



# **Institutional audit**

**University of London**

**April 2011**

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## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) mission is to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education. To this end, QAA carries out Institutional audits of higher education institutions.

In England and Northern Ireland QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher education sector to provide public information about the maintenance of academic standards and assurance of the quality of learning opportunities provided for students. It also operates under contract to the Higher Education Funding Council in England and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland to provide evidence to meet their statutory obligations to assure the quality and standards of academic programmes for which they disburse public funding. The audit method was developed in partnership with the funding councils and the higher education representative bodies, and agreed following consultation with higher education institutions and other interested organisations. The method was endorsed by the then Department for Education and Skills. It was revised in 2006 following recommendations from the Quality Assurance Framework Review Group, a representative group established to review the structures and processes of quality assurance in England and Northern Ireland, and to evaluate the work of QAA.

Institutional audit is an evidence-based process carried out through peer review. It forms part of the Quality Assurance Framework established in 2002 following revisions to the United Kingdom's (UK's) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

Institutional audit results in judgements about the institutions being reviewed. Judgements are made about:

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

## Institutional audit: report

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision, the judgements and comments also apply, unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

## Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

## Summary

### Introduction

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

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the University and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the University manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom (UK). The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

### Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations the audit found that:

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

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

### Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

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

### Published information

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

## Recommendations for action

It would be advisable for the University to:

- ensure that, through Collegiate Council, it discharges its collective responsibilities in respect of: the routine review of the currency of its Regulatory Framework; the consistent monitoring of the performance of all central activities; the management of quality and standards in the School of Advanced Study
- require the School of Advanced Study to: undertake regular reviews of the currency and scope of its Quality Assurance Framework; develop and implement an approach to annual monitoring that ensures an holistic evaluation of each taught and research programme; adopt a consistent and effective approach to periodic programme review; develop a reliable means of assuring itself that it complies with its Regulatory Framework, with particular regard to the QAA Academic Infrastructure; prescribe common assessment practices for all taught programmes, permitting variation only after consideration of an academic rationale and approval at School level; use, as a matter of routine, student management information in assuring itself of the quality and academic standards of taught and research degrees; ensure that all staff involved in the admission of students to taught and research programmes receive timely information, support and training; ensure the accuracy and consistency of all information for students published by the institutes
- require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to: collecting, considering and responding to feedback; training representatives; making available and ensuring awareness of informed and impartial advice about School procedures; making available and ensuring awareness of information about English language support.

It would be desirable for the University to:

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

## Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit investigated the use made by the University of the Academic Infrastructure, which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the University seeks assurance from the Colleges that they engage with the Academic Infrastructure, and that the School of Advanced Study meets some but not all of its expectations.

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of the University of London (the University) was undertaken in the week commencing 28 March 2011. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Mr P Lloyd, Professor P Manning, Dr G Murphy, and Professor D Timms, auditors, and Ms E Clewlow, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor R Harris, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University of London (the University) was granted its first charter in 1836 and is the third oldest University in England. Since major governance changes in 1994, it has functioned both as an equal member of a federated institution with its 19 Colleges, and as directly responsible for the work of several Central Academic Bodies. One of these, the School of Advanced Study (the School), which comprises ten institutes and around 350 postgraduate students (of which slightly over half are taking taught master's programmes), is included in this audit. Since its previous Institutional audit the University has further revised its governance model, replacing the Senate with a Collegiate Council (the Council) constituted of the heads of the Colleges and the Dean of the School. The Council is supported by an Academic Quality Advisory Committee populated by quality practitioners and charged, among other duties, with quality enhancement. There are no student representatives on either body, although the President of the University of London Union receives non-confidential Council agenda items and may request permission to attend for items directly related to students: the University may wish to keep this unusual arrangement under review.

4 The Colleges are legally autonomous, directly funded, and separately and individually audited by QAA; most award degrees of the University of London. The School does not enjoy similar autonomy: its Dean, unlike the heads of College, reports to the Vice-Chancellor, who also chairs its senior deliberative body, the School Board, which itself reports to the Council. The Dean does, however, chair the School's Academic Quality and Standards Committee, to which the higher degrees and research degrees committees of its constituent institutes report, and which in turn reports to the Board.

