



# **Institutional audit**

**Royal Holloway, University of London**

**May 2011**

© The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2011

ISBN 978 1 84979 400 8

All QAA's publications are available on our website [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)

Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

## Preface

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

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

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

The aim of the Institutional audit process is to meet the public interest in knowing that universities and colleges of higher education in England and Northern Ireland have effective means of:

- ensuring that the awards and qualifications in higher education are of an academic standard at least consistent with those referred to in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and are, where relevant, exercising their powers as degree awarding bodies in a proper manner
- providing learning opportunities of a quality that enables students, whether on taught or research programmes, to achieve those higher education awards and qualifications
- enhancing the quality of their educational provision, particularly by building on information gained through monitoring, internal and external reviews and on feedback from stakeholders.

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

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

## Institutional audit: report

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 information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision.

Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

### **Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex**

The reports of quality audits have to be useful to several audiences. The revised Institutional audit process makes a clear distinction between that part of the reporting process aimed at an external audience and that aimed at the institution. There are three elements to the reporting:

- the **summary** of the findings of the report, including the judgements, is intended for the wider public, especially potential students
- the **report** is an overview of the findings of the audit for both lay and external professional audiences
- a separate **annex** provides the detail and explanations behind the findings of the audit and is intended to be of practical use to the institution.

The report is as concise as is consistent with providing enough detail for it to make sense to an external audience as a stand-alone document. The summary, the report and the annex are published on QAA's website.

## Summary

### Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Royal Holloway, University of London from 16 to 20 May 2011 to carry out an Institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the learning opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the institution offers.

To arrive at its conclusions, the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the institution and to current students, and read a wide range of documents about the ways in which the institution manages the academic aspects of its provision.

In Institutional audit, the institution's management of both academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities are audited. The term 'academic standards' is used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the UK. The term 'quality of learning opportunities' is used to describe the support provided by an institution to enable students to achieve the awards. It is about the provision of appropriate teaching, support and assessment for the students.

### Outcomes of the Institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of Royal Holloway, University of London is that:

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

In the audit team's view, the institution's approach to managing quality enhancement is firmly rooted in both process and strategy. Student experience working groups are proving increasingly effective in making sure that the improvements most important to students are identified and put into practice.

### Postgraduate research students

In the audit team's view, the institution provides an appropriate research environment and research student experience. The recent recommendations of a working group that has thoroughly reviewed arrangements for research students were broadly supported by the team as a basis for effective policy and a way for the institution to ensure that it fully meets the expectations relating to postgraduate research programmes, stated in the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (the Code of practice)*, published by QAA.

## Published information

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

## Features of good practice

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

- the mechanisms for ensuring parity across the institution and consistency over time in the consideration of those cases of student assessment that might require a waiver of regulations
- the effective contribution of the various central services to programme approval and review processes
- the use of student experience working groups, following student-led agenda, to review and enhance the student experience.

## Recommendations for action

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

The team advises the institution to:

- ensure that programme validation reports contain a confirmatory note indicating that the validation process has, for the purpose of checking the academic standard of the programme, included explicit reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and any relevant subject benchmark statements
- clarify the lines of deliberative and executive responsibility for postgraduate research degree programmes, with particular reference to the function and remit of the Graduate School.

It would be desirable for the institution to:

- establish a timescale for departments to make their written response to external examiners, addressing issues identified in their reports
- ensure that descriptions of programmes of study in departmental handbooks always include the overall learning outcomes of the programme and their mode of assessment.

## Reference points

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

- the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- the frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in Scotland

- subject benchmark statements
- programme specifications.

The audit found that the institution took due account of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

## Report

1 An Institutional audit of Royal Holloway, University of London (Royal Holloway) was undertaken during the week commencing 16 May 2011. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the institution's management of the academic standards of the awards that it offers and of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor E Evans, Mr W Page, Mr S Pallett, Professor A Peat, and Professor T Softley, auditors, and Dr C Robinson, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Ms J Holt, assistant director, Reviews Group.

### Section 1: Introduction and background

3 Royal Holloway grew from the merger in 1985 of Bedford College and Royal Holloway College. Its educational provision is organised within 18 academic departments grouped into three faculties: Arts; History and Social Sciences; and Science. In 2010-11 there were almost 9,000 students, about 80 per cent studying at undergraduate level.

