QAA

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

November 2007

Annex to the report

Contents

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Introduction

Following a prolonged engagement with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (the School) in connection with its successful application for taught and research degree awarding powers, a team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the School on 15 and 16 November 2007 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the School offers, on behalf of the University of London.

Outcomes of the institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine is that:

- confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the School's current and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards made on behalf of the University of London

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team found that the School is in the early stages of developing its strategy for enhancement. There was evidence that the School is taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of learning opportunities, but as yet these are taking place outside any articulation of a strategic approach to this objective.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the institution's arrangements for its postgraduate research students meet the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes.*

Published information

The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

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

- the development of more systematic approaches to obtaining student feedback across the School as a whole, and the responsiveness of the School to the views of its London-based students (paragraph 60)

- the support given to London-based students prior to their arrival and throughout their period of study (paragraph 79)

- the effective management of change and the engagement of staff in the development of new arrangements for learning and teaching (paragraph 83).

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the School consider further action in some areas.

In particular, the team advises the School to:

- develop an assessment strategy that deals with issues of validity, reliability and consistency in order to underpin the comparability of standards across awards (paragraph 34)

- continue to clarify the roles and purposes of the academic committees to ensure that they work together in an increasingly effective and complementary way (paragraph 37).

It would be desirable for the School to:

- continue to develop the more systematic use of management information to support the achievement of both strategic and course-level goals (paragraph 38)

- continue to make progress with the analysis and development of quality assurance processes in order that they may become effective tools for enhancement (paragraph 44)

- build on its considerable efforts to achieve greater parity in the quality of learning opportunities between its London-based and distance-learning provision (paragraph 71).

Section 1: Introduction and background

The institution and its mission

1　　The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (the School) was founded in 1899 and is a self-governing college of the University of London (the University), awarding degrees of the University. The School is an exclusively postgraduate institution, offering taught courses operating in London, distance-learning taught courses through the University External Programme, and research degrees. Only a very small number of such courses are subject to professional regulation or approval. The School is subject to the University's Ordinances, which have, however, since 1996, delegated authority to the School to administer the award of its taught degrees and work to its own regulations.

2　　The School's mission is to contribute to the improvement of health worldwide through the pursuit of excellence in research, postgraduate teaching and advanced training in national and international public health and tropical medicine, and to undertake activities which influence policy and practice in these areas. Organisationally its academic activities are best expressed in the titles of its three departments, Epidemiology and Population Health; Infectious and Tropical Diseases; and Public Health and Policy, all of them further subdivided into more specialist units.

3　　The School, based on several sites in Bloomsbury, has an academic staff complement of 461 (full-time equivalent 415) with additional teaching support provided by a cadre of around 100 honorary or emeritus professors and a wide range of research staff and postgraduate research students; its distance-learning programmes are supported by London-based staff and over 100 part-time external tutors on teaching-only contracts. Student numbers in academic year 2006-07 were 2,835 (2,497 taught, including 1,922 distance learning, all of which are part-time, and 338 research). These numbers have grown by some 90 per cent in the last decade, an increase largely but not wholly explained by the School's development of a suite of distance-learning courses. The student population is extremely diverse: an internal study of the 2005-06 cohort reveals that London-based students came from 102 countries and that their ages ranged from 20 to 63. The School is understandably proud of the fact that many of its graduates achieve prominent positions in health ministries, universities, major hospitals and public health organisations across the world.

4   The School's governance is the responsibility of the Board of Management (to be renamed Council subject to Privy Council approval of revisions to the Charter). The Chief Executive is the Director, who is supported by a Senior Management Team. The School's deliberative committee structure had been significantly recast in the year prior to the audit visit.

The information base for the audit

5   The information available for the audit included the School's application for taught and research degree awarding powers, submitted to the Privy Council in April 2006; the report of a review of research degree programmes, conducted by QAA in 2006; and the report of the institutional audit, conducted by QAA in 2003. Given the nature and context of the audit team's engagement with the School and the timing of the main audit visit in an institution whose main face-to-face taught provision comprises one-year master's courses, it did not prove possible for the students to produce a written submission for this audit; nor, given the availability of evidence initially presented and considered in the context of the application for degree awarding powers, was the School required to submit a briefing paper.

6   The audit visit in November 2007, took place after completion of the scrutiny of the degree awarding powers application but before its result was known. Accordingly this report describes the School's constitutional relationship with the University at the time of the visit. During the visit, the audit team met senior academic and administrative staff with responsibility for, or competent to address, all areas of activity covered by the audit. The team also met Students' Union representatives face to face and a wide range of distance-learning students through the School's online facility, to discuss in writing, areas normally covered in student written submissions. Advice and information provided by both sets of students have contributed significantly to this report, and the team is grateful for their assistance.

Developments since the previous audit

7   The School's previous institutional audit, in March 2003, resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the soundness of its current management of the quality of its academic courses and, provided that plans to develop periodic course review with external involvement were carried out, in its future management of the quality of those courses. The report expressed broad confidence in the School's current and likely future capacity to manage the academic standards of its awards.

8   The audit report noted the following areas of good practice:

● the School's procedures for monitoring and supporting the experience of students undertaking research degrees

● the way that the School obtains, and acts upon, feedback from its London-based master's students

● the handbooks and teaching guides for students and staff.

