London School of Economics and Political Science

Preface

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) exists to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education (HE) qualifications and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of HE.

To do this QAA carries out reviews of individual HE institutions (universities and colleges of HE). In England and Northern Ireland this process is known as institutional audit. QAA operates similar but separate processes in Scotland and Wales.

The purpose of institutional audit

The aims of institutional audit are to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges are:

● providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and

● exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

Judgements

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

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

● 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.

These judgements are expressed as either **broad confidence**, **limited confidence** or **no confidence** and are accompanied by examples of good practice and recommendations for improvement.

Nationally agreed standards

Institutional audit uses a set of nationally agreed reference points, known as the 'Academic Infrastructure', to consider an institution's standards and quality. These are published by QAA and consist of:

● *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), which include descriptions of different HE qualifications

● The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*

● subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects

● guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

The audit process

Institutional audits are carried out by teams of academics who review the way in which institutions oversee their academic quality and standards. Because they are evaluating their equals, the process is called 'peer review'.

The main elements of institutional audit are:

- a preliminary visit by QAA to the institution nine months before the audit visit
- a self-evaluation document submitted by the institution four months before the audit visit
- a written submission by the student representative body, if they have chosen to do so, four months before the audit visit
- a detailed briefing visit to the institution by the audit team five weeks before the audit visit
- the audit visit, which lasts five days
- the publication of a report on the audit team's judgements and findings 20 weeks after the audit visit.

The evidence for the audit

In order to obtain the evidence for its judgement, the audit team carries out a number of activities, including:

- reviewing the institution's own internal procedures and documents, such as regulations, policy statements, codes of practice, recruitment publications and minutes of relevant meetings, as well as the self-evaluation document itself
- reviewing the written submission from students
- asking questions of relevant staff
- talking to students about their experiences
- exploring how the institution uses the Academic Infrastructure.

The audit team also gathers evidence by focusing on examples of the institution's internal quality assurance processes at work using 'audit trails'. These trails may focus on a particular programme or programmes offered at that institution, when they are known as a 'discipline audit trail'. In addition, the audit team may focus on a particular theme that runs throughout the institution's management of its standards and quality. This is known as a 'thematic enquiry'.

From 2004, institutions will be required to publish information about the quality and standards of their programmes and awards in a format recommended in document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance,* published by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The audit team reviews progress towards meeting this requirement.

All QAA's publications are available on our website www.qaa.ac.uk

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Summary

Following an application by the London School of Economics and Political Science (the School or LSE) to the Privy Council seeking the grant of its own taught and research degree-awarding powers, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) was asked to advise the Privy Council as to whether such powers should be granted. Having regard to the Government's criteria governing the grant of powers, a team of QAA assessors accordingly visited the School in the period November 2004 to January 2005 to review the institution's application.

At the time the School was undergoing QAA scrutiny for taught and research degree-awarding powers it was also due to have been subject to a QAA institutional audit. The purpose of audit is to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to current and prospective students and on the academic standards of the awards offered by the institution. The outcome of institutional audit is a QAA statement of confidence about the way in which the institution is managing the quality and standards of the awards offered through the institution.

The words 'academic standards' are 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. Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their awards. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them. In institutional audit, both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

Using the information derived from the QAA scrutiny for taught and research degree-awarding powers, this report provides a commentary on the way in which the School is managing the quality and standards of the awards it presently offers under the aegis of the University of London. The audit element of the combined process also included the conducting of three discipline audit trails (DATs) in law, government, and social policy.

Process

The combined process was conducted through structured discussions with staff, students and representatives of the governing body; observation of committee meetings; and scrutiny of extensive documentation in hard copy and on the institution's intranet. The assessors made an initial visit to the institution in November 2004 to hold discussions with the Director, representatives of the Students' Union, and senior staff. This was followed by observation of a number of committee meetings in December 2004 and January 2005, and the combined audit and scrutiny process culminated in a three-day visit to the institution during which further discussions took place. The three DATs were also carried out during this visit.

The assessor team which carried out the combined degree-awarding powers and audit scrutiny comprised Ms A Kettle, Dr D Furneaux and Professor V Gore (assessors) and Mr Derek Attwood (review secretary). The DATs were led by auditors Professor J Baldock, Professor K Bonnett, and Dr S Blake. The combined degree-awarding powers and audit process was coordinated on behalf of QAA by Dr P Hartley (Assistant Director, Reviews Group).

The School

The School stated in its Critical Self-Assessment (CSA) document that it 'aims to be a centre of international excellence in the study of the social sciences'. This is underpinned by an 'intention to maintain a decentralised culture of intellectual freedom, challenge, tolerance and openness'. The School currently has 18 academic departments, six institutes, and 17 research centres. It has a very focused disciplinary range, which influences the internal organisation. The School is structured as a 'single faculty' institution, and has no intermediate management layer between the 'centre' and the individual departments. More than 60 per cent of the students are from outside of the UK, and more than half of the student body is postgraduate.

While the School has its own Memorandum and Articles of Association it is required, as a College of the University of London, to operate also in accordance with the Statutes and Ordinances of the University. The degrees offered by the School are still, in all cases, degrees of the University of London but the School now administers the processes whereby taught degree programmes are introduced, or withdrawn, and examined. The same position obtains in respect of the appointment of professors, readers and teachers. While professorships and readerships held by School staff remain University of London titles, responsibility for the process of establishing (or disestablishing) and appointing to a chair or readership has been devolved to the School, as has the senior academic staff promotions process. The University of London requires its constituent institutions to document and lodge with the Vice-Chancellor of the University the detailed procedures whereby they implement their delegated authority to exercise, on its behalf, the University's powers to award degrees and to appoint professors and readers. The constituent institutions are authorised to award degrees of the University of London to their students based on 'Colleges' individual and collective responsibility for the University of London awards and titles'. Each constituent institution is, therefore, responsible for the standard, the quality control and quality assurance of the degrees that it awards. The School has also secured delegated powers in relation to the appointment of examiners, the approval and amendment of regulations of programmes of study (excluding research programmes), and procedures relating to examination irregularities.

Outcome of the audit

As a result of its investigations the audit team's view of the School is that:

- broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of the School's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of the awards it offers.

Features of good practice

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

- the success of the Centre for Learning Technology (CLT) and the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) in supporting learning and teaching (paragraphs 50 and 57)

- the robust and reflective process of review undertaken by the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee (TLAC) (paragraph 37)

- the clear information on the School's requirements given to candidates for interim and major review and the guidance and support offered by convenors, mentors, senior colleagues and the TLC (paragraph 49).

Recommendations for action

The audit team also recommends that the School should consider further action in a number of areas to ensure that the academic quality and standards of the awards it offers are maintained. The team advises the School to:

- review as a matter of urgency the remit of the Appointments Committee, in particular its role with regard to academic standards, and its formal position within the governance of the School (paragraph 16)

- seek to ensure fuller and more analytical responses from External Examiners when they submit inappropriately cursory reports, in view of the primacy of the reports in the annual monitoring process at School level (paragraph 26)

- reconsider its annual monitoring policy with the aim of producing consistent and appropriate arrangements which would add value to programmes and provide effective assurance at School level regarding the quality and standards of its awards (paragraph 34)

- review its procedures for assuring the quality and standards of collaborative arrangements, with particular regard to potential overseas partners (paragraph 46)

- reduce the significant variations in the level and quality of tutorial support offered to students by departments (paragraph 58).