5 The Council is chaired by the Vice-Chancellor as an equal stakeholder in the collective discharge of institutional-level responsibility for academic quality and standards. The fact that the University discharges its academic responsibilities in a context in which, short of recommending to the Trustees that a College be required to leave the Federation, it has collective moral and professional authority but no enforcement powers over Colleges awarding University of London degrees is of central relevance to this audit. In assuring itself that the academic standards of all University of London awards meet the specifications of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), the Council relies largely on the Academic Framework specified in University Regulation 1 (hereinafter the Regulatory Framework). The audit found, however, that it is potentially hampered in doing so by the fact that no procedure exists for routinely reviewing the Framework's alignment with the Academic Infrastructure. It is advisable that the University ensures, through the Collegiate Council, that it discharges its collective responsibilities in respect of the routine review of the currency of its Regulatory Framework.

6 Colleges are required to report annually to the University on specified areas of activity, including the outcomes of any engagements with QAA and how they have

addressed any adverse findings. While this system operates as intended, the Council does not address College reports other than individually: it has not, for example, taken a strategic approach to the fact that a small minority of Institutional audit reports have been strongly critical of aspects of the management of quality or standards in on-campus or collaborative provision.

7 The School describes itself as an umbrella organisation sheltering ten distinct institutes. While its Quality Assurance Framework for Postgraduate Teaching (the Framework) is critical to its coordinating activities, the current version of the Framework itself has not been formally approved either by the University or the School, nor does any procedure exist for it to be routinely reviewed. It is advisable that the University ensures that, through Collegiate Council, it discharges its collective responsibilities in respect of the management of quality and standards in the School of Advanced Study. It is also advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to undertake regular reviews of the currency and scope of its Quality Assurance Framework.

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

8 The School's procedures for nominating, approving, inducting and supporting external examiners were found to be satisfactory, and external examiners' reports to be comprehensive in scope and fit for purpose. While there is scope for improving the consistency with which items of good practice are progressed and with which institutes provide feedback to external examiners themselves, the audit found that the system broadly meets the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*, and contributes effectively to the management of academic standards.

9 Proposals for the approval of new programmes are fit for purpose. Annual programme monitoring, while generally satisfactory, does not require institutes' higher degrees committees to report on the outcomes of monitoring as a whole or to provide an overview of the process: as such it does not provide the University with such evidence as would enable it to have confidence in the overall effectiveness of programmes and courses. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement an approach to annual monitoring that ensures an holistic evaluation of each taught and research programme.

10 Programme review, normally a quinquennial process, involves the institute higher degrees committee submitting papers to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The audit found that, while the conduct of all reviews scrutinised is conscientiously discharged and conforms to the Quality Assurance Framework specification, the specification itself permits extensive variations in method and focus, with neither academic nor procedural rationale. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to adopt a consistent and effective approach to periodic programme review. Overall, and subject to these recommendations, the audit found that approval, monitoring and review largely meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*, and contribute to assuring the University of the academic standards of its awards and the quality of student learning opportunities.

11 The School addresses those elements of the Academic Infrastructure relevant to its provision, although it will already be clear that it is mainly but not wholly successful in doing so. In particular, in the absence of regular and formal means of establishing congruence between the requirements of its Quality Assurance Framework and the expectations of the Academic Infrastructure it is non-compliant with University regulations. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop a reliable means of assuring



itself that it complies with its Regulatory Framework, with particular regard to the QAA Academic Infrastructure.

12 Responsibility for approving the School's assessment policies rests with the Council. The audit found that, while the Quality Assurance Framework specifies arrangements for dealing with such matters as late submission of assessed work or extenuating circumstances claims, it permits a wide variety of practices which impact differently on students, normally in different institutes but occasionally in the same one. The audit particularly found a case of a decision by an institute examination board involving a significant variation from the norm being merely 'received and noted' by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee: this does not meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 7*. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to prescribe common assessment practices for all taught programmes, permitting variation only after consideration of an academic rationale and approval at School level.

13 Nevertheless, the audit found no evidence of any student receiving an academic award for work not meeting the level descriptors in the FHEQ; indeed external examiners' reports suggest that institutes set their standards well above threshold requirements. In that they permit significant and seemingly unjustifiable variations, however, the School's assessment regulations, while contributing effectively to each institute's maintenance of the academic standards of awards, do not currently ensure that a consistent standard is set and maintained at School level.

14 Neither the Council nor the School Board currently receives adequate statistical data and analysis. In the case of the School, the omissions include summative data on admissions, progression, pass rates and withdrawals; and, as noted above (see paragraph 9), annual monitoring is not so reported in as to provide a summary overview of statistical indicators. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to use, as a matter of routine, student management information in assuring itself of the quality and academic standards of taught and research degrees.

