



QAA

Iniziativa di

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the

Recommendations for action

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

- strengthen the provision, analysis and utilisation of data on student retention and achievement at programme level
- strengthen the oversight of postgraduate research degree programmes at both institutional and school levels by improving the quality of its progression and completion data
- strengthen the institutional-level oversight of external examiner appointment procedures.

It would be desirable for the University to:

- ensure that all research students who teach and/or assess are formally prepared for these roles.

Reference points

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

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

The audit found that the University engages constructively with the Academic Infrastructure.

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1 An Institutional audit of the University of East London (the University) was undertaken in the week commencing 22 March 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the University's management of the academic standards of its awards and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor J Feather, Dr P Harris, Professor K Hurst, Professor H McKenzie and Professor D Meehan, auditors, and Miss G Hooper, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor R Harris, Assistant Director, Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 The University, situated on a modern campus in Docklands and two older campuses in Stratford, defines itself in terms which reflect its history, aspirations and location: diversity; inclusiveness; pedagogic innovation; employability; regionality; and engagement with social, cultural and economic development. Over two-thirds of campus-based students are from ethnic minorities, and half are from social classes traditionally under-represented in higher education; one-third of the 27,000 student population is located in partner institutions.

4 The University underwent separate institutional and collaborative provision audits in 2005-06: together these identified 12 features of good practice emphasising particularly its support for staff and students; and made eight recommendations, of which three were suggested enhancements. The University has generally built upon its good practice and addressed the recommendations of both audits.

5 Ultimate responsibility for quality assurance and enhancement, and for setting and managing academic standards, lies with Academic Board, which exercises it through a range of committees (including Quality and Standards, and Learning and Teaching) and subcommittees (notably Collaborations Monitoring, External Examiners, Validation and Review, and Research Degrees); although much operational responsibility is delegated to the eight academic schools

procedures. For example, it failed to address the fact that two external examinerships for one field lay vacant between September 2008 and April 2009. It is advisable for the University to strengthen the institutional-level oversight of external examiner appointment procedures.

9 Programme approval involves preliminary proposals being given in-principle consideration by the Corporate Management Team, which heads the executive structure. Detailed validation documents, including programme specifications, are then, following school-level scrutiny, submitted to Validation and Review Subcommittee. The annual school-level review and enhancement process involves detailed field and programme-level reports, from which are derived school-level overview reports identifying general themes and specific concerns: again these are submitted to the Validation and Review Subcommittee. The six-yearly academic review involves a self-evaluation document being considered by a panel consisting of institutional staff external to the area under review, external advisers, and (where appropriate) professional body representatives: it is envisaged that next academic year panel membership will be extended to students. Review reports, with conditions or recommendations where applicable, are considered at institutional level, both individually and, for quality enhancement purposes, thematically.

10 The audit found that programme approval, monitoring and review are generally thorough in design and execution, and contribute to the assurance and management of academic standards and the quality of student learning opportunities.

11 In respect of the Academic Infrastructure, the audit found that:

- the University makes effective use of relevant components in approval, monitoring and review
- it ensures that programme specifications are published in the current format
- such specifications are well-understood by students
- the University prepares diploma supplements for all graduates
- the University oversees and supports school-level engagement with professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

12 Overall, the audit found that:

- the University is an outward-facing institution which makes consistent use of expert external academic opinion
- existing procedures enable it to assure itself that full account is taken of external requirements and advice
- its use of the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points contributes to assuring academic standards and the quality of students' learning opportunities.

13 The Assessment Policy, introduced in 2007, involves a framework which aspires to be student-friendly, transparent and equitable. Members of academic staff spoke warmly about the more imaginative approach to assessment it facilitates; it received a slightly more mixed, but still predominantly positive, response from partner organisation staff. The audit team found the policy clear, accessible, well-supported by a Good Practice Guide and widely understood; the two-tier system of field and award assessment boards operates effectively and consistently. From the

programme-specific issues affecting student achievement. Overall, the team found that the University's use of management information to assure itself of the academic standards of programmes (as opposed to fields) is limited. It is advisable that the University strengthen the analysis and utilisation of data on student retention and achievement at programme level.