It would be desirable for the School to:

- review (in partnership with the Students' Union) its policy on examination resits in the summer period (paragraph 13)

- increase the degree of externality in its procedures through more extensive engagement with external assessors in its programme approval processes (paragraphs 31 and 41)

- ensure more consistent implementation of the Code of Good Practice on Teaching Learning and Assessment (paragraph 54)

- ensure more consistent production and better analysis of data on student retention and progression in order to enhance its evaluation of student performance (paragraph 61)

- review its policies and practices with regard to the training of part-time staff; research supervisors and research students (paragraphs 52 and 63).

Summary outcomes of discipline audit trails

Postgraduate programmes in law and social policy, and undergraduate programmes in government

To arrive at its conclusions the audit team held meetings with staff and students, and consulted a wide range of information relating to the School and the programmes listed above. The team was also able to consult examples of assessed student work.

National reference points

The audit team also investigated the use made by the School of the Academic Infrastructure that has been developed by QAA on behalf of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help to define both good practice and academic standards. The team found that the School was making some use of the Academic Infrastructure to inform its management of quality and standards but that more use could be made of certain elements, including the use of benchmark statements to inform its programme approval processes.

In due course, the institutional audit process will include a check on the reliability of the information set published by institutions in the format recommended in HEFCE document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*. At the time of the taught and research degree-awarding powers scrutiny, the School was alert to the implications of the document HEFCE 03/51 and was moving in an appropriate manner to fulfil its responsibilities in this respect.

Main report

The main report

Management of the School

1   The Council is the governing body of the London School of Economics and Political Science (the School or LSE) and is responsible for determining strategy. It discusses major issues and is responsible for the appointment of the Director. It was clear to the audit team that the Council, which has a highly distinguished membership, takes an active and informed interest in matters of mission, character and strategic direction.

2   Council, whose role was reviewed and explicitly defined in the second report of the Effectiveness Review Group, February 2002, monitors performance more closely now than was the case in the past. This closer involvement is in part a result of the Council's wish to see the LSE, with its established international reputation for excellence in the study of the social sciences, now develop as a business with more corporate ways of working. Growth and enhanced performance is sought in an increasingly competitive market, primarily conceived in global, rather than national terms. The Council and senior management of the School indicated to the audit team their belief that they were able to move in this direction because it built logically upon the phase of academic change and refreshment under the previous Director.

3   The audit team was able to confirm, on the basis of discussions with staff and students, that the new Director (in post for eighteen months) has introduced a more strategic, business-like approach and an emphasis on international comparators (for example, Harvard) and corporate working. This last point can be seen in the reconfigured structure of the senior management stratum and its relationship to support services and academic departments. A Director's management team has been created, currently comprising the Director, the three Deputy Directors, the Secretary and Director of Administration, the Director of Finance and Facilities, and the Director for Business and Enterprise.

4   The audit team concluded that it was too early to form a definitive judgement on the effectiveness of this development but it represents in the team's view a timely adjustment to the management of the School. In a corresponding move, heads of academic subject departments, termed 'Conveners', have been given the opportunity and the mechanism for structured, collective discussion with the Director, through the newly created Conveners' Forum. Both senior management and the Conveners spoke positively about the introduction of the Forum.

5   There was, in the view of the audit team, evidence of team working and a corporate approach, as for example in the more integrated approach to support service activities. The team noted that, as part of these wider developments, the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office (TQARO) is intending to shift its focus away from preparation for external quality assurance demands to ongoing development of internal systems suited to the ethos of the School. The team also noted the School's strategy for controlled growth in the international market, but was left unclear as to whether the desirability of any corresponding development in quality assurance and standards maintenance had been considered within the School.

6   Management structures beneath the senior School level are 'flat' with no intermediate management layer. There are no faculty structures, therefore, only academic departments and interdisciplinary institutes. This is a function of the singular, social science focus and, in combination with a connected commitment to 'horizontal governance', constitutes in many ways the key to the distinctiveness of the School as a higher education (HE) organisation. The heads of departments, known as Conveners, have responsibilities that include academic leadership and management. These are clearly set out by the School in a Conveners' Handbook under a section entitled 'Conveners' Responsibilities: An Overview'.

7   Conveners, in discussion with the audit team, described themselves as facilitators rather than managers or leaders. They also stressed their accountability to colleagues, rather than to senior management or, in particular, to the Director. This reinforced the view of the team that securing ownership of changes in quality assurance systems, particularly in terms of School-wide consistency of policy and practice, or indeed change more generally, could present a challenge for the School. The team formed the view that it might prove difficult to make timely progress on issues where greater systematisation and consistency across departments might be seen as desirable.

8   The audit team noted in its meetings with staff that there was amongst some staff a limited awareness of the wider academic standards debate in British HE. The team formed the view that the School could do more to encourage such awareness and understanding on the part of its staff. The team also encountered little appreciation at the academic departmental level of the need for School-wide consistency or greater student equity.

9   The current pursuit of a more corporate management style geared to the strategic development of the School may presage change but appeared to the audit team to be applied more to the business side of the School than, at present, to the academic. Despite its reservations about inconsistencies at departmental level and a potentially slow rate of change in systems and attitudes, the team was on balance satisfied that senior management were aware of the main issues and had developed a considered strategy that they believed suited the School, its distinctive heritage and its current situation and ambitions.

Quality and standards

The regulatory framework

10   As a University of London College, LSE must observe the requirements of the University's Statutes and Ordinances, although

the School operates under its own Academic Regulations. The one exception to this is the regulations for research degrees, which are still under the direct control of the University.

11   The School's regulations are published in the School Calendar. It also publishes internal codes of practice, for example relating to the supervision of research students; and teaching and learning at undergraduate and postgraduate level. These latter codes have yet to be fully implemented.

12   Departments are being required to develop their own implementation policies during the current academic year. According to the Critical Self-Assessment (CSA), the School does not as yet have a specific strategy statement on its approach to assessment. Institution-wide assessment policies are defined by the relevant School committees (Academic Board and Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee), and these are promulgated to examiners, both internal and external, by booklets giving detailed guidance; and to departments by internal literature at the start of the examination period.

13   A specific area of the Regulations raised by the students written submission (SWS) concerned the School resit policy. With the exception of students' in Law, no resits can be taken in the September following the summer examinations, candidates having to wait until the following summer. The SWS identified significant difficulties with this. The audit team discussed the matter with staff and learnt that there were two main concerns. The first was that the standard of the examination might be different, and the second concerned availability of staff. As the summer period was the only time staff could concentrate solely on research they were not able to make time available for resits during this period. The team concluded that there were significant difficulties for students as a result of this policy and that it was desirable that the School review this regulation in partnership with the Students' Union at the earliest opportunity.

Academic standards

14   The Academic Board (AB) has collective authority and responsibility for the standards of the School's academic awards. Academic standards are seen as an Academic Board responsibility in so far as it has responsibility for academic decisions 'affecting fundamental issues of academic standards'. The only other committee whose terms of reference have an explicit bearing on academic standards is the Appointments Committee (AC). This committee 'is to serve as the body responsible for ensuring that the academic standards and purposes of the School are monitored and upheld'. The AC is not within the formal School committee structure, its membership includes all Professors, and it is 'advisory to the Director'.