4 The institution has its own degree awarding powers (granted in 2008), although it continues to award University of London taught and research degrees under delegated authority. Royal Holloway participates in the University of London inter-collegiate system, whereby students are able to take courses at other institutions of the University; it also acts as lead institution on a number of the University's distance-learning programmes. In addition, Royal Holloway is a member of the South West [London] Academic Network, which facilitates joint teaching initiatives in biomedical sciences and leadership and management education for health professionals.

5 QAA's last audit of the institution, in January 2005, resulted in an overall judgement of broad confidence in the institution's current and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards. The audit recommendations were subject to a mid-cycle follow-up by QAA in June 2007, which concluded that good progress had been made in addressing the recommendations. The present audit confirmed that the institution had taken appropriate action.

6 Executive responsibility for the work of Royal Holloway is vested in its Principal, supported by a Deputy Principal with responsibility for academic affairs and two vice-principals, one with responsibility for planning and resources and the other with responsibility for research and enterprise. A new Principal took up office in August 2010 and there have also been a number of personnel changes at the levels of vice-principal and faculty dean.

7 Within the committee structure, Academic Board has overall responsibility for academic standards and the quality of provision. Reporting to it, the Academic Development Committee has responsibility for academic planning and for reviewing proposals for new academic developments, while the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee has responsibility for the development of academic policy and procedures in relation to learning and teaching and for the periodic review of departmental provision. Faculty boards have delegated authority from Academic Board for programme and course unit validation and the annual review of programmes. Overall responsibility for research strategy rests with the Research Committee.

8 At the time of the audit, a general review of decision-making processes was underway, with a view to implementation from the start of the 2011-12 academic year. The audit team understood that the proposed changes would streamline committee work



within a flexible structure and encourage individuals to accept greater direct responsibility for decision making. However, the team was able to judge only the institution's current framework for the management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, which it considered to be generally effective.

## Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

9 Royal Holloway establishes and monitors the academic standards of its awards through the application of approval and review processes for individual programmes. The same processes also deal with the learning opportunities that enable students to achieve their awards. They are managed by the Academic Development Services department.

10 Proposals for new programmes are dealt with through the programme validation process, which is also used to deal with major changes to programmes. There is a series of approval stages: first, in-principle approval by the Academic Development Committee, based on strategic fit and the presentation of a business case; second, educational and operational appraisal of a draft programme specification by a range of central service departments; and third, detailed scrutiny of programme documentation by a validation panel, reporting to the faculty board for final approval.

11 Validation panels include one or more subject specialists from outside Royal Holloway. These specialists are asked to verify the consistency of the programme with national standards, using external benchmarks, specifically the *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), subject benchmark statements and the *Code of practice*. However, scrutiny of the reports submitted to all three faculty boards in 2010-11 revealed some inconsistency, in that some reports referred to the standards benchmarks, while others did not. The audit team considers it advisable for the institution to ensure that programme validation reports contain a confirmatory note indicating that the validation process has, for the purpose of checking the academic standard of the programme, included explicit reference to the FHEQ and any relevant subject benchmark statements.

12 All programmes are subject to annual review. In the context of academic standards there is a focus on student achievement and the comments of external examiners. Centrally-produced statistics on student progression and degree classification, covering a five-year period, are provided to departments so that they can comment on their data relative to institution-wide data. Annual review reports follow a pro forma which requires departments to highlight the principal issues (up to four) raised by external examiners and attach copies of responses made, for scrutiny and consolidation at faculty level. Key points are brought to the attention of the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee via faculty summary reports. Students currently learn about external examiner reports only indirectly through the issues highlighted in annual review reports presented at departmental staff-student committees. At the time of the audit visit, a proposal was under consideration to include external examiner reports along with annual review reports as a standing agenda item for these committees.

13 Departments undergo a formal review every six years through a centrally-managed process of periodic departmental review dealing with all aspects of academic provision. The review is conducted by a panel, chaired by the Deputy Principal, which includes at least two external reviewers and a student reviewer. The panel produces a report, which leads to the development of an action plan by the head of department and faculty dean. These are considered by faculty boards, approved by the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee and ratified by Academic Board. Progress with the implementation of action plans is followed

up a year later. The audit team concluded from scrutiny of documentation that periodic departmental review was a thorough process. In a recent development, review panels are expected to comment on the alignment of programme outcomes with the FHEQ and subject benchmark statements, and the team confirmed that this had been done in the review reports produced in 2010-11.

