

School of Oriental and African Studies

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Linney Direct
Adamsway
Mansfield
NG18 4FN

Tel 01623 450788

Fax 01623 450481

Email qaa@linneydirect.com

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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 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 Department for Education and Skills (now the Department for Innovation, Universities 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 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 approach to external quality assurance. At the centre of the process is an emphasis on students and their learning.

The aim of the revised institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges 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 enable students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews, and feedback from stakeholders.

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

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the 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 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 and the report, without the annex, are published in hard copy. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website. The institution will receive the summary, report and annex in hard copy (*Institutional audit handbook: England and Northern Ireland 2006 - Annexes B and C* refer).

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited the School of Oriental and African Studies (the School) from 19 to 23 March 2007 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the School offers.

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

- confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers on behalf of the University of London
- limited confidence can be placed in the soundness of the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The audit team found that, although the School is engaged in some limited enhancement activity at institutional level, there is scope for this to be done in a more strategic way.

Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

The audit team concluded that the School's arrangements for its postgraduate research students met the expectations of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice), Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, published by QAA, and noted that these arrangements and effective practice in this area allowed for the securing of academic standards and quality of provision for postgraduate programmes.

Published information

The audit team found that, although there were areas to be addressed in the consistency and updating of some aspects of the School's published information, overall, the accuracy and completeness of such information is improving.

Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

- the opportunities provided for student representation at all levels of the School's deliberative structures
- the support provided to both undergraduate and postgraduate students by the Learning and Teaching Unit

- the introduction of the logbook for postgraduate research students as a means of tracking progress and supporting the development of appropriate skills.

Recommendations for action

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

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers advisable:

- as a matter of priority, establish a systematic approach to ensure that the School responds to the findings of internal and external reviews in a timely and effective way
- ensure that deliberative structures operate with full oversight of the Quality Assurance Framework and have the capacity to assure its effectiveness
- in the context of programme approval, develop guidelines for programme design, criteria for appointment of external subject specialists, and advice for such specialists on the nature of their roles
- develop a consistent and effective procedure for ensuring that the annual review of programmes meets the requirements of its quality assurance framework
- ensure that at the earliest opportunity all remaining programme specifications are completed, and suitably comprehensive learning outcomes produced and published for all courses in the context of both undergraduate and taught master's programmes
- make more consistent and purposeful use of management information for admissions, progression, completion and achievement at all levels
- ensure that students are made aware of the outcomes of course and programme evaluations
- establish and monitor threshold requirements for academic support systems for students
- ensure systematic implementation and monitoring requirements of peer observation of teaching, as agreed by the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee, staff development review, and the mentoring and training of new members of teaching staff
- ensure that the process of upgrading research students from MPhil to PhD status operates consistently across departments and faculties.

Recommendations for action that the audit team considers desirable:

- develop systematic mechanisms for routinely and effectively identifying and disseminating good practice
- develop a strategic approach to quality enhancement.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings the audit team investigated the use made by the School 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 institutions. 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 whereas the School had generally responded appropriately to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and subject benchmark statements, further work will be required regarding programme specifications and the *Code of practice*.

Report

1 An institutional audit of the School of Oriental and African Studies (the School) was undertaken during the week commencing 19 March 2007. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the School's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students. The School's collaborative provision, both undergraduate and postgraduate, with other colleges of the University of London was included in the present audit.

2 The audit team comprised Professor C Behagg, Professor E Evans, Professor P Manning and Dr N Taylor, auditors, and Ms M Sheehan, audit secretary. Mr D Greenaway, Assistant Director, Reviews Group, coordinated the audit on behalf of QAA.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The School of Oriental and African Studies is a constituent college of the University of London. Established by Royal Charter in 1916, in effect it operates for most purposes as a small and specialist university in its own right, concentrating its teaching and research on Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Its academic structure comprises three faculties and 17 departments or their equivalent, with almost 4,000 full-time equivalent students, more than 40 per cent of which are taught postgraduate or research students. Approximately 1,500 students are registered on master's programmes by distance learning for which the School is the lead college within the University of London's External System.