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

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

16 Within the University Federation gathering and analysing student feedback are College responsibilities; within the School they are governed by the Quality Assurance Framework. The audit found that the questionnaires required by the Framework are indeed used and discussed at staff-student meetings but not necessarily by more senior committees; nor, in the absence of a common template, are they necessarily included in the annual monitoring cycle. It is (see paragraph 14) advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to use, as a matter of routine, student management information in assuring itself of the quality and academic standards of taught and research degrees.

17 While the small size and collegial ambience of the School and the institutes mean that many student issues can be resolved informally, the School does not systematically collate, consider and respond to feedback contained in student surveys. While such feedback is generally handled adequately at institute level, it is advisable that the University requires the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to

its engagement with students, with particular reference to collecting, considering and responding to feedback.

18 Within the School, students are represented on all key committees and chair the Students' Representative Committee; they are involved in programme approval and review activities, although not in a wholly consistent way. They are similarly widely represented within the institutes, although external examiners' reports are not routinely shared with them. In the light of the Higher Education Funding Council's expectation on this point, it is desirable that the University encourage the School of Advanced Study consistently to share external examiners' reports with student representatives.

19 Given that since the University's previous academic audit the role and remit of the University of London Union have been revised to focus on recreational and sporting activities, the Union played no part in the present audit and the written submission was prepared by members of the School's Students' Representative Committee. In addition, since the Union no longer provides support and training for student representatives, those currently serving have not themselves been trained. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to training representatives.

20 In the course of the audit, students stated firmly that the research reputation and the research environment of their institute had influenced their decision to apply, and they confirmed that their expectations had been fulfilled. The audit found that institutional arrangements for maintaining links between research, scholarship and teaching and the students' learning opportunities, while not necessarily subject to close attention within the School, are nonetheless effective.

21 The Collegiate Council is responsible for all central activities, including the internationally important libraries in Senate House and the institutes; it monitors the performance of most but not all of them. To the extent that monitoring takes place (see paragraph 32), these arrangements were found to operate satisfactorily, although a comprehensive approach on the part of the Council would provide added assurance as to the quality of service provided. The Careers Group manages the careers services of seven larger Colleges, and evidence was found of the rigorous use of student feedback; a wide range of events and activities; and a commitment to developing strong relationships with employers. The Specialist Institutions Careers Service provides a tailored service for students of smaller Colleges and Central Academic Bodies, including the School. While its task is a challenging one, the Service aims to meet these challenges by means which include providing specialist sessions and working closely with employers and academic staff.

22 The School's virtual learning environment constitutes a resource for information and exchange for students, providing information on research training sessions and events. The School's web presence is increasingly central to both research and teaching, although the School is aware that significant investment will be needed if it is to achieve a more structured and coherent interface.

23 Within the University Federation, admissions, although a College responsibility, are supported by the University by means which include a Taster Course Programme, allowing potential applicants to acclimatise themselves to university life by sampling selected College courses, and a course finder website link, enabling browsers to navigate to programmes of potential interest.

24 Since within the School a procedural framework for the accreditation of prior learning has been approved but is not yet fully operational, the possibility of inconsistencies continues to exist. As, in addition, the School's common admissions policy does not meet all

expectations of the Quality Assurance Framework or of the relevant section of the *Code of practice*, particularly in respect of the preparation of staff involved with admissions, its management of admissions is not in all respects consistent or effective. While the School is able to attract academically well-qualified applicants likely to complete their programme of study, it is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to ensure that all staff involved in the admission of students to taught and research programmes receive timely information, support and training.

25 Within the University Federation Colleges are responsible for providing day-to-day student support. Some uncertainty was found concerning the responsibilities of the University of London Union in respect both of students in Colleges without a students' union and those who, while having access to a College union, prefer to seek advice elsewhere: the University will wish to clarify this point. Within the School, students do not have access to such independent advice, and the audit found that the handbooks offer inconsistent information on obtaining it. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to making available and ensuring awareness of informed and impartial advice about School procedures.

26 Students of the School spoke positively of the information and advice received prior to arrival; international students would have valued more detailed practical information and speedier confirmation of acceptance. Induction was generally valued, subject to some reservations about the responsiveness and helpfulness of the Registry. The audit found, however, that support for the use of English for academic purposes is inconsistently and inequitably provided across the institutes. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to making available and ensuring awareness of information about English language support.

27 In the absence of a school-wide policy on personal tutoring, practice varies across institutes, although students greatly value the opportunities available to them for informal as well as formal contact with academic staff. The School website and student handbooks confirm a strong commitment to a diverse entry and to supporting students with disabilities, although the audit found that the annual report on disability activities in particular is not formally and systematically considered within the School.