9   The School was advised to:

● develop the monitoring role of its Education Committee, and make the mechanisms for taking action on the outcomes of monitoring more visible, thus continuing to address the point made in the subject review report of January 2000, by QAA, that 'while much evaluation takes place there is less information on the systematic actions taken'

● give priority to the development of its model for periodic review at institutional level, and strengthen external participation in the review process

● make more use of external reference points in the management of academic quality and standards

- make use of the *Code of practice* more systematically to underpin the reliable and consistent operation of all the School's provision, including its collaborative arrangements

- achieve greater parity in the academic quality of the students' learning experience between London-based and distance-learning provision.

10   The School's response was mainly expressed in a major Teaching and Research Degrees Management Review (the 2005 Review), completed in summer 2005. This led to the introduction, mainly during academic year 2006-07, of revised structures, in particular the creation of a new post, Dean of Studies, responsible to the Director for the strategic development of the teaching programme and its day-to-day management. This was followed by the establishment of the Teaching Programme Department, managed by the Dean of Studies, comprising the Teaching Support Office, (which assumed many of the administrative responsibilities formerly resting with the three academic departments), the Distance Education and Professional Development Office, and a new Quality and Management Support Office.

11   The 2005 Review also led to a major revision of the School's committee structure, with the Education Committee replaced by two separate committees with overlapping membership: the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee and Quality and Standards Committee. The former is charged with developing, maintaining and monitoring strategy, policy and regulations concerning taught courses, learning and teaching, assessment, and codes of practice and procedures, and with responsibility for course approval and monitoring student support services; the latter's responsibilities involve developing, implementing, maintaining and monitoring strategy, policy and regulations in respect of quality and standards. While its remit is primarily with taught courses, extending it to research degrees is under consideration.

12   The audit found that the School has addressed all other recommendations of the 2003 audit, in particular its arrangements for periodic review and its use of external reference points in the management of quality and standards. So far as distance-learning students are concerned, the School's progress includes more active liaison with the External System in the despatch of study material and in the development of surveys of distance-learning students. The School was also able to explain how it now attempts to ensure parity of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities between London-based and distance-learning students; for example, London-based students may undertake a small element of their study as blended learning by means of modules from the distance-learning programme.

The institution's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities

13   Senate, chaired by the Director, has institutional responsibility for defining and maintaining standards, including the authority to make regulatory changes, and for the quality assurance of teaching and learning, admissions, and examinations and assessment. It discharges this responsibility mainly through subcommittees, including the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee, Quality and Standards Committee and Research Degrees Committee. Overall, the School's approach is now characterised by the adoption of more institution-wide processes to perform administrative functions which previously fell to departments.

14   The School assures the academic standards of the academic awards for which it is responsible by deploying clearly defined procedures for student selection, course design and approval, and assessment, ensuring that the latter in particular are benchmarked against appropriate external norms and expectations, including the *Code of practice* and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

15   Overall, the audit team found that the School's approval, monitoring and review processes collectively constitute an appropriate and effective means of assuring the quality of student learning opportunities; that the new arrangements have been carefully planned and are properly monitored; and that robust structures and mechanisms are in place to ensure the academic standards of the University's higher education awards.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

Approval, monitoring and review of award standards

16   The School stated that it defines and assures the academic standards of its awards by deploying rigorous procedures for student selection, course design and approval, and assessment, and that these are benchmarked against relevant external guidance (including the *Code of practice*, which had been particularly helpful). While knowledge of the *Code* was found to be largely limited to the staff leading the development of the new procedures, the School had drawn substantially on the revised *Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and *Sections 6 and 7*. Proposals for new awards are accompanied by programme specifications (known as course maps for London-based provision), which are in place for all taught, including distance-learning, courses.

17   The School stressed the importance of externality in quality management: external examiners make significant contributions to annual monitoring, which takes place for all courses; periodic review involves the judgements of at least one external expert and (as relevant) consultations with alumni, employers, professional bodies and external examiners.

External examiners

18   The roles and responsibilities of external examiners are set out in the School's regulations and procedures for all (including distance learning) taught master's courses. These are consistent with the framework for University degrees as prescribed in Ordinances and, in the case of distance-learning programmes, in a memorandum specifying the respective responsibilities of the School and University. In the case of research degrees, the role of external examiners is governed by federal regulations made by the University's Research Degrees Committee.

19   For taught courses the roles of external examiners are specified in guidance notes for boards of examiners. All relevant documents are readily available to students and staff, both in hard copy and on the intranet. All boards of examiners for taught courses include at least one examiner external to the University. External examiners for London-based courses are normally appointed for four years (subject to annual reconfirmation) on the basis of nominations from the course examination board, which, after consideration by the head of department and Dean of Studies, are approved by the Senate. The appointment of external examiners for distance-learning courses is a University responsibility, normally exercised on the basis of nomination by the lead college.

20   External examiners' primary function is to ensure that the standards of academic awards are consistent with national standards in the disciplinary fields involved, and with FHEQ and other relevant reference points. They approve marking schemes and examination questions, review grade distribution and internal feedback and adjudicate internal disagreements. They do not re-mark work and their influence on individual results is limited to their role as members of the relevant board of examiners. All external examiners' reports are made available to student representatives; those scrutinised by the audit team were positive in tone and complimentary about the standards of work produced by students and, particularly, about the influence of research.

21   Responses to the reports (which cover course structure and content, teaching and examining) are made on a special feedback form by the board of examiners and the course committee; a report on the responses is then made to the following year's board. At institutional level the Dean of Studies and Deputy Registrar review all reports and student feedback, in order to identify School-wide issues. Reports are then summarised and forwarded to the Quality and Standards Committee and the School Senate, which, in the case of London-based provision, submits a report to the University Senate on issues raised and action taken. In the case of distance-learning courses, reports and responses are dealt with in an annual programme review conducted jointly by course teams and external programme staff, and published on the External Programme Extranet.

