assessment; Student Affairs; Academic Planning and Resources; and Library and Information Services Committees. The committee structure is supported by a comprehensive set of general and specific regulations at School and programme level. These are readily accessible to both staff and students on the School website, along with detailed policies on issues such as harassment, ethics and safety. The nature and conduct of the committee structure have led the School to the view that it has in place the means for checking the discharge of departmental responsibilities: this view is a topic of further discussion in this annex (see in particular paragraphs 15, 37).

10   The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee, chaired by the Pro-Director (Teaching and Learning) and including representation from the five Academic Board constituencies, the Students' Union and the Research Students' Consultative Forum, is responsible, with the support of the Teaching and Learning Innovation Sub-Committee, for developing policies and strategies within its remit. It also has a direct role in monitoring award standards by reviewing assessment outcomes, investigating courses with high failure rates, and receiving digests of reports from external examiners and other external bodies. The audit team found, however, little evidence of the Committee's use of external benchmarks for quality and standards.

11   At local level, assessment is the responsibility of sub-boards of examiners, which undertake detailed monitoring and review of standards for individual programmes, including cases of extenuating circumstances, examination complaints and appeals. The work of these sub-committees is overseen by the institutional-level Undergraduate and Graduate School Boards of Examiners, which ratify award classifications on behalf of Academic Board.

12   The School's overall approach to quality assurance is shaped by its confidence in its academic standards, particularly as affirmed by external examiners, and on the basis of the principle that whereas Academic Board has collective authority and responsibility for the standard of academic awards, all quality assurance responsibilities rest with departments. The School acknowledges that this approach, which entails leaving arrangements for course monitoring and periodic programme review to departmental discretion (see paragraph 23), is not aligned with all precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review.*

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

13   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

14   The centrality of external examiners to the School's approach to the assurance of academic standards is fundamental, and was emphasised to the audit team in its meetings with academic staff. The School provides helpful and current documentation on external examiners' responsibilities; a school-wide nomination template is used, which the team found both appropriate and searching; the minutes of the scrutinising bodies provide evidence of careful consideration being given to nominations; appointments are for four years but subject to annual ratification. Arrangements for induction and support are clearly specified, and the external examiners' report form invites comment on preparation for the role. While external examiners invariably confirm the academic standard of awards, the team also noted that the depth of their responses to the prompts of the report template is variable, a significant proportion being restricted to a single word. In contrast with this, the generally more evaluative responses provided in the section of the report designed to be shared with students appear to be of considerable potential value. It is desirable that the School adapt its external examiner report form to ensure that it elicits evaluative responses from all examiners.

15   Clear procedures exist for consideration to be given to external examiners' reports, both centrally and departmentally. While the audit team found these procedures are broadly followed, responses requested from departments to issues raised are not invariably timely or consistent in presentation: some, for example, are sent only in the form of committee minutes. While the team detected no evidence of dissatisfaction with the responses received, the School cannot currently be confident that requirements which it visits on departments in respect of these reports are invariably met. This relates particularly to the requirements that: the reports are considered systematically by all relevant academic staff members; the appropriate section of the reports is shared with students; and all departments utilise the reports as a systematic component of programme monitoring (see paragraph 23). It is advisable that the School establish a systematic means of assuring itself that departmental practices are fully aligned with its regulatory and other requirements.

16   The chairs of the Undergraduate and Graduate Studies Sub-Committees are responsible for preparing short reports on school-wide issues arising from external examiners' comments as contributions to an annual report for Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee. The audit team confirms that these reports, which, while overwhelmingly positive in tone, on occasion identify areas for further consideration, receive full and serious consideration.

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

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

18   The procedures for approval and review of educational provision are determined and overseen by the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee and operated by the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office. The Graduate and Undergraduate Studies Sub-Committees, both of which have student representation, are responsible for individual course and programme approvals. While noting a number of operational inconsistencies in the examples studied, and in particular that variable attention is given to external assessors' reports (which do not normally receive detailed discussion and were, on at least one occasion, dispensed with), the audit team confirms that, overall, these bodies conduct their business in a conscientious and professional manner.

