



**Institutional audit**  
**School of Oriental and African Studies**  
**MARCH 2007**  
**Annex to the report**  
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## Annex to the Report

### Introduction

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

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

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

### Outcomes of the institutional audit

As a result of its investigations, the audit team's view of the School of Oriental and African Studies is that:

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

### Institutional approach to quality enhancement

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

### Postgraduate research students

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

### Published information

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

### Features of good practice

The audit team identified the following areas as good practice:

- the opportunities provided for student representation at all levels of the School's deliberative structures (paragraphs 14, 15)
- the support provided to both undergraduate and postgraduate students by the Learning and Teaching Unit (paragraph 149)

- the introduction of the Logbook for postgraduate research students as a means of tracking progress and supporting the development of appropriate skills (paragraph 186, 187).

### **Recommendations for action**

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

Recommendations for action the audit team considers advisable:

- in the context of programme approval, develop guidelines for programme design, criteria for appointment of external subject specialists, and advice for such specialists on the nature of their roles (paragraphs 17 to 20)
- as a matter of priority, establish a systematic approach to ensure that the School responds to the findings of internal and external reviews in a timely and effective way (paragraphs 22, 23)
- ensure that deliberative structures operate with full oversight of the Quality Assurance Framework and have the capacity to assure its effectiveness (paragraphs 34, 36, 37)
- ensure that at the earliest opportunity all remaining programme specifications are completed, and suitably comprehensive learning outcomes produced and published for all courses in the context of both undergraduate and taught master's programmes (paragraphs 69 to 71)
- make more consistent and purposeful use of management information for admissions, progression, completion and achievement at all levels (paragraphs 72 to 75)
- develop a consistent and effective procedure for ensuring that the Annual Programme Review meets the requirements of its Quality Assurance Framework (paragraphs 82 to 90, 92)
- ensure that students are made aware of the outcomes of course and programme evaluations (paragraphs 100 to 110)
- establish and monitor threshold requirements for academic support systems for students (paragraphs 146, 147, 152 to 154)
- ensure systematic implementation and monitoring requirements of peer observation of teaching, as agreed by the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee, staff development review, and the mentoring and training of new members of teaching staff (paragraphs 155 to 157)
- ensure that the process of upgrading research students from MPhil to PhD status operates consistently across departments and faculties (paragraphs 189 to 191).

Recommendations for action the audit team considers desirable:

- to develop a strategic approach to quality enhancement (paragraph 160)
- to develop systematic mechanisms for routinely and effectively identifying and disseminating good practice (paragraphs 162 to 167).

## **Section 1: Introduction and background**

### **The institution and its mission**

1 The School of Oriental and African Studies (the School or SOAS) is a college of the University of London (the University). It was established by Royal Charter in 1916 which defined the purposes of the School and set out its system of self-governance. In practice it operates as a largely autonomous institution: as an institution of the University of London, however, it is subject to the London University Act and is required to comply with the statutes and ordinances of the Charter of the University of London.

2 A revision of the School's Charter came into effect in 1997 empowering its Governing Body to create Standing Orders defining the system of governance in detail. The Charter states that the Governing Body 'shall have absolute power within the School with overall responsibility for the general supervision, direction and control of all aspects of the School'. In practice, responsibility is delegated in many areas, particularly to Academic Board, which is responsible for advising the Governing Body on any proposal relating to the scope and structure of the School in relation to teaching and research and to its various subcommittees.

3 In the Institutional Briefing Paper, SOAS described itself as a small and specialist institution which has increasingly developed an interdisciplinary focus in recent years. At the beginning of the academic year 2006-07, student numbers were: 2,192 full-time equivalent undergraduates, 1,197 taught postgraduate students and 397 postgraduate research students. It employs 683 established members of staff, of whom 227 are academic and 456 professional and support staff. SOAS claims that its national and international status attracts staff and students of the highest calibre.

4 Since 1994, colleges of the University have been funded independently of the University itself. Colleges take both individual and collective responsibility for University of London degrees, diplomas and certificates. Since 1995, the School has awarded bachelor's and taught master's degrees, although the University retains authority for the awarding of MPhil and PhD degrees.

