



Institutional audit

University of London International Programmes

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Preface

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

In England and Northern Ireland QAA conducts Institutional audits on behalf of the higher

Summary

- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland
- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that, on the whole, the International Programmes took due account of the elements of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students, but recommends action as noted above.

overview of its activities or enhanced the learning experience of students. However, the team considered that some developments could have been implemented earlier.

17 The defining feature of the International Programmes is that of the independent student, though approximately 80 per cent of undergraduate students seek out a third party provider for supplementary tuition, support and/or guidance. The retention of an emphasis on flexibility of student choice and flexibility of provision is reflected in the International Programmes' strategic plan, which in turn drives the structure and mechanisms of the institutional framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities. Thus the focus of the management of the International Programmes is primarily on securing the academic standards of its awards, rather than setting out to provide a consistent quality of learning experience irrespective of where a student learns. Nevertheless, the University does recognise that many of its students require learning support and is increasing provision in this area.

18 The University of London International Programmes is the result of collaboration between 12 lead colleges and the University. The University and the lead colleges are joined together in a federation, but are legally distinct entities that have chosen to work together by accepting the University's set of statutes, ordinances and regulations. The colleges are termed 'lead' because they provide academic direction to the programmes and provide learning support to students, and in some cases the colleges take joint responsibility and form a consortium to do so. Academic debate tends to be at lead college or consortium level, with the conclusion of that debate presented to the University for its consideration. Students are registered with and are awarded degrees by the University of London, which also appoints examiners to set and mark the assessments. The International Academy is the business, administrative and development support to the International Programmes.

19 The Board of the International Academy is the principal decision-making committee, reporting to the University's Collegiate Council, which has overall responsibility for the academic affairs of the University. Within the International Academy, academic matters are dealt with by the Academic Committee, chaired by the Dean of the International Programmes and reporting to the Board of the International Academy. The principal sub-committees of Academic Committee of relevance to the audit are: the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Sub-committee; the Quality Assurance and Student Lifecycle Sub-committee; the Institutions Sub-committee; and the Systems and Technologies Sub-committee. From a scrutiny of the minutes of these deliberative bodies the audit team considered that, in the main, the University was using these bodies to good effect in the management of the International Programmes.

20 Executive leadership and management of the International Programmes is vested in the Dean of the International Programmes; each programme or group of cognate programmes has a programme director who provides academic leadership and facilitates student support, and a programme manager who deals with administrative aspects. The audit team noted many and extensive articulation points between college-based staff and the management and delivery of the programmes, and formed the view that such staff are an essential component in the International Programmes system. College staff populate the central deliberative bodies to such an extent that, in practice, there is little college-university separation of the academic corps that gives the International Programmes its academic credibility. The audit team agreed with the University's view that this arrangement is appropriate. Further, the team considered that, despite the overlap in personnel between university and college bodies, the locus of management and overview was in general with the University.

21 The International Programmes' Quality Framework document, revised in 2010, gives principles and processes governing and relating to the various aspects of the assurance of quality and standards, explains the relationship between the different parties involved in programme management and delivery, and specifies a schedule of systematic reporting, including the overall annual report of the International Academy to the Collegiate Council and the Vice-Chancellor. However, despite its comprehensive nature, many staff the audit team met did not use the Quality Framework and did not appear to know of it.

22 The University has recently developed a Learning, Teaching and Assessment Framework, which reinforces and operationalises the External System Strategic Plan 2009-12 and advocates an ongoing consideration of methods deployed in teaching and the support of students; indicates institutional directions of change in learning enhancement; and offers a guide to lead colleges and consortia in the development of their own learning and teaching strategies. The audit team viewed this framework as providing a focus for developments that are, in general, sensible and pedagogically sound.

23 The audit team noted disagreement among university staff as to which body had responsibility for setting the standards of the awards: some cited the University and some the lead colleges or consortia, though the University's briefing paper made plain that the

students to succeed in their studies and in promoting and increasing access to the University's programmes.