4 In response to the recommendations contained in the previous institutional audit report, the School has made effective progress in some areas. However, its responses to the findings of internal and external review have not invariably been followed up, and the School will wish to address this issue in order to ensure that its management of the quality of learning opportunities is effective.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

5 Formal responsibility for defining and assuring the academic standards of awards in accordance with the academic framework of the University of London lies with the Academic Board, supported by two School level subcommittees, the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee, and the Quality Audit and Assurance Committee, and three Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees.

6 Whereas the reorganisation of the School into faculties has streamlined the management of academic standards, there is still scope for improving the consistency and effectiveness of the processes used to assure some key aspects in this area. At the time of the audit, the task of producing programme specifications for all programmes, identified as a key recommendation in the QAA audit conducted in 2003, had not been completed. Moreover, many courses still lack suitably articulated learning outcomes, thus generating areas of uncertainty both for students in terms of understanding of what is expected of them and also for examiners in interpreting marking criteria. The audit team considers it advisable the School ensures at the earliest opportunity all remaining programme specifications are completed, and suitably comprehensive learning outcomes produced and published for all courses in the context of both undergraduate and taught master's programmes.

7 The School makes appropriate use of external examiners in terms of securing the academic standards of awards. Some aspects of the procedures used, however, leave room for further improvement, for example, the introduction of more robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the arrangements for briefing and inducting external examiners, and that recommendations reflecting good practice in the context of securing and maintaining standards are more widely disseminated.

8 At undergraduate level the School operates a single Board for the award of degrees, responding to recommendations made by the subject-specific subboards. One set of degree regulations covers all programmes, with the exception of the LLB degree. For taught master's degrees there are separate boards subject to one set of degree regulations. Research students are assessed within a framework administered by the University of London. The audit team concluded that the assessment policies and regulations and the implementation thereof were generally secure, apart from the caveat already identified in terms of the lack of learning outcomes for all courses.

9 Since the previous audit, progress in terms of improving the quality and completeness of management information routinely made available to monitor and enhance the management of academic standards has been slow, notably in the production of progression and completion data and their consideration in this context as part of the processes of annual review. Opportunities, therefore, to use the framework for internal quality assurance effectively to map and evaluate, at the time of the present audit, the quality of the learning opportunities at each level to attainment in the context of academic standards, has yet to be fully explored.

10 The audit found that confidence could be placed in the soundness of the School's present and likely future management of academic standards of its awards that it delivers on behalf of the University of London.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

11 The QAA audit of 2003 resulted in a number of recommendations. The audit team was able to confirm that the School had to varying degrees addressed these recommendations, but it noted that progress had in many instances been slow and in some was still incomplete. The School now publishes and consistently implements clear criteria for the marking and grading of assessments; it had taken steps to ensure that external examiner reports were received in a timely fashion; it had enhanced its arrangements for providing external examiners with feedback; and it had effectively addressed the recommendation to consider how it might achieve greater consistency in arrangements for student representation. But while the School has made significant progress with the systematic collection of student feedback, insufficient attention has been paid to the reporting of results to relevant individuals and committees or to ensuring that necessary changes are implemented; some programme specifications were still either incomplete or not available; and the team does not consider that the role of external assessors in programme approval has been fully addressed and consistently implemented. The team noted the length of time since the previous audit and the School's own reflections that some of its processes required urgent attention. The team considers it advisable that the School ensures that deliberative structures operate with full oversight of the quality assurance framework and have the capacity to assure its effectiveness.

12 The School offers a unique range of courses and programmes. Undergraduate degrees can only be studied full-time, but part-time students are registered on a range of certificates, diplomas and postgraduate degrees, many of which are available in distance-learning mode, and short and tailor-made one-to-one language courses in over 50 African and Asian languages. There is an institutional commitment to diversity and equality of opportunity and staff believe they have sufficient control over admissions to ensure that the School only registers students who may be expected to be able to complete satisfactorily the programmes for which they are registered. Nevertheless, significant progress has yet to be made internally in analysing and evaluating admissions data in ways that will allow it to be used effectively. Where the School acknowledges problems with recruitment in some areas, with retention in others, and with the nature and efficiency of aspects of the current registration processes, the audit team was satisfied that the School was developing policies designed to address these issues. The team concluded it advisable that the School makes more consistent and purposeful use of management information for admissions, progression, completion and achievement at all levels.

