



# Institutional audit

**King's College London**

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## Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA) 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 the 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) approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education 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* (FHEQ) 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 on 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 academic standards of awards
- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

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
- 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 King's College London (the College) from 23 to 27 November 2009 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 College offers.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the College and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the College 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 team's view of the College is that:

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The College does not have an agreed definition of enhancement, but is committed to improving the learning opportunities of its students through a range of formal and informal processes based on a shared ethos. It would benefit, however, from monitoring the impact of these processes.

### Postgraduate research students

The College's arrangements for its postgraduate research students meet the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and provide evidence of full and proper attention being paid to the quality of learning opportunities and the academic standards of its awards.

### Published information

Reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the College publishes about its educational provision and the academic standards of its awards.

### Features of good practice

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

- the contribution of the Graduate School to the development of college-wide policies and practices for postgraduate research students
- the completeness and accessibility of documentation in the new Committee Zone on the College website

- the embedding of the identification of good practice in institutional processes
- the quality, range and accessibility of online support for personal tutors.

### **Recommendations for action**

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

- ensure that programme approval, monitoring and review procedures are consistent, rigorous and independent, and include a full consideration of module content
- develop its procedures for engaging with external examiners and their reports, including preparing them for their role, sharing their reports with students and ensuring that all issues raised in each report are considered and addressed, and the response communicated to the external examiner in a timely manner
- ensure the consistent application of its assessment criteria, including achieving consistency in the exercise of the discretionary elements of the Regulations for Examinations
- ensure the systematic collection, analysis, dissemination and utilisation of student data and feedback.

It would be desirable for the College to:

- involve external subject experts in all programme reviews to assure itself of academic standards and the appropriateness of the curriculum
- extend the opportunities for personal development planning to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.

### **Reference points**

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the College 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*
- 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 College generally engages constructively with the Academic Infrastructure.

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of King's College London (the College) was undertaken in the week commencing 23 November 2009. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the College'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 Dr P Bassett, Dr K Elliott, Dr K King and Dr R Latta, auditors, and Mr G Clark, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor R Harris, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The College, a founding member of the University of London and a member of the Russell Group of research intensive institutions, has a student roll of almost 23,000 (two-thirds undergraduates); it employs some 2,650 academic staff, operates on five London campuses, and has undergone rapid growth since the 1980s, with medical, dental and health education emerging as major features of its teaching and research portfolios alongside its traditional strengths in the arts and sciences. The College defines itself as a research-led institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge, learning and understanding in the service of society. Its limited collaborative provision mainly takes the form of dual or joint award schemes with prestigious international partners; it does not envisage major expansion or diversification.

4 The College's previous Institutional audit in 2004 resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in its capacity to manage the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The audit identified six features of good practice and made four 'desirable' recommendations. While the College has addressed, or is addressing these, the present audit found some variability in implementation and monitoring at local level. It is fair to say that such variability surfaces repeatedly in this report (see paragraphs 9, 10, 12, 15, 20, 23, 33 and 47).

5 Other significant changes implemented since 2004 include obtaining and exercising full degree awarding powers while remaining a member of the University of London; revising its governance and senior management structures; introducing a Graduate School; completing the introduction of an institution-wide credit framework; and investing heavily in estate and information technology.

6 Academic Board, the College's senior academic body, is supported by three subcommittees (the College Assessment Board, College Education Committee and College Research Committee), each of which oversees a suite of mainly operational bodies, and the first two of which make use of scrutiny panels to undertake detailed assessments of operational matters, freeing the parent bodies to focus more on strategic issues.

7 The College's devolved governance and management system allows operational and interpretive autonomy to its nine schools of study within a clear regulatory framework. This framework includes requiring the appointment (by the College Education Committee) of senior and experienced academics from other institutions as external peers: the main function of such peers, who sit as full members of approval and review panels, is to provide an external viewpoint on the process. Other devolved arrangements are clearly specified in a suite of regulations, procedures and guidelines, and helpfully made available to students in summary form.

## Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

8 Responsibility for programme approval is devolved to schools. Following in-principle approval, the proposing department makes a submission to its school's Education Committee, which institutes a programme approval panel, the membership of which includes an appropriate member of another school and an external peer, to examine the proposal in detail. A broadly similar procedure exists for new module approval.