26 The Institutions Policy Framework (see paragraph 13) is the means by which the International Academy formally recognises and supports some independent teaching institutions, in order to ensure that the quality of learning opportunities is maintained and to provide clear advice and guidance to students about available venues for tuition support. Recognition applies to specific programmes on named campuses, and includes the requirement to participate in quality assurance processes and to abide by a code for advertising and promotional materials. Support available to recognised institutions from the University includes marketing and business development, and workshops about the programmes of study, dependent on which programmes are supported by the institution.

27 Recognised independent teaching institutions fall into two types: affiliate centres and registered centres. The audit team had difficulty, from the associated definitions, in readily identifying which type, affiliate, or registered, the University had more con2(by)9(w)8c 0.00e <</MCI

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evidence presented, and subsequently meets staff and students to explore lines of enquiry that it has identified.

39 The final panel reports are considered by lead colleges, the Quality Assurance and Student Lifecycle Sub-committee and Academic Committee. The Quality Assurance and Student Lifecycle Sub-committee carries responsibility for the oversight of follow-up action from the review, receiving both the final report of the panel, and then within 12 months, the lead college's formal response to the panel recommendations and its associated action plan. The Quality Assurance and Student Lifecycle Sub-committee also takes forward any institutional issues raised, and through the annual programme and planning review monitors actions assigned at programme, college or departmental level.

40 In its reading of typical audit trails, the audit team was able to confirm that the process was detailed and self-critical, containing sufficient data to enable judgements to be made. Further examination demonstrated that matters identified for attention in the periodic programme reviews had been addressed, and that officers within the International Programmes had been monitoring progress.

41 In summary, the audit team found that the processes for programme approval, monitoring and review are thorough, rigorous and fit for the purpose of managing the academic standards of the International Programmes. The processes are well-coordinated by the programme managers in the International Academy.

42 The role of externals is well-defined, focusing almost entirely upon reassuring the University of the academic standards of the International Programmes. External examiners are appointed (annually, and for no more than four years) by the International Academy, following nomination by the appropriate lead college. They are generally drawn from outside the University of London, but in common with practice throughout the University, a small proportion is drawn from other University of London colleges which offer appropriate academic disciplines. These 'inter-collegiate' examiners carry an additional remit to assure that comparability of academic standards is maintained throughout the University of London.

43 The Guidelines for Examinations contain detailed advice for externals, who have also been provided with a dedicated external examiners' information page on the International Programmes website. The specific duties of external examiners are well-described. They are required to produce an annual written report to the Dean of the International Programmes, using a standard template. The template permits externals to raise matters of a confidential nature directly to the Dean of the International Programmes.

International Programmes' use of independent external examiners is fit for purpose, strong and scrupulous.

46 The International Programmes has taken a number of steps to engage with the Academic Infrastructure. All programmes are aligned with the FHEQ and the audit team noted that, in aligning with the Framework, programmes were compared with the national subject benchmark statements wherever appropriate. In 2009, International Programmes formally conducted a mapping exercise to consider the engagement of the International Programmes with the *Code of practice*. While this work is not yet complete, an update on the mapping process was presented to the Quality Assurance and Student Lifecycle Subcommittee in April 2011. Programme specifications are now in use throughout International Programmes. They prominently feature within student handbooks, and all include the detailed programme assessment regulations. The audit team believes that, while progress to engage with the Academic Infrastructure has been slow since the last audit, significant steps have been taken.

47 The University made the point in meetings with the audit team that during assessment the principal risk to standards and reputation is the possibility of plagiarism in assessed work, and that its generic approach to assessment is thus to make use of time-constrained unseen examinations for all core assessments. Increasingly, technology is permitting the introduction of other forms of assessment, particularly at postgraduate level (where programmes are typically smaller), and while this may well evolve in the future, for the moment the University continues to insist upon a minimum of 70 per cent and 60 per cent of assessment to be unseen examinations for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes respectively.

48 The detailed academic regulations for each programme are considered and agreed at initial programme approval, and are published as an appendix to the publicly available programme specification. The audit team noted that the programme-specific regulations included detailed assessment criteria; a positive feature which would be of significant assistance to students studying at a distance.