14 Responsibility for confirming attainment of standards rests, in the case of taught programmes, with a college board of examiners for each faculty, with sub-boards of examiners for undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes operating at departmental level. The results for students on joint degrees are also considered by a special cross-faculty sub-board of examiners. The college boards of examiners have responsibility for confirming the recommendations of the sub-boards about degree classification and individual student progression, bringing consistency across the departments within a faculty. Consistency across the institution is assisted by having assistant registrars each attend several sub-board meetings spread across different faculties. A College Board of Examiners' Executive Committee, comprising the Deputy Principal and the faculty deans, takes an institutional overview and acts as an arbiter where assessment arrangements or decisions may entail a suspension of regulations.

15 External examiners, known as 'visiting examiners', are members of sub-boards of examiners. There are clear appointment criteria and as a general policy at least one visiting examiner is external to the University of London, while another is from a different institution within the University. The audit team was satisfied that the appointment process was conducted in accordance with institutional regulations, noting that appointments covered a wide range of institutions, both inside and outside the University of London. The duties of visiting examiners are defined in institutional regulations on the conduct of assessment and clarified through briefing materials and online resources. Visiting examiners complete their reports on a standard form following a series of questions with spaces for additional comments. The audit team saw examples of reports where visiting examiners made little or no written comment, a point noted by Royal Holloway itself through its Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee.

16 Reports from visiting examiners are received centrally in the first instance, but chairs of sub-boards of examiners are charged with making the necessary response; these responses are scrutinised in the annual review process. The audit team found that sub-board chairs mostly responded fully and carefully to visiting examiners, although in a small number of cases a response had not been made by the time of the annual review. Therefore, the team considers it desirable for the institution to establish a timescale for departments to make their written response to visiting examiners, addressing issues identified in their reports.

17 As mentioned above, the programme validation process provides the mechanism for confirming that awards are positioned at the correct level within the FHEQ and the importance of making this explicit in validation reports is the subject of an earlier recommendation (paragraph 11). The relationship between curricula and subject benchmark statements is considered in programme development and validation, with continued alignment confirmed through annual and periodic review. The Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee has recently taken on responsibility for notifying departments of revisions to benchmark statements in their subject area and for monitoring departmental responses. The accreditation requirements of professional bodies are treated in the same way, with accreditation reports now being received by the Committee.

18 Programme specifications are produced to a standard template and are an authoritative description of a programme's structure, progression and award requirements, and its overarching aims and learning outcomes. They form part of the required

documentation for both programme validation and periodic departmental review. However, the institution does not see programme specifications as 'student-friendly' documents by comparison with programme descriptions in departmental handbooks. These are also produced to a template, but this does not list programme learning outcomes as a standard item. The audit team found examples of departmental handbooks that did not contain a description of programme learning outcomes, or make reference to programme specifications; moreover it found that the existence of programme specifications was not generally well known among the students it met. The team therefore considers it desirable for the institution to ensure that descriptions of programmes of study in departmental handbooks always include the overall learning outcomes of the programme and their mode of assessment.

19 Assessment policies and procedural guidance are readily accessible to students, staff and visiting examiners on the institutional website and are also referenced in departmental handbooks. Students commented positively on the clarity of marking schemes in departmental handbooks. Plagiarism policy is well defined and understood by students, with their use of detection software being widespread to help avoid its occurrence. Procedures for academic appeals are also clearly specified, with detailed information and guidance on the institution's website.

20 Departmental handbooks contain clear procedures for students on requesting consideration of extenuating circumstances affecting their assessment. Such requests are normally dealt with by a committee, with at least one visiting examiner present, convened by each sub-board of examiners prior to its main meeting. Complex cases are dealt with by the College Board of Examiners' Executive Committee; these usually involve borderline cases where extenuating circumstances might suggest the need for a waiver of regulations. The cases from all programmes are considered together at a single meeting, at which a summary of past 'case law' is made available to the Committee to assist its deliberations. The audit team identifies as a feature of good practice the mechanisms for ensuring parity across the institution and consistency over time in the consideration of those cases of student assessment that might require a waiver of regulations.

21 The College Board of Examiners' Executive Committee also monitors student progress and performance in relation to equality of opportunity, using statistical reports grouping students by gender, declared ethnicity, and fees status. Any anomalies that are identified are routed as appropriate through executive or committee structures. The institution also uses statistical information to monitor appeals and complaints through the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee, while admissions statistics are considered annually by faculty boards and Academic Board. The audit team considered that Royal Holloway was making effective use of statistical management information both in its routine review processes and its mechanisms for monitoring academic standards against broader issues relevant to student achievement.