9 The audit found that while the documentation is broadly appropriate and the procedures conscientiously implemented, scope exists for significant strengthening:

- programme specifications should specify learning outcomes in joint programmes (most include only the separate learning outcomes of the two single honours components)
- the composition of approval panels, currently very variable, with, in particular, different degrees of independence from the proposers' school, should be rationalised
- consideration should be given to involving students; detailed module specifications should always be provided
- confirmation that all conditions have been met and recommendations addressed should always be documented prior to commencement
- in module approval, where stated learning outcomes vary considerably in detail and, in particular, in the extent to which they align with level descriptors, the degree of acceptable variability should be specified (see paragraphs 10, 12, 13 and 41).

10 Annual monitoring, template-based following a previous audit recommendation, involves self-reflection on strengths and weaknesses, and reporting on an appropriate range of specified issues. The College acknowledges, and the audit confirms, that considerable variability exists in the detail and level of evaluation of the documentation available. This variability restricts its capacity to judge the appropriateness, comparability and effectiveness of all its programmes, including those delivered in collaborative provision (see also paragraphs 9, 12, 13 and 41).

11 Programme review is structured and delivered by school education committees and reported to College Education Committee. The substantial documentation involved includes a bespoke self-evaluation document and a range of centrally provided data sets; the ensuing report addresses the use of these data at programme level (see paragraph 22). The process is conducted by panels required, where practicable, to include a student member, and has clear and appropriate aims.

12 The audit found that:

- the College regards students, when included on panels, as active and valuable members; nevertheless, student membership is variable and sometimes lacking completely (invariably so in one school)
- because external peers (see paragraph 7) are not appointed as subject specialists, some reviews lack expert subject-level external scrutiny; it would be desirable for the College to involve external subject experts in all programme reviews to assure itself of academic standards and the appropriateness of the curriculum
- as indicated above (see paragraph 9) there is no requirement to consider individual modules comprising the programme (see paragraphs 10, 13 and 41)
- programme review reports, produced on a detailed and helpful template, are well designed, consistently produced and appropriately followed up
- procedures for programme and module changes outside the review process are clear and appropriate.



13 Given the reservations expressed above (see paragraphs 9, 10 and 12) it would be advisable for the College to ensure that programme approval, monitoring and review procedures are consistent, rigorous and independent, and include a full consideration of module content. Notwithstanding this, the audit found that programme approval, monitoring and review are generally thorough in design and execution, and contribute appropriately both to the assurance and management of academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities.

14 The College appoints a large number of external examiners, the duties of which include overseeing the maintenance of academic standards and their comparability to national standards; overseeing the operation of assessment tasks (including approving draft examination papers); advising on suspected cases of plagiarism; giving consideration to relevant sections of the *Code of practice*; and submitting an annual report.

15 The audit found that external examiners' reports are appropriately scrutinised, with clear lines of responsibility for addressing matters raised in them and, at the end of each annual cycle, the Chair of College Assessment Board and the Deputy Registrar produce a critical summary of each report, to which schools are asked to respond. These summaries are wide ranging, pertinent and potentially useful. Nevertheless, the audit also found that:

- although newly appointed external examiners should receive complementary information and advice from the Examinations Office and the chair of their programme board, confusion exists among some examiners as to aspects of their role and responsibilities, and among some departments and schools as to where responsibility for supplying specific information lies
- there is no college-level induction nor any requirement for schools to offer it, although the College has identified as good practice the fact that some schools have voluntarily done so
- while some annual reports of school boards of examiners provide a full commentary on external examiners' reports and action taken, most refer to them only briefly, while others make no comment at all; it is accepted that the College is reviewing current procedures
- only a minority of annual programme reports provide a full commentary on external examiners' reports and action taken
- no institutional requirement exists for responding directly to external examiners, although the chair of the programme or examination board often does so orally or in writing; some examiners reported themselves unaware of any action taken in response to their comments
- when one department, contrary to regulations, decided against sending draft examination papers to the external examiner, the situation was identified only retrospectively through the external examiner's report, and was not, therefore, rectified until the following year
- in spite of a regulation specifying termination of contract as the normal response to non-submission, some external examiners failed to submit successive reports without remedial action
- in spite of the recommendation of the Review of the Quality Assurance Framework that external examiners' reports should be shared with students, this is not invariably done.

16 Given the several issues raised in paragraph 15, it would be advisable for the College to develop its procedures for engaging with external examiners and their reports, including preparing them for their role, sharing their reports with students and ensuring that all issues raised in each report are considered and addressed, and the response communicated to the external examiner in a timely manner.