13 The School requires new programmes to fit the School's Strategic Plan and Research Strategy, operate within the Academic Infrastructure, and be approved only after careful scrutiny at department, faculty and School levels, and in the light of advice from at least one subject specialist external to the School. Distance-learning programmes delivered through the University of London's External System are also approved by the University's External System Academic Board. The School devolves to faculties the responsibility for managing the process of all but major amendments to existing programmes.

14 The audit team concluded from its scrutiny of documentation relating to a number of new programme proposals that, despite the individual efforts of the Quality Assurance and Audit Committee, the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee and the Learning and Teaching Unit, the School's detailed approval procedures were not always strictly followed at every stage. At the same time, the team also noted the absence within those procedures of any written guidelines for programme design, any statement of the criteria used in the appointment of external subject specialists, or any guidelines provided to such specialists, or alumni or prospective employers, about their roles and duties in the process. The team concluded that the School's approval process were not sufficiently embedded at faculty level.

15 Responsibility for Annual Programme Review (APR) is delegated to faculties, and requires departments to comment on the delivery and assessment of their programmes, taking account of external examiners' recommendations, student feedback and management information. While it could identify evidence that departments give due consideration and response to issues raised, the audit team also found that statistical data were not routinely being used. The team also noted that there is some evidence of APRs and external examiner reports not being completed on time or at all, and there does not appear to be a defined systematic procedure or timetable for ensuring that missing documentation is chased and processed. The team concluded that the current process of internal annual review was not providing its appropriate committees and office-holders with sufficient information for the School to assure itself and its stakeholders that all its courses and programmes were providing the necessary learning opportunities for students to achieve its programmes' approved learning outcomes.

16 All departments and their programmes are subject to internal Departmental and Programme Review (DPR) every six years. Under the procedure, a panel including in its membership two assessors external to the School scrutinises the department's self-evaluation, which includes, among other elements, an analysis of statistical information and a statement of the programme's compliance with the Academic Infrastructure. Students make their own independent written submission. Having met with the department and some students, the panel produces a report for the Quality Assurance and Audit Committee, including recommendations for action, and progress on these is reviewed a year later. The audit team studied a range of documentation and concluded that the procedure had the potential to work effectively and noted in particular the work of the Quality Assurance and Audit Committee in respect of DPRs. However, the team noted that there remained room for improvement, especially in ensuring that the Committee received more timely responses to the recommendations made in its reports.

17 The audit team further noted that some departments had failed to complete, or had been slow in completing or updating programme specifications on the Learning and Teaching Unit website. The School's view at the time of the previous audit was that one of its tasks was to ensure that its quality assurance procedures were 'better co-ordinated, disseminated, monitored and embedded'. The team supports these comments and believes that the School needs to develop further its quality assurance framework and system to make them still more comprehensive, coherent and robust. The team considers it advisable that, in the context of programme approval, that the School develop guidelines for programme design, criteria for the appointment of external subject specialists, and advice for such specialists on the nature of their role. The team also considers it advisable that the School develops a consistent and effective procedure for ensuring that the annual review of programmes meets the requirements of its

quality assurance framework. The team considers it advisable, as a matter of priority, that the School establishes a systematic approach to ensure that it responds to the findings of internal and external reviews in a timely and effective way.

18 The School has been systematically monitoring its alignment with the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, has recently published on its intranet a grid summarising each element in the *Code* and is mindful of the extent to which its provision conforms with it. Logbooks fulfilling the role of personal development plans (PDPs) have been introduced for postgraduate research students, but the School has not yet implemented the introduction of PDPs for all programmes.

19 The School aims to publish a complete set of programme specifications for undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes on the School intranet, and those which have been published state that, in the design of the programme, reference has been made to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and, when appropriate, to the relevant subject benchmarks. At the time of the audit some programme specifications, and information on the learning outcomes of individual courses, were not published, thus restricting student awareness of the School's learning opportunities. The audit team advises the School that, at the earliest opportunity, all remaining programme specifications are completed, and suitably comprehensive learning outcomes produced and published for all courses in the context of both undergraduate and taught master's programmes

20 The audit team particularly noted students' appreciation of the level of learning and study support provided by the Learning and Teaching Unit. At the time of the audit, the School was currently working towards a better integration of its central support services with its academic framework of faculties and departments. Although the School itself recognises the limitation of the library's opening hours and computer provision, students reported that they are aware of the availability of such services and are able to access them when needed. Nonetheless, the School will need to be vigilant in ensuring that the quality of provision is secured and enhanced to meet the rising expectations of its students. The team advises the School to establish and monitor threshold requirements for academic support systems for students.

21 The School has around 1,500 students registered on master's programmes delivered by distance learning, and it intends to increase recruitment to these programmes. These students are supported by well-designed study packs and structured unit study programme, and they have access to considerable on-line journal material.

22 The draft Learning and Teaching Strategy 2006-07 to 2009-10 proposes as a key strategic objective 'to deliver a research-informed teaching environment that reflects the specialist nature of the institution'. All candidates for academic posts and all applicants for promotion are assessed in terms of their strengths in both research and teaching, and their ability to relate each to the other. The students the audit team met confirmed they valued the teaching by research-active staff at the forefront of their discipline; and the team acknowledged that the School was engaged in exploring further, and articulating for its stakeholders, the mutual dependence of research on teaching and teaching on research.

23 Whilst students whom the team met confirmed the general accessibility of tutorial staff, the School has registered concerns in recent years with the operation of its personal tutoring system. The devolution of the responsibility for personal tutoring to faculties has resulted in a range of approaches to the academic support of individual students. Meetings with staff and students indicate that this remains an unresolved issue in the minds of both staff and students. Whilst the diversity of models for achieving advice for individual students is not necessarily problematic in itself, the potential for confusion on the part of students is greater where there is such diversity.

24 The School believes internal periodic review to be its main mechanism for disseminating good practice. DPR reports identify examples of good practice and faculty officers are involved in the reviews. The audit team noted, however, that the reports it read almost always gave the same or similar examples of good practice couched in the same or similar words. Minutes of School committees examined by the team did not reveal any evidence of these or other examples being systematically discussed, commented on, or taken further. The team is of the view that that DPR alone (and as it is currently conducted) provides a sufficiently dynamic structure to ensure that good practice is necessarily brought to the attention of a wide audience and acted upon. The team considers it desirable that the School develop systematic mechanisms for routinely and effectively identifying and disseminating good practice.

25 At the time of the audit, the School did not take a systematic approach to gathering the views of employers and graduates, but it did consider student feedback to be a significant element in gauging the quality of teaching, learning and support systems. A standardised form is used for the process referred to as the Student Evaluation of Courses and a summary report on these evaluations and the National Student Survey is posted on the Learning and Teaching Unit website. However, the receipt of the data does not, at present, trigger any systematic process of action planning and the process occurs too late in the year to effect change for the following year's delivery of programmes.

26 At the time of the audit, staff in some departments expressed a belief that certain aspects of student feedback cannot be discussed openly with students and placed within the public domain. The Periodic Review of Politics, in March 2005 revealed that a requirement made by the QAA Subject Review Panel in 2001 to ensure closure of this particular quality assurance loop had not yet been met because student feedback on courses was regarded by the department concerned as confidential information. The audit team suggests that the School challenge, more directly than it has done so far, the question of confidentiality that surrounds student feedback at course level. The team concluded that it is advised to establish and implement mechanisms to ensure that students are made aware of the outcomes of their evaluations of the courses and programmes that they are undertaking.

27 In the previous audit report, it was recommended that the School consider how it might achieve greater consistency in arrangements for student representation at all levels. While the effectiveness of the student representative system still appeared to vary across the School (as was the situation at the time of the previous audit), students whom the team met considered that they are provided with full opportunities to express their views throughout the deliberative structure and the approach taken by the new Director and Principal is widely felt to affirm this process which the team considered to be a feature of good practice.