22   While these arrangements appear comprehensive and inclusive, the audit team learned slippages in the timetables involved during the changes which took place in academic year 2005-06. These included delays until late summer 2006 in reviewing reports, with the knock-on consequence that reporting to Senate was delayed until November. The following academic year, while the situation had improved, slippage again occurred in a minority of cases to which the School responded by introducing, for that year only, an expedited process. It did not however, appear to the team that these slippages had any negative effect on academic standards.

23   The audit team formed the view that the School provides external examiners with comprehensive guidance with which they are well acquainted; and that all comments and reports are carefully and thoroughly addressed, not only at course level but also, where they have broader implications, institutionally. The team also noted the Dean of Studies' report for the Quality and Standards Committee in November 2006, which reviewed the effectiveness of procedures for responding to external examiners' reports, and suggested administrative economies which could be made without detriment to the thoroughness of the process. This report appears to suggest that the new structures have the potential to initiate efficiency, effectiveness and economy gains.

24   The audit team concludes that external examining is effective in assuring the academic standards of the School's courses, programmes and awards.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

25   The School deploys a range of formal procedures to ensure academic standards. Its annual monitoring and periodic review procedures pay close attention to external examiners' reports, cross-School progression data and research students' completion and submission rates; they make extensive use of external experts; and they address the regulatory frameworks and guidance on good practice provided by the UK research councils and, any applicable accreditation requirements of professional and statutory bodies. Overall, they are considered fit for purpose.

26   The course maps by which the School describes its taught (18 London-based and four distance-learning courses) and research degrees (MPhil, PhD and Doctor of Public Health (DrPH)) are informed by the FHEQ level descriptors and supported by quality assurance procedures drawing extensively on the *Code of practice*. The audit team noted the School's alertness to changes in the Academic Infrastructure: for example, between 2004 and 2006 the Research Degrees Committee oversaw a process designed to ensure the better alignment of its research degrees with the revised *Section 1* of the *Code*.

27   While published subject benchmark statements are not directly applicable to the School's courses, the course maps set learning outcomes commensurate with the levels of degree awarded. Noting, however, that distance-learning courses are currently specified at a greater level of detail, having both a course map and the fuller programme specification required by the London External System, the audit team considered that, in reviewing London-based courses, the School might find it helpful to provide a similarly detailed specification across the board.

28   The audit team noted that detailed awareness of the Academic Infrastructure appears largely limited to key staff responsible for course approval and quality assurance procedures, but also that the 2005 Review had been led by staff well informed about best practice in the sector. The fact that, at the time of the audit, the Quality and Standards Committee was engaged in a number of reviews (for example, of annual monitoring and assessment procedures) suggests a self-reflective approach leading to a readiness to monitor and amend practices in the light of experience.

29   The School's annual monitoring system addresses academic standards primarily through the annual quality report. The areas covered by such reports include student numbers, all internal and external evaluations and significant course developments and modifications; it also confirms that course quality has been maintained. Following approval by the relevant taught course

director, reports are submitted to the Quality and Standards Committee, which summarises them for Senate consideration. The current quinquennial review system of periodic review, introduced in academic year 2004-05, appears to be aligned with the *Code of practice, Section 7: Programme design, approval, monitoring and review*. External experts are deployed to consider both curricular content and academic standards; any resultant modifications, once they have been accepted by the department and approved by the Committee, are reflected in course maps. The Committee monitors both annual monitoring and periodic reviews to ensure consistency of operation.

30   Research students benefit from an environment and culture in which extensive research is conducted to the highest international level. Measures such as research income, the results of successive research assessment exercises and the volume of staff publications confirm the achievements and reputation of the School; the research students who met the audit team were universally complimentary about the research standards set.

31   The audit team considers that the School's procedures, particularly periodic reviews and the arrangements for the approval of new modules and courses are effective in enabling it to align its practices with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points.

Assessment policies and regulations

32   The School's examination regulations and marking schemes for London-based courses are specified in two comprehensive documents: Procedures for the Examination of Diplomas and MSc Degrees, and Teaching Policies and Codes of Practice. User-friendly versions of these documents are made available in a wide range of course, research degree, and teachers' handbooks. For distance-learning courses, the School specifies detailed assessment criteria, albeit within the core regulations of the University. These are published in combined form on the London External System's website, with hard copies available to students. At the time of the audit, the School was in the process of creating single intranet portals leading to all regulations, guidelines and handbooks. Students who met the audit team confirmed the adequacy of the information and guidance with which they had been provided.

33   The three departments operate similar marking criteria. Students present work for assessment in a variety of ways, with consistency tested through moderation and the careful monitoring of pass rates and grade distribution. Assessment arrangements for distance-learning courses, which involve a greater emphasis on unseen examinations, follow the same basic system, with minor adaptations. Consistency is further supported by an element of common membership of the examination boards of London-based and distance-learning courses; while some distance-learning external examiners have previously examined London-based courses and vice versa.