19   The course proposal template requires the presentation of a justification together with a wide range of operational information; proposers are not, however, required to address internal or external reference points, explain how the teaching will support specified learning outcomes, or state what assessment criteria will be used. In addition, in line with institutional policy, some proposals envisage shared teaching between undergraduates and taught postgraduates. The audit team confirms that the large majority of the proposals reviewed responded conscientiously to the prompts of the template, but because of the nature of the template the information provided gives only limited opportunity for the sub-committee to be assured of the level of the proposed provision or the standard of achievement required.

20   In the case of programme approval, the current template, which must be accompanied by a programme specification, requires: confirmation that consultation with cognate disciplines and service providers has taken place; confirmation that all strategic and resourcing implications have been formally considered at School level; and two external experts to be nominated, one of which will normally be appointed external assessor. The template refers to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) but does not require confirmation of its use: although the audit team was told that external assessors are required to ensure that proposed provision meets the relevant subject benchmarks, this obligation does not appear in the documentation: indeed the template states that the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office will enter the relevant benchmark statement retrospectively.

21   On the basis of its scrutiny of four programme proposals, the audit team believes that, while the procedure as a whole is basically sound, firstly, it should involve consistent and active engagement with external assessors' reports, and secondly, the programme proposal template should require the academic standard of the proposed provision and progression between levels to be addressed. It is advisable that the School ensure that the course and programme approval system addresses more explicitly, both in the information presented and in the consideration given to it, institutional expectations as to the levels, progression and academic standards of any proposed provision.

22   As noted previously, departments themselves are responsible for developing and operating procedures in line with minimum specified requirements. Following the School's previous Institutional audit, monitoring and review arrangements requesting annual reports on teaching provision were instituted, though since this arrangement simply involved duplicating information available elsewhere, the School replaced it with an approach designed to ascertain whether departmental procedures met minimum requirements: the outcome of the ensuing enquiry revealed high levels of compliance but also significant variability and some potentially risky practices. The School accordingly concluded that in a minority of areas procedures were not effective in offering an overview of the quality and standards of academic provision. The audit team, concurring with this view, also noted both that the School does not have a systematic approach to the use of management information and that external involvement is not a routine feature of periodic programme review: it is advisable that the School ensure the systematic inclusion of external assessors in periodic programme review.

23   Henceforth all departments will be required to undertake annual monitoring of courses and at least quinquennial reviews of programmes. The audit team, while noting the value of this, notes also that the reporting requirement as presently structured may still not be adequate to assure the School as to the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities of all provision. It is advisable that the School ensure that the newly-adopted framework for monitoring and review includes a specification of, and a clear procedure for addressing, the evaluative outcomes it requires from departments.

24   In addition to departmental review responsibilities, the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee undertakes quinquennial reviews of teaching provision. These reviews, which are widely seen as an effective means of keeping the School abreast of departmental teaching developments, now take a thematic approach. Review panels consist of standing internal members and an external reviewer, and have at their disposal specified departmental documentation. The audit team found that: this documentation is extensive but variably analytic; the periodicity of the reviews means that they contribute only selectively and not always in a timely fashion to the assurance of the quality of learning opportunities; there is overlap between the objectives of this review process and those of its departmental counterparts; the level of departmental engagement with the process is variable; the quantitative data used, while fit for a specific purpose, has only limited potential for supporting the consideration of broader standards-related matters. In respect of this final point, the Committee itself has come to a similar conclusion, and is working to identify the range of data required to contribute more effectively to the oversight of award standards and to identifying issues which potentially affect student performance. It is advisable that the School develop further its utilisation of management information, the better to support its evaluation of award standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

25   Overall the audit team confirms that, notwithstanding the recommendations contained in this section and in the context of high levels of departmental autonomy, course and programme approval, monitoring and review procedures go a considerable way towards being able to assure the School as to the academic standards of its awards and the quality of student learning opportunities.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

26   The School acknowledges that its approach to the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points is selective, in that it makes use of those elements of it which, in its view, complement its quality assurance and enhancement activities; it also claims to recognise and address the key 'pinch points' in areas such as programme specifications, benchmark statements and the *Code of practice, Section* 7.

27   The School has not undertaken an institution-wide exercise to position its programmes against the FHEQ; such positioning is, however, required at programme approval. In addition, external examiners are asked to confirm the level of the programmes and awards for which they have responsibility against the FHEQ descriptors. The audit team confirms that external assessors indicate that the School makes some use of this external reference point in the assurance of the standards of its awards.