49 Examinations are held in approved centres throughout the world, administered from the International Programmes' central offices in London. There are detailed procedures for the approval of new centres and for the conduct of examinations. Examination centres are themselves subject to a periodic review of processes and arrangements, conducted upon the University's behalf by a private auditing company, and audit reports were thorough and identified a number of procedural improvements to enhance the management of examination centres.

50 The comprehensive Guidelines for Examinations and a number of associated assessment procedures and processes give detailed guidelines on the conduct of assessment, the consideration of assessment offences, the handling of extenuating circumstances and the constitution, role and terms of reference for boards of examiners. Students are signposted within their student handbooks to processes for appealing or claiming mitigation.

51 The audit team found that assessment policies and procedures were clear and well-signposted for students, and met the constraints imposed by assessment at a distance. Assessment arrangements are robust and well-managed.

52 The University described how it has, since the last audit, invested significant resource into developing a bespoke management information system, to little benefit, and has now committed to working with a commercial provider to develop a system appropriate for the particular needs of a large distance-learning student population. Progress is good;

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the system commenced limited operation in 2010, but will only fully roll out in 2012. Thus, while the data currently available for monitoring and review purposes provided sufficient information to enable the processes to operate satisfactorily, the International Programmes

58 There is student representation on faculty and course module committees with variable evidence of attention being given to students' views, although students and staff gave the audit team examples of the student voice informing developments. There is evidence of variable practice in lead colleges in engaging students both formally and informally in deliberative processes. Virtual learning environment developments in the consortia and in the Bloomsbury Learning Environment showed staff are concerned to involve students through developing informal channels and also formally by asking them to developmentally test learning materials.

59 Proactive use of the virtual learning environment as a conduit for continuous improvement was evidenced by non-UK students who had identified the need for seeing a wider range of study guides, and within four to five months the situation had been rectified. Such students also were concerned that they do not always get responses to their feedback. Through the newsletter and portal this is beginning to be addressed and is part of the new Student Charter.

60 There is evidence of student feedback being acted on and the Law Library has been improved following information from student surveys in 2008-09. Recently a student has been a member of Periodic Programme Review and there are indications that the role is understood. Annual programme reviews also now have a section dedicated to student feedback gathered from formal and informal mechanisms, including information about admissions from the Information Centre.

61 The University of London Union sees the student written submission as students' views being independently conveyed for the first time with the hope that this will be the norm emU1(t)-7(hst

like examiners' commentaries (notes provided by examiners following an exam to show examples and standards of excellent, good and acceptable answers) were generally up to date on websites. The International Programmes staff have a critical role in ensuring quality of learning support, especially as student numbers increase, as noted by the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Sub-committee. It is noted that while chairs of boards of examiners have a formal opportunity to meet, there is no similar opportunity for programme directors and learning from this might speed the sharing of good practice.

66 Although some prospectuses and websites indicate the careers for which students may be qualified on successful completion of awards, consideration of employability is generally left to lead colleges. The Dean identified a need for a strategic approach so that if the International Programmes were to expand in the UK then this may be an aspect for attention.

67 In view of the above findings the audit team considers that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

68 The institutional approach to enhancement, as described in the briefing paper, occurs in two ways. Firstly through the International Academy focusing on student lifecycle issues and thus benefiting the student body as a whole. Secondly through individual college-led initiatives which thus benefit students on individual programmes or groups of programmes.

69 Enhancement at institutional level is driven by annual consideration of the strategic plan through the committee structure, which itself is driven by the annual and periodic review of programmes undertaken within the colleges which have enhancement at programme level as a key outcome. The strategic plan includes the commitment to providing 'a higher quality student experience'. Areas highlighted for enhancement include student support, extending formative assessment, identifying and sharing good practice and the introduction of the Strategic Information Technology Services management information system. A number of examples of enhancement in these areas were seen by the audit team.

70 It is intended in the future that enhancement will be supported by the Learning and Teaching and Assessment Framework which, when fully established, will have learning and teaching strategies developed at the individual programme level. At present, strategies for learning and teaching have been developed for two programmes and a further four are under development.