17 Notwithstanding these unresolved communication problems, external examiners, who overwhelmingly judge the standards attained appropriate to the level of the award, contribute significantly to the assurance of academic standards.

18 The audit found that the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points are embedded in institutional processes; appropriate references to the Infrastructure appear in approval, monitoring and review documentation; and, other than in the case of joint programmes (see paragraph 9), programme specifications meet its expectations. Overall, the College engages generally constructively with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points.

19 The Regulations for Examinations are supported by detailed policies and guidelines, including complaints and appeals procedures. The Learning and Teaching Strategy refers to 'fair and equitable assessment procedures', stating that the College, aided by the new credit framework, has worked to harmonise practice. The College has very recently revised its institution-wide marking framework to reduce the burden of universal double-marking by allowing a range of options within defined parameters. In this context schools submit annual proposals to the scrutiny panel, effectively mapping subject-specific criteria on to the College framework.

20 The audit found:

- the Regulations permit the exercise of limited but unstructured discretion in significant areas, so making possible the differential treatment of identically placed students; such a situation, while not necessarily unfair, would be unlikely to be equitable
- the guidelines for translating marks awarded by collaborating institutions currently, as the College acknowledges, permit a variety of practices and methodologies for transferring off-campus marks; the introduction of a standard conversion framework, currently under consideration, would be beneficial
- while the College has assessment criteria for all three undergraduate levels, some schools operate on the basis of only the highest; this raises the possibility of inequitable assessment
- in contravention of College Regulations the College Assessment Board permitted one school's postgraduate taught assessment board to replace the College criteria with its own on the ground that the former were unsatisfactorily generic
- the student written submission reported concerns among some undergraduates about the use of the criteria. It would be advisable for the College to ensure the consistent application of its assessment criteria, including achieving consistency in the exercise of the discretionary elements of the Regulations for Examinations.

21 The student written submission also suggests that while the majority of students are satisfied with the quality of feedback and the time taken to receive it, a significant minority are dissatisfied, mainly with timeliness or content, but in some cases with the fact that their work was never returned. The audit endorses the increased emphasis the College is giving to this central aspect of students' experience.

22 In relation to management information (statistics), while both the College Education Committee and College Assessment Board have access to a wide range of relevant data, the audit found no evidence of their systematic disaggregation, dissemination and utilisation, but clear evidence that progression rates are a source of concern to some departments and divisions. Some departmental staff find the central system unfriendly, and would value having usable progression and completion data annually. Overall, present arrangements are not conducive to the consistent and efficient utilisation of quantitative data in school or departmental-level policy planning. The absence of reliable and usable data on a wide range of student variables potentially prevents the College from assuring itself of the comparability of the academic standards of its awards or of the quality of learning opportunities for all its students, including those in partner institutions.

23 Staff-student liaison committees operate at departmental or divisional level; most, though not all, appear active and responsive. The College does not routinely undertake institution-wide student experience surveys, nor does it have a single system for gathering feedback on central support services; nevertheless, all such services have their own procedure for doing so, and, notably, the Careers Service reports its responses online. Module and programme questionnaires are a departmental or divisional responsibility and, while most address similar issues, the absence of a standard template reduces the scope for inter programme comparison; in addition, not all students are aware of the responsive actions taken. These concerns, combined with those relating to data gathering and utilisation expressed in the preceding paragraph, make it advisable for the College to ensure the systematic collection, analysis, dissemination and utilisation of student data and feedback.

24 It will be clear that in this section a number of concerns have been raised, and that inconsistencies in the College's assessment procedures, when set alongside the findings about its communication with external examiners (see paragraphs 15 and 16), demonstrate there is scope for improvement. Nevertheless, the College is increasingly working to harmonise its procedures in a situation in which departmental enthusiasm for harmonisation is by no means universal. In addition, while some current policies and procedures permit unplanned variability and others create avoidable inefficiencies, the College is assiduous in protecting the threshold standard of its awards, and, its success in doing so is overwhelmingly confirmed in external examiners' reports. It is in this context and for this main reason that overall confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's current and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

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

25 The College has been disappointed by some of the results of successive National Student Surveys (NSS); these are considered at all institutional levels, with a Task Force instituted and all schools required to produce action plans. The College is also aware of the seriousness of some comments made in the student written submission, a number of which resonate with the NSS findings, and is currently taking these issues forward in partnership with the Students' Union.