28   The School acknowledges that its provision is not always closely aligned with subject benchmark statements. Departments are not required to make use of such statements in monitoring and review, and, while external assessors involved in programme approval are asked to confirm that proposed provision is at an appropriate level for the relevant benchmark, the audit team cannot, on the basis of its scrutiny, state that such confirmation is invariably explicitly given. The team concluded, from its consideration of approval documentation, that the opportunity to use subject benchmarks as an external reference point is by no means invariably taken.

29   Departments are expected to update programme specifications annually to reflect any approved modifications. The School has reservations about the utility of programme specifications for students, publishing them in full on the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office web pages, but preferring to present them more accessibly and flexibly in its online Calendar. The audit team found both flexible and full versions of the specifications

useful, although both would be improved were they to offer a clearer and more precise explanation of the link between learning and assessment.

30   Some programmes are subject to accreditation by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. Responsibility for managing the relationships and processes involved lies with departments: while the audit team found evidence of these activities being discharged wholly appropriately, the absence of systematic institutional-level oversight of the reports denies the School an opportunity to access information about the academic standards and quality of learning opportunities in the programmes concerned.

31   The School expects departments to be familiar with institutional policies informed by the *Code of practice* but not necessarily with the *Code of practice* itself. It gives consideration, through the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office, to successive sections of the *Code of practice*, brings changes to the attention of relevant parties, and states that it finds current practice generally, but not wholly, in line with the precepts. The audit team found examples of changes being introduced to increase alignment: for example, the School plans to introduce a centralised process for the consideration of programme monitoring to ensure its alignment with the revised *Section 7*.

32   The audit team found that the School takes a selective approach to its engagement with the Academic Infrastructure.

Assessment policies and regulations

33   Since receiving degree-awarding powers, the School has developed its pre-existing regulations in a wholly appropriate manner: the audit team found them comprehensive, rigorous, equitable and coherent. The School does not have an overarching assessment strategy, but operates on the basis of a policy framework set by the Academic Board, bye-laws governing all aspects of relevant activity, and operational instructions specifying key principles, policy and practice. Central to these principles is a heavy reliance on the fixed-time summer examination, a longstanding practice which has not, however, prevented the School from increasingly encouraging the use of formative assessment. The audit team, while aware that the absence of autumn resit examinations (other than where required by the Solicitors' Regulation Authority, which also demands certain other departures from the norm) is understandably unpopular with many students, confirms that the School has consulted on the issue, albeit that its policy remains firm.

34   As noted previously (see paragraph 11), the School operates a two-tier examination board system for taught provision. Departmentally-based sub-boards set summative assessments, consider results data, ratify marks, consider progression, classify finalists, request suspension of regulations where extenuating circumstances exist, and deal initially with complaints and appeals (on the management of which the School has sought and received assurance). The School Board of Examiners is responsible for ensuring the sub-boards apply regulations and classification rules equitably. Subject only to some limitations in the quality of student-related management information (see also paragraph 24), the audit team confirms that the system is appropriately recorded, carefully and transparently conducted and assures the probity and consistency of decision-making.

35   Among the School's assessment regulations is the requirement for the double-blind marking of summative assessments. On surveying departmental practices in this area in academic year 2009-10, the School discovered a minority of departments which were non-compliant with this policy. An ensuing debate culminated in the introduction, four months prior to audit, of a system permitting specified deviations from this norm in limited cases. While it would be premature to comment on the effectiveness with which this recent change

has been implemented, the School will doubtless take steps to ensure that it is systematically and effectively built into its quality assurance mechanisms.

36   In general, students speak positively about the clarity and accessibility of assessment information but less so about the transparency of marking criteria, which are perceived as contributing to inter-marker inconsistencies. The School acknowledges the issue, and has endorsed the view that marking practices in all departments should be made transparent, though the manner in which it intends to monitor this expectation and evaluate its impact remains unclear to the audit team.

37   Feedback to students on assessed work has been the subject of Teaching Task Force (see paragraph 43) recommendations; other areas where the School may need to be assured that departmental practice is in line with its central policies and requirements include late submission penalties. Given the consistent theme to emerge from this and the two preceding paragraphs, that some inter-departmental variations are potentially inequitable, it is advisable that the School establish a systematic means of assuring itself that departmental practices are fully aligned with its regulatory and other requirements.