22 The judgement reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

### **Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities**

23 Royal Holloway has developed its policies relating to students' learning opportunities in the light of the *Code of practice*. As sections of the *Code of practice* have been issued or revised, the institution has kept up to date with changes through adopting an informal approach, such as the use of plenary meetings. However, in the current academic year, it has moved to a more formal system, through the Learning, Teaching and Quality

Committee, for recording revisions to the *Code* and resultant institutional responses. Examples were provided in relation to the sections on careers education and disabled students, both revised in 2010. Procedures are also aligned to other reference points in addition to the *Code of practice*; for example, the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001*, in relation to disabled students, and guidance on Supporting Professionalism in Admissions, in relation to admissions policy.

24 The processes for programme validation, annual review and periodic departmental review, described above in the context of academic standards, also help to ensure the continuing availability of appropriate learning opportunities that allow students to achieve the learning outcomes of their programme. The validation process, in its initial assessment of the business case for developing a programme, explicitly takes account of resource issues, such as staffing levels and departmental workload. Programme proposals are also circulated for comment to central service departments, including Academic Development Services and the library and careers services.

25 Similarly, central service departments provide input to periodic departmental review, supplementing comments from the faculty dean, by suggesting issues to be pursued in the review and commenting on the effectiveness of interaction with the academic department. In the reviews sampled by the audit team, some of the issues raised in this way were evident in the final report. Noting also the role played by central services in the programme validation process, the team identifies as a feature of good practice the effective contribution of the various central services to programme approval and review processes.

26 The annual review of taught programmes is designed to pull together the views of teaching staff, students and external specialists and create an opportunity for reflection on delivery and outcomes, so as to achieve improvements in provision. The report pro forma focuses attention on the four principal issues raised by students, as well as those raised by visiting examiners. The audit team considered the process to be effective: it involves a panel that has access to the source documents; annual review reports are reviewed by faculty boards; and faculty summary reports identify good practice to be shared through faculty teaching groups, as well as issues to be referred to institution-level committees.

27 Royal Holloway uses a standard questionnaire to obtain student feedback on course units, although departments may add questions to elicit information specific to a discipline or department. Questionnaire results feed into course unit reports, which in turn inform annual review reports. Postgraduate research students also complete an institution-wide questionnaire. In addition, Royal Holloway participates in the main externally administered student experience surveys: the National Student Survey, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey and the Student Barometer. National Student Survey results are analysed and benchmarked at institutional and departmental levels, with outcomes reported and considered in a way that is well designed to enhance provision. The audit team considered that the institution had yet to make such full and systematic use of the other external surveys, despite its stated aim that these should be dealt with in the same way as the National Student Survey.

28 The student representation system is the formal mechanism for students to communicate views and contribute to decision making. Student members, usually Students' Union sabbatical officers, sit on a range of institutional committees, while departments have staff-student committees, which are normally chaired by students. In 2010-11, the Students' Union introduced, with the support of senior staff, a programme of training for newly-elected course representatives, supplemented by a guidance manual. In an evaluation report presented to the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee, it was noted that those who had attended the training sessions had found them useful.

29 Students play a more direct role in quality assurance through their involvement in periodic departmental review, where panels include a student reviewer and hold meetings with student groups. While students do not have a direct involvement in annual review, their views form an integral part of the process through consideration of survey feedback. In relation to the broader student experience, the Students' Union sabbatical team have regular contact with the Principal and heads of key student services through an informal group.

30 Students are also represented on the user groups that advise on the strategic development of learning resources - library, IT and e-learning - and on the various working groups set up to review and improve the student experience. There are currently five such groups (focusing on the themes of learning, studying, employability, communication, and student life), whose leaders form a steering group reporting to the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. These working groups, which consist of a mixture of academic staff, students, Students' Union officers and central services staff, are generally credited within the institution with having provided the stimulus for significant improvements to the student experience. Students have an influence on the particular areas addressed by the groups through the survey feedback they provide. The audit team identifies as a feature of good practice the use of student experience working groups, following student-led agenda, to review and enhance the student experience.

31 Royal Holloway involves research-active staff in curriculum design, enabling teaching to be research-informed, and provides opportunities within the curriculum for students to conduct research, so that they can develop research skills. Students who met the audit team spoke enthusiastically about the final-year research project, which some saw as the highlight of their course. Periodic departmental review provides the main quality assurance mechanism for ensuring that the curriculum reflects contemporary research and scholarship.