34   In addition to its routine monitoring activities, the Quality and Standards Committee conducts periodic assessment reviews to address the full range of assessment processes, attending particularly to issues of consistency. Such a review was conducted in academic year 2002-03, using the relevant section of the *Code of practice* as the key reference point; the resulting recommendations had been put in place for academic year 2004-05. At the time of the audit, a new assessment review group was addressing, inter alia, the consistency of assessment rules across courses, including considering replacing alphabetic assessment with numeric grades, an issue that had revealed some variety of practice. The audit team, while noting the value of debates such as this, believes the debates would be better informed if they took place within the context of an explicit institutional assessment strategy involving an articulation of the overall principles and objectives of assessment and their relation to intended learning outcomes. Accordingly, the team considers it would be advisable for the School to develop an assessment strategy that deals with issues of validity, reliability and consistency in order to underpin the comparability of standards across awards.

35   The audit team concludes that the School's arrangements for the assessment of students allow it to maintain effective control of the standards of its awards.

Management information statistics

36   The Registry maintains a comprehensive range of datasets; these are thoroughly addressed in annual monitoring, with summary outcomes considered by the Senior Management Team, Senate and the Board of Management. The University External Programme Registry provides all data on distance-learning students. Quite appropriately in the view of the audit team, distance-learning data, which are considerably more complex, and include numbers, progression and outcomes, are considered separately from, but alongside, the London-based data for comparison purposes.

37   In addition to, and separately from, overseeing the departmental implementation of review procedures and outcomes, both the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee and Quality and Standards Committee review performance data from across the taught course portfolio, including student application, conversion and diversity data; future numbers targets; short course programme reports; progression and awards; and quality reports. While these reviews contribute to institutional overview, they do so in a less than wholly integrated fashion, in part because aspects of the relationship between the two committees have yet to be settled. Accordingly, the audit team advises the School to continue to clarify the roles and purposes of the academic committees to ensure that they work together in an increasingly effective and complementary way.

38   The audit team observed instances of the use of data not only to ensure academic standards and quality, but also to drive enhancements to both the practice and the administration of learning and teaching. Nevertheless, the School acknowledged that there remains scope to improve its use of available sources of information to drive decision-making and planning at both course and School level. Accordingly, at the time of the audit, work was in progress in areas which included upgrading the information systems which monitor the progress and outcomes of research degree students and creating a web-based front-end designed to facilitate cross-School access to student data currently held by the Registry. The audit team considers it desirable for the School to continue to develop the more systematic use of management information to support the achievement of both strategic and course-level goals.

39   The audit team found that the School's use of statistical management information provides effective support for the assurance of the academic standards of its courses, programmes and awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

40   Responsibility for managing and enhancing student learning opportunities, rests formally with the Director, supported by the Dean of Studies, but is exercised through the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee, the Quality and Standards Committee and, as appropriate, the Research Degrees Committee. Extensive reference is made to these committees elsewhere in this report (see in particular paragraph 37). These committees, which became fully operational in the course of academic year 2006-07, while they have still to establish a clear demarcation of their respective activities, are, in conjunction with the increased managerial and administrative support now available, effective in assuring the quality of students' learning opportunities.

Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

41   Responsibility for ensuring the School's alignment with external reference points rests with the Dean of Studies, whose appointment has considerably strengthened the breadth and depth of this alignment. In addition, the nature of the School's provision and the number and range of external teaching inputs it embraces mean that extensive feedback from relevant external communities, including alumni, is received and incorporated into planning and developing the learning environment.

42   The fact that the School, as an exclusively postgraduate institution, was able to state in its one-year follow-up report to the QAA special Review of research degree programmes that it had identified supervisor training, a graduate teaching assistant scheme and improving student information as areas for enhancement, confirmed to the audit team that the School remains alert to, and engaged with, developing sector norms and expectations.

43   The audit team concludes that the School's teaching and learning activities engage appropriately with relevant external influences.

Enhancement of academic quality

44   The newly appointed Associate Dean of Studies will have quality assurance and enhancement as key responsibilities. This will include continuing to develop a five-year work plan which updates and develops the School's quality assurance processes to ensure an enhancement focus, completing the development of an Enhancement Strategy in academic year 2007-08, for implementation a year later. Nevertheless, the School recognises that, while it is committed to enhancing student learning opportunities, it has some way to go before its procedures for doing so can be said to be settled. The audit team considers it desirable for the School to continue to make progress with the analysis and development of quality assurance processes in order that they may become effective tools for enhancement.

Research students

45   Responsibility for assuring the quality of research students' learning opportunities rests, via departmental research degrees committees, with the Research Degrees Committee subject to the overall authority of Senate (the taught elements of the School's DrPH course are reviewed in line with taught postgraduate provision). This Committee reviews statistical data, recommends action arising from student feedback and reports received, and ensures that correct procedural information is made available in the Research Students' Handbook. The research students who met the audit team endorsed the procedures and spoke highly of the skilled and conscientious supervision they receive. The team formed the view that, through its generic and particular monitoring processes, the School is in a position to ensure that its research students' learning opportunities are and will remain both assured and responsive.

Approval, monitoring and review of programmes

46   Procedures for taught course approval, review and monitoring are clearly documented, and, in line with the five-year work plan, will be updated in the current academic year. Regulatory and policy frameworks are transparent and all key documents readily available, responsibility for their maintenance and communication lying with the Registry.

Approval

47   Proposals for new London-based courses, which proceed through the committee structure from departmental teaching committees to the Senate, are subject to an integrated internal approval process addressing both resource and academic planning matters, as well as to external scrutiny. This requires outline approval being given by the Senior Management Team, usually following consideration by the Planning and Finance Committee, prior to full academic consideration being given to the application. The audit team found the School appropriately opens its approval, monitoring and review activities to external involvement.

48   For distance-learning programmes, the internal procedures are the same as for London-based provision; once approved at School level, the proposed programme, accompanied by a business plan, is submitted to the External System Academic Board and then the External System Lead Colleges Committee for approval.