38   The audit team confirms that, subject to the observations included in this section, the School's assessment framework, regulations and conduct of examinations are robust and contribute to the maintenance of the academic standards of awards.

Management information - statistics

39   The Academic Registrar's Division is responsible for: maintaining the quality of student records; checking the integrity of data; defining the codes used; generating data for committees, examination boards and other internal bodies; and reporting to the Higher Education Statistics Agency and other external agencies.

40   The data available to departments and committees is extensive and in many cases usefully cross-tabulated; the use to which this data is put, however, varies significantly across the institution. Detailed statistical information is also collected on service provision, including the Library, Language Centre, Teaching and Learning Centre, and the Careers Service. Although the audit team found clear evidence of statistical information being used effectively to inform internal monitoring and review processes, as noted previously, the School lacks any transparent mechanism whereby, as a corporate body, it can reliably and systematically assure itself that this is indeed happening. This being so, it is advisable that the School develop further its utilisation of management information, the better to support its evaluation of award standards and the quality of learning opportunities.

41   Overall confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the School's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its programmes and awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

42   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

43   The School takes a systematic approach to gathering student opinion. In addition to encouraging participation in external surveys such as the National Student Survey, the results of which it has addressed decisively by instituting the Teaching Task Force, the Task Force gathers feedback from a range of internal surveys, feeding the results into the committee structure. It is clear, both from committee minutes and meetings with students, that feedback is welcomed and generally acted upon, albeit not always as speedily as students would wish.

44   Overall, the audit team found that institutional arrangements for student feedback contribute effectively to the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Role of students in quality assurance

45   At School level, students' contribution to quality assurance is principally through: membership of all senior committees and forums relevant to audit; involvement in key quality management processes, including programme approval and all forms of review (where, however, participation is sometimes low); membership of the Teaching Task Force (where students' contribution has been particularly tangible); and majority membership of the consultative forums for undergraduates, taught postgraduates and research students. These forums receive reports from central service areas and staff-student consultative committees, and in turn report to the Student Affairs Committee and then the Academic Board. With a membership consisting of Students' Union sabbatical officers and elected student representatives from each department or research institute, the forums can be said to be broadly representative of the student body, and to provide extensive opportunities for the School to solicit students' views on a wide range of topics.

46   At departmental level, students' formal contribution to quality assurance takes place through membership of staff-student liaison committees (which operate separately for undergraduates, taught postgraduates and research students, and meet at least termly) and the opportunities this offers to: participate in approval and review (programme and course proposals are submitted first to the relevant liaison committee); identify and address any problems with teaching skills or related matters highlighted by internal or external student surveys; report to the consultative forums on issues of importance or concern; and discuss the evaluative section of relevant external examiners' reports. While the audit team was told by students that these arrangements are generally effective, senior managers acknowledged that they are not confident that liaison committees operate consistently, and questioned whether the relevant section of external examiners' reports is universally discussed. The School will wish to assure itself that liaison committees take any necessary action in this regard.

47   While the student written submission suggests that representation is variably effective in triggering change, this view was only partially echoed by students who met the audit team: while confirming that major changes can be slow to take effect, they gave several examples of interactions which had resulted in improvement. Again, while the student written submission urged the School to develop a strategy to address support and training for liaison committee representatives, undergraduates questioned, in meetings, the need for this given the provision of guidance from departmental tutors. The School will wish to give further consideration to these conflicting perspectives.

48   While student engagement in some aspects of quality assurance is less than the School would wish, and departmental-level procedures are operationally variable, overall the

School takes seriously its commitment to involving students in quality management, going to considerable lengths to gather opinion on any aspect of the student experience.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

49   The School's research strengths are a key element of its global reputation and a dominant reason for its attractiveness to students. Academic staff are appointed primarily on the basis of these strengths, and policies exist to enable their further development. The School believes that this level of research expertise informs curricula, particularly from third-year undergraduate level upwards. Students were generally aware of their lecturers' research specialisms, but their experience of how these specialisms informed the curriculum varied, with some viewing research-informed teaching as the norm and others unable to cite examples of research influencing teaching.