32 Through its staffing policies and training and development opportunities, Royal Holloway encourages staff to see research and teaching as synergetic activities. There are accredited programmes, mandatory for staff new to teaching, to support their pedagogical development. One of these is aimed at postgraduate research students, some of whom have opportunities to teach at Royal Holloway, thereby further underpinning its culture of research-informed teaching. Promotion to more senior academic positions in Royal Holloway requires staff to demonstrate how they contribute to the advancement of teaching, learning and curriculum development or assessment, thus ensuring that recognition and reward is given for sustained excellence in teaching.

33 None of Royal Holloway's own programmes are offered through distance learning. (The University of London international programmes mentioned previously are outside the scope of this audit.) With regard to study in the workplace, there are practice placements in psychology and social work, and study-abroad placements in modern languages. Royal Holloway relies on departments to ensure that their placement handbooks are consistent with the *Code of practice*, and there is no explicit institutional guidance. A scrutiny of these handbooks by the audit team showed that they covered all necessary angles. There is also useful general guidance for students undertaking a period of residence abroad. The team considered this devolved approach as adequate, given the amount of provision currently involving work-based and placement learning.

34 In relation to learning resources, the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee is in overall charge of the development of learning technologies, but separate advisory groups (which include student representation) discuss strategy and policies, operational and financial plans, and elicit user inputs to make recommendations on IT and library provision.

It was clear to the audit team from discussion with student representatives that they are able to raise issues about resources with the institution and that they are listened to.

35 The library benchmarks itself against other institutions and as a result steps have been taken to improve facilities and increase spending. Use of the virtual learning environment has expanded considerably since it was introduced, to cover more than 1,000 course units. Support for developing e-learning applications is provided through a dedicated team within Academic Development Services. Recent years have also seen a growth in the use of online plagiarism detection services, as well as the development of e-assessment. An e-learning users' advisory group maintains an overview of such developments.

36 A substantial building plan was approved in 2005 and this has already led to improvements in the teaching infrastructure, but development of the estate continues to be a key priority. Students who met the audit team mentioned specific teaching spaces which they felt needed improvement, although, on the whole, matters were satisfactory. They also mentioned a lack of study space for some postgraduate research students, especially outside the sciences.

37 The admission of students to Royal Holloway is managed centrally, with entry requirements and selection processes for particular programmes agreed with departments, and admissions decisions made in conjunction with departmental admissions tutors. There are termly meetings of admissions tutors, as well as an induction session for those new to the role. Admissions requirements are clearly communicated to potential applicants on the institution's website. There is guidance for international students on English language requirements and on expectations in respect of 'in-country' qualifications. Applicants who disclose disability at the admissions stage are put in touch with the Educational Support office. Royal Holloway regularly surveys applicants on their reasons for deciding to come or not to come to the institution. Academic Board receives an annual report on admissions, analysed by department.

38 In relation to widening participation, Royal Holloway's attention has focused on encouraging mature students, through running open evenings and outreach events and providing suitable access routes. Data relevant to equal opportunities is monitored as part of both annual review and periodic departmental review, while the College Board of Examiners' Executive Committee also receives annual reports in this area.

39 Student support is based on a personal adviser system and Royal Holloway has issued comprehensive guidelines to academic departments. Each undergraduate student is allocated a personal adviser whose role is to provide guidance on academic issues and first-line pastoral care. For postgraduate taught students, the equivalent role is performed by the relevant programme director (or nominee) and for research students by the supervisor and adviser. The institution is aware from student surveys of inconsistency between departments in the operation of the personal adviser role, and is to review support and training for personal advisers before the start of the 2011-12 session to emphasise, among other things, the responsibilities of the personal adviser in assisting students with personal development and career planning. Careers advice for students is available through an on-site careers service, which is part of the University of London Careers Group, thus extending the network of support. Specific arrangements for international students, including English language and study skills support, are provided through Royal Holloway International.

40 The arrangements described above are supplemented by a variety of central support services, covering disabilities, learning difficulties, counselling, finance, health, community liaison and faith. These are brought together through a termly executive forum, which gives overall direction to an operational management group, while separate

user groups seek feedback on specific services. The Student Barometer is used for monitoring purposes, and in the most recent survey support for disabled students scored particularly well.

41 Staff support begins with a comprehensive induction and training programme for new staff. Through the Educational Development team, Royal Holloway runs two programmes accredited by the Higher Education Academy : a postgraduate certificate aimed at lecturers and senior lecturers who are not Higher Education Academy members, or need to achieve 'recognition' as teachers as a probationary requirement; and a skills programme that is mandatory for postgraduate research students and 'associate staff' having a lead teaching role. The staff and research students who met the audit team confirmed the value of both programmes. A well-established support system is in place for academic staff during their probationary period, involving mentoring and the monitoring of workload. Peer observation of teaching, operated at departmental level, provides further opportunities for staff to support one another in their professional development.