15   The Committee has as its first term of reference a responsibility for academic standards. In practice, however, this responsibility is restricted to standards defined exclusively in terms of academic staff quality. The audit team noted that the Committee had no clear onward reporting line to any other committee or body within the School's deliberative committee structure. Through the device of receiving reports from the Research Committee and the Academic Planning and Resources Committee (APRC) the committee is intended to exercise a central role in the maintenance of standards with a capacity to make interventions when necessary. The team was unable to find evidence of any such action, however, or even discussion prompted by such reports, for the year 2003-04, the relevant minute simply recording 'received'.

16   The audit team was interested to note an Internal Audit Report of academic quality assurance and enhancement arrangements, which argued that the Appointments Committee, while influential in staffing matters, was an anomaly within the structures. The report noted that the Committee 'fell between two stools' in terms of any formal internal review of committee systems, and did not carry out, except in a very narrow sense, a responsibility for maintenance of academic standards. It was evident to the team that no action had been taken on this report and it was confirmed to the team that AC did not form part of a current review of the effectiveness of the newly introduced committee structure, since 'it appeared to work'. The team concluded that the Committee's role in respect of academic standards beyond those aspects involved in the recruitment, review and promotion of staff, together with its formal place within the governance of the School, should be reviewed as a matter of urgency.

17   It was evident to the audit team that academic standards are primarily set and maintained at department level. The School expects them to be kept appropriate and secure by recruiting high quality staff with particular strengths in research, and safeguarded primarily by means of the external examiner system and by periodic review.

Assessment

18   The CSA demonstrated an awareness of the important role played by assessment processes in the maintenance of academic standards. It described 'double marking' as a key device for assuring standards and identifies external examiners as a source of reliable information on the fairness and impartiality of the assessment procedures. With effect from 2003-04, external examiners have been asked to confirm that the level of degree awarded is consistent with the appropriate level of *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ).

19   The CSA also identified concerns expressed by subject review reports, external examiners, and student input to internal review, about the School's approach to assessment. These were the subject of a review in 2001 and issues raised included: the absence of consistent marking schemes or statements of assessment criteria; written feedback to students on performance in assessments and examinations; and the assessment mix.

20   The School has not developed a School-wide taxonomy for the criteria to be attached to the marks used in the marking schemes on

the grounds that it is impossible to devise a set of statements which would have cross-School validity. According to the CSA, the School also feels that the calibration of standards should be set as much in relation to departments in the same discipline in other institutions as to departments of different disciplines in the same institution.

21   At department level, progress has been made in the development of more explicit criteria for formative assessment and individual departments are making their criteria available to external examiners.

22   There are signs of change in some areas with regard to the assessment mix. This appeared to the audit team to be due largely to the role of the Teaching, Learning and Assessment Committee (TLAC), which has been instrumental in assisting with the implementation of new assessment methods. The CSA stated that there was also resistance to the external pressure to change the assessment mix, at least partly rooted in concerns about plagiarism.

23   Useful developments in assessment have taken place within departments and there is also evidence at School level of a recognition of the need to look across the School at statistical data and consider performance across departments. This will help the School to decide if the institution's degree programmes make consistent demands on students in terms of the degree classification awarded. The audit team would encourage the School to continue this work in the interests of more effective evaluation of its teaching, learning and assessment processes and of student achievement.

24   A recent paper comparing the 'number of firsts' both internally across departments, against historical data and against other institutions is currently exercising the TLAC, and the CSA indicated that future work includes developing a central data base enabling comparison of departmental performance with School norms and national benchmarks.

External examiners

25   The external examiner's reports constitute the only School-level monitoring of programmes on an annual basis. The process of nomination and approval of external examiners was in the view of the audit team broadly robust with the approval authority resting operationally with the Undergraduate and Graduate sub-committees of TLAC. Reports are received in the Examinations Office and are passed to TQARO. They are read by the Senior Assistant Registrar (SAR) and then passed to departments for response. The SAR has 'reserve powers' to bring particularly negative comments to the attention of the relevant Deputy Director. The Chairs of the Undergraduate Studies Subcommittee (USSC) and the Graduate Studies Subcommittee (GSSC) have a role in discussing the reports and the departments' responses and a resulting annual report intended to identify School-wide issues is submitted to TLAC by the SAR.

26   The audit team was able to consult a wide range of external examiner reports and found their quality and comprehensiveness varied significantly. In view of the primacy of these reports in the annual monitoring of programmes at School level, the School might wish to review its practice in this area to see if there are ways in which it could ensure a more consistent, comprehensive, and analytical response from its external examiners.

Quality assurance

27   In March 2001, the Academic Board agreed a motion that alternative proposals for internal quality assurance should be devised and implemented within the School. A paper entitled 'Towards a strategy for managing academic standards and quality' resulted, which set out a series of beliefs and principles underpinning the School's approach to quality assurance. Key beliefs are; in a context where the Academic Board has collective authority and responsibility for the standard of the School's academic awards, quality assurance belongs at the department level; and that the exercise of these departmental responsibilities should be collective.

28 The position paper resulted in a suite of quality assurance processes for initial approval for new programmes and courses and one for major modifications, together with a process for centrally organised five-yearly reviews of departmental provision. The process of annual monitoring was delegated to departments.

Initial course and programme approval

29 Proposals for new programmes are considered in outline by TLAC in the context of the overall portfolio and in detail by either USSC or GSSC. New programmes are considered by either USSC or GSSC as appropriate. Since 2001, there has been a procedure for referring new programme proposals or major modifications to an external assessor. The CSA stated that the School was still 'feeling its way' towards the most effective usage of an external assessor.

30 It was evident to the audit team that, in the process of planning and approval, due cognisance was taken of School policies and regulations. Apparent inconsistencies were questioned and, if necessary, proposals were referred back to departments. There was also evidence of prior consultation with students at USSC. However, neither the preparation process nor the approval process involved any consideration of the benchmark statements so, for programmes not referred to an external assessor, the academic standards appeared to be internally referenced.

31 In discussion with staff involved in the approval of new programmes, the audit team was told that standards were judged using the collective experience of internal staff and that on some occasions the views of an external expert would not be sought. Where external assessors are involved, their contribution is made in the form of a short report. In the team's view, this approach misses the opportunity of a more meaningful discursive exchange at the approval meeting. Although the team came to the conclusion that the programme and course approval processes were broadly effective, the frequency and level

of engagement with external assessors were a cause for some concern. The School will wish to review its approach to this aspect of its approval processes in order to enhance the degree of externality in it procedures.

Annual and periodic monitoring

32 The CSA identified this area as one where the School was 'less obviously at one with the QAA infrastructure'. The School leaves arrangements for regular monitoring and periodic programme review to the discretion of the department. On the basis of the audit team's discussions with staff and students and its scrutiny of available documentation, it was evident that there was a wide variation in the formality and comprehensiveness of activities at department level. Some departments reviewed each programme individually at a staff meeting, others held a general staff meeting given over to a general discussion of teaching and examining, one described the process as 'informal'. It was also apparent that where formal systems were in place annual monitoring would be the sole responsibility of the 'teacher responsible'. The discipline audit trails (DATs) also revealed a diversity of procedures which did not always fit with the concept of annual programme monitoring as a holistic process.

33 The audit team concluded that the policy of delegating the annual monitoring of programmes to departments had resulted in a wide range of responses, many of them not fully fit for purpose, in that there was, in the team's view, insufficient evidence to be confident that each programme was effectively monitored on an annual basis. It was, therefore, unclear how the Academic Board discharged its stated responsibility for academic standards, without receiving some form of report on the annual monitoring of the programmes leading to its awards. Currently, the institution's only annual report in this area is a summary report on external examiners, focusing on School-wide issues.