28 The audit found that limited confidence could be placed in the soundness of the School's present and likely future management of the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

29 The School informed the audit team that there was a developing institutional approach to enhancing quality, but the team was not able to find any comprehensive explanation of what constituted that approach in the documentation available to it. The team found little comprehensive evidence, in either the documentation supplied to it or in its meetings with staff, of a conscious and articulated engagement with the concept of enhancement. In its Briefing Paper, the School stated that the quality of its teaching was 'enhanced through the high calibre of its academic staff' but the team was unable to find evidence that the School had developed a method for testing the validity of such an assertion. The team welcomed, as an example of the School taking a deliberate step towards enhancing the quality of its provision of learning opportunities, the decision in March 2005 that permanent staff would in future be subject to peer observation of teaching every three years. The team formed the view that it is desirable the School develops a strategic approach to quality enhancement.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

30 At the time of the audit, the School currently offered five joint degrees with other Colleges of the University of London in accordance with the Ordinances of the University which regulate such collaborative arrangements. Responsibility for the management of these degrees rests with the lead institution in each case, and the School accordingly manages three of these degrees in partnership with three other Colleges of the University of London. Students studying for these degrees are subject to equivalent learning opportunities and assessment arrangements to those taking the same courses for non-collaborative awards. In addition, the School offers distance-learning programmes in Finance, Management and Public Policy via the University of London's External System. The audit team concluded that arrangement for the management of the particular processes necessary to secure its collaborative arrangements were working effectively and aligned to the *Code of practice, Section 2*.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

31 The administration of research degrees, including assessment, is undertaken by the Research Degrees Committee on behalf of University of London. The School uses the University of London's ordinances which it supports with its own regulations. All procedures, regulations and the Code of Practice for Research Degrees are contained within the School's Postgraduate Research Handbook. The School's management of its research degree programmes was reviewed in July 2006, which concluded that the institution's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its provision in this area was appropriate and satisfactory.

32 The School Registry has developed a framework of guidelines for admissions, which specify the normal range of prior qualifications applicants should possess. The Guidelines also allow for checks on the qualifications of supervisors and examiners. Primary responsibility for the selection of research students lies with departments and admissions decisions are taken by two members of staff, one of whom should be the department's Research Tutor. The School accepts that more training might be provided for staff involved in the admissions process for postgraduate research students and is working to achieve greater consistency in this area.

33 Induction arrangements for postgraduate research students are appropriate. All new students are initially registered for the degree of MPhil and are normally assigned one formal supervisor, with whom they should have regular meetings. Supervision is managed by a Supervisory Committee which monitors progress and receives an annual report which is scrutinised by the appropriate Faculty Associate Dean for Research. The School provides a dedicated induction session for all new research students and also a longer orientation programme. Incoming students have a free choice of attending whichever sessions they wish within the induction programme.

34 The School's research environment is well established, acknowledges the importance of appropriate support for postgraduate students especially since constraints of space in central London militate against giving research students optimal desk space and IT access. The School aims to reduce these difficulties by active participation as one of six London colleges involved in the rapidly developing Bloomsbury Virtual Learning Environment, including the Bloomsbury Postgraduate Skills Network.

35 The audit team considered the development of a Research Students' Logbook a feature of good practice; the team noted that the School did not have in place a formal mechanism for monitoring the success of postgraduate research students' programmes against appropriate internal and external targets, such as the *Code of practice*. The team also noted considerable variation in the operation across departments of the process of upgrading postgraduate research students from MPhil to PhD status. The School will wish to review its arrangements to ensure both consistency in the upgrading process and the regular monitoring of statistical and other relevant indicators, and in accordance with the University of London's requirements. The team

considered it advisable the School ensures that the process of upgrading research students from MPhil to PhD status operates consistently across departments and faculties.

Section 7: Published information

Accuracy and completeness of published information

36 The School provided prospectuses for undergraduate and postgraduate applicants, an Orientation Handbook to support the induction of new students and a comprehensive Student Handbook for undergraduate, taught postgraduate and postgraduate research students. This information is augmented by programme and course-level handbooks. Corporate publications were the responsibility of the Marketing, Publications and Publicity Department, which liaises with the academic and service departments to ensure accuracy of information.