50   The School is aware of these varying perceptions, and its response has taken two main forms: first, the development of LSE100, now a compulsory course for first year undergraduates. The course aims: to expose students to debates around broad topics from different social science perspectives; to explore different approaches to evidence, explanation and theory; and to enable students to acquire a range of critical skills beyond those developed within their own degree programmes. It is delivered over two terms, with each three-week module delivered by a leading expert in the field. As the course was being delivered on a compulsory basis for the first time during the audit visit, only limited information was available on its effectiveness, although feedback from the pilot course the previous year was very positive. Secondly, the Teaching and Learning Innovation Sub-Committee has been preparing a strategy for research-led teaching for the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee. This, however, was also at an early stage of development at the time of the audit.

51   Overall, the School recognises that the extent to which its research excellence infuses teaching and learning is currently variable and insufficiently apparent to students. It is in the early stages of identifying how best to ensure that research-teaching linkages are made explicit to students throughout the institution.

Other modes of study

52   The School's provision of flexible and distributed learning is confined to its longstanding participation in a Global Executive MBA, which it delivers jointly with the leading business or management schools in the United States and France. The audit team's comments on this programme are subsumed into the broader evaluation of collaborative arrangements (see Section 5).

Resources for learning

53   The School regards the Library, IT Services and the Centre for Learning Technology as central features of an integrated approach to academic and professional support. The Library enjoys high international standing for the quality and range of its collections. Since the previous audit, the Library has developed its approach to: ensuring student access to learning and information resources; information skills training; working with academic staff to produce online course packs; and extended opening hours (24-hour opening now operates for much of the academic year).

54   Much information technology provision is located in the IT Services, and Library staff work together to ensure that students have access to relevant information and expertise

(much of which is available remotely), and sufficient expertise to benefit from them. A laptop surgery providing support and assistance for students' own laptops and other mobile devices is available, and wireless coverage has been extended to most of the campus. Students' generally high opinion of the quality of information technology support available is reflected in high satisfaction ratings in both internal and external surveys. Notwithstanding these results, IT Services held focus groups to explore how its services could be improved; these led to a number of innovations, including responding to the existence of pressure on workstations and printers at peak usage periods, increasing the number of printers, and introducing a laptop loan service for use in the Library.

55   The Centre for Learning Technology provides a range of services for students and staff, some of them quite innovative. The Centre has been particularly helpful in encouraging the use of the virtual learning environment in delivering teaching: it is now students' preferred learning resource for course information.

56   All three services make extensive use of survey data to inform service development. As well as reporting to the Library and Information Services Committee (a sub-committee of the Academic Board) they are represented on the Student Affairs Committee, to which they report annually; they also report to the student consultative forums. The audit team found that clear and efficient resource allocation procedures are in operation, and that the claims made by members of the services that individually and collectively they contribute directly to the School's strategic framework are justified.

57   Other support services for students include: the Student Services Centre; the Disability and Well-Being Office; the Teaching and Learning Centre (for study skills training: see paragraph 64); the Language Centre; and the Careers Service (which provides training in such 'soft skills' as drawing up a curriculum vitae and interview performance).

58   The School provides an extensive range of high-quality resources and services to support student learning, and does so on a strategic basis which aims to ensure the most effective and efficient allocation of resources. Performance is systematically monitored and evaluated, and satisfaction ratings from external and internal surveys confirm the success of the approach taken. The committee structures in place enable the services supporting student learning to make a positive contribution to the quality of learning opportunities and to the student experience more widely. The integrated and proactive contribution of the services providing support for staff, graduate teaching assistants and students to the furtherance of student learning constitutes a feature of good practice (see also paragraph 63).

Admissions policy

59   The School has a clearly-articulated policy for undergraduate admissions, with responsibility shared between the central Admissions Office and departmental selectors and administrators, who are trained for the purpose and supported by means of comprehensive and detailed handbooks. The process as a whole is overseen by the Head of Recruitment and Admissions, who reports annually to the Academic Board on all aspects of the process. In addition, entrance requirements are subject to reviews by the Consultative Forum for Admissions Tutors which reports to the relevant consultative forums and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee as appropriate. The School provides clear and concise information for applicants about entry requirements (which are set by departments), application procedures and the process as a whole. With minor adjustments, the system operates similarly for postgraduate admissions, where particular attention is paid to guidance on international qualifications equivalences: an emphasis reflecting the fact that international

students constitute some 60 per cent of the taught postgraduate population. The audit team found these procedures wholly fit for purpose.