34 In the audit team's view, the School's current arrangements do not deliver a fully consistent and appropriate monitoring of

programmes on an annual basis and do not provide effective assurance to the central committees ultimately responsible for the quality and standards of awards. The team considered it advisable that the School reconsider its annual monitoring policy with the aim of producing consistent and appropriate arrangements that add value to programmes and provide effective assurance at School level regarding the quality and standards of its awards.

Periodic review processes

35　The five-yearly review is a two-stage process. A TLAC review takes place first and concentrates on a department's teaching provision. The review team is provided with comprehensive documentation including benchmark statements, programme specifications, external examiner's reports, and the results of student feedback. These reviews were described in the CSA as being developmental rather than inquisitorial. There is a core membership for TLAC reviews consisting of the two Deans and the Director of the Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC). There is also an external assessor and a student member. The department provides a departmental facilitator.

36　The audit team discussed TLAC reviews with staff and examined associated documentation. The use of an impartial core team to ensure continuity adds strength and robustness to the process which seems to have credibility within departments and has a clear reporting route to the appropriate central committees.

37　Based on its discussions with staff and its consultation of the relevant documentation, the audit team concluded that the periodic TLAC review was a robust and reflective process with an appropriate degree of external input which has a developmental role and provides an opportunity for the dissemination of good practice.

38　The APRC review follows a year after the TLAC review. The focus for this is on forward plans, resources and financial arrangements,

and governance. The reviews seek to assess the academic quality of a unit as the basis for fixing its level of funding. This process, which draws in part on the outcome of the TLAC review, seemed to the audit team to be similarly robust and appeared to have a more direct approach to making decisions and recommendations.

Externality

39　The School requires the involvement of an external assessor in departmental TLAC and APRC review. It was, however, evident to the audit team in discussion with staff, and from documentation consulted, that there was limited engagement with peers outwith the School when considering the approval of new or revised programmes.

40　The CSA stated that the School does not involve employers in course or programme design, a stance it believes is in keeping with an institution with an independent academic viewpoint.

41　The audit team concluded that the School has, at present, somewhat limited external peer involvement in its internal processes for programme development and approval, in contrast with the external peer involvement in its periodic review process. The School will wish to reflect on this apparent anomaly and review its involvement of external peers in programme approval in the context of the potential academic enhancement of its programmes and its assessment processes.

Quality assurance of collaborative provision

42　Following a review of School procedures in relation to the *Code of Practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, published by QAA, the School has produced a policy statement regarding its collaboration with other higher education institutions. This states that 'the School aims to have alliances and relationships with universities that are known to share its high standards and public position'. It also states that all joint arrangements are

subject to the Ordinances of the University of London. Approval within the School using its normal procedures, and regular monitoring and review are requirements, as is a formal written agreement. The School does not franchise its own programmes to other institutions, nor does it validate programmes designed in partner institutions. The School's collaborative arrangements are characterised by exchange programmes, joint/dual awards and, in one case, collaboration with two other partners resulting in a single degree from all three institutions.

43   In terms of quality assurance arrangements and procedures, the School's position is that it considers the volume of activity too small and too disparate to warrant separate quality assurance procedures, and that this activity is covered through the School's existing arrangements for monitoring and review and student feedback, or through an equivalent arrangement.

44   The audit team learnt that, arising from an internal audit of the TRIUM programme two years ago, the School's internal auditor had produced a checklist of matters to be addressed prior to Council's approval of future collaborative ventures. However, the team noted that, currently, there are no additional arrangements for approving and monitoring overseas collaborations, even though the School already operates potentially 'global' MBAs such as the TRIUM. A recent Asia Strategy paper produced by the School indicated, as one strategy aim, developing 'new masters programmes and "global" degrees with top level Asian universities', and also references to planned joint degrees with institutions in China. The team considered that, while attention had been given to matters relating to the corporate strategic development of the School and to commercial risk, there was little evidence of any explicit reference to risk assessment or management relating to academic standards, per se.

45   It also appeared to the audit team that no formal specific monitoring of the success or otherwise of individual collaborative arrangements took place in any of the School-level committees. These activities appear to be subsumed into the internal departmental arrangements on an annual basis, and considered along with all other programmes during periodic review. In the team's view the integrity of the current arrangements seemed to rely too heavily on the reputation of institutions operating in very different HE environments.

46   Insistence by the School on high calibre partners, and the need to protect its reputation as a global brand, are not in themselves, in the audit team's judgement, sufficient safeguards of academic standards. The team therefore considered it advisable that the School review and revise its quality assurance procedures for collaborative arrangements so that it can assure itself on a regular and consistent basis that the integrity and standards of its awards are safeguarded.

Support for learning

Staffing

47   According to an internal audit report on the School's arrangements for quality assurance and enhancement, a 'key element in the achievement of high academic standards across the School is the quality and potential of staff and the support offered to them for the development of their careers'. Staff met by the audit team confirmed that the School operates rigorous recruitment procedures in which account is taken of experience and potential in teaching. The induction of new staff is handled jointly by the School and the departments and includes sessions on teaching, learning and assessment issues and postgraduate supervision. The School operates a staff review process based on departmental interim review followed by a major review conducted by AC. Staff whose appointments are subject to interim review are assigned a departmental mentor whose responsibilities include ensuring that the mentee's teaching programme offers good scope for the development of teaching interests and techniques.

48   Staff confirmed in discussions with the audit team that observation of teaching by the mentor

was optional. As peer observation of teaching is offered by TLC to both new and established staff the team would wish to encourage the School, by building on good practice in some departments, to attempt to overcome the reported resistance to making it mandatory.

49   The audit team was struck by the clear information on the School's requirements given to candidates for interim and major review and by the guidance and support offered by convenors, mentors, senior colleagues and the TLC, and considered this to be an instance of good practice.

50   The audit team learnt of the importance that the School attaches to the work of the TLC in promoting the quality of teaching and learning by working directly with staff and students at all levels. In addition to organising central events and workshops, the TLC offers one-to-one professional development on such matters as preparing a new course, developing teaching materials, teaching observation and 'facing up to teaching difficulties'. An APRC review of the TLC in 2002 revealed a considerable increase in the take up of the services offered to academic staff by the TLC and resulted in the continued funding of some activities supported by the Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund (TQEF). The team concluded, from what it heard in meetings and read in the documentation supplied to it, that the work of the TLC in offering staff development opportunities and enhancing learning and teaching across the School constituted an example of good practice.

51   The performance of staff who have not yet undergone major review is appraised annually, although concern that appraisal is not carried out consistently across all departments has led to attempts to simplify the procedure and to involve the departmental mentor. Appraisal of staff who have passed major review takes place every three years, although staff who met the audit team showed uncertainty about its regularity and there appeared to be no mechanism in place to ensure that it is carried out. In view of the introduction by the Director of appraisal for senior managers and the

increase in the number of staff whose development needs have been identified as a result of appraisal, the School will wish to consider, in the current review of appraisal, increasing the frequency of appraisal for all academic staff and ensuring that it is carried out and that evidence derived from the process can then feed more directly into staff development strategies and policies.