28 The University states that academic staff within the School have distinctive profiles and that newly-appointed staff members are normally experienced and well-established academics. Induction is undertaken at both School and institute levels. While a postgraduate certificate programme delivered by a College is available to all newly-appointed staff, no policy yet exists for factoring time spent on it into workloads, and take-up is low. Annual appraisal is conducted by institute directors (who are in turn appraised by the Dean) on the basis of a competency framework, which the School believes has increased the clarity of the procedure. Appraisal functions satisfactorily, and its purposes include identifying, monitoring and supporting staff development needs, these being addressed by or through the University's Staff Development Unit. Peer observation of teaching is not undertaken systematically within the institutes, although school-wide plans are in place to encourage wider and more consistent usage.

29 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**

30 The University's collective oversight of Colleges includes enhancing academic excellence; the Council, supported by its Academic Quality Advisory Committee, is the main institutional vehicle for doing so. The fact that the Council proceeds by dialogue not policy means, however, that while interesting examples of imaginative collaboration are identified, they arise more from discussion than planning. In addition, while each College is required to provide the Council with all QAA reports and the response, normally only reports containing an adverse judgement are discussed in detail. The scope for disseminating good practice is, therefore, largely restricted to the circulation of the University Quality Overview Report (which derives from College annual reports, see paragraph 6) following discussion of its main function of providing assurance that the institutions are safeguarding the integrity of University awards; and an annual meeting of the Academic Quality Advisory Committee, which it devotes to an enhancement topic of its choice in the hope that it will be of interest and value to the Colleges.

31 The University, in acknowledgement that this process is in need of revivification, has established a working group to review significant issues, including the Report template's effectiveness in supporting quality enhancement. At the time of the audit the inaugural meeting of this group had yet to take place. Nevertheless, the frank analysis of its contextual paper gives grounds for the belief that the group is aware of and understands the nature of quality enhancement as an institution-wide strategic activity and some of the challenges to be overcome for it to be fully achieved.

32 While the University is working to improve the quality and responsiveness of central support services, the audit was unable to establish how the Council currently exercises its remit of overseeing those central activities which do not submit regular reports themselves and on which it does not systematically report. It is advisable that, through Collegiate Council, the University discharge its collective responsibilities in respect of the consistent monitoring of the performance of all central activities.

33 The School, which describes itself as an umbrella organisation sheltering a rich collection of distinctive institutes, views quality enhancement primarily as an opportunity for interaction and networking. Indeed, its draft revised Learning and Teaching Strategy refers to enhancement only in the context of a broad commitment to continued improvement in research, research degree supervision and staff training; institutes' strategic plans seldom refer explicitly to enhancing learning opportunities. The audit found little evidence of enhancement opportunities being consistently and reliably utilised, transferred to other institutes, evaluated or reflected upon for the general good. It follows that the School, while its agenda for the next two years includes initiatives with enhancement potential, has some way to go before it has in place procedures which draw effectively on its exceptional strengths to enhance the quality of provision. It is desirable that the University encourage the School of Advanced Study to develop a systematic approach to enhancement.

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

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

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

## Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

36 Colleges are responsible for all aspects of their research degree students' progress, although at the time of the audit, because aspects of the administration of examinations had been a central responsibility until 2010, the Council's Research Degrees Committee remained in existence to oversee residual examinations.

The School registers some 150 research students annually for the seven institutes offering doctoral supervision. It has standard admissions criteria; prospective students are encouraged to make initial informal contact; and at a formal level applications are independently assessed. While these arrangements are clearly articulated and well-managed, the fact that staff involved with admissions receive no training means, given the crucial nature of initial advice both academically and in the wider context of an applicant's preparedness for advanced study, that the University cannot be assured as to the consistency and reliability of the process, and that current arrangements do not wholly meet the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. It is (see paragraph 24) advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to ensure that staff involved in the admission of students to taught and (in this case) research programmes receive timely information, support and training.

37 The School's annual induction programme was found to be satisfactory, although, as noted previously, further thought might usefully be given to strengthening early support for international students; addressing the variability of provision for students requiring help in English language and communications skills; and improving the availability and reliability of information provided on this matter, since all these matters impact also on research students. It is, therefore, (see paragraph 26) advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to making available and ensuring awareness of information about English language support.

38 Comprehensive procedures are in place to cover the supervisory process. Supervision itself is closely monitored by research degrees committees, with clear requirements in place for the submission of research and training plans, upgrading, draft submission and final examination: all relevant arrangements were found to be thorough and appropriate. Students spoke highly of the research environment, the availability of facilities, the quality of academic support and advice, and the quality of research training. At a structural level, however, some omissions were detected in the collective and systematic oversight of postgraduate research programmes across the institutes. As before (see paragraph 9), it is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement an approach to annual monitoring that ensures an holistic evaluation of each taught and (in this instance) research programme.