26 In relation to the role of students in quality assurance, the College states that it considers students important partners. Regular meetings take place between Students' Union officers and senior College managers; the Union is represented on all major institutional and school-level committees (for which training is provided jointly by the College and Union); and students are involved in working groups, projects and other forums. Nevertheless, the College acknowledges that representation is not uniform, and a joint working group is currently reviewing the issue.

27 The audit identified two areas where the College's communication and engagement with students echo comments in the student written submission:

- while the College has initiated a major programme to upgrade facilities and maximise space efficiency, the audit found that many students are aware of this only to the extent that their work is disrupted, and that they show little understanding of the strategic purpose of the upgrades, or of the steps being taken to minimise disturbance
- the College's management of the phasing out and imminent closure of two sets of undergraduate degree programmes appears not to have included timely discussion with affected students.

While the schools and departments concerned have worked to ensure that students' experience is as little affected as possible, at institutional level the limited engagement with students has led to avoidable concern and anxiety. Difficult as this would be to achieve, it might be that a more strategic approach to partnership with students in sensitive areas would turn some currently critical comments into more positive, engaged and understanding ones. Accordingly, the audit

found that student participation arrangements, while contributing to managing and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, are diminished in effectiveness by variable implementation.

28 As a research-led teaching institution the College gives high priority to achieving effective links between research and learning opportunities. The audit found that most curricula contain an explicit research dimension; external examiners confirm the existence of a research-led environment and students value the influence of research on their learning experiences. The College's approach to supporting research-led teaching is successful and has a positive impact on the quality of students' learning opportunities.

29 The College offers a small number of programmes by distance or blended learning and these are appropriately monitored and reviewed, although the College has plans to develop its coordination of such programmes. In addition, over 400 students annually spend a year abroad obtaining credit towards their degrees, and many more undertake professional placements. The audit found that current arrangements meet all relevant expectations of the *Code of practice*.

30 The College has a large resource of printed and electronic learning resources, with information services centres and libraries on all main campuses and high quality subject collections. Nevertheless, the audit found considerable scepticism among students about the College's claim to have very high levels of fault-free availability and speedy repair of its 1,600 public access workstations. The College has, however, approved the purchase of 250 further machines and improved printing facilities, while also investing heavily in improving the cross-campus information technology infrastructure, providing better access and improving support for research, teaching and administration. Overall, therefore, the audit found that many excellent learning resources are available in the College and elsewhere in London; NSS results in this area are largely positive; the College is addressing identified deficiencies; and most students are adequately served by available learning resources.

31 The College's admissions policy reflects the fact that it is a selecting institution with high entry standards which is also committed to balancing academic excellence with cultural diversity. In particular the College, in conjunction with local partners, is investing in raising aspirations and providing progression paths, not least through its Access to Medicine programme, which has facilitated the admission of local students who fall short of standard entry requirements. The audit found that these achievements could be further built upon by monitoring the progress of such students in comparison with that of standard entrants as to enable the College to enhance the effectiveness of its approaches and programmes. Accordingly the College's admissions strategy, while fit for purpose, would benefit from further systematic college-level monitoring.

32 At institutional level, the main responsibility for student support falls to the Directorate of Services for Students, which handles student induction and provides continuing support for the increasing volume of international students, supported as appropriate by the English Language Centre. International students confirmed the effectiveness of the support provided. More generally the audit found that students value the College's comprehensive and well-publicised range of central services.

33 At departmental level all undergraduates are assigned a personal tutor (slightly different arrangements appertain for taught postgraduates). Such tutors are offered training and development and are provided with an online toolkit which was considered comprehensive, practical and user-friendly; tutors can access the College portal for information about their tutees' progress. Although students commented on the variability of personal tutoring (an issue which the College may wish to consider), the quality, range and accessibility of online support for personal tutors constitute a feature of good practice.

34 While personal development planning is available for postgraduate research students, no formal provision is made to extend it to students on taught programmes; the introduction of such a requirement at institutional level is currently under consideration. It would be desirable for

the College to extend the opportunities for personal development planning to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students.

35 Operational responsibility for staff support (including staff development), including the induction and management of probationary staff, rests with the head of department or division. All new appointees are assigned a mentor, and those without appropriate previous teaching experience or qualifications are required to take the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice. The College has a well-developed appraisal scheme, the records of which are maintained by heads of department, and a peer support scheme where there is still variation in uptake.

36 At institutional level the King's Learning Institute offers a range of professional development opportunities, provides tailored advice and courses on request and, where appropriate, encourages staff to undertake and disseminate pedagogic research. The College has a balanced institutional promotion strategy, with teaching excellence a criterion for promotion. Nevertheless, whereas fewer than 5 per cent of staff promoted since 2008 did not include research as a main contributor to their applications, over one-third of such staff, predominantly in science disciplines, omitted teaching. Institutional awards for excellence in teaching and research student supervision are available; a science department has introduced a similar competition for demonstrators.

37 Confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the learning opportunities available to its students.

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

38 The College identifies continuous improvement as a guiding principle of its quality framework. College Education Committee receives numerous reports of good practice from schools and scrutiny panels; school learning and teaching coordinators perform supportive, enabling and promotional functions at school level; they meet monthly, both with each other and with staff from the King's Learning Institute, in the Learning and Teaching Coordinators' Forum, one of a number of mechanisms for disseminating good practice within and across schools. The King's Graduate Project, a joint venture with the University of Warwick, is undertaking a fundamental review of teaching, learning and assessment. While the College has yet to complete the systematisation of its various processes, the audit found that introducing the reporting of good practice into the remits of all College and school-level bodies is culturally consonant and operationally effective, the embedding of the identification of good practice in institutional processes is itself a feature of good practice.

39 The College does not have an agreed definition of enhancement, but is committed to improving the learning opportunities of its students through a range of formal and informal processes based on a shared ethos. It would benefit, however, from monitoring the impact of these processes.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

40 The College's collaborative strategy involves collaborating with a small number of high quality partners; its modest portfolio comprises joint and dual degrees, partnership programmes and one validation. Recognised categories of collaborative agreements are clearly defined. All collaborations, each of which is assigned a defined level of risk, are supported by a signed memorandum of understanding or agreement; a publicly available central register is maintained; reports on all joint and validated awards are appended to school annual reports; external examiners are appointed by, and report to, the College; all exported students receive a handbook containing information appropriate to the nature of their programme and likely experience.

41 The audit found that:

- the College devotes considerable attention to verifying the quality of potential partners and to approval
- all necessary information is in place
- annual reports, notably on the College's three dual award schemes, are of variable quality and do not invariably enable the College to monitor the equivalence of student experience at the partner institution
- the College does not routinely undertake comprehensive comparative analyses of the respective performances of dual award and College-based candidates on programmes in the same subject.

Again it would be advisable for the College to ensure that programme monitoring procedures are consistent, rigorous and independent, and include a full consideration of module content (see also paragraphs 9, 10, 12 and 13).

42 The audit found that the College's processes for assuring the academic standards and quality of collaborative provision have been informed by the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. Partner and programme approval processes are generally rigorous, though annual monitoring in particular would benefit from further development.

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

43 The College's 2,000 research students operate in a flourishing research environment, with extensive learning resources, workspaces in all libraries and graduate lounges on four campuses. Clear rules exist for the approval, training and monitoring of supervisors; each research student has two supervisors and a review panel consisting of both supervisors and at least one other staff member: this panel reports to the appropriate school committee at least six-monthly and is responsible for recommending upgrading to PhD. With, normally, two external examiners appointed, there is a high degree of externality in the examining system. External examiners' reports are scrutinised at several levels, and an analysis of reports, including possible reasons for referrals, is submitted to the Graduate School Forum and Research Degrees Examination Board.

44 The Graduate School is responsible for research students and some aspects of taught postgraduate provision; it also has lead responsibility for the professional development of early career researchers. Its main spheres of activity involve supporting most aspects of the general experience of research students and liaising with the schools of study where they are primarily based. The School's website was found to be an especially effective communication vehicle, containing thoughtful and useful information and advice (including the results of the 2008 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey); the Graduate School Forum contributes significantly to institutional-level policy development. The Graduate School's contribution to the development of college-wide policies and practices for postgraduate research students is a feature of good practice.

45 In the context of an overall very positive view of arrangements for research students, the audit found that some policies are at best loosely implemented:

- schools' annual reports to College Education Committee on the implementation of the College's Core code of practice for postgraduate research degrees are of variable quality (a matter the Graduate School is currently addressing in the context of a general enhancement programme)

- institutional admission policies are not always closely adhered to by schools
- the generic training of postgraduate research students is not always carefully monitored and uptake is not universal
- the fact that research students are permitted to teach only six hours weekly is neither universally known nor reliably monitored.

The College acknowledges these omissions, and is putting in place procedures to ensure increasingly effective monitoring at College and school levels.

46 The College's arrangements for its postgraduate research students meet the expectations of the precepts of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and provide evidence of full and proper attention being paid to the quality of learning opportunities and the academic standards of its awards.

## Section 7: Published information

47 The College publishes a wide range of information in hard copy and electronic format. All prospectuses are centrally monitored, with externally available web pages and printed materials governed by institutional policy and subject to approval by the Director of Marketing. Collaborative partners are required to submit material for publication for College approval. The audit found that students consider all admission and induction information full and accurate, and school and departmental handbooks (responsibility for checking which lies with schools) predominantly so. The College, acknowledging the variability of these handbooks (an issue also identified in the student written submission) will require the inclusion of core information in all handbooks from next academic year.

48 The externally available information required by the Higher Education Funding Council for England guidelines is published on the website; the teaching quality information on the Unistats website was found to be accurate and complete.

49 The College is moving its web-based information for staff and students into a new portal to increase coherence and user-friendliness. It has redesigned its Policy Zone, introducing a new Committee Zone to archive central and school committee agenda, minutes and all associated papers. The completeness and accessibility of documentation in the new Committee Zone on the College website constitute a feature of good practice.

50 Programme specifications are available online; module approval forms do not contain syllabus details, are held centrally, and are not available to staff or students. The necessity of students relying on details contained in school or departmental-level documentation increases the likelihood of inaccuracy, but the introduction of a single electronic data source for programme and module information, currently under consideration, would solve this potential problem.

51 Reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the College publishes about its educational provision and the academic standards of its awards.

## Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

52 As a result of its investigations the audit found that:

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

## **Features of good practice**

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

- the quality, range and accessibility of online support for personal tutors (paragraph 33)
- the embedding of the identification of good practice in institutional processes (paragraph 38)
- the contribution of the Graduate School to the development of college-wide policies and practices for postgraduate research students (paragraph 44)
- the completeness and accessibility of documentation in the new Committee Zone on the College website (paragraph 49).

## **Recommendations for action**

54 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- to ensure that programme approval, monitoring and review procedures are consistent, rigorous and independent, and include a full consideration of module content (paragraphs 9, 10, 12, 13 and 41)
- to develop its procedures for engaging with external examiners and their reports, including preparing them for their role, sharing their reports with students and ensuring that all issues raised in each report are considered and addressed, and the response communicated to the external examiner in a timely manner (paragraph 16)
- to ensure the consistent application of its assessment criteria (paragraph 20)
- to ensure the systematic collection, analysis, dissemination and utilisation of student data and feedback (paragraph 23).

55 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to involve external subject experts in all programme reviews to assure itself of academic standards and the appropriateness of the curriculum (paragraph 12)
- to extend the opportunities for personal development planning to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students (paragraph 34).



## Appendix

### King's College London's response to the Institutional audit report

The College welcomes the positive outcome of the Institutional audit that confirms confidence can be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of both the academic standards of its awards and the quality of learning opportunities available to its students.

The College is pleased to note the areas of good practice that the audit team identified. We are particularly pleased that the report recognises the way that the College embeds best practice in institutional processes as a means by which it aims to enhance the student learning experience.

Given that this was the first round of institutional audits to include a specific commentary on postgraduate research degrees, the College was particularly gratified to receive not only a statement of overall confidence with regard to the arrangements for postgraduate research students, but also to have the contribution of its Graduate School to the development of College-wide policies and practices for such students identified as a feature of good practice.

The College notes that the theme of the recommendations is one of ensuring greater consistency of practice across the College. As acknowledged in the Briefing Paper, the College is continually seeking to ensure an appropriate balance is struck between enabling local innovation and ensuring central oversight. In the College's update to the Briefing Paper provided at the main audit visit, we noted a number of new developments that had been put in train to address issues relating to consistency of practice. The College Education Committee, in consultation with the wider College community, will be developing a detailed action plan to address the recommendations of the audit report which will be overseen and monitored by the Academic Board and which will include active involvement from the King's College London Student Union.

The College would like to thank the audit team for their constructive and courteous engagement with the College, its staff and students throughout the audit process.

**The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000  
Fax 01452 557070  
[www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

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