52   It was explained in the CSA that most departments make extensive use of part-time or occasional teachers (Graduate Teaching Assistants or GTA) for undergraduate teaching. According to guidelines on good practice seen by the audit team, occasional teachers have the same responsibility as other teaching staff 'for maintaining the quality of teaching and learning and enhancing the international reputation' of the School. Mentoring at departmental level is supplemented by training offered by the TLC and a new GTA Handbook, which is available electronically. There is a School survey of the performance of occasional teachers during the seventh week of the academic session and this is supplemented in some departments by other forms of monitoring. The School has been made aware from student feedback that the overall quality of teaching by GTAs 'has not always been consistent or at the very high level to which it aspires' and has made that development and support of part-time teachers a priority area. Teaching prizes have been established 'to celebrate the good practice of the GTAs in each department' and the School's Language Centre has been funded to provide English for Academic Purposes training for part-time teachers. A Teacher Accreditation Programme has been targeted initially at GTAs. The Team also noted that TLC had recently put in place a new system for prompting departments to take action on underperforming GTAs. In spite of these initiatives, it was reported in the SWS that the Students' Union has to deal with complaints about GTAs with 'unacceptable standards of spoken and written English'. Undergraduates met by the team commented on the variable quality of GTAs and the differing responses by departments to complaints about their

performance. In view of the extensive use of part-time teachers, the School will wish to consider the desirability of making training, including English for Academic Purposes (EAP) where appropriate, compulsory and, by building on existing good practice, monitoring performance more carefully.

Feedback from students

53   For over ten years the School has conducted annually two central surveys of student opinion on the quality of the teaching that they receive: the first of part-time teachers and a later one seeking views on all taught courses and all teachers. The School admits that 'it is perhaps trying to do too many things at once' by seeking to produce quantitative and qualitative information on both courses and individual teachers. The usefulness of the data produced by the surveys is inhibited by confidentiality agreements with staff. Although there was evidence in the DATs that considerable importance is attached in some departments to the surveys of teaching by GTAs, and that corrective action is taken where appropriate, it was pointed out in the SWS that feedback to students on the results of the surveys was 'extremely limited'. It was also suggested that there was little indication that departments were taking action to deal with inadequate teaching. As part of its current plans to coordinate student surveys, the School should be encouraged to bear in mind the importance of 'revealing and explaining the positive changes that are the consequence of student opinion'.

54   The nature and amount of feedback given to students on their performance was an issue of concern at the time of the audit visit. According to the internal Code of Good Practice on Teaching, Learning and Assessment for Undergraduate Programmes, 'feedback on formative course work is an essential part of the teaching and learning experience at the School'. Class teachers are expected to mark formative course work and return it with constructive comments, normally within two weeks of submission. A report on School-wide issues

emerging from internal reviews conducted in 2003-04 indicated 'wide variations of feedback styles (differences in amounts and formats) both across departments and within departments themselves'. No individual feedback on summative assessment is required and this School policy was reiterated in 2004 when AB rejected a proposal from TLAC to institute feedback mechanisms for failing and under performing students. At the time of the audit visit a request from the Students' Union for some form of collective feedback on examinations was under consideration by TLAC and AB. The audit team concluded that the School should consider ensuring more consistent implementation of the Code of Good Practice on Teaching, Learning and assessment and, by building on existing good practice, increasing the amount of feedback to students on summative assessment.

Student representation

55   Students are represented on all the School committees dealing with learning and teaching and student support and there is a student on the core team conducting internal reviews. The audit team was able to confirm the high quality of the input received by the School from student representatives. As observed in the SWS, the main area of concern for both the School and the Students' Union in terms of student representation lies within departments. A report prepared for the Student Affairs Committee revealed wide differences in practice in the operation of staff-student liaison committees (SSLC) across the School. The team was, however, encouraged to hear that the School and the Students' Union intended to work together to make the student contribution more effective. In particular, there is a wish to improve the linkages between SSLCs and the separate fora for undergraduate, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students and also between these student constituencies and the Student Affairs Committee (SAC) and TLAC. The team endorsed the view of the SWS that the channels of student representation and feedback could be very useful to the School, especially if used in conjunction with student surveys.

Induction

56   The CSA explained the comprehensive induction offered to new students and students met by the audit team confirmed the effectiveness of the process, particularly for international students. Students appreciated the benefits of 'LSE for You' (the School's on-line information system) in choosing courses on-line, although the SWS was concerned that it should 'not detract from personal interaction between students and staff'. Induction programmes run by the Library and information technology (IT) Services supplement School and departmental induction events and the complete induction process is reviewed each year.

57   The School has made considerable investment in its Library and IT Services and both services conduct regular user surveys. According to the SWS, students appreciate the high standards of IT support and recognise 'the fantastic resource' of the British Library of Political and Economic Science. Students met by the audit team confirmed the high quality of learning support, modified by concerns about the availability of core texts. The provision by the Library of course packs containing copies of core weekly readings has helped to alleviate pressure on the Course Collection. The success of the Centre for Learning Technology (CLT) in supporting on-line learning and teaching is demonstrated by the high level of student satisfaction with WebCT. A range of study skills and support activities are provided, including a 'drop-in' one-to-one study advice service, and it intends to be more proactive in helping students in difficulties.

Pastoral and academic support

58   The CSA explained that academic and related pastoral responsibilities are set out in the internal codes of good practice. Advice and support are primarily departmental responsibilities and undergraduate personal tutors and postgraduate personal supervisors are expected to monitor progress, and provide advice on academic or non-academic problems. Both the School and the Students' Union

recognise that the tutorial system is a 'major area of strain'. The SWS drew attention to variations between departments in the allocation of students to tutors and the lack of mechanisms for changing or providing feedback on tutors and to the need to train tutors and keep them abreast of changes in the central student support services. The audit team formed the view that, in its monitoring of the implementation of the codes at departmental level by means of the SAC, TLAC and internal reviews, the School would be advised to deal with significant variations in the level of tutorial support offered by departments.

59   Students met by the audit team were enthusiastic about the Student Services Centre that brings together most student-focused administrative services in a single location. The School provides and monitors the performance of a range of pastoral and welfare support services. Particular attention has been paid recently to the Careers Service and, in view of the importance of the employability agenda, both TLAC and SAC provide oversight of the service.

60   The School has recently concentrated its efforts in attempting to meet the requirements of students with disabilities. A full-time disability adviser has been appointed, an audit of internal practice has been conducted based on the *Code of practice* published by QAA and a disabled students working group established. The School is aware that it must now produce explicit policies and procedures in order to anticipate the needs of disabled students. At the staff level, equality of opportunity is addressed by a series of targets and actions in the Human Resources Strategy.

Progression and retention

61   In deciding whether, and under what conditions, individual students may progress to the next year of study, the Student Progress Panel of the SAC is expected to ensure equity of decisions across departments with regard to specifically identified problem cases. The TLC and the Careers Service are taking the development of Progress Files forward; students

will be encouraged to share their Personal Development Portfolios (PDPs) with their tutor and details will be logged on LSE for You. The SAC receives annual reports on student progression and datasets on individual departments are prepared for TLAC and APRC reviews. The School has, however, identified as probably the single most serious problem confronting the School's progress in the quality assurance area the fact that data on such matters as student progression and retention are prepared in different offices in the administration, and that the data held centrally are not always consistent with those held in departments. The School has begun to address these problems, in particular the data on student performance has been put on a more authoritative footing. The School is, however, aware that it needs to analyse data better, rather than simply produce it. In the view of the audit team, such an improved analysis would be of considerable benefit to the School.