42 All staff are subject to annual appraisal and those conducting appraisals are given training, thereby facilitating the sharing of best practice. Training and development needs are identified through the appraisal process and a wide range of such opportunities is available through the Staff Development team. Relevant areas for staff development emerge from a number of sources, including probation reviews, annual appraisal, peer observation of teaching and staff surveys.

43 The judgement reached by the audit team is that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

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

44 Royal Holloway seeks to bring about improvements in the student learning experience through the application of established processes, such as annual review and periodic departmental review and the implementation of its Learning and Teaching Strategy. The Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee takes a lead role through its responsibilities for delivering the Learning and Teaching Strategy, overseeing the outcomes of review processes and providing a reporting route for various working groups instrumental in driving the enhancement agenda. There is now more coherent support for this agenda, achieved by bringing together the Academic Development and Educational Development teams.

45 Faculty teaching groups were introduced in 2009 as forums for debating issues concerned with learning and teaching and sharing good practice. The Graduate School Forum fulfils an equivalent function for matters relating to the postgraduate research student experience. However, Royal Holloway sees the establishment of the five student experience working groups as the most significant enhancement project undertaken in recent years (paragraph 30). These grew out of a single group set up in 2008 to respond to the results of the National Student Survey, but now take a more proactive stance, tackling the breadth of the student experience through the development of action plans that feed into the committee structure.

46 An informal learning and teaching interest group, established in 2009-10, organises workshops on various aspects of pedagogy and has also introduced an annual symposium. Royal Holloway has in place a recognition scheme for good practice in teaching through the award of annual prizes. The scheme has recently been revised to encourage greater participation, and the symposium will be used to raise its profile.

47 In the audit team's view, the institution's approach to managing quality enhancement is firmly rooted in both process and strategy. Student experience working groups are proving increasingly effective in making sure that the improvements most important to students are identified and put into practice.

## Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

48 Royal Holloway has only a limited amount of collaborative provision outside its participation in the University of London inter-collegiate system. In a recent decision, the South West [London] Academic Network is to focus its collaborative activity on postgraduate taught programmes and research; there will be no further recruitment to undergraduate programmes and appropriate teach-out arrangements are in place.

49 Currently, Royal Holloway's main collaborative activity is centred on two separate partnerships, each offering a postgraduate programme in geosciences. One partnership is with a Russian university, the other with an international geosciences company. Both programmes lead to Royal Holloway awards and are delivered at the partners' premises. These existing collaborative arrangements resulted from ad hoc opportunities, although the institution is developing plans to expand its overseas provision.

50 In relation to new collaborative ventures, Royal Holloway urges those involved first to obtain administrative advice from the Research and Enterprise office and from the relevant assistant registrar. There then follow informal discussions between the relevant head of department and the faculty dean. If specific proposals are developed, these are considered as part of the institution's normal planning and approval processes, but with additional safeguards. Therefore, in considering the business case, the Academic Development Committee takes account of the particular risk factors associated with collaborative ventures. Once approval in principle has been given, the relevant central services take the lead in negotiating a memorandum of agreement with the partner organisation. Additional scrutiny is applied at the educational appraisal stage to check that the proposal is in alignment with the *Code of practice, Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)*. The final version of the memorandum, amended in the light of the educational appraisal and validation, is signed by the Principal (or nominee).

51 The audit team confirmed that both geosciences programmes had received detailed scrutiny at validation by panels including external reviewers. The team judged that the approval process was thorough and in conformity with Royal Holloway's requirements. The memoranda of agreement signed with partner organisations were clear and in accordance with the *Code of practice*. Once approved, collaborative provision is subject to mainstream quality assurance procedures and the team saw examples of thorough annual review reports. (The arrangements have not been in place long enough to have been included in a periodic departmental review.) The team concluded that the institution had in place mechanisms which allowed it to manage the quality and standards of its partnership arrangements and collaborative provision.

## Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

52 Royal Holloway has some 900 research students and, since 2008, has taken full responsibility for the operation of its postgraduate research programmes, which previously were subject to University of London regulations. Programmes are now subject to Royal Holloway's own academic regulations, which are supplemented by an institutional code of



practice, with advisory status, setting out the roles and responsibilities of those involved. They are covered by the institution's annual and periodic review processes.