Annual monitoring

49   As indicated above (paragraph 23), annual module and course monitoring are fit for purpose, although module review, recognised as not wholly efficient, is currently being streamlined by integration into periodic review. Student feedback at module level is fed into module organisers' evaluation summaries and action plans, and submitted to the appropriate departmental teaching committee, which oversees the implementation of minor modifications (major modifications falling within the remit of the Quality and Standards Committee and Learning and Teaching Policy Committee).

50   In the case of distance learning, comprehensive annual course reports containing action plans and based on responses made to student evaluation and external examiners' reports; the audit team found that these are carefully, if not invariably speedily, followed up.

51   The audit found the level and intensity of annual monitoring appropriate to the size and nature of the School, and that the system as a whole offers senior committees and the Dean of Studies a clear overview of provision. In addition, while the quality of the documentation (some of which is more descriptive than evaluative) varies, it never falls below the level required to enable the School to assure itself of the quality of the product. While not all parts of the procedure invariably operate with optimal efficiency, the School is aware of this, and taking steps to address both the level of integration between different parts of the system and the speed with which it responds to issues arising.

Periodic review

52   The audit team followed up comments made about periodic review in the previous audit (see paragraph 12). The process involves a team, comprising the course director, the chair of the board of examiners, a non-involved member of staff and an external expert, engaging with documentation that includes contributions from students, alumni, employers and examiners. The process culminates in a review report submitted, via the relevant course committee, to the Quality and Standards Committee, with a progress report submitted to the same Committee a year later.

53   The audit team found convincing evidence of School-wide engagement with the process, which it found fit for purpose. Both the 2005 Review and the revised structures that have followed it have achieved a greater profile and visibility for, and a greater level of engagement with, periodic review, as they have with all other quality-related procedures. The process has been modified in line with the suggestion made in the previous audit, and is now aligned with the precepts of *Section 7* of the *Code of practice*. Overall, periodic review now delivers a thorough approach to assurance, engages strategically with external influences and makes a constructive contribution to updating and restructuring provision.

54   Overall, the audit team found the School's approval, monitoring and review procedures effective in assuring the quality of learning opportunities for both taught (London-based and distance learning) and research students.

Role of students in quality assurance

55   The current mechanisms by which the School obtains feedback on students' experience of their learning opportunities include extensive and relevant representation on School and departmental committees, formal and informal opportunities for student representatives and others to engage in dialogue with staff at all levels, course surveys, involvement in course monitoring and review, and an open-door policy (operating, with limited exceptions, on a School-wide basis). The audit team noted, in particular, that the School has recently considered guidelines for MSc course reviews, which, in an initiative to make such contributions more effective, include advice on how best to gather information from alumni and students.

56   In particular, the School has a Student Representative Council, constituted of elected representatives from each of the London-based MSc courses and PhD students, with specific representation rights for part-time students. The Council is integrated into the School's deliberative structure through both representation on other School committees and regular meetings with the Director and other senior staff. The audit team, while considering the Student Representative Council an encouraging arrangement (and its internet page and record storage facilities particularly helpful), notes also that the high turnover of membership inevitable in an institution populated mainly by one-year master's students has, thus far, somewhat inhibited its effectiveness.

57   For distance-learning students, provision for whom was subject to comment in the last institutional audit (paragraph 12), monitoring and review have been considerably developed. Module evaluations are collected by questionnaire-based feedback; while electronic discussion (notably a student-staff virtual common room) and conference arrangements (including a 'feedback to organisers' conference) are used for general communication, trouble-shooting and response monitoring. The School has continued to address the challenge of improving response rates, and has strengthened arrangements for student representation, both directly and via the Student Representative Council.

58   The School has recently initiated cross-institutional surveys of taught and research students (for consideration, as appropriate, by the Quality and Standards Committee and Research Degrees Committee), which are scheduled to become annual events. The audit team noted that both surveys attracted encouraging response rates and that there is already evidence of the comments being addressed. For example, a key finding from London-based MSc respondents was that construction work had resulted in a negative impact on teaching: the School reacted by following respondents' advice on how to minimise disruption, and, here and elsewhere, students endorsed the School's responsiveness. The team also noted that the School provides departments with feedback on the outcome of surveys, thereby demonstrating an institutional oversight of the procedure.

59   The audit team noted that virtually all learning and personal support services are solicitous of student feedback and respond positively to it. For example, library and information and communication technology services conduct periodic surveys and offer associated informal meetings with staff; Student Services also provide opportunities for feedback, and, notably in the case of the Careers Service, the team saw evidence of such feedback being instrumental in encouraging service development.

60   The School both promotes and exemplifies an informal and non-hierarchical culture characterised by frank dialogue between staff and students, a culture facilitated by the School's wholly postgraduate student population. In this context, student feedback provides a key input into approval, monitoring and review, and the development of more systematic approaches to obtaining student feedback across the School as a whole and the responsiveness of the School to the views of London-based students constitute a feature of good practice.

61   In terms of student representation, the proposed new Charter provides students, who currently have only observer status (albeit with discussion rights granted by the Chair), with full Council membership; when enacted, the School will have implemented student representation on all senior and quality-related committees. Students are involved in course monitoring and review as sources of information not formal members of panels, although the guidance made available to members of such panels is also available to students, supplemented informally as appropriate. In the particular context of a small postgraduate institution, this is considered appropriate. The students who met the audit team spoke positively of the arrangements, emphasising, however, that given the maturity of the student body and the culture of the School, formal arrangements for representation are in practice a fail-safe arrangement, should day-to-day informal staff-student contact fail to resolve specific issues of concern.

Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities

62   The School can readily illustrate the high level of research and scholarly activity undertaken by its academic staff. Participation in external scholarly activities is virtually universal; many academic staff are active, nationally and internationally, as external examiners and members of validation and review panels, while some serve as special advisers to international health and other bodies. The School also stressed that all academic staff teach, and that teaching is only offered where expertise and research capability exist in the School or are available from the School's network of professional and academic specialists.

63   The audit found that it is in the nature of the School for research and teaching to be inextricably linked; its recruitment, appointment, probation and promotion procedures are designed to ensure that this remains the case. The School's human resource documentation links directly to strategic objectives concerning the quality and interrelatedness of research and teaching, an interrelatedness which the audit team considers a key feature of the School's academic character and one which directly supports student learning opportunities.

64   Students confirmed to the audit team the accuracy of the School's claim that it was precisely this combination of research expertise and specialist courses which attracted them to it; and both external examiners' reports and student feedback demonstrate the value the research eminence of teachers and supervisors adds to student learning. The audit found, both that the School's research reputation informs and enhances teaching and supervision, and that research expertise is brought to bear on course design.

Other modes of study: flexible and distributed learning

65   The School offers four distance-learning courses under the auspices of the London External Programme. The respective responsibilities of the parties are clearly specified in University documentation; within the School, responsibility for distance learning falls to the Dean of Studies, advised by the Distance Learning Steering Group and aided, in the last academic year, by a retreat, the outcomes of which the Group was implementing and monitoring at the time of the audit. Students are supported administratively by the Distance Learning Office, which liaises closely with the External System, and academically by module tutors through an internet-based conference system, email or postally, depending largely on student preference and the availability of electronic resources.

66   With 1,922 part-time and globally dispersed students in the academic year 2006-07, the academic, financial and strategic importance of distance learning is self-evident. The School regards this aspect of its portfolio as successful, and has permitted significant recent expansion, which it has in part supported by hiring additional programme-specific external tutors. While the audit team notes that at least some staff involved in delivery regard the project as 'work in progress', the team also accepts that the School is aware of, and engaging with, the challenges of maintaining academic standards and delivering a positive student learning experience through this mode.

67   Distance-learning external tutors are contracted to the School, and have access to a staff development programme which includes training and development on issues specific to distance learning. The support provided appears appropriate, especially since the School is in the process of making more such support available online.

68   It is clear, both from course maps and from the programme specifications prepared in line with the requirements of the London External System, that, as regards learning outcomes, learning objectives and modes of delivery, assessment arrangements are similar to those for London-based courses, although, in terms of the method of assessment, greater weight is given to unseen examinations than is the case for London-based courses.

69   Support for distance-learning students is designed to involve a comparable level of service to that for London-based students. Since the advisability of achieving greater parity between the learning experiences of London-based and distance-learning students arose in the last institutional audit (see also paragraph 12), the present audit team paid close attention to this. The team particularly noted that the increased formalisation of the Distance Learning Steering Group has contributed to a previously course-based approach becoming more institutional in focus, and signals a serious institutional engagement with such challenges.

70   Nonetheless, the audit team learned from direct communication with distance-learning students that, while largely supportive of the School's efforts, a significant proportion still has reservations about the effectiveness of some aspects of provision. So while some spoke positively of the learning resources available to them (on enrolment they receive a study-skills guide and annually updated course handbook; subsequently they are given learning support materials that include past examination papers and outline answers), others said that learning materials are sometimes out of date, and identified a number of communication problems, including variability in the timing and quality of assessment feedback.

71   Accordingly, while the audit team shares the School's view that as yet this transition has yet to be wholly achieved and a truly strategic institutional approach yet to be in place, the School is addressing the issue seriously and has made significant progress since the last institutional audit. Hence the service received by distance-learning students can no longer be categorised as posing a potential threat to the quality of learning opportunities. Nonetheless, because, not least in the light of recent and possible future expansion, the enhancement agenda should remain a priority, the team considers it desirable for the School to build on its considerable efforts to achieve greater parity in the quality of learning opportunities between its London-based and distance-learning provision.

Learning resources

72   The School's approach to allocating learning resources, in which the Senior Management Team (containing as it does the Dean of Studies and the three heads of department, who are collectively well placed to be aware of students' academic and learning resource needs) plays a central role, aims to integrate the learning environment with the needs of students as learners. While the School's recent extensive investment in its physical environment has had a positive impact on the student experience, the School itself acknowledges that the learning support materials provided through its virtual learning environment would benefit from continued attention; the audit team endorses this view.

73   The audit team noted that, as a whole, the School's learning resources have been judged excellent in a range of external reviews. The specialised nature of the institution and its exclusively postgraduate student population studying a range of science and social science courses makes the selection of appropriate benchmarks difficult. Nonetheless, the students who met the team confirmed that the School's pride in its learning resources, which permit access to on-campus wireless provision and offer competitive levels of information and communication technology provision in general, is justified, and that the overall learning and research infrastructure is of high quality. Accordingly the resources for learning and their management within the School are commensurate with students' need to meet the learning outcomes of their courses. This alignment operates across and between courses and into the research and distance-learning areas of activity.

Admissions policy

74   The School undertook a review of admission procedures in 2003, since when it has begun to develop a formal admissions policy, a draft of which was considered early in 2007, when it was decided that further development would be a priority in the five-year action plan for enhancement (see paragraph 44).