Research students

62   There is a high level of research degree activity in all departments and research supervision and examination is an expectation of research-active staff. In 2002-03, 1,130 research degree students were in current and extended registration and 127 students in the School were awarded PhD degrees in 2003. The School acknowledges that until recently 'it did not bring the same degree of formal, central attention to monitoring quality assurance at the PhD level as it did at undergraduate and taught master's levels'. A code of practice sets out the minimum required of research students, their supervisors and departments. In 2002, TLAC was made responsible for policy and strategy in the research degree area and research students were given representation on the Committee. It is left to departments to determine how to meet their responsibilities for research students but each department has a doctoral programme director or research degree coordinator and TLAC internal reviews cover provision for research students. There are separate fora for research degree students and

supervisors and the Dean of Graduate Studies carries out an annual survey of research students with School-wide issues emerging from the survey being reported to TLAC. An annual progress review procedure is used to identify individual problems. Although in meetings with students the audit team identified some problems with feedback from supervisors and learning support resources, in the team's opinion the School has made considerable advances in the central oversight of postgraduate research students.

63   The *Code of practice* section on research degree programmes has informed the School's quality assurance arrangements in this area and at the time of the audit visit TLAC was considering an initial response to the revised version of the relevant section of the *Code*. In addition, prompted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England consultations on standards and quality in PhD programmes, and the discovery that the School has a poorer record than it would expect in PhD completions, a working group was established in June 2004 to consider ways of improving submission rates. Following its meetings with staff and students, the audit team would wish to encourage the School to pay particular attention to the precepts of the *Code* relating to supervisor training and training in research skills. Although the TLC provides training in PhD supervision it is not as yet compulsory for new supervisors, nor is additional training provided for established supervisors. Training in research skills is offered both centrally by the TLC and the Methodology Institute and at departmental level, but it appeared to the team that the take up was largely optional and that a more coordinated approach would be desirable.

Information for students

64   The School provides a Calendar containing regulations for all programmes and detailed guides for all courses, which is available both on-line and as hard copy. Students receive written information about the institution and their programme as part of their

induction, and they are also given departmental and course handbooks which contain information on course choices, assessment procedures and matters to do with learning resources and personal support. Full reading lists are provided for each course, and for some courses packs of supplementary reading materials are made available. The examples of the student handbooks and guides available to the audit team appeared to be clear and comprehensive, and in discussions with the team the students expressed general satisfaction with their accuracy. In addition to the hard copy information available to students, the School has introduced a new on-line information system entitled 'LSE for You'. Students spoke positively of this further information source.

65   On-line provision of course materials and other information through the departmental and School web sites is growing but it was evident to the audit team from their discussion with students that the provision varies considerably from course to course.

Discipline audit trail: programmes in government

i   BSc Government

ii   BSc Government and Economics

iii   BSc Government and History

Degree of evaluation/analysis in the DAT SED

66   The discipline self-evaluation document (DSED) drew extensively on the January 2003 internal review of Government provision, and consequently offered an evaluative perspective that gave insights into the quality and nature of the undergraduate awards concerned. A number of issues were identified where concerns had emerged and actions had, to varying degrees, followed. Other documentation to amplify these issues was made available in a systematic and accessible set of resources.

Effectiveness of internal monitoring and review processes

67   The periodic review conducted on behalf of the School's Teaching, Learning and Assessment committee (TLAC) was critical and evaluative, marshalling considerable evidence and indicating a range of matters for subsequent attention with the department. Equally importantly, successive department convenors were required to compile an initial response (June 2003) and a year-on implementation report. Some review recommendations had been contested by the department while others had led to actions backed by resource commitments. Where an issue arose in review that demanded School-level action, rather than a departmental response, it was less evident that mechanisms for implementation were effective.

68   Annual monitoring of student attainment and the effectiveness of programme delivery does occur within the Department, but through a range of particular local arrangements since there is no procedure in place which is common to the whole School. The Departmental Committee has regular agenda items concerning external examiner reports and also on specific matters concerning programmes. The Departmental Teaching Committee meets regularly and attaches importance to various forms of student feedback. The Department runs its own general student feedback survey as well as receiving the localised results of the School-wide on-line survey. Great importance is attached to student feedback on teaching by the occasional teachers (research students) who are responsible for much of the undergraduate small-group teaching. It is clear that action follows concerning individual teachers to correct matters for the Lent term.

69   Overall, the Department actively performs the function of annual monitoring in various ways. However, the lack of common systems between departments, and the apparent lack of School-level collation of monitoring, means that cross-departmental issues affecting students can only be resolved by informal or ad-hoc means.

70   The currency of the curriculum is a matter for individual Departments at LSE, and there has been a recent review of the undergraduate Government curriculum. A series of Undergraduate Curriculum Reform meetings was convened, and a remit adopted that took account of external pressures to include more explicit skills development in the degrees, as well as more structured progression in learning. After extended debate, some new optional courses had been introduced, and there was a reduction in the range of optional Government courses that had been previously offered, but not available every year.

Awareness and use of the Academic Infrastructure

71   The remit of the Department's Undergraduate Curriculum Reform Group was influenced by the Benchmark, and by comments from some external examiners concerning the need for more explicit skills development.

72   Programme specifications have been produced and revised, but there appears to be no particular use made of these beyond compliance. However the reports from external examiners, along with the detailed responses to examiners from the Department, show full engagement with expectations in the infrastructure, including *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). External examiners have offered explicit guidance through their comments on curricular matters and assessment strategies, and marking standards.

Assessment

73   Summative assessment is primarily conducted through written closed examinations, in which essay questions predominate. Formative assessment is the responsibility of those teaching the classes that support lectures; students are required to submit written formative coursework in order to be eligible for examinations.

74   Examinations are diligently double blind-marked with informative comments on each

answer, but while staff stated that students could request sight of these comments as feedback, students seemed unaware of this and did not generally ask for them. However, class teachers' reports are an important element of feedback on progress and these are available on-line through 'LSE for You'.

75   Overall, while staff expressed commitment to providing feedback and guidance to students, individual student experiences remain somewhat variable in practice, and the audit team formed the view that the Department might wish to ensure a higher degree of consistency in the extent and quality of feedback to students.

Student support

76   Students are allocated tutors for pastoral support, and course teachers offer an office hour. Students found staff to be accessible at these times, and in addition staff usually responded helpfully to individual email contact. However, students described quite variable individual experiences concerning the degree of contact with their tutor, and whether their tutor initiated regular communication. They also felt that only limited academic guidance was given in choosing optional courses. The audit team would wish to encourage the Department to address the student concerns at the variability of personal tutor contact and the availability of academic guidance to students.

Learning support services

77   Students were critical of the proportion of library space and resource devoted to undergraduate needs as they experienced strong competition for relevant stock. However, they welcomed the opportunity to purchase photocopied course resource packs where available, and they were very positive about WebCT course material and wished to see this facility expanded.

Opportunities for feedback from students and how used

78   Feedback from students appears to be taken very seriously by the Department. It has

a Staff-Student Liaison Committee and it conducts its own detailed survey of student opinion as well as using School-wide survey returns. Students perceive clear actions resulting from their feedback on teaching.

Quality of information for students

79   Clear and comprehensive departmental handbooks are provided for students. 'LSE for You' was highly valued as a practical improvement to information and feedback.

80   Staff and students both expressed concern about inaccurate information concerning the future availability of particular courses within programmes. Some of this related to recent curriculum changes affecting current students, but there was also staff concern about discrepancies between School-level information to prospective students and actual planned provision in the Department.