53 The management of the selection, induction, supervision and examination of research students, is devolved to academic departments, where responsibility is assigned to a director of graduate studies. At institutional level, the Graduate School has a remit to enhance the postgraduate research student experience, in particular through the provision of relevant training for both staff and students. All postgraduates are members of the School, which is led by a Dean of the Graduate School. A Graduate School Forum, chaired by the Dean and comprising the directors of graduate studies from each department, exists outside the formal committee structure to discuss a range of strategic, policy and operational matters; it has no formal terms of reference.

54 All current arrangements relating to postgraduate research programmes were reviewed during 2010, in the context of the *Code of practice*, by a research degree programmes working group, which has recently reported through faculty boards and the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee to Academic Board. Following a recommendation from the working group, reporting lines from the Graduate School have recently been revised, such that most issues arising are now reported to the Research Committee, while the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee retains responsibility specifically for quality assurance matters. Even so, the audit team found that postgraduate research issues still represented a relatively small part of the Research Committee's work and noted that its terms of reference had not yet been updated.

55 The audit team concluded that the division of responsibility for postgraduate research students between the Research Committee and the Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee remained an uneasy one, an issue exacerbated by the absence of a clear role for the Graduate School Forum in the institution's governance structure. The team noted that the institution plans to address these issues through a reorganisation that was under preliminary discussion at the time of the audit. In this context, the team considers it advisable for the institution to clarify the lines of deliberative and executive responsibility for postgraduate research degree programmes, with particular reference to the function and remit of the Graduate School.

56 Royal Holloway considers that its research students can play a significant role in the development of the research culture within departments. Factors contributing to the research environment are scrutinised through the periodic departmental review process. Library provision is critical to the research environment and the library works closely with the Graduate School to ensure that there is appropriate support for research students. In addition, research students have access to the University of London's library services and many make extensive use of this facility. One issue that has been consistently raised by both staff and students in annual review is the overall adequacy of study and social space for research students outside the sciences, and this is being addressed by the institution as part of its space utilisation strategy.

57 The Dean of the Graduate School has recently presented a set of guidelines on admissions to the Graduate School Forum. The audit team learned that most academic staff involved in the admission of research students have not received any specific formal training for the role and that this point had been identified on previous occasions. Therefore it considered the new guidelines on admissions to be a timely development, which would allow departments to incorporate them into their own admissions processes without further delay.

58 There are induction sessions for research students provided at institutional level, which are augmented by departmental induction. Each academic department also produces an annually-updated handbook aimed at research students, while there is further information

on the Graduate School website. The audit team confirmed that appropriate material was readily available and generally user-friendly.

59 Academic departments allocate to each of their research students an appropriately qualified supervisor and an academic adviser, who may also act as a second or replacement supervisor; together they form the core supervisory team. However, there are variations in supervisory practice from one department to another, which appeared not to arise from subject differences. The audit team noted that the working group had picked up on many of the same points and had made appropriate recommendations for the institution to consider. A particular point emphasised by the working group was that training should be available regularly for all supervisors.

60 The institution's regulations state that a research student's academic progress will be reviewed at least once every twelve months. The review is conducted by a panel comprising the supervisor(s), the academic adviser and at least one other member of academic staff outside the supervisory team. The review meeting is documented on a standard form. Research students confirmed that they found the process useful in checking that they were on track with their research work, to set a plan for the coming year and as a preparation for the final oral (viva-voce) examination. The same panel process is used to evaluate whether a student may be upgraded from an MPhil to a PhD registration and students were clear about how this process worked. The outcomes of all annual progress reviews are considered by the relevant committee at departmental level.

61 Research skills training is a mandatory part of any postgraduate research degree at Royal Holloway. The Graduate School runs a programme comprising a range of courses covering diverse generic skills and there is also a separate programme to prepare research students for a teaching role. Each research student undertakes a bespoke training programme determined by agreement between student and supervisor. Royal Holloway stipulates that as a minimum these programmes should involve the student in five days training per year (increased to 10 days per year for those funded by research councils). There is no formal assessment, but attendance at the appropriate courses is recorded in a research training log and monitored at annual progress reviews. The working group has recommended a fundamental rethink of research skills training, in terms of delivery, focus and content, with each academic department being asked to identify what constitutes core training for its research students. The audit team considered that this process would be helpful in clarifying the relative responsibilities of academic departments and the Graduate School (see related recommendation, paragraph 55).