5 Article II of the School's Charter states that the School's objective is 'to be a centre of excellence in research and teaching relating to Asia and Africa' in a number of academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. The Strategic Plan (2003-06), which was extended to 2007 to cover the arrival of a new Director and Principal, clarified that its distinctive mission was 'to be the leading centre for understanding Asia, Africa and the Middle East'. The School's academic role is stated in the Strategic Plan (2003-06) to be animated by interdisciplinary and trans-regional initiatives, including a growing interest in development issues, the origins and dynamics of migration and diasporic communities, issues of identity, belief systems, local knowledge and cultural production in the non-western world and the interplay of global influences and regional particularities

6 At the time of the audit, the School was in the process of confirming a new Strategic Plan, SOAS 2016 - A Vision and Strategy for the Centennial. The 'Vision' sees SOAS as 'one of the top twenty Universities in the world', by 2016 both in terms of institutional position and in key areas of the School's expertise, with a greater focus on, and engagement with, the contemporary world and promoting global understanding. A key objective is to make the School 'more strategically-minded, less centralised and less bureaucratic...devolving more power and budgetary responsibility to the Faculties'. SOAS sees its research and postgraduate strength being linked to high-quality undergraduate programmes. Its revised Strategic Direction anticipates a growth in student and staff numbers and academic priorities which concentrate on Islamic Studies, Chinese Studies, Africa and thematic master's programmes. It also plans 'to put the quality of its students' experience at the heart of everything it does'.

### **The information base for the audit**

7 The School provided the audit team with a Briefing Paper and access to a wide range of internal and published documents, many of which were available on the intranet. The School also provided the audit team with audit trails of two recent programme-level reviews including all submitted documentation, the minutes of meetings and consideration by relevant School committees and the resultant actions. The School provided the team with access to the intranet during the briefing and audit visits. The School also enabled the team to access the intranet remotely during the period following the audit visit.

8 The audit team was particularly grateful to representatives of the Students' Union who produced a student written submission.

## Developments since the last audit

9 The School sees the period since the previous audit as one of consolidation after a major academic restructuring into three faculties. The faculties have been developing both academic and business plans and the School states that it has been 'adjusting incrementally' both to the changed internal structure and to a more competitive external context. The School particularly draws attention to the developing roles in quality management of Pro-Director, deans, associate deans with specific faculty responsibility, faculty administrators, heads of department and centre chairs. Business across faculties is now conducted in a more standardised fashion, since faculties operate under Guidelines developed by the Academic Services Manager. The School believes that the new academic structure has made it easier for common standards to be maintained, with faculty administrators acting to coordinate standard practices across the three faculties in relation to the work of central administrative units.

10 The most significant personnel changes since the previous audit have been the appointments in 2006 of a new Director and Principal and a Registrar. The post of Registrar is new, created after the resignation of the Director of Finance and Administration during the academic year 2005-06. The School decided to revise the responsibilities of this key post in order to co-ordinate responsibility for the provision of all central services under one head. The Registrar chairs a monthly meeting of the Heads of all Professional and Administrative Services.

11 At the time of the audit, the School had begun the process of rationalising its committee structure in order to support more effectively the new Vision and Strategy Document. The Governing Body has established a Working Party to review the School's committee structure. In discussion with the audit team, the senior staff of the School described the committee structure as 'enormously cumbersome', impeding both innovation and getting things done. Their view was that committees should be part of a governance structure and should not act as 'lobbying groups or democratic groups'. The School has been consulting on the structure of committees, both across the School in a general 'web consultation' and with chairs of existing committees.

12 At the time of audit, it was not possible to determine how effectively any new committee structure was likely to work or, indeed, whether the proposal to implement it from the beginning of the academic year 2007-08 was realistic. The audit team did, however, note that wide consultation was taking place on proposals likely to have radical implications for the deliberative processes and governance structures of the School.

13 The institutional audit of 2003 resulted in a judgment of broad confidence about both the quality of the School's academic provision and of the standards of its awards. The audit also report included a number of recommendations, advising the School to: enhance its present arrangements for external peer participation in programme approval; review its present template for programme specification...; publish and consistently implement clear criteria for the marking and grading of assessments; consider how responses to the findings of internal and external reviews at programme and institutional levels might be made more timely; take steps to ensure that External Examiner reports were received in a more timely fashion and to enhance its arrangements for providing external examiners with feedback; consider how it might achieve greater consistency in arrangements for student representation; review arrangements for collecting and analysing feedback from its students; and keep under review adherence to requirements for teacher training assistants, extra academic assistants and other academic staff prior to their assessing students.

14 The School provided the audit team with a digest explaining how it had addressed these recommendations and the team investigated the work which had been done. The School states that extensive student representation across its entire committee structure is now in place. Students are briefed by the School's Quality Assurance Officer at handover and specifically about key elements in the quality assurance processes such as Departmental and Programme Review (DPR). Students are now encouraged to be in attendance and participate during course and programme approval processes. SOAS acknowledges, however, that more work needs to be done

to improve communication, feedback mechanisms and also the embedding of student involvement with policy at institutional level. Students also played an important role during 2006 in the consultation process on the new Strategic Plan. In meetings with students, and through the study of documents, the team was able to confirm that student representation was now a key feature of the School's committee structure at departmental, faculty and school levels. It noted, however, that student attendance at some committees was variable and that, in some cases, students had not attended meetings at faculty level over an entire academic session. The team noted that the School was attempting to address this problem in liaison with the Students' Union; the team concluded that, overall, the recommendation concerning student representation had been effectively addressed.

15 The opportunities provided for student representation at all levels of the School's deliberative structures are identified in the audit as a feature of good practice.

16 In its Institutional Briefing Paper, the School stated that two of the three faculties had developed generic criteria for the marking and grading of assessments and that the third used such criteria with some departmental variations to meet subject-specific needs. In its scrutiny of faculty documentation, the audit team was able to confirm that the School had addressed this recommendation effectively and that these criteria were published in faculty, and usually in departmental, handbooks and on the School's website.

17 In response to the recommendation concerning receiving, and acting upon, reports of its external, or visiting, examiners in a more timely fashion, the School states in the Institutional Briefing Paper that it has instituted a procedure whereby external examiners who do not submit a written report within one month of the meeting of the relevant examination board receive a written reminder. Fees are not paid until the report is received. The School's procedure now requires a formal response to comments made by its visiting examiners and action taken is formally reported to the next examination board. In its scrutiny of documentation, and in meetings, the audit team found evidence that faculty associate deans and faculty administrators managed this process effectively, producing a digest of key points from the reports and drawing these to the attention of faculty teaching and learning committees. The team concluded that in this specific context the recommendation had been satisfactorily addressed. However, it is reported in the Institutional Briefing Paper that, notwithstanding the new procedures for payment of fees, there is still some way to go before the School meets the expectation that all external examiner reports are received within an acceptable timescale.

18 In response to the recommendation that the School ensure that responses to internal and external reviews should be timely, the Institutional Briefing Paper acknowledged that review recommendations had not in all cases been promptly received, chased up or considered rigorously by the Quality Audit and Assurance Committee (QAAC). However, it claimed that the appointment of a Quality Assurance Officer and the involvement in the process of faculty administrators had provided enhanced opportunities for sharing and disseminating good practice across and between faculties following the previous review. The School also states that review recommendations are 'now being routinely and systematically chased with regular reports to QAAC'. The team found that this was not always the case.

19 The audit team did not, however, consider that the role of external assessors in programme approval had been fully addressed. The School may find it helpful formally to clarify in documentation whether it meant by 'external involvement' external to the School or to the University. While the team notes that the latest version of the programme approval form requires those developing new programmes to seek external academic advice other than from external or visiting examiners, it was unable to confirm from its scrutiny of documents concerning programme approval either that advice and comment external to the University was invariably being sought, or that the degree of external involvement in programme approval was being consistently monitored by relevant committees. Similarly, the team noted the view of the School's own QAAC that, some recent improvements notwithstanding, the School 'had been slow to respond to recommendations concerning the programme approval process following the 2003 Institutional Audit'.

20 The audit team considered it advisable that in the context of programme approval, the School should develop guidelines for programme design, criteria for appointment of external subject specialists, and advice for such specialists on the nature of their roles.

21 The School stated in its 'one year after report' following the 2003 institutional audit, that it was reviewing its programme specification template as part of a wider review of its undergraduate curriculum. In scrutiny of documentation at departmental level, the audit team found that, although the QAAC had noted that 'good progress had been made on completing programme specifications', programme specifications were still not available in all cases. The team was also concerned that the School had noted an 'urgent need' to address the requirement for comprehensive and up-to-date programme specifications in June 2006, more than three years after the audit report was received.

22 The School says that it has made some progress towards improving its processes for collecting and analysing feedback from students on their learning experience. Its processes are stated to be both more systematic and more consistent across the School. The School has conducted a Student Skills Needs Analysis and has also gathered feedback on the induction process. The audit team noted concerns expressed by the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee that, although the School had made significant progress with the systematic collection of student feedback since the previous institutional audit, insufficient attention had been paid to the reporting of results to relevant individuals and committees or to ensuring that necessary changes were implemented.

23 Overall, the audit team concluded that, although progress had been made in some areas, the School's responses to the findings of internal and external review have not invariably been followed up in either a timely or an effective way. The team also noted the length of time which had passed since the previous institutional audit and the School's own reflection that some of its processes required urgent attention. The team therefore advises the School, as a matter of priority, to establish a systematic approach to ensure that the School responds to the findings of internal and external reviews in a timely and effective way.

## **Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards**

### **Academic standards**

24 The School states in its institutional briefing paper that as a college of the University of London, it is responsible for ensuring that its quality assurance frameworks align with the University's Academic Framework. The School is responsible for the standard and quality assurance of the University of London degrees which they deliver. The management of academic standards is vested by the Governing Body in the Academic Board.

25 In the Institutional Briefing Paper, the School states that it takes an institutional approach to academic standards, which are managed according to School-wide regulations and procedures under the central remits of the Academic Board and the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee (LTPC).

26 The Academic Board, which is chaired by the Director and Principal, has primary responsibility for the management of academic standards, including the quality of programmes and the standards of academic awards. The Academic Board is advised by two subcommittees, the LTPC, chaired by the Pro-Director, and Quality Audit and Assurance Committee (QAAC). LTPC's remit is to advise Academic Board on all matters relating to the teaching of the School. Its terms of reference require it, inter alia, to promote quality and innovation in learning and teaching and to ensure that quality requirements are met. All programmes of study must have the approval of the LTPC before places can be offered to intending students. LTPC reports actions taken in respect of programme approval to the Academic Board.



27 The QAAC oversees the School's internal audit policy and procedures and, with the support of the Deputy Secretary's Office, bears operational responsibility for ensuring compliance with external audit and quality requirements. Chaired by a member of academic staff selected from among the two members representing each faculty, its terms of reference require it, *inter alia*, to conduct academic reviews, to advise and keep under review procedures for the consideration of annual reports from visiting and external examiners, the periodic review of courses and to prepare reports for the LTPC and Academic Board as appropriate on quality matters.

28 The Director and Principal delegates overall responsibility for central administrative services to the Registrar. Administrative processes in respect of Regulations concerning quality and standards are overseen by the Registry, which assumes the role of 'Gatekeeper' to ensure that the School's Regulations are upheld. The Recruitment and Admissions Office, responsible for admissions and under the operational direction of the Head of Admissions and Recruitment, has recently been restructured. The Office is part of the Registry and under the operational direction of the Academic Registrar. The Registry is also responsible for examinations, the student record system and management information reports derived from it. The Deputy Secretary's office has administrative responsibility for quality audit and assurance and supports the School's QAAC.

### **Learning opportunities**

29 The School states in the institution briefing paper that it offers a cross-disciplinary curriculum within a distinctive learning environment. The School states that students derive benefit from close contact with staff who are subject experts in the regions of the world in which the School specialises and that programmes are diverse and afford students considerable flexibility of choice. The School states that all academic staff are responsible for the quality of their teaching.

30 An interim Learning and Teaching Strategy for 2006-07 to 2009-10 was prepared but subsequently withdrawn pending further consideration of the strategy of the School to its centennial in 2016. The strategy was prepared at the end of 2006 following a consultation process that took place during the autumn term 2006. As a small, research-led institution the School identifies 'a research-informed teaching environment that reflects the specialist nature of the institution' as key to ensuring the quality of delivery. The School sees quality as maintained by the calibre of its academic staff, whose teaching is informed by high-level research. The School's academic standards are 'managed according to approved School-wide regulations and procedures' and 'both maintained and enhanced by the intellectual attainment demanded of the students, whose levels of achievement verified by external examiners'.

31 The School refers to the work of the Head of the Learning and Teaching Strategy, who works with the Pro-Director and the Associate Deans (Teaching and Learning). Significant developments have been undertaken and more importance is now being given to 'taught students' in the School's overall work. The new Strategic Plan, SOAS 2016, recognises the need for stronger strategic commitment to teaching and learning. It is also stated the strategic importance of central Student Services.

32 At the time of the audit work had begun towards harmonising the teaching and learning elements of the new Strategic Plan, which states that 'SOAS aims to place the quality of the students' experience at the heart of everything it does'. SOAS 2016 anticipates streamlined operations which ensure that the services, support and facilities provided by the School are fully geared towards students' needs. The ongoing planning process should, in the institution's view, provide a more coherent framework, with associated operational plans, which will enable it to manage and monitor the quality of learning opportunities.

33 The audit team noted from policy minutes of November 2006 that the Registrar had expressed concern that the School still needed to give attention to the consistency and completeness of the evidence required to show adherence to quality audit procedures. The

Registrar believed that procedures were being followed but that it was not always able to point to evidence which demonstrated this.

34 Through its scrutiny of documentation, and in meetings with staff, the audit team agreed with the judgement of senior staff of the institution that it was not always easy to confirm that relevant procedures were being followed in respect of the quality of the learning experience. The team was also unable to confirm that the LTPC made sufficient checks to ensure that key elements in the quality process which were the primary responsibility of departments and faculties, and particularly Annual Programme Review (APR), were being followed or, if they were not, that effective, timely corrective action was being taken. The team noted that the LTPC had been informed by regularly received reports of deficiencies in the consistency and completeness of evidence required to show conformity