75   The School uses standard application forms, specifying minimum entry qualifications and maximum numbers for each course. The Registry screens applications, passing qualified ones to designated departmental academic staff; the process includes recording reasons for rejecting unsuccessful applicants. Responsibility for final approval of special cases (applicants considered suitable for admission by departmental staff but who do not fulfil the stipulated admission requirements) rests with the Dean of Studies. Admissions data, including all areas where legal obligations exist, are received and monitored centrally; the audit team notes that, while distance learning and research student data are as yet not fully disaggregated, this is scheduled to occur in the future. The admission and registration of research students fall under University regulations, and the External and Internal Student Administration deal with applications for distance-learning courses on the basis of School entry requirements.

76   The audit team found that the School's selection and admission procedures, although yet to function within an explicit strategic framework, ensure that decisions are reached in a fair and transparent manner.

Student support

77   Students receive extensive and detailed advice as to the nature and sources of support to which they are entitled; students from overseas receive cultural and general as well as academic support and information, designed to help them realise the many opportunities deriving from living in London. The audit team read a number of documents (which showed that the information is clear and apparently comprehensive) and held discussions with students, which confirmed that their expectations of entitlement, although high, are generally met. The team also studied a sample of general handbooks designed to inform students about academic options and study requirements, as well as handbooks for course teachers and research student supervisors: these appeared satisfactory.

78   The School provides support in the areas of English for academic purposes, mathematics, and information and communication technology. Student support arrangements involve academic departments (which provide a personal tutor for all students), the Registry and the student support team (consisting of the student adviser and careers adviser); a counselling service is available through the health service. The audit found the School responsive to both general and specific student need, and willing to provide additional resources to help meet exceptional or unexpected difficulties.

79   The availability and quality of student support services across the School are fully endorsed by students, and the audit team understands that, within reasonable bounds, the School is committed to providing and extending such services in line with student demand. Overall, the team considers the support given to London-based students prior to their arrival and throughout their period of study a feature of good practice.

Staff support

80   The School's human resources policy is comprehensive in scope, emphasising staff development and its alignment with institutional aims and objectives. Appraisal is well incorporated into staffing procedures, and academic staff endorsed its developmental as well as managerial effectiveness.

81   The School's full-time staff development manager and two assistant staff liaise with senior institutional and departmental staff in planning and developing the annual staff and educational development programme, which complements in-house training in central areas of activity with opportunities available through external providers. The School supports a Certificate in Learning and Teaching programme for staff new to teaching, which is to be considered for accreditation by the Higher Education Academy during academic year 2007-08; it currently has 60 participants, a significant number given the size of the School. The School also operates a voluntary and, the audit team noted, currently largely unrecorded, peer observation scheme. The School may find it helpful to explore ways of formalising this scheme without threatening its confidentiality or popularity.

82   The School operates a flexible workload model, with staff permitted to engage in open negotiation about teaching loads and research involvement. This model aims to achieve a fully managed balance between staff members' various roles and their personal and professional development. The audit team did not investigate the workings of this approach in detail, but received positive accounts of it from newly appointed lecturing staff.

83   The audit found that staff support and development are areas in which the School engages fully, and that current procedures are both supportive and regarded as such by those subject to them. The opportunities for all staff to engage with their own training and development are extensive, flexible and relevant, they offer constructive support to the management of change and contribute significantly to staff engagement in the development of new arrangements for learning and teaching; the audit team considers this a feature of good practice.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

84   The School is in the early stages of developing a quality enhancement strategy, and provided the audit team with a statement and draft strategy, setting out the steps to be taken and the types of activity that might be included. While the team was unable to find evidence in other documentation or in meetings with staff that the School was engaging with enhancement in a clear and organised manner, the team found that the School does take deliberate steps to improve the quality of learning opportunities, but without any developed articulation of a strategic approach to this objective.

85   The audit team found evidence that senior staff are aware of the ways in which management information can be used as a quality assurance and enhancement mechanism, and formed the view that in some areas, notably module performance and completion statistics in annual monitoring, the School makes good use of management information, and its major committees are provided with data in areas relevant to their responsibilities. While the team believes the School would find it helpful to take a more systematic approach at both course and institutional levels and encourages it to do so, it also accepts the argument that for the School to gain optimal benefit from the information available to it, significant further investment would be necessary.

86   The audit team noted some areas where the School has implemented what it considered good practice in relation to enhancement. These include strengthening the learning environment, continuing to improve student feedback questionnaires and representation arrangements, strengthening its approach to student employability, and improving the dissemination of good educational practice. The School is encouraged to pursue these initiatives in the context of its developing strategy.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

87   The School offers three courses in collaboration with other colleges within the University. In two cases, students are registered with another College; in the remaining case, the MSc Health Policy, Planning and Financing, students are registered at the School, but with lead responsibility for the oversight of assessment resting with the partner college. The audit team judges that the relevant memorandum of understanding protects the overall interests of the students concerned.

88   Responsibility for the management of these postgraduate degrees lies with the lead institution in each case, and all courses are subject to University rules and regulations. The audit team confirms that students on these courses have similar learning opportunities and assessment arrangements to those taking School-based awards. The School's extensive distance-learning programmes operate under the aegis of the University's External System, but do not constitute collaborative provision as defined by QAA.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The research environment

89   The School's claim that its research reputation is a major attraction to students from all over the world was confirmed by the students who met the audit team; both external examiners' reports and student feedback confirm the contribution the academic staff's research expertise makes to teaching and supervision.