62 Research students are included in Royal Holloway's normal feedback arrangements, involving departmental staff-student committees and questionnaires. Also, as mentioned previously, the institution participates in the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey. Feedback is an input to annual and periodic review processes, and the institution has been receptive in its response to student concern about dedicated study space and about the value of aspects of the generic skills programme.

63 As is normal practice, final assessment of postgraduate research students entails examination of a thesis and an oral examination. There are two examiners, one external to the University of London and the other normally from another institution within the University of London. The institution has appropriate procedures and criteria for examiner appointments and its regulations contain clear protocols governing both the written and oral components of the examination. The transfer of regulatory authority from the University of London brought with it responsibility for student appeals. Grounds for appeal against the outcome of assessment (either in relation to progress review or final examination) are clearly stated in Royal Holloway's regulations. The number of appeals from postgraduate research students is very small, with only two appeals being submitted in 2009-10.

64 In the audit team's view, the institution provides an appropriate research environment and research student experience. The recent recommendations of a working group that has thoroughly reviewed arrangements for research students were broadly supported by the team as a basis for effective policy and a way for the institution to ensure that it fully meets the expectations stated in the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

## Section 7: Published information

65 Royal Holloway produces a wide range of information for both prospective and current students on both the institution itself and on its programmes, with much of this now web-based. A new website, launched in September 2010, was designed in consultation with students. There are protocols for ensuring that web-based information is kept accurate and up to date. Departments produce student handbooks, with most following a standard template; there is also an institutional handbook containing regulations, policies and procedures. Student feedback is sought on institutional publications at various points in the production cycle, and on departmental publications through periodic departmental review. The students' written submission indicated that students were satisfied with prospectus and publicity material and with the information they receive about their programmes.

66 Royal Holloway employs various internal checks to ensure that its official information is accurately presented on the Unistats website (which enables comparisons to be made between institutions and courses) and undertakes an internal audit of its annual return to the Higher Education Statistics Agency. It makes publicly available on its own website many of the items of information suggested to be of public interest in the 2006 Review of the [national] Quality Assurance Framework. In the audit team's view, the institution has systems in place to ensure that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information it publishes about the standards of its awards and the quality of its educational provision. It meets the current national expectations for public information on teaching quality.

## Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

### Features of good practice

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

- the mechanisms for ensuring parity across the institution and consistency over time in the consideration of those cases of student assessment that might require a waiver of regulations (paragraph 20)
- the effective contribution of the various central services to programme approval and review processes (paragraph 25)
- the use of student experience working groups, following student-led agenda, to review and enhance the student experience (paragraph 30).

### Recommendations for action

68 Recommendations for action that is advisable:

- to ensure that programme validation reports contain a confirmatory note indicating that the validation process has, for the purpose of checking the academic standard of the programme, included explicit reference to *The framework for higher*

## Institutional audit: report

- *education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and any relevant subject benchmark statements (paragraph 11)
- to clarify the lines of deliberative and executive responsibility for postgraduate research degree programmes, with particular reference to the function and remit of the Graduate School (paragraph 55).

### 69 Recommendations for action that is desirable:

- to establish a timescale for departments to make their written response to external examiners, addressing issues identified in their reports (paragraph 16)
- to ensure that descriptions of programmes of study in departmental handbooks always include the overall learning outcomes of the programme and their mode of assessment (paragraph 18).

## Appendix

### **Royal Holloway, University of London: response to the Institutional audit report**

Royal Holloway, University of London welcomes the Institutional audit report. We found both the visit and the audit team helpful and constructive. We have already taken steps to ensure that the validation process for new programmes makes explicit reference to *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and relevant subject benchmark statements. We have also established, with effect from September 2011, a new Research Degree Programmes Committee, which will report both to College Research Committee and to Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. We are retaining the Directors of Graduate Studies Forum as an informal mechanism that will be able to feed any potential policy issues into the new Research Degree Programmes Committee. In addition, we have established timescales for departments to make written responses to external examiners on undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes, which we intend to include in the Regulations on the conduct of assessment with effect from September 2011. Finally, we are also investigating how we can best ensure that descriptions of programmes of study in departmental handbooks include the overall learning outcomes of the programme and their mode of assessment.

**RG 813 10/11**

**The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

Southgate House  
Southgate Street  
Gloucester  
GL1 1UB

Tel 01452 557000  
Fax 01452 557070  
Email [comms@qaa.ac.uk](mailto:comms@qaa.ac.uk)  
Web [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk)