



# **Institutional audit**

**Queen Mary, University of London**

**November 2010**

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## Preface

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

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

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

The aim of the 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* 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

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- 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 Queen Mary, University of London from 15 to 19 November 2010 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 institution offers.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the institution and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the institution 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 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 Queen Mary, University of London is that:

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

In the audit team's view, the institution's approach to improving teaching quality and the quality of the student learning experience is firmly rooted in institutional strategy and supported through the resourcing of special projects, managed primarily at institutional level. The approach is characterised by schemes that give recognition to staff who are outstanding teachers or are involved in innovative projects, and by demonstrable efforts to engage with students' views on enhancing their learning experience.

### Postgraduate research students

In the audit team's view, institutional arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience. However, there have been recent revisions to both organisational and procedural arrangements with which the updating of documentation has not fully kept pace.

### Published information

In the audit team's view, the institution has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the standards of

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its awards and the quality of its educational provision. It meets the current national expectations for public information on teaching quality.

## Features of good practice

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

- the extensive development of outreach work by schools, which contributes to the institution's 'widening participation' strategy
- the opportunities the institution makes available to students for enhancing their employment prospects
- the coordinated support for teaching, learning and enhancement projects, provided through the Learning Institute
- the academic and support infrastructure, the policies and the staff commitment which sustain the collaboration with Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications.

## Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the institution:

- to revise its guidance to examination boards on their scope for discretion in deciding the degree classification of students so as to ensure that the lower limit of the mark range within which discretion may be exercised is uniformly applied
- to bring to a conclusion its debate on the process for handling extenuating circumstances in the context of decisions on assessment and the granting of awards, and to implement a consistent approach across the institution based on clear and equitable criteria
- to ensure the timely production and appropriate dissemination of regulatory or policy documentation, including the timely notification to users of changes as and when they are made.

It would be desirable for the institution:

- to ensure that its monitoring mechanisms at both faculty and institutional levels routinely involve consideration of reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
- to establish a mechanism which ensures that any research student undertaking teaching, assessment or similar duties has received appropriate training
- to develop guidance for staff in their support and progress-monitoring of research students studying off-campus, drawing on existing good practice.

## Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- 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 institution took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of Queen Mary, University of London was undertaken during the week commencing 15 November 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the institution's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Dr R Davison, Professor E Evans, Dr D Lamburn, Dr A Read and Ms C Richer, auditors, and Mrs S Applegarth, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 Queen Mary, University of London (Queen Mary) was admitted to the University of London in 1915. It has its own degree awarding powers (granted in 2007), although it continues to offer University of London awards, which it makes under delegated authority.

4 In 2010-11, there are over 14,000 students studying at Queen Mary. In addition, around 2,400 study through collaborative arrangements, the most significant partnership being that with Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications. Of Queen Mary's total students, approximately 23 per cent are on programmes accredited by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies. The institution is organised into three faculties, Humanities and Social Science, Science and Engineering, and the School of Medicine and Dentistry, which has faculty status. Each faculty comprises a number of academic schools; those in the School of Medicine and Dentistry are called institutes.

5 The primary objective of the institution's current Strategic Plan is 'to be fully established by 2015 within the top ten universities in the UK on the basis of objective and widely respected criteria'. This it aims to achieve by improving its processes of knowledge creation (including research) and dissemination (including teaching).

6 QAA's last audit of Queen Mary, in November 2004, resulted in a judgement of broad confidence in the institution's management of the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards. A mid-cycle follow-up by QAA in November 2007 concluded that good progress had been made in addressing the audit recommendations and the present audit confirmed that the institution had taken appropriate action.

7 During 2009-10, following the appointment of a new Principal, Queen Mary undertook a major review of academic governance and a new structure came into effect in September 2010. Senate, replacing Academic Board as the principal academic authority, acts as custodian of academic standards and exercises overall responsibility for academic activity under the superintendence of Council, the institution's governing body. The main strategy documents relevant to the audit, the Strategic Plan and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (both covering the period 2010-15) are also newly approved.

8 In a radically revised structure, the number of academic subcommittees has been reduced. However, there remain several boards, which, under delegated authority from Senate, have operational responsibility for the management of academic standards and for regulatory compliance: the Programme and Module Approval Board, taught degree examination boards, and the Research Degrees Examination and Awards Board. Responsibility for programme monitoring and other aspects of the student experience, formerly the remit of a raft of committees, is now the responsibility of designated individuals who are accountable through executive structures and will present overview reports to Senate.



9 At institutional level, two vice principals have respective briefs for teaching and learning, and research and international affairs, each appointing an advisory group to work with them in their area. The identification of individuals to lead on teaching and learning, and on research, is mirrored at faculty level and the intention is that it will also be replicated at school level.

10 Since so many components of the institution's framework for managing academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities were new at the time of the audit, the audit team was not able to judge their operational effectiveness over a cycle of work. The team did, however, see these changes as substantial, in placing the overall emphasis more upon individuals and executive action and less upon deliberative structures. The team was of the view that, in addition to assessing the impact of the changes at appropriate points in the cycle of work (as already planned by Queen Mary), a review of their impact as a whole should be undertaken at the conclusion of the cycle.

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

11 The standards of awards are set and maintained through programme approval and review processes that also look at the quality of the student learning experience. The relevant procedures are detailed in a Quality Assurance Handbook. Programme approval is an extensive and rigorous two-stage process involving approval in principle based on an outline proposal, followed by approval of a detailed academic submission, incorporating the programme specification, proposals for any new modules, any programme-specific regulations, and comments from at least one external adviser.

12 Operational responsibility for the approval of programmes and modules is now vested in the Programme and Module Approval Board. Previously this was the responsibility of faculty boards reporting to the Quality Enhancement Committee, but Queen Mary had become concerned that faculty boards were unable to give sufficiently thorough consideration to the increasing volume of programme proposals. Acting in a transitional capacity until the new structure came into place, an institution-level programmes committee considered a wide range of proposals during the first half of 2010. Its work afforded a valuable blueprint for the Programme and Module Approval Board, whose terms of reference are very similar.

13 The audit team accepted that the changes to the approval procedure were likely to improve the rigour and efficiency of the process, while acknowledging that the previous process was also rigorous, since proposals were frequently referred back to their originators for revision after scrutiny by a faculty board or the Quality Enhancement Committee.

14 Taught programmes are reviewed each year and, under the new reporting arrangements, advisory groups at school and faculty levels will consider the resultant reports. These will then be scrutinised in the Academic Registry and Council Secretariat, which will produce separate overview reports on undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes for consideration by Senate. The previous reporting route was from schools, through faculty boards, to the Quality Enhancement Committee. The audit team found the overview report on the reviews of postgraduate taught programmes for 2008-09, which was a pilot for future reviews across the institution, to be a thorough and self-critical exercise.

15 Queen Mary intends to integrate Annual Programme Review within the currently parallel process of Planning and Accountability Review, whose purpose is to hold the responsible executive managers to account for the activities of their schools and faculties. Noting that this would allow quality and standards issues to be evaluated within the wider context of the institution's plans and strategic objectives, the audit team could see the

potential for developing further in the new structure what had been a robust and reflective review process under the previous arrangements.

16 Internal Review, covering the totality of a school's activities, takes place on a six-year cycle and involves self-evaluation, peer review and follow-up action. The Vice Principal (Teaching and Learning) takes responsibility for the reviews, which are conducted by a panel, whose membership includes two external subject experts and a student representative. From its review of documentation emanating from the previous quality assurance system, the audit team considered Queen Mary's evaluation procedures to be thorough. The team was not able to judge the operational effectiveness of revised processes beginning only in the current academic year, but the clear elements of continuity with previous practice gave it confidence that the institution's review processes would continue to be effective.

17 Through the work of its external examiners, Queen Mary aims to ensure comparability in the standards of its degrees with those awarded by other UK universities, and fairness and consistency in its student assessment and classification procedures. External examiners are appointed according to published criteria and nominations are checked centrally. They are members of examination boards, which operate within a two-tier system. Subject examination boards consider the entire profile of students' results, reporting to degree examination boards, which take a final overview of attainment, with one of the specific duties of the external members being to offer advice on the use of discretion in reaching decisions on progression and award. Queen Mary publishes Guidelines for External Examiners, which outline the various activities in which they are likely to be involved.

18 External examiners report orally to the examination board and also produce a written annual report. These reports are received centrally by the Academic Registry and Council Secretariat and passed to schools for action, with any areas of concern highlighted. The Academic Registry and Council Secretariat compiles an annual summary report covering both good practice and issues raised by external examiners, which is considered by Senate. Chairs of examination boards are responsible for making a written response to external examiners on their reports. The audit team noted that, in general, this requirement was conscientiously met, although responses were not always timely.

19 The audit team found that external examiners overwhelmingly judged the standards reached by students to be comparable with those at other UK institutions and assessment methods to be suitable for the published learning outcomes. The team noted, in the context of award classification procedures, that external examiners had commented on the variable use of discretion in borderline cases (see paragraph 23).

20 All awards offered by Queen Mary are designed to fit within its Academic Credit Framework, which is referenced to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), adopted by the higher education sector as part of the Academic Infrastructure. In curriculum design, when formulating learning outcomes, staff are required to pay due regard to relevant subject benchmark statements and professional body requirements, and to the FHEQ for the appropriate level. The institution assures itself through its approval and review processes that these alignments are in place. The audit team found that programme specifications, in the main, referenced relevant subject benchmark statements, while student handbooks normally indicated how learning outcomes would be tested by assessment tasks.

21 Under current arrangements, the Academic Secretary has responsibility for monitoring the institution's continued engagement with the Academic Infrastructure, while schools are responsible for fulfilling the requirements of relevant professional, statutory and

regulatory bodies. The Academic Registry and Council Secretariat maintains a record of accrediting bodies and holds a central file of their reports.

22 Senate has overall responsibility for assessment policies and academic regulations, which are explained in three key documents: the Academic Regulations, the Assessment Guide and the Academic Credit Framework. In addition, there is a code of practice for staff focusing on the pedagogical aspects of assessment practice and feedback to students, which closely follows the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA.

23 The audit team tracked a particular assessment issue, the use of discretion by examination boards in borderline cases of award classification, which had been raised initially by external examiners in terms of both the scope for discretion and the inconsistency of practice across subject disciplines. Based on a report from a task and finish group, Senate had now agreed to a narrower mark range within which examination boards might use discretion. However, it became clear to the team that examination boards would still be free to apply discretion within a still narrower range if they so chose, leading to the same issue of inconsistency between boards as before. The team considers it advisable for the institution to revise its guidance to examination boards on their scope for discretion in deciding the degree classification of students so as to ensure that the lower limit of the mark range within which discretion may be exercised is uniformly applied.

24 On a separate but related issue, Queen Mary is currently reviewing its policy on extenuating circumstances, having identified considerable variability of practice, which could have affected assessment outcomes over several years. While acknowledging that the final report from the task and finish group looking into this issue was imminent, the audit team was also aware that the issue had been a point of discussion over the last three years. Therefore, the team considers it advisable for the institution to bring to a conclusion its debate on the process for handling extenuating circumstances in the context of decisions on assessment and the granting of awards, and to implement a consistent approach across the institution based on clear and equitable criteria.

25 Many key policy documents were, at the time of the audit, still being updated in the light of organisational changes. The audit team considered that the lack of up-to-date information for students when they registered for new programmes and modules represented a risk to the institution, particularly where this information related to areas such as assessment. Accordingly, the team considers it advisable for the institution to ensure the timely production and appropriate dissemination of regulatory or policy documentation, including the timely notification to users of changes as and when they are made.

26 Statistical information forms an important element in Annual Programme Review. Relevant statistics covering student admissions, progression, attainment and appeals are supplied centrally, and schools add a critical commentary. The audit team noted variability in the extent to which schools made use of the statistics provided and that data held by schools did not always match that held centrally. Partly to address such problems, Queen Mary is introducing a new student information system, the first stage of which was successfully implemented in 2008. This gave the team confidence that later stages of the project would be implemented with equal success and that the new system would greatly improve the provision of statistical management information throughout the institution.

27 The judgement reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its provision. This confidence is based on the team's understanding of the rationale for the changes to the academic management structure being introduced and on the evidence it found of effective management under the previous structure.

### Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

28 Institutional management of learning opportunities is guided by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, which covers the totality of the student experience from pre-application through to graduation and on to further study or entry to employment. Implementation of the Strategy is the responsibility of the Vice Principal (Teaching and Learning). Closely linked to this Strategy is the recently approved Statement of Graduate Attributes, which identifies, under key themes, the broad characteristics to be expected of the Queen Mary graduate.

29 The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy makes appropriate reference to the Academic Infrastructure, including the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*). The institution's responsiveness to recently revised sections of the *Code of practice* was evident in the work of the former Quality Enhancement Committee and there was no reason to expect, given the already established role of the Academic Registry and Council Secretariat in monitoring institutional procedures for consistency with the *Code of practice*, that the shift in responsibility to the Academic Secretary would have any adverse impact. It was apparent from the Quality Assurance Handbook that the Statement of Graduate Attributes was being adopted as an internal reference point, with a view to enhancing the curriculum.

30 The procedures for programme approval, monitoring and review, outlined above in relation to academic standards, also deal with the learning opportunities of students. At the planning stage, there is a clear emphasis on setting the resource demands of new programmes or modules in the context of the resource requirements and viability of existing programmes. At the approval stage, the audit team found that close attention was given by the interim programmes committee (now the Programme and Module Approval Board) to approaches to teaching and learning and the incorporation into the curriculum of employability and entrepreneurship skills.

31 Through Annual Programme Review, schools reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of programme management. They comment on feedback obtained from student evaluations, external examiner reports and reports on accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. They are also encouraged to be forward looking, through the preparation of action plans. The audit team noted that the reporting process elicited examples of good practice identified by external examiners, but where accreditation was concerned there was merely a request to update the status of programmes and append any recent reports. There was no evidence that these reports were considered as a matter of routine at institutional level and staff conceded that Queen Mary was missing opportunities to learn from and implement good practice. The team considers it desirable for the institution to ensure that its monitoring mechanisms at both faculty and institutional levels involve consideration of reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

32 Queen Mary regards Internal Review as a core process for assuring the quality of the student learning experience. While tailored to local circumstances, the process appeared to the audit team to be operated consistently across the institution. Students are directly involved, not only as members of review panels, but also, under the new structure, in the process for follow-up action at the time the school prepares its 12-month progress report.

33 Queen Mary gathers feedback from its students through a variety of means, including module evaluation surveys, specifically designed surveys and the National Student Survey. Results from the National Student Survey are first considered at institutional level before being distributed to schools, which respond through annual action plans. Queen Mary attributes several recent policy initiatives to information gleaned from the National Student

Survey, which it sees as informing quality enhancement. The audit team saw evidence of a systematic approach to module evaluation in individual schools, but noted that attempts to introduce an institution-wide online system had so far failed to effect improvements on administratively time-consuming paper-based systems.

34 Student-staff consultative committees, operating at school level, provide a further opportunity for obtaining students' views, although they are geared to encouraging a broader student involvement in quality assurance. They now use standard agendas to schedule discussion of external examiner reports, module evaluation, National Student Survey results and Annual Programme Reviews. There is an annual summary of the activity of student-staff consultative committees, which the audit team saw as a systematic means of identifying institution-wide issues. Under the new structure, this will be considered by Senate. Queen Mary Students' Union successfully bid for funding from the institution's Student Experience Investment Fund for a post aimed at strengthening the course representative system and encouraging closer links with annual monitoring processes. Students also have a role in quality assurance through participation in annual open meetings, faculty forums and away days.

35 Under the new structure, students continue to have membership of the reduced number of institution-wide committees with responsibilities for quality assurance, as well as membership of both vice principals' advisory groups. However, the audit team noted that several task and finish groups relating to learning and teaching did not have student representation and Queen Mary may wish to consider this point further.

36 One of the themes in the Statement of Graduate Attributes is the development of 'research capacities'. Queen Mary seeks to introduce its undergraduate students to research and inquiry through a curriculum that allows them to learn about current research in their discipline, develop research skills, and undertake research projects. In most schools, the research interests of staff inform curriculum development, increasingly so where postgraduate taught programmes are concerned. Most undergraduate students undertake a research project or dissertation in their final year and the audit team saw several examples of innovative projects aimed at engaging students with research and developing their skills.

37 There is a small amount of postgraduate provision delivered by distance learning, and this is covered by mainstream quality assurance processes. With regard to students' learning in the workplace, clinical experience is an important part of medical and dentistry training. Queen Mary takes seriously students' views on their clinical experience, as was evident from the relevant school action plan in response to National Student Survey results. The institution is looking to increase the number of students in other disciplines who have the opportunity to undertake placement learning as an integral part of their programme, although its inclusion in the curriculum is currently limited and mainly concentrated in placements abroad for language students.

38 The learning opportunities of students are also supported by the provision of various institution-wide learning resources and services. Queen Mary has in place a comprehensive set of strategies guiding its priorities for resources provision whose implementation is the responsibility of relevant executives assisted by project groups. There has been significant investment in the estate, library and information technology infrastructure, as well as in new learning technologies. Students indicated their general satisfaction with library provision, reinforcing National Student Survey results, and also with e-learning. The Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy envisages that all taught programmes will have a substantial e-learning component. From the number of innovative developments underway, the audit team considered that Queen Mary was well positioned to achieve this strategic objective.

39 Queen Mary has set a target to raise the entry qualifications of its students and has already seen an increase in the average tariff points of entrants. An institutional Admissions Policy sets out the principles and procedures for admissions, which are based on academic merit and evidence of potential in the chosen discipline. Schools develop their own admissions criteria within the institution's overall policy. The Admissions Policy was still in draft form at the start of the academic year, with several revisions awaiting approval, a fact which lends support to the earlier recommendation concerning the timely production and appropriate dissemination of policy documentation (see paragraph 25).

40 There is a range of centrally-managed widening participation initiatives. These are complemented by outreach work undertaken by schools, including innovative projects where research-related activities and outreach work are combined. Queen Mary has sought to disseminate the findings from its evaluation of such projects across the higher education sector. The audit team identifies as a feature of good practice the extensive development of outreach work by schools, which contributes to the institution's widening participation strategy.

41 Academic support for students is provided through a network of academic advisers, operating at school level. Students were generally complimentary about the system, although there were some difficulties affecting joint honours students, attributed by students to schools not working well together, which Queen Mary may wish to address.

42 Current strategic priorities include developing students' writing and communication skills (a theme in the Statement of Graduate Attributes) and supporting students' employability. The Careers Service, as part of the University of London Careers Group, has achieved the matrix quality standard for information, advice and guidance services. The Drapers' Skills Award is available as an extra-curricular course, aimed at preparing students for the transition to work. In the schools of Law and Business Management, there are opportunities for students to undertake pro bono work on local community projects. The team identifies as a feature of good practice the opportunities the institution makes available to students for enhancing their employment prospects.

43 Newly appointed teaching staff are required to attain professional accreditation from the Higher Education Academy. This requirement is now applied rigorously, monitored through the probationary period, and reviewed before posts are confirmed. Queen Mary offers a postgraduate certificate programme leading to a teaching qualification recognised by the Higher Education Academy, together with an alternative programme for staff with lesser teaching commitments, such as those in clinical disciplines. Training of part-time teachers, including graduate teaching assistants, is managed at school level, and there are variations in approach by different schools. Queen Mary's policy is that all postgraduate research students with teaching or related duties must first receive training, but the audit team was unable to confirm either from students or from documentation that, in practice, this policy was universally applied. The team considers it desirable for the institution to establish a mechanism which ensures that any research student undertaking teaching, assessment or similar duties has received appropriate training.

44 A common appraisal scheme for all staff has been implemented throughout the institution and appraisal records form the basis of identifying staff development needs. At institutional level, staff development is organised through the recently revamped Learning Institute, bringing together a range of services to support staff and students in their teaching, learning and research activities and to assist them in taking forward the employability and entrepreneurship agenda. The Institute also manages project funding, specifically the Student Experience Investment Fund and a staff professional development fund. The audit team identifies as a feature of good practice the coordinated support for teaching, learning and enhancement projects, provided through the Learning Institute.

45 Further support for staff is provided through peer-based schemes, including mentoring of staff during their probationary period and peer observation of teaching. The audit team understood that both schemes were under review and that an institution-wide code of practice on peer observation of teaching was in draft. The team saw this as another example of an area where important policy revisions were awaiting approval, which lends support to the earlier recommendation concerning the timely production and appropriate dissemination of policy documentation (see paragraph 25).

46 The judgement reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. This confidence is based on the team's understanding of the rationale for changes to the academic management structure being introduced and on the evidence it found of effective management under the previous structure.

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

47 Queen Mary's approach to improving teaching quality and the quality of the student learning experience relies on achieving the measurable objectives set out in its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. In support of these objectives it continues to invest in enhancement projects, which are managed at institutional level primarily through the Learning Institute. In 2009, Queen Mary launched the Student Experience Investment Fund, open to bids for project finance from schools, professional services and the Queen Mary Students' Union. The audit team noted that the bidding process had encouraged the development of a good range of project proposals. In addition, there is a small grants scheme, also open to competitive bidding, to fund projects aimed at improving the student learning experience through curriculum developments aligned to the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy.

48 One of the institution's key performance indicators for improving teaching quality is to increase year-on-year the number of staff who are national teaching fellows, an area in which it has already performed well. Queen Mary also rewards staff through schemes of its own that recognise innovative projects and outstanding teaching. In another initiative, it has developed a set of teaching quality indicators, which provide an objective basis for staff promotion founded on teaching performance as distinct from research performance.

49 The Learning Institute provides coordinated support for teaching, learning and enhancement projects, and plays an important role in disseminating good practice. In conjunction with Queen Mary Students' Union, it organises an annual student experience seminar, in which students can make presentations to staff about their experiences of the quality of teaching and services and also make recommendations for improvements. The audit team noted several examples of initiatives that had been fast-tracked as a result of listening to students and taking on board their priorities.

50 In the audit team's view, the institution's approach to improving teaching quality and the quality of the student learning experience is now firmly rooted in institutional strategy and supported through the resourcing of special projects, managed primarily at institutional level. The approach is characterised by schemes that give recognition to staff who are outstanding teachers or are involved in innovative projects, and by demonstrable efforts to engage with students' views on enhancing their learning experience.

## **Section 5: Collaborative arrangements**

51 Queen Mary is planning an expansion of collaborative provision, in particular where jointly developed taught programmes have the potential to develop into strong research partnerships. Currently, its most significant partnership, involving almost 2,000 undergraduate students, is with Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications. This concerns the joint delivery of taught degrees at Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications leading to awards of both institutions. Other partnerships are mainly with a range of institutions in London, including some within the University of London. In addition, Queen Mary has articulation agreements through which it admits students onto its programmes, allowing them to carry forward credit from their previous institution. There are also partnership arrangements associated with joint research student supervision, student exchanges or study abroad, and clinical or professional placements.

52 The approval of a new partnership entails securing strategic approval on the basis of a business case and risk assessment, which triggers the processes of approving the partner institution and approving any collaborative programmes to be offered through the partnership. The approval of the partner institution is based on consideration of a due diligence report, a detailed business plan, a draft memorandum of agreement and, if a visit to the partner is undertaken, a report from the visiting panel. The approval process for collaborative programmes mirrors that for on-campus provision. Collaborative programmes are managed in accordance with the appropriate memorandum of agreement. Broadly, mainstream processes are applied, including those for external examining, annual and internal review of programmes, student feedback, student support and staff support.

53 In keeping with the size of the provision, the programmes offered jointly with Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications are subject to separate review and reporting. Two notable features of the collaboration are the appointment of external examiners by both institutions (exceptionally so in the case of Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications, since there is no external examiner system operating in China) and the accreditation of the programmes by the relevant UK professional body, the Institution of Engineering and Technology. Student surveys, external examiner reports and a recent accreditation report all pointed to a well managed programme, with dedicated academic and pastoral support for students and support for teaching staff from the Learning Institute at Queen Mary. The audit team identifies as a feature of good practice the academic and support infrastructure, the policies and the staff commitment which sustain the collaboration with Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications.