90   The delivery of research degree programmes for the period from admission to thesis submission is governed by School regulations, made in compliance with University Ordinances; all processes subsequent to submission are the responsibility of the University.

91   Between 2004 and 2006, the Research Degrees Committee conducted a programme of review. This aimed to achieve the optimal alignment of regulations and procedures with external norms, expectations and requirements, including the Academic Infrastructure and the expectations of such external stakeholders as research councils and statutory bodies. Among the results of this review were firmer adherence to timeframes for upgrading to PhD and funded periods of study, and establishing benchmarks for monitoring submission and completion rates. The review of postgraduate research degree programmes, conducted in February 2006 by QAA, which concluded that the School's arrangements were satisfactory, cited a number of areas of good practice, and the audit found that current research degree regulations are aligned with the precepts of the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* and FHEQ level descriptors.

Selection, admission, induction and supervision of students

92   The School has a clearly defined process for selecting, admitting and inducting research students, and provides helpful information and advice to facilitate the process. Applicants for research degrees complete an online form and a short (less than 1500 words) research proposal designed to enable selectors to assess their knowledge and understanding. In addition to acceptance or rejection, a possible outcome is acceptance subject to registering for and successfully completing a related MSc.

93   After processing by the Registry, applications are considered by departmental selectors, usually including the prospective supervisor, with a recommendation from the unit research degrees coordinator forwarded to the Department Research Degrees Director for a decision. The Registry also reviews admission and induction arrangements annually to identify areas for strengthening.

94   A two-stage induction day for new research students (comprising separate introductions to School and department) is held at the beginning of the academic year. Students advised the audit team that this day is helpful academically, administratively and socially.

Supervision, progress and review

95   At institutional level, the Research Degrees Committee is responsible for monitoring collective as well as individual student progress; it does so mainly by analysing student numbers, equal opportunities, submission and completion rates, and the results of the questionnaire for research students (see paragraph 105 below). Operationally, research student supervision normally takes place in research units, created within departments to reflect areas of research activity and expertise; supervisors are assisted by an advisory committee, on which they sit with two other academic staff; in all units research degree coordinators oversee arrangements and report to the Department Research Degrees Director.

96   The Research Degrees Handbook explains that student progress is monitored in three main ways. First, students meet their supervisor at least twice monthly in their first year, with greater flexibility subsequently; second, formal progress reviews take place after the first six months and annually thereafter; third, individual progress meetings are held between students and their unit research degrees coordinator. The audit found the manner in which the School monitors the progress of its research students both careful and methodical.

Development of research and other skills

97   Research students' training in research and other skills takes place in two main ways: the School's transferable skills programme, consisting of workshop sessions that reflect the research councils' training requirements for research students; and a new module, delivered within the virtual learning environment, which serves as a repository of information and resources designed to support research degree students' continuing professional needs. The audit found these arrangements satisfactory.

Feedback mechanisms

98   The annual student questionnaire for research students contains a range of closed questions about satisfaction, as well as inviting open comment. In the most recent survey, conducted in June 2007, responses were received from 202 out of 292 research students (69 per cent). A detailed analysis of the results has been reported to the Research Degrees Committee for comment and action, although the survey recorded a very high level of satisfaction with supervision, including frequency of contact, timeliness of feedback and progress monitoring.

99   Research students have representation on the Student Representative Council (see paragraph 56), on departmental research degree committees and, at institutional level, on the Research Degrees Committee, where their reports are a standing agenda item. The audit found the School is justified in claiming to value the views of its students and to have created an 'informal and non-hierarchical culture that encourages frank dialogue between staff and students'.

Assessment, complaints and appeals

100   The School operates under the aegis of federally approved regulations, with responsibility for final assessment resting with the University. Research degree students seeking to challenge any aspect of the examining process do so through a well-established University procedure.

101   The School's appeals and complaints procedure applies to all students, although the informal mechanisms and processes outlined in the Research Degrees Handbook are designed to enable issues to be resolved without invoking the formal procedure. While none of the students who met the audit team had any experience of this procedure, they were complimentary about the responsiveness of staff to issues raised, and confirmed their effectiveness in handling the overwhelming majority of concerns as they arise.

Section 7: Published information

Accuracy and completeness of published information

102   The Registry is responsible for checking and approving all published materials, from the Prospectus to student handbooks, and from publicity to web-based content. Nevertheless, the audit found uncertainty as to whether all departmental or unit-level materials are similarly checked and approved centrally, and the School may wish to check the reliability and effectiveness with which this is done.

103   The small size and postgraduate nature of the School's student population mean that its entry on the Unistats website unavoidably consists of largely factual demographic data of little or no evaluative utility.

Students' experience of accuracy and completeness

104   The students who met the audit team were extremely complimentary about the quality of the printed and electronic information with which they had been provided, whether prior to application, as applicants or as students. They confirmed that the information is accurate, comprehensive and at an appropriate level of detail, but stressed that it does not stand alone but augments the caring and collegial atmosphere of the School.

105   The MSc student satisfaction survey undertaken in academic year 2006-07 revealed high levels of satisfaction (more than 75 per cent) for questions related to student handbooks, pre-registration information, material available on the virtual learning environment and the School intranet, although slightly lower scores in respect of information on module choice. The research degree student satisfaction survey did not contain a specific question on information provided, although a question on 'guidance about who and where to go to for help' revealed an 80 per cent satisfaction rate.

106   The audit team found that the consumers of materials provided by the School to support student studies see them as accurate and complete.