37 The School's website contains course descriptors and programme specifications. At the time of the audit, the School was bringing its website construction and management in-house. This 'Web-first' policy has been triggered by difficulties acknowledged by the School in the maintenance of comprehensive and current information on the website, particularly with regard to course and programme changes. The team formed the view that the School is making efforts to improve the accuracy of public information by constructing a new website which will be operational from June 2007 and be the responsibility of a newly appointed Web and Publications Editor.

Student experience of published information and other information available to them

38 The student written submission states that students feel that information provided by the School is 'at least fairly accurate'. However, concern was registered by students met by the audit team that published information did not always reflect the actual availability of courses, once student numbers and staff availability had been taken into account. Students met by the auditors attributed this partly to adjustments made in light of course recruitment and partly to late changes occasioned by staff sabbaticals. Based upon previous experience of demand, the School may wish to consider offering only courses which have a realistic possibility of being provided.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

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

- the support provided to both undergraduate and postgraduate students by the Learning and Teaching Unit (paragraph 20)
- the opportunities provided for student representation at all levels of the School's deliberative structures (paragraph 27)
- the introduction of the logbook for postgraduate research students as a means of tracking progress and supporting the development of appropriate skills (paragraph 35).

Recommendations for action

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

40 Recommendations for action the audit team considers advisable:

- as a matter of priority, establish a systematic approach to ensure that the School responds to the findings and recommendations of internal and external reviews in a timely and effective way (paragraph 11)
- ensure that deliberative structures operate with full oversight of the School's quality assurance framework and have the capacity to assure its effectiveness (paragraph 11)

- make more consistent and purposeful use of management information for admissions, progression, completion and achievement at all levels (paragraph 12)
- in the context of programme approval, develop guidelines for programme design, criteria for appointment of external subject specialists, and advice for such specialists on the nature of their roles (paragraph 17)
- develop a consistent and effective procedure for ensuring that the annual review of programmes meets the requirements of its quality assurance framework (paragraph 17)
- ensure that at the earliest opportunity all remaining programme specifications are completed, and suitably comprehensive learning outcomes produced and published for all courses in the context of both undergraduate and taught master's programmes (paragraphs 6, 17, 19)
- establish and monitor threshold requirements for academic support systems for students (paragraph 20)
- ensure that students are made aware of the outcomes of course and programme evaluations (paragraphs 25, 26)
- ensure systematic implementation and monitoring requirements of peer observation of teaching, as agreed by the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee, staff development review, and the mentoring and training of new members of teaching staff (paragraph 29)
- ensure that the process of upgrading research students from MPhil to PhD status operates consistently across departments and faculties (paragraph 35).

Recommendations for action the audit team considers desirable:

- develop systematic mechanisms for routinely and effectively identifying and disseminating good practice (paragraph 24)
- develop a strategic approach to quality enhancement (paragraph 29).

Appendix

The School of Oriental and African Studies' response to the institutional audit report

The School is pleased that the QAA has placed confidence in the School's current and likely future management of the academic standards of the awards the School delivers on behalf of the University of London.

The School is disappointed that the QAA was only able to place limited confidence in the soundness of the School's current and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

However, the School is encouraged that the QAA did not make any 'essential' recommendations and welcomes the identification of areas of good practice. The School notes that none of the 'advisable' and 'desirable' recommendations relates to the quality of teaching or student achievement per se. In the strategic and operational review, instigated by the new Director and Principal in this his first year of office 2006-07, the School had already identified the need, inter alia, to improve and streamline operations in pursuit of its academic goals. Thus, action had already commenced on strengthening the systematic management and timely implementation of processes supporting and informing teaching and learning, the student experience and the assurance and enhancement of quality and standards. The QAA's recommendations will therefore be taken on board by the School as part of its new internal agenda for monitoring and improving the management of its processes.

The audit result has been discussed with due seriousness by the School's senior management team, Academic Board and Governing Body, and has been reported to the University of London. The School is producing and implementing an action plan to be considered by an extraordinary meeting of Academic Board in October 2007, prior to its dispatch to the QAA by the due date.