60   In a highly selective context (with up to 20 applicants per place for home and European Union students), the School aims to admit students who can benefit from and contribute to the School community, based on principles of fairness, transparency and consistency, and on a commitment to diversity and equality of opportunity. The steps taken to operate the system in a manner consistent with these principles and commitments include: adjusting offers where a candidate's performance significantly exceeds the average for the school or college attended, and initiating and developing a Discretionary Places Scheme, which involves assigning 40 places annually (originally allocated by the Higher Education Funding Council in 1999) to applicants displaying merit and potential but whose educational background has been characterised by elements of disadvantage.

61   The audit team found the School's admissions procedures consistent and effective.

Student support

62   All undergraduates and taught postgraduate students are assigned an academic adviser to offer direct information and advice on academic matters and make appropriate referrals where personal issues arise. Academic advisers' work is managed by departmental tutors (certain operational variations are permitted) and supported by comprehensive formal guidance, the quality of which was commended by academic advisers who met the audit team. The School operates an institution-wide office-hour system for the provision of academic advice: it acknowledges that this system, the subject of a recommendation in the last Institutional audit, continues to operate less than consistently. Nevertheless, the audit team confirms that improvements have been made, not least in facilitating improved interdepartmental liaison for joint honours students and identifying instances of good practice.

63   In addition to departmentally-based support, students have access to an extensive and well-coordinated network of central services designed to meet health, social and spiritual needs. The audit team particularly noted that hall wardens are increasingly encouraged to offer pastoral support to students and are systematically supported in doing so, and that students speak highly of the quality, range, responsiveness and coordination of these services. The team found again that the integrated and proactive contribution of the services providing support for staff, graduate teaching assistants and students to the furtherance of student learning constitutes a feature of good practice.

Staff support (including staff development)

64   The Teaching and Learning Centre delivers: a well-regarded postgraduate certificate programme, of which all new staff other than those exempted by dint of prior experience are required to take specified elements; an induction programme for all new staff; an extensive programme of developmental courses to prepare academic staff for activities ranging from different modes of teaching to departmental tutor and PhD supervisor; and annual surveys of students' perceptions of the teaching performance of academic staff and graduate teaching assistants, which the School uses to monitor performance and identify individuals in need of further training. The audit team noted that aggregated survey results by department are available on the School's website, and heard the surveys described as a key part of the feedback received by graduate teaching assistants. Other training and support are offered by the Language Centre and the Centre for Learning Technology; an online booking system facilitates the accessing of available courses and provides data on uptake; consultative forums, such as those for departmental tutors and heads of department,

also contribute to supporting staff in particular roles through facilitating inter-departmental dialogue and supporting engagement in policy development.

65   The Academic Career Development Scheme requires all academic staff members (not only probationers) to have mentors: the audit team found this Scheme effective in identifying and responding to a range of development needs. A teaching observation policy applies to all staff and is a prerequisite for interim and major review; it is supported by a prize scheme acknowledging exceptional performance.

66   Overall, the audit team considers that 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

67   The School regards quality enhancement as a natural outcome of quality assurance; its commitment to devoting greater energy and resource to it is reflected in the Strategic Plan and a range of policy documents. The Teaching and Learning Innovation Sub-Committee is mandated to explore, encourage and disseminate good practice; the Teaching and Learning Centre contributes to the enhancement agenda; both academic and service departments consider and address the implications of internal and external satisfaction data; and the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee's review process identifies areas of potential good practice within the selected theme areas, although there is scope for the findings of these reviews to be more systematically disseminated.

68   The audit team found evidence of enhancement activity in the work of the Teaching Task Force. Through the Task Force the School is taking action to improve students' learning opportunities by means which include: greater recognition for teaching in promotion; improvement in student support through academic advisers (see paragraph 62); the development of LSE100 (see paragraph 50); and reductions in master's-level class sizes. Although it would be premature to comment on its effectiveness, academic staff reported that the Teaching Task Force had supported a school-wide culture-shift towards greater recognition of the importance of teaching quality. The School will wish to reflect on how these initial, promising achievements might best be evaluated and, as appropriate, developed and systematised.