71 The International Programmes' approach to enhancement is through the concept of managing student expectations. Currently, the International Programmes is undertaking a project to enhance the quality of support and academic guidance for students. The project has seven strands: support and guidance in the area of study skills development; a review of student handbooks; development of technology-enhanced learning and linked support; promoting interactivity; guidelines and standards for exam reports; access to taster materials; development of formative assessment; and aims to set minimum student expectations for all the International Programmes' provision in each of these areas.

72 Students are seen by the International Programmes as having a vital role in producing enhancement through student feedback via student surveys, the programme review processes currently in place and through membership and participation in the committee structure. The Student Voice Project is extending this work and has four

components, namely: Student Surveys and Feedback; Student Membership (Governance), which aims to increase student membership of the committees which deliberate on the International Programmes; Student Representation,

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79 Five diplomas (in Computing and Information Systems, Creative Computing, Economics, Law, and Social Sciences) are offered and are one or two-year programmes designed to give access to higher education, including to the University's International Programmes, for students who typically do not have standard entry qualifications. The diplomas constitute a significant proportion of the International Programmes, involving over 4,000 students.

80 Evidence available to the audit team indicated that the diplomas are aligned with level 4 of the FHEQ that is, at the level of certificate of higher education. The programmes carry the title 'diploma' to satisfy local markets. While recognising the reasons for using the term 'diploma', the team urges the University to nonetheless be vigilant in ensuring that there is no ambiguity for students and potential students concerning the level of study.

81 Admissions decisions are made by the independent teaching institution within a framework stipulated by the lead colleges or consortia and in cases where there is automatic progression to an International Programmes degree programme, the independent teaching institution effectively controls some admissions to the degree programmes.

82 Institutions seeking Diploma Teaching Status apply to the appropriate lead college or consortium, which has the responsibility to inspect the applicant institution against its own criteria and to monitor the relationship in keeping with its remit for programme management. Diploma Teaching Status is granted for a fixed period of typically two to three years. The institution agrees to abide by the information it supplied on its application form and by subsequent requirements placed on it by the University or lead college or consortium. However, the audit team noted an absence of a formal, signed bipartite agreement covering Diploma Teaching Status. Without such agreement the team concluded that a high level of risk was present in the relationships and that the interests of students were not sufficiently safeguarded. Consequently, it is advisable to ensure as a matter of urgency that there is a formal agreement in place between the University of London and those independent teaching institutions that have been awarded Diploma Teaching Status, in line with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*.

83 The approval and review of institutions with Diploma Teaching Status is managed by the lead college or consortium, and the audit team heard and read conflicting evidence concerning which body formally approved the outcomes of approval and review processes, in particular whether the body was located within the University or the lead colleges or consortia. Consequently, the team considered that the locus of quality management of these awards was unclear and in some cases rested with the lead college or consortium. The team formed the view that there was significant doubt as to whether, in these cases, quality management processes are, effectively, at one remove from the business of the University. As a result, it is advisable to ensure that oversight of programmes offered through the Diploma Teaching Status scheme is managed effectively within the deliberative system of the University of London International Academy so that the University of London is able to exercise appropriate oversight.

84 The audit team heard that staff development specifically targeted at diploma teaching staff is informal and considered that the University may wish to formalise and record these activities so that it can assure itself that staff are developed in an appropriate way to deliver the University's programmes.

85 The audit team viewed examples of diploma certificates and the accompanying transcripts and noted that neither indicated the place of study. As a result, it is advisable to ensure that the location of study is recorded on either the certificate or transcript for

body of any actions taken to address students' concerns. The audit team noted that the International Programmes was already addressing some of these issues.

91 The audit team found that reliance could reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that University of London International Programmes publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

92 The audit team identified the following area as being good practice:

- the Code of Advertising which sets out the rules and responsibilities of recognised teaching institutions with respect to advertising University of London International Programmes' provision.

Recommendations for action

93 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- ensure as a matter of urgency that there is a formal agreement in place between each lead college or consortium and the Uni Tc 0.(n)e i235..39-7(s)9(a /P <</MCID 39 >>BDC -

Appendix

University of London International Programmes' response to the Institutional audit report

The University of London International Programmes (hereafter International Programmes) welcomes the findings of the audit team

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