Standards of awards

81   Scrutiny of students' assessment performance, primarily from closed examinations, along with external examiners' reports, confirmed that undergraduate awards in the Government Department maintain standards of student attainment comparable to other UK universities. Work marked in the various classification bands is securely comparable to that produced elsewhere. The distribution of results tends toward higher classifications and shows relatively few failures or low passes.

Quality of learning opportunities

82   Students of Government met by the audit team indicated that they appreciated the opportunity to study alongside highly talented contemporaries of diverse nationalities, and they were acutely conscious of the high reputation of the LSE awards. Through lectures, they also appreciated their exposure to leading researchers in the field and enjoyed contact with those School academics currently engaged in shaping national policy. For many students, the team was told, these features provide a rich and intense learning opportunity.

83   However, in their discussion with the auditors, single honours BSc Government undergraduates showed quite limited awareness of the desirability of developing broader social scientific skills, or undertaking more varied learning tasks within their undergraduate programme. Recent revisions to the curriculum (such as the extended Government Essay option, or the optional course in Empirical Research in Government) should go some way towards encouraging students to develop progressively skills and abilities beyond those demanded by a limited range of assessment experiences.

84   Based on the available documentation and their discussions with staff and students, the audit team concluded that the standard of student achievement on the programmes within the DAT was appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ. They were also able to confirm that the quality of the learning experience of the students is suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Discipline audit trail: LLM programmes

Introduction

85   The Department of Law provides an LLB and other undergraduate law programmes, a range of taught master's programmes, and supports students studying for doctorates. The DAT covered the LLM and the MSc in Law and Accounting, which is taught jointly with the Department of Accounting and Finance but managed by the Department of Law. The LLM currently has over 200 full and part-time students and the MSc around 20. The LLM includes up to 60 potential courses, of which each student selects four, with the possibility of specializing in a particular area. At least one course must be examined by dissertation. The Department recruits a relatively large proportion of overseas students, and prides itself on the research-led nature of its teaching, and on the quality of its intake.

The self-evaluation document

86   The DSED was based primarily on a TLAC review that took place in 2003-04. This was a five-yearly review with external academic and legal professional input covering strategy, teaching and resourcing. The DSED also contained a detailed evaluative review of the first year of the independent LLM produced by the LLM Programme Director, and a report on the BSc, which is a longer established programme. The DSED provided significant material on the running of the LLM by the department, and on ongoing developments.

Monitoring of programmes

87   The audit team was told that annual monitoring of programmes was run by the Department Teaching Committee, and involves the Convenor, the Heads of Programmes, Teaching Committee, Course Steering Committees and departmental meetings. The team came to the conclusion that, with a variety of individuals and groups involved it is not easy to ensure that all aspects of a programme are reviewed annually in a coherent way. The lack of a documentary process pulling together all aspects of the annual monitoring process can make it difficult to chart programme development and to check that all action points are identified and fulfilled. Staff expressed clear satisfaction with the current process, but they may nevertheless wish to consider whether it could usefully be made more transparently coherent and developmental.

Programme specifications

88   Programme specifications were included with the DSED. The specifications included reference to their alignment with the appropriate level descriptors in the FHEQ. There is no directly relevant benchmark. Formal specifications of the courses that the students can select are not produced, but information about all of them is available from a variety of sources, including the website.

Quality and standards

89   External examiners' reports seen by the audit team confirmed that the courses were of an appropriate standard, and the team saw evidence of suggestions for course review being followed up. Matters that had been raised recently included a query about the substantial use of traditional exams rather than coursework for assessment, a point echoed by students. The team was told that the department had reviewed the matter and thought the methods of assessment used were appropriate, for example to combat the possibility of plagiarism. The Department will wish to continue to review whether assessment methods are sufficiently varied to stretch all students and to allow them to show their strengths, so that the widest possible range of marks may be used. Students said that assessment criteria were not very clear to them, though the difference between degree classifications was clear. The team was provided with a range of examples of students assessed work, and, in the view of the team, the work clearly matched the outcomes set out in the programme specifications and was of a standard appropriate to the title and level of the relevant awards. The reports of the external examiners strongly supported this view.

Support for learning

90   The postgraduate students whom the audit team met generally expressed the view that the learning resources available to them, including library resources, were very good. The students praised the quality of the staff teaching them, and spoke very positively about other facilities available to them such as guest lecturers and specialist seminars. Some students commented on the relatively poor quality of the teaching facilities in a number of classrooms. They also indicated that at peak times there could be pressure on the availability of computers. There is a significant variation between courses in terms of teaching methods, class sizes, and whether materials are provided through course packs or WebCT. Such variation is entirely justifiable and no concerns about quality were raised, but it was not entirely clear what overview of variation is maintained, and

students said that advance information about such variation could be limited unless students specifically sought it out.

91   The audit team was provided with copies of the handbooks provided by the Department for the courses under review, and with copies of induction materials. The information provided was reasonably clear and comprehensive and students expressed general satisfaction with its accuracy. Students commented that on some courses a basic knowledge of common law or principles of accountancy was assumed, which was entirely reasonable but more advance indication of expected levels, with an indication of how they might be reached, would be useful.

Student evaluation of the provision

92   A clear system for the evaluation of courses by students is regularly followed using structured questionnaires. Summaries of the results are prepared. Departmental results are compared with other results across the School and any unusual results noted and considered. The student evaluations of the Department of Law seen by the audit team were positive and useful.

93   There are 45 full-time and 42 part-time teaching staff in the Department. The audit team was told that recruitment processes are rigorous. Teaching is research led, and good quality teaching is seen as being very important. The student evaluation of the teaching of individual staff is seen by the Convenor and can be relevant to the staff review and promotions process. There is no scheme in place for regular observation of teaching, though this can be done on a voluntary basis.

Student support

94   All students are allocated a personal tutor. The students who met the audit team said that they had met their personal tutor but that many postgraduate students were more likely to seek support from those teaching the subjects they were taking. Their experience was that whatever support they asked for was available. The team was told by staff there was an expectation that all students would get

feedback on at least two pieces of work during each course, with additional feedback where relevant, for example on a presentation in a seminar. The students were less clear as to what feedback they could properly expect, though they were confident that sufficient guidance on their work would be available if they sought it. A high standard of English is an entry requirement, but support for students with a first language other than English is available from the Language Centre if necessary.

95   A staff-student liaison committee for postgraduate students meets termly and the audit team were provided with copies of minutes, which are written by students. Information about meetings is circulated as appropriate. The minutes showed that matters raised by students were discussed and could lead to appropriate change, and this view was supported by the students whom the team met.

96   Based on their discussions with staff and students and their scrutiny of the available documentation, the audit team was able to confirm that the standard of student achievement on the programmes within the DAT was appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the FHEQ. The team also formed the view that the quality of the learning experience of the students is suitable for the programmes of study leading to the named awards.

Discipline audit trail: social policy programmes

Introduction

97   The scope of the discipline trail was designed to investigate three of the 13 taught master's programmes currently offered by the Department of Social Policy:

a   MSc Social Policy and Planning (20 full-time, 11 part-time students registered in 2004-5)s

b   MSc European Social Policy (14 full-time, 2 part-time students registered in 2004-5)

c   MSc Social Policy and Planning in Developing Countries (40 full-time students registered in 2004-5).