69   The audit team found that the School's approach to quality enhancement has developed since the last Institutional audit, but that it remains characterised by a range of positive structures and activities rather than an overall strategic approach: its impact is also diminished because the School has yet to mount a systematic evaluation of its effectiveness or to explore optimal methods of dissemination in an environment characterised by high levels of departmental autonomy. It is desirable that the School develop a systematic procedure for both identifying and disseminating good practice and for evaluating the impact of its quality enhancement activities generally.

70   The School is committed to enhancing the learning opportunities of its students, but in that its approach to quality enhancement is embedded in the overall framework for quality assurance, its capacity to evaluate the impact of its enhancement activities on the quality of provision is limited.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

71   The School's collaborative strategy involves forming partnerships with a small number of high-quality institutions in globally significant cities, with the aim of broadening its academic portfolio and creating innovative opportunities for prospective students. Collaborative arrangements (other than those operated through the University of London International Academy, which are excluded from this audit) are overseen within the External Relations Division. The School has thus far established five institutional partnerships, involving a joint degree programme targeted at a selective group of experienced and successful international business executives, and double degree and dual degree programmes. The audit team confirms that, following the School's response to a recommendation in the previous Institutional audit that it should review procedures for assuring the quality and standards of collaborative arrangements with particular regard to potential overseas partners, School-level approval procedures are sound.

72   Bearing in mind the fact that, as with on-campus provisions, responsibility for monitoring and review is devolved to departments, and that in a minority of cases the approach taken is less than wholehearted, the School has initiated Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee reviews of aspects of collaborative provision. Two such reviews have thus far been conducted, of dual and double degree programmes. In the first case, the review team, while making also a number of positive comments, identified shortcomings in significant areas, including: the use of student data; published materials; student feedback; the variable quality of the partner's quality assurance information; and failure to conduct a scheduled review and institute promised programme committees. The second review: was critical of aspects of the information provided to students by partner institutions; expressed concern about the lack of a body responsible for overseeing the programme as a whole; and concluded that insufficient use was being made of student statistics for quality assurance purposes. The audit team confirms that the School is fully aware of these critical issues, and is now in the process of considering how to address them.

73   While the audit team acknowledges the value of such detailed reviews, two concerns remain: the fact that a delay of more than four years occurred between the previous audit and the first of these reviews; and the fact that the audit team takes the view that the School does not yet have in place a central management system sufficient to ensure that all operational deficiencies identified by the review process are reliably addressed. It therefore falls short of the expectation of the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*, that it is fully exercising its responsibility for ensuring that the quality of learning opportunities offered through its collaborative arrangements is adequate to enable students to achieve the academic standard required. It is advisable that the School require partnership agreements to specify procedures which enable it to assure itself of the academic standards of, and the quality of learning opportunities appertaining to, all programmes delivered as collaborative provision.

74   The audit team found that while the School is belatedly taking steps to address the shortcomings in collaborative arrangements identified in the previous audit, it is not yet able wholly to demonstrate the effectiveness of its approach.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

75   The School, globally acknowledged as a leading research centre within the social, political and economic sciences, takes pride in maintaining a challenging but supportive intellectual environment for research students. Such students have access to outstanding

learning resources, well-developed programmes of research seminars and external events, and supervisors who are in many cases pre-eminent and well-networked in their field of expertise. The School ensures that research student training meets research council requirements, and provides additional training and support through the Teaching and Learning Centre, the Methodology Institute and other internal bodies; the Careers Service has a dedicated PhD Careers Adviser; the Library provides one-to-one advice to PhD students. Overall, the aim of providing high-quality learning support which will enable all research students to maximise their potential appears realistic.

76   The Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee's Research Degrees Sub-Committee assists its parent body in developing the institutional strategy for research training. Within its sphere of responsibility the Sub-Committee is also charged with: overseeing programmes; appointing external examiners; considering external examiners' reports; approving programme modifications; and keeping regulations under review. The audit team confirms that the School, aided by external assessors, carefully monitors and benchmarks relevant progression and other data. In addition, immediately prior to audit it determined to take institutional-level responsibility for improving completion rates, situating this aim as an integrated part of its institutional-level oversight of academic standards and programme quality.