15 The institutional-level postgraduate research and taught doctorate statistical data made available to the audit team were insufficiently detailed for the school-level retention of postgraduate students to be accurately determined by cohort. Nevertheless, an overview report for academic year 2008-09 identified significant anomalies between centrally available and

22 The University offers library and computing facilities on all three campuses. All learning resources are reviewed annually and are included in the student satisfaction and other surveys. Students, while generally satisfied with learning resources and particularly appreciative of the virtual learning environment, drew attention to problems with noise and disruptive behaviour in one library and cramped conditions in another: the audit found that the University is appropriately addressing these concerns.

23 The University's approach to admissions reflects its commitment to providing routes into higher education for non-traditional entrants; its Admissions Policy is complemented by another on the accreditation of prior learning, with potential candidates supported by a website providing an information portal and application forms with associated guidance. Each school has an accreditation of experiential learning panel to advise the assessment board on specific cases. Students spoke highly of the efficiency and effectiveness of the process, all aspects of which were found to be effectively implemented.

24 The University provides extensive systems and services to support its diverse student body, covering academic, financial, health, employment and personal needs. These systems are centrally coordinated, well-publicised, regularly monitored at a senior level, and designed to be offered in a flexible and student-centred manner. The services particularly include: a strong commitment to induction; a Student Charter; integrated employability advice; and tailored support for students with special needs, international students, and those requiring help with English language skills. Students were generally appreciative of the services available, drawing attention, however, to some difficulties in accessing services in the evenings and being less persuaded than University officers of the value added by the Student Charter. Students similarly spoke broadly positively about the personal tutor system, noting, however, a degree of cross-school variability in delivery.

25 The audit found that the University provides comprehensive support in a manner generally appropriate to a diverse student body, and is able, through the review and enhancement process in both central services and schools, to maintain an appropriate oversight of this provision.

26 The University's staff development programme, designed to address the needs of all categories of staff, is widely publicised. Teaching achievements are recognised by means which include enhancement-oriented teaching fellowships, a range of discussion forums, and annual learning and teaching conferences. Newly-appointed lecturers lacking two years' prior experience in higher education are normally required to undertake, as a minimum, the concise and focused lecturers' development programme. This programme is available also to staff with a more limited teaching role, including doctoral students hired as part-time teaching assistants. The audit found that it is possible for some teaching assistants to rely on local mentoring by experienced members of staff, and that it is normal for the programme to run concurrently with teaching. It is desirable that the University ensure that all research students who teach and/or assess are formally prepared for these roles (see paragraph 53).

27 The University has comprehensive policies for staff recruitment, appointment, induction, probation and promotion, and procedures to oversee their implementation; responsibilities relating to these functions are largely addressed in the staff development programme. The audit found the integrated nature of these policies supports an institutional commitment to enhancing the staff experience, and that the University's approach to staff development is well-conceived and appropriate to an institution which describes itself as a learning community in the widest sense.

28 In the wake of variable participation in the peer review of teaching, the University has recently introduced a new system, which aims to increase involvement, partly by taking a more inclusive and enhancement-oriented approach. It would be premature to gauge the success of this approach.

29 The audit found that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely future management of the learning opportunities available to its students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

30 The University's aim of providing reliable and demonstrable improvements in the quality of learning opportunities is systematically monitored. The audit identified valuable institutional activities which, though not necessarily distinctive in themselves, collectively bring an enhancement focus to the academic environment. These include:

- the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, which encourages the promotion of good practice and championship of enhancement and innovation
- significant developments in e-learning practice
- learning and teaching research groups (see paragraph 20)
- the learning enhancement opportunities system, which supports mainly pedagogic research
- the development of the role of leaders in learning and teaching, placed in all schools to lead enhancement and support the implementation of institutional policies
- the thoughtful way in which student academic difficulties (including poor literacy, poor referencing skills and academic dishonesty) are addressed
- the annual Field and Programme Leaders' Event, designed to facilitate enhancement in areas which include retention, employer engagement and inclusive practice
- a range of discussion forums and targeted training events
- the partner enhancement review system in collaborative provision.

The University's planned, integrated and strategic approach to quality enhancement, which both underpins and brings cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities, is a feature of good practice.

31 The review and enhancement process, involving in particular an institutional overview report prepared by the Validation and Review Subcommittee, identifies common themes, areas of good practice for dissemination and matters for consideration by Academic Board. The audit found the process (in particular the use of external examiners' comments, both individually and as synthesised in the annual external examiner overview report) a useful vehicle for embedding enhancement in the quality management system.

32 The audit found that the University has a planned, integrated and strategic approach to quality enhancement, which underpins and brings cohesion to a broad range of enhancement activities.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

33 In spite of having, as yet, no overarching collaborative strategy, the University is heavily involved in collaborative provision. Its development of such provision as an extension of its widening participation agenda was identified as a feature of good practice in its collaborative provision audit, and the present audit found that this commitment has been maintained at all institutional levels. A memorandum of cooperation signed on behalf of the University and the

Subcommittee. The latter Subcommittee, which was instituted (with partner organisation representation) following the collaborative provision audit, oversees the review and enhancement process for collaborative programmes and considers termination proposals. The Subcommittee was considered a useful addition to the committee structure.

35 The nature of the University's association with a large National Health Service Trust (through which it offers programmes to over 800 students) is such that it approved the institution of the Trust's own quality management structure (on all elements of which it has ex officio representation), regarding the Trust as broadly akin to a school: hence it is subject to academic review, and its procedures are required to be approved by the University prior to implementation. Following careful investigation, the audit found this devolution appropriately conceived and responsibly managed.

36 Procedures for the appointment, induction and reporting of external examiners largely replicate those for on-campus provision. Where possible, a common examiner is appointed to oversee identical or cognate modules offered in multiple locations, and the audit found evidence of such examiners commenting on student performance on modules and programmes delivered across centres. The University has only one partnership where a language other than English is used: in accordance with requirements it is overseen by a bilingual external examiner. All transcripts and diploma supplements meet the expectations of the *Code of practice*.

37 Partner organisation staff members speak in complimentary terms about the system itself, the support and information they receive from the University, and their involvement with the University through committee membership and attendance at staff development events. They understand and are confident in implementing assessment requirements and procedures. Students are equally clear about the assessment criteria, which are readily available, and most are content with the timeliness and usefulness of markers' feedback.

38 Approval arrangements distinguish between the approval of a partner organisation and of programmes, although in both cases the criteria involved emphasise the integrity of academic quality and standards, requiring evidence that the candidate organisation is of appropriate standing and not prepared to place quality and standards at risk for financial gain. All aspects of the approval procedure, which includes external contributions, are monitored by Validation and Review Subcommittee, conducted in a professional manner, and meet all relevant expectations of the *Code of practice*.

39 At the end of the first year of a partnership, an institutional-level partner enhancement review monitors the effectiveness of existing procedures in the light of experience, and identifies areas where remedial action is necessary or enhancement possible. The audit found this process both supportive and incisive; it contributes to assuring and enhancing the operational integrity of the collaboration.

40 The review and enhancement process broadly mirrors that for on-campus provision, subject largely to such necessary modifications as involving partner organisation staff and ensuring that reports are reviewed by the Collaborations Monitoring Subcommittee. While a number of review and enhancement reports largely replicate the previous year's report (a matter which should be identified in the Validation and Review Subcommittee's triennial review), the audit found that procedures are competent and characterised by partner involvement, the monitoring role of the Collaborations Monitoring Subcommittee is an active one, and partner organisations value the process.

41 Collaborative review also broadly follows the academic review procedure (see paragraph 9), but involves review of both the partnership itself and all programmes offered by the organisation concerned. While generally the process operates in accordance with expectations, the University acknowledges that the system is not as yet fully embedded. This is consistent with the audit finding that a condition relating to strengthening moderation prior to assessments being sent to

external examiners appeared both in a 2004 and 2009 review, in spite of

supervision, review and examination of postgraduate research students. Admissions decisions for research degrees are made by the Research Degrees Subcommittee. Induction, an institutional-level responsibility, is normally supplemented by school-based provision which students found particularly useful. The University responds appropriately to the results of internal and external surveys, and formal procedures govern all aspects of assessment. Students expressed general satisfaction with these activities, including the learning environment, the experience and helpfulness of their supervisors, and assessment, appeals and complaints procedures. The audit found all these procedures fit for purpose.

51 Criteria exist both for approval as supervisor and for assuring the collective experience of supervisory teams. In a policy being refined to address, as far as currently possible, the differential responsibilities of directors of studies and other supervisors, the University specifies a maximum supervisory load. New supervisors are required to take a day-long staff development programme within six months of commencement, and continuing support is available. Supervisors confirmed



The University of East London's response to the Institutional audit report

The University welcomes the outcome of the Institutional audit and its judgement that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the University's present and likely

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