98.   Each of these programmes can be taken full-time, over 12 months, or part-time, usually over two years. Each programme consists of four course units, one of which is a core course and another the dissertation or long essay course. The latter is taken from the Michaelmas term onwards and is the product of supervised but independent research by the student and is mainly written up during the summer months. The remaining two courses are selected by the students from a wide range of one-unit and half-unit options available from within the department and, in some cases, other departments in the School. Students are also encouraged to attend one or more research methods courses, depending on the intended focus of their dissertation, offered by the School's Methodology Institute.

99   The master's programmes offered by the department, and by the School, are relatively unusual in that most of the final assessment (in these cases 75 per cent) is based on two or three-hour unseen examinations. Furthermore, resits are not available in the autumn and students must wait until the following summer to retrieve failed courses. However, failures are very rare, for example, there was only one case among these programmes in 2004.

Documentation

100 The documentation submitted by the Social Policy Department included a specially written 30-page self-evaluation document. The audit team was also able to review a substantial amount of material including examples of students assessed work, all the induction and course materials supplied to students, the reports of external examiners over the last eight years and the complete reports of the most recent periodic reviews of the programmes that were conducted in 2001-02. In addition, the audit team met most of the academics teaching on the programmes and a selection of full and part-time students currently registered for them. From these sources, the team was able to

obtain a full account of how the programmes are managed and monitored, the staff's evaluation of these processes and the ways in which they and the School have sought to enhance them.

Programme monitoring

101 The master's programmes are annually monitored by the department through a series of related events and meetings. The first and key event is the annual board of examiners for each programme and the report from the external examiner that follows it. These consider the pattern of results and student performance in the context of previous years. Issues that arise are further considered by the 'Cluster Groups' of staff involved in the teaching of related programmes. The Social Policy Cluster deals with the master's degree in Social Policy and Planning and European Social Policy, while Social Policy and Planning in Developing Countries is dealt with in the Development Cluster. These groups report to the Teaching Committee which reviews all aspects of the curriculum and quality of the programmes, considers any changes required and reports to the Staff Committee of the whole department. In 2004 for example, the Michaelmas Term Staff Committee considered suggestions that the organisation of the curriculum of related MSc programmes should be reviewed and this process was taking place at the time of the audit.

102 In its monitoring of programmes, the Teaching Committee also takes account of students' views. These are expressed through student-staff meetings at the level of both individual programmes and the whole department. They are supplemented by surveys of student opinion on the quality of their programmes and their class teachers that take place in both Michaelmas and Lent terms. The students were less aware of the outcomes of the module feedback questionnaires they filled in and the department and School might consider publishing the results in some form on its internal websites.

103 There was evidence that these monitoring processes have led to significant changes and

improvements, such as the extension of the time allotted to dissertations, the introduction of explicit marking frames for formative and summative work and increased feedback to students on their performance. However, while annual monitoring of programmes clearly takes place, the process is somewhat diffuse and spread across the academic year and a variety of meetings. It is recommended that the department consider whether it should put in place a more explicit annual monitoring procedure in line with School developments in this area.

The Academic Infrastructure

104 The programmes audited were appropriately calibrated with FHEQ and external examiners are explicitly asked to consider the level descriptors contained within the framework. The programme specifications have been written to take account of the Social Policy Benchmark Statement, though this refers only to undergraduate degrees. While teaching staff do not refer directly to the *Code of practice for the assurance of quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA, indirect compliance is ensured by School and departmental procedures and the monitoring of it by the Teaching Quality Assurance and Review Office.

External examiners

105   External examiners confirm in their reports that standards are correctly set and they are frequently complimentary about the standard of student work. Where concerns are expressed there is evidence that they are carefully considered and responses made. For example, over the last few years some externals, though not all, have pointed out that some master's programmes use assessment methods that rely to an unusual degree on unseen examinations. The department's response has been to increase gradually the proportion of assessed coursework essays, particularly when new optional courses have been introduced.

The student experience

106 The department has a tradition of substantial teaching loads, particularly for senior members of staff. In addition a student:staff ratio of 14:1 and a commitment that class sizes at the master's level do not exceed 17 (and are in practice often considerably smaller) mean that students enjoy frequent contact with academics regarded as leading in the field including those who play a part in development of public policy in their areas of expertise. Students confirmed the advantages of this exposure to current debates and recent research together with the accessibility of staff, both formally and informally. Students reported that they felt the benefit of studying in a department with very strong research culture.

107 Students are provided with a comprehensive induction at the start of their master's programme, detailed departmental handbooks describe course choices, assessment procedures and matters to do with learning resources and personal support while full reading lists are provided for each course. In many cases, course packs of important reading materials are made available. All students taking the MSc in Social Policy and Planning in Developing Countries attend a residential study weekend at Cumberland Lodge on the Windsor Estate in February. A similar opportunity is offered to all other masters' students in January but places are limited.

Student support

108 At the start of their programme master's students are allocated a tutor from among the academic staff who will provide advice on both academic and pastoral matters. It is commonly the case that this academic will also act as the supervisor of the student's dissertation, though this is adjusted according to topic and expertise. The library resources available within the School and the wider University of London are particularly rich, though demand for key texts can sometimes exceed supply. Electronic resources, particularly access to academic journals, and the availability of computer terminals are good. Provision of course materials

and other information through departmental and School websites is growing but varies considerably from course to course. Students' views on learning resources are routinely collected both at a School and at departmental level. It is clear that students' use of information, facilities and resources can vary, particularly at the master's level where students are expected to be self-motivating and able to articulate any needs they have in the context of ready access to academics and other sources of advice.

Quality and standards

109 The audit team examined a selection of assessed student work. Much of this demonstrated considerable knowledge and originality and reflected significant engagement on the part of the students with their subject. The standard of student achievement on the programmes investigated here was appropriate to the titles of the awards and their location within the national FHEQ.

110 The master's programmes reviewed here attract able and highly motivated students the great majority of who progress well academically in the context of a rich variety of learning support services and under the guidance of accessible and helpful staff who are leading figures in their discipline. The quality of the learning experiences of students is suitable for programmes of study leading to the awards of the MSc.

Appendix

The London School of Economics and Political Science's response to the audit report

The LSE would like to thank the QAA Audit Team for the useful exchange during its Institutional Audit visit undertaken at the School between November 2004 and January 2005 and also for its helpful report.

We are pleased with the favourable judgement the Team has reached, both on the standards and quality of the School's academic provision and on the robustness of our quality assurance procedures.

Work is already in hand for considering the recommendations made in the report. Some have been addressed already; the rest will be considered within the School's committee cycle in the near future.

In response to paragraph 7 of the report, a set of proposals for clarifying the responsibilities of Conveners (Heads of Department) has been drawn up. It is expected that there will be significant changes in this area.

In paragraph 9 of the report the Team comments on the School's 'more corporate management style'. While we are content with the wording in the report, for the avoidance of doubt we want to make it clear that we do not intend to apply the same type of management approach to academic departments as to 'the business side of the School'. While we have taken steps over the past few years to tighten accountability on academic standards and teaching quality, the School continues to believe that departmental autonomy is very important in many areas and that disciplinary differences need to be respected where appropriate.

In response to paragraph 34, proposals for a new system of annual monitoring have been agreed, for implementation in 2006-07. The School's existing system of periodic review of academic departments, which gives attention to individual programmes and courses as circumstances dictate, is to be supplemented by a new department-based system of annual monitoring, which will focus primarily on courses. However, we consider that a more elaborate system involving both monitoring and review of both programmes and courses would be unduly bureaucratic and counter-productive in terms of enhancing standards and quality.