77   Comprehensive advice for potential applicants, including details about procedures, expectations, programmes and supervisors, is available on the School website. Applications are handled centrally, but final selection decisions are made in departments. Supervisors are normally assigned to students when a formal offer is made; registration and orientation are centrally managed, being supported both by the 'new arrivals' website page and by departmental induction events. Students spoke positively about their induction, and the audit team confirms, from its scrutiny of relevant documentation, that it is well-conceived and attractively and professionally presented. For current research students the School has well-established, clearly-written and easily-accessible regulations, procedures (which include complaints and appeals) and codes of practice. Progression criteria are subject-specific, clearly described and communicated in writing. Institutional web pages contain information on academic, administrative and financial matters, and provide links to relevant internal resources and external websites. The quality and availability of information for staff and students were identified as a feature of good practice.

78   All students are allocated a lead supervisor, with additional support made available on the basis of one of three approved models. Each department has a doctoral programme director, with responsibility for overseeing: the training, support and supervisory workload of supervisors (all supervisors receive bespoke training); the induction of new research students; and the training of all research students. The obligations and responsibilities of research students, supervisors, and departmental doctoral programme directors are clearly specified: these include the minimum frequency of supervisions and early support from supervisors with identifying research training needs, planning time and drawing up a research framework. While research students who met the audit team were not entirely clear about their frequency entitlements, they described their supervisors as readily available and expressed satisfaction with the quality of support and guidance received.

79   As well as being represented on the Research Degrees Sub-Committee, research students sit on the Student Affairs Committee, which has a wide remit in developing strategies and policies concerning student experience, pastoral support, student feedback, and codes and procedures. In addition, as noted previously (see paragraph 45) they have majority membership of the Consultative Forum for Research Students and are members of the relevant staff-student liaison committee. Research students confirmed to the audit team that the formal arrangements function satisfactorily and are helpfully augmented by informal contacts with supervisors and other members of academic staff.

80 Approximately 90 per cent of PhD students have contracts as graduate teaching assistants: the maximum teaching commitment is six classes weekly. For such students both departmental-level mentoring and a mandatory training programme are in place, the latter covering the main aspects of both teaching and assessment. Student opinion surveys demonstrate a consistently high level of satisfaction with graduate teaching assistants' performance.

81 The audit team confirms the exemplary nature of the School's arrangements for the selection, learning support, training, supervision and assessment of research students. The School's procedures for postgraduate research students are soundly based, supervision and support arrangements are satisfactory, and the School has in place effective procedures for the management of its research programmes which meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes.*

Section 7: Published information

82 The School is committed to maximising the transparency of its approach to published information. Its website was redesigned in 2010 following careful planning and wide consultation, and a detailed policy and code of practice for its use, supported by a comprehensive web editors' handbook, are in place. The website is well-managed, with responsibilities for maintaining and enhancing it, and ensuring its currency, clearly designated. The audit team saw evidence of the School undertaking serious scrutiny of all its published information, including that produced by collaborative partners.

83 The public pages of the School's website contain all major strategies and policies relevant to this audit, and extensive, up-to-date and well-presented information for internal and external audiences. A searchable, password-protected area of the website provides staff members and student representatives with major committees' agendas, minutes and supporting papers, and the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office section (though not, as a matter of policy, the student section: see paragraph 29) contains all programme specifications. The School acknowledges, however, that the present system has been over-reliant on the accuracy of checking by individuals, and has responded by means of a project designed to increase levels of automation, particularly in updating programme and course information. Nonetheless, with very limited exceptions the audit team found the School website clear, well-maintained and user-friendly, and noted that it attracted extremely positive comments from both staff and students. The quality and availability of information for staff and students are together identified as a feature of good practice.

84 As well as speaking positively about the School website, students informed the audit team that they find admission and induction information full and accurate, and programme and departmental handbooks predominantly so (their main reservation here relating to the reliability of information on the availability of optional courses). Checking the accuracy of handbooks is a departmental responsibility, the discharge of which has been monitored in Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee reviews (see paragraph 24). The School is also addressing the variability in form and content of departmental handbooks by introducing a core set of information for universal use.

85 It is confirmed that the externally available information required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England guidelines is published on the School's website, and that the teaching quality information on the Unistats appears accurate and complete.

86   Overall, the audit team considers that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the School publishes about its educational provision.