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

## Section 7: Published information

40 Each College is responsible for the accuracy and completeness of the information it provides. The University website publishes a wide range of general information on the Federation and its activities, and provides links to all College prospectuses, thereby facilitating comprehensive searches. Nevertheless, the dispersal of responsibility for its publications, combined with the absence of an overarching information strategy, allows the possibility of erroneous or outdated information being made publicly available. It is desirable

that the University assign overall responsibility for assuring the accuracy of information published by the University of London.

41 Within the School, overall responsibility for the accuracy of information is devolved to the Dean, who in turn delegates the management, maintenance and development of the website to officers and departments. Within this authority framework, institutes are responsible for their own websites and handbooks: these, however, were found to vary considerably in focus, format and user friendliness, and some contain incorrect, outdated or conflicting information. While students stated that they are generally satisfied with the published information available both before entry and subsequently, this view, although genuine, is clearly not authoritative. It is advisable that the University require the School of Advanced Study to ensure the accuracy and consistency of all information for students published by the institutes.

42 While, for the most part, the externally available information required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England guidelines is published, external examiners' reports are not as yet routinely shared with student representatives. It is (see paragraph 18) desirable that the University encourage the School of Advanced Study consistently to share external examiners' reports with student representatives.

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

## **Section 8: Recommendations and features of good practice**

44 The audit found that:

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

### **Recommendations for action**

45 It is advisable that the University:

- ensure that, through Collegiate Council, it discharges its collective responsibilities in respect of: the routine review of the currency of its Regulatory Framework (paragraph 5); the management of quality and standards in the School of Advanced Study (paragraph 7); the consistent monitoring of the performance of all central activities (paragraph 32).
- require the School of Advanced Study to: undertake regular reviews of the currency and scope of its Quality Assurance Framework (paragraph 7); develop and implement an approach to annual monitoring that ensures an holistic evaluation of each taught and research programme (paragraphs 9 and 39); adopt a consistent and effective approach to periodic programme review (paragraph 10); develop a reliable means of assuring itself that it complies with its Regulatory Framework, with particular regard to the QAA Academic Infrastructure (paragraph 11); prescribe common assessment practices for all taught programmes, permitting variation only after consideration of an academic rationale and approval at School level (paragraph 12); use, as a matter of routine, student management information in

assuring itself of the quality and academic standards of taught and research degrees (paragraphs 14 and 16); ensure that all staff involved in the admission of students to taught and research programmes receive timely information, support and training (paragraphs 24 and 37); ensure the accuracy and consistency of all information for students published by the institutes (paragraph 42).

- require the School of Advanced Study to develop and implement a systematic approach to its engagement with students, with particular reference to: collecting, considering and responding to feedback (paragraph 17); training representatives (paragraph 19); making available and ensuring awareness of informed and impartial advice about School procedures (paragraph 25); making available and ensuring awareness of information about English language support (paragraphs 26 and 38).

46 It is desirable that the University:

- encourage the School of Advanced Study: consistently to share external examiners' reports with student representatives (paragraphs 18 and 43); to develop a systematic approach to enhancement (paragraph 33)
- assign overall responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of information published by the University of London (paragraph 41).

## Appendix

### University of London's response to the Institutional audit report

The University welcomes the audit team's judgement that confidence can be placed in its present and likely future management of the standard of University of London awards and of the learning opportunities available to students. The University is pleased that the review of the University's constitution, concluded in 2008, has made the respective roles in quality management of the University and the nineteen Colleges which join with it to form the University Federation more transparent. The University thanks the audit team for its constructive and courteous approach, and for the care taken to understand the key characteristics of a federal structure unique in English higher education.

The nature of the interaction between the autonomous Colleges continues to evolve within the revised constitution, and the University looks forward to realising more fully, over time, the potential for enhancement offered by the federal model.

All of the students within the scope of this audit were in the School of Advanced Study. The University is pleased by the team's recognition that 'Institutes set their standards well above threshold requirements'. The audit recommendations support the continued development of consistent and regularly evaluated practice across the seven teaching institutes of the School. The University welcomes the encouragement which they provide to continue and accelerate a process of harmonisation already in train, and recognises the need for the Collegiate Council to maintain effective oversight of that process. At the time of publication of the report, the Council has given initial consideration to the recommendations, and has agreed an outline timetable for response.



**RG 782 08/11**

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