54 There are currently 25 research students with joint supervision arrangements, spread across a number of institutions, some overseas. Visits are made to the partner institution to ensure the suitability of the research environment. Supervisors and students maintain close contact through email, telephone and video links, supplemented by face-to-face meetings. However, there are no written guidelines to formalise minimum entitlements to student support. The audit team considers it desirable for the institution to develop guidance for staff in their support and progress-monitoring of research students studying off-campus, drawing on existing good practice.

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

55 Queen Mary has over 1,200 research students, with all faculties actively engaged in research; it aims to double its PhD registrations over the next five years. The institution's strong showing in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise recognised the quality of its



research activity, also providing an external indicator of the existence of a conducive environment within which students could work.

56 The main procedural documents which frame the institution's arrangements for research students are the Academic Regulations and an internal Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes; both were revised for 2009-10. Under the new structure, the Research Degrees Examination and Awards Board is responsible for ensuring that regulations and standards are applied consistently across the institution, while the Vice Principal (Research and International Affairs) is responsible for the quality of the research student experience. At faculty level the research experience of students is monitored by the dean for research and at school level by a director of research.

57 Research student admissions are governed by the institution's admissions policy. Specific decisions are made by at least two research-active staff, who are given training and written guidance. At the point of acceptance, the relevant head of school takes on responsibility for ensuring that sufficient learning resources will be in place to support students throughout their period of study. On entry, research students receive a school-based handbook and an induction programme, provided at both school and institutional levels. Students confirmed from their experience of induction that it was a thorough and useful process.

58 Schools are responsible for establishing suitable supervision arrangements. Each student is assigned a principal supervisor from Queen Mary's staff, as well as a secondary supervisor or adviser. Both must be research-active and together they form the core of a supervisory team. There are limits placed on the number of students a supervisor may supervise and those new to the role undertake compulsory training, which is organised by the Learning Institute and takes account of their discipline area. Staff commented positively on the relevance of the training they had received.

59 Supervisors are responsible for regular informal reviews of student progress. They report formally on progress at least annually to the school director of research, and, under the new structure, via a series of upward reports, through the faculty, to the Vice Principal's advisory group and the Research Degrees Examination and Awards Board. As of September 2010, students aiming for PhD have registered directly for this award, reversing the previous policy whereby they initially registered for MPhil and later upgraded to PhD, subject to a satisfactory progress review. The most suitable timing of such reviews is still being debated, now that the trigger point of transfer of registration is no longer relevant. The audit team noted that students' experience of progress review, albeit under previous arrangements, had been satisfactory.

60 On the basis of a training plan agreed with their supervisors, students are able to access training in research methods and other generic skills. The Learning Institute offers a specific development programme for research students, which includes training for teaching and related duties. Recent figures showed that over three-quarters of research students had taken part in the development programme.

61 Research students have various formal means for giving feedback at school, faculty and institutional levels, but the audit team was told that most preferred to discuss any issues they had with their supervisor or supervisory team in the first instance. Research student opinion is canvassed through internal surveys on specific aspects of their experience. Queen Mary also participates in the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, run by the Higher Education Academy. Survey results are considered at faculty and institutional level.

62 Responsibility for the appointment of internal and external examiners for research degrees now rests with the Research Degrees Examination and Awards Board; formerly,

responsibility lay with individual schools. There are clear criteria for appointment to the role of external examiner and protocols for the conduct of examinations, set out in the Academic Regulations. Students are also issued with separate guidance on the assessment process and confirmed to the audit team that they were well informed of the relevant processes prior to submitting their theses.

63 Queen Mary uses common regulations for appeals against examination board decisions across all its taught and research degrees, which also cover appeals against progress review decisions. There is currently a separate complaints procedure exclusively for research students. Through their written submission to the audit, students pointed to specific issues concerning research student appeals and complaints. Queen Mary has acknowledged that it is in the process of ensuring alignment of the complaints procedure for research students with its Academic Regulations. This is an area where any ambiguity for students is to be avoided, which lends support to the earlier recommendation concerning the timely production and appropriate dissemination of policy documentation (see paragraph 25).

64 In the audit team's view, institutional arrangements for research students are providing an appropriate research environment and student experience. However, there have been recent revisions to both organisational and procedural arrangements with which the updating of documentation has not fully kept pace.

## **Section 7: Published information**

65 Prospectuses and corporate web pages are produced centrally and checked for accuracy with schools and professional services. A sample of material reviewed by the audit team indicated that this process resulted in good quality and accurate corporate publications. Schools and professional services are responsible for their own locally produced materials. On a sample basis, the team cross-checked information from web pages, prospectuses and programme specifications, in most cases finding this to be consistent and up to date.

66 Students confirmed that the information published about their programmes was comprehensive and accorded with their experience, although opinions were more mixed with regard to the accuracy of information on option choices, as presented by schools. It was evident that students knew how to access regulations, including appeals regulations, and complaints procedures, to which they are directed through an institutional publication, the Student Guide. However, as previously indicated, a number of regulatory and policy documents were either in draft form or in need of updating, a point that is reflected in a related recommendation (see paragraph 25).

67 Queen Mary publishes information on teaching quality in accordance with national guidelines.<sup>1</sup> The prescribed statistics, National Student Survey results and links to QAA reports may be accessed from the Unistats website, which also contains the required commentary on graduate employability. Items relating to the quality and standards of programmes are mostly available on the Queen Mary website; any others are available on request.

68 In the audit team's view, the institution has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. It meets the current national expectations for public information on teaching quality.

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<sup>1</sup> *Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: phase two outcomes, HEFCE 06/45*

## Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

### Features of good practice

- 69 The audit team identified the following areas as being good practice:
- the extensive development of outreach work by schools, which contributes to the institution's 'widening participation' strategy (paragraph 40)
  - the opportunities the institution makes available to students for enhancing their employment prospects (paragraph 42)
  - the coordinated support for teaching, learning and enhancement projects, provided through the Learning Institute (paragraph 44)
  - the academic and support infrastructure, the policies and the staff commitment which sustain the collaboration with Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications (paragraph 53).

### Recommendations for action

- 70 Recommendations for action that is advisable:
- to revise its guidance to examination boards on their scope for discretion in deciding the degree classification of students so as to ensure that the lower limit of the mark range within which discretion may be exercised is uniformly applied (paragraph 23)
  - to bring to a conclusion its debate on the process for handling extenuating circumstances in the context of decisions on assessment and the granting of awards, and to implement a consistent approach across the institution based on clear and equitable criteria (paragraph 24)
  - to ensure the timely production and appropriate dissemination of regulatory or policy documentation, including the timely notification to users of changes as and when they are made (paragraphs 25, 39, 45, 63).
- 71 Recommendations for action that is desirable:
- to ensure that its monitoring mechanisms at both faculty and institutional levels routinely involve consideration of reports from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (paragraph 31)
  - to establish a mechanism which ensures that any research student undertaking teaching, assessment or similar duties has received appropriate training (paragraph 43)
  - to develop guidance for staff in their support and progress-monitoring of research students studying off-campus, drawing on existing good practice (paragraph 54).

## Appendix

### **Queen Mary, University of London's response to the Institutional audit report**

Queen Mary welcomes the report following the Institutional audit and was pleased to receive a positive endorsement of the management of the academic standards of our awards and the quality of the learning opportunities we provide to our students.

The audit team arrived during a time of transition at Queen Mary when new academic governance structures were being implemented. Queen Mary is grateful to the audit team for the time and effort that was dedicated to understanding our governance structures, both old and new, and appreciates the report commentary which focuses on these changes.

Employability and outreach work are key priorities for Queen Mary, so the identification of these features of good practice was welcomed, particularly at a time when our distinctive graduate attributes are being embedded across the institution. The Learning Institute provides excellent support for teaching, learning and enhancement projects so it was pleasing to see this contribution recognised by the audit team. Our collaboration with Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications continues to flourish, and the programme team were encouraged to see their commitment recognised as a feature of good practice.

The recommendations relating to discretion and extenuating circumstances were in the process of being addressed at the time of the audit visit, and this work is now concluded. As outlined in the audit report, Queen Mary has revised its structures for academic governance, and the documentation which flows from these new structures is now fully updated and accurate. Each of the recommendations has been considered carefully by our Senate, which will monitor progress with these issues over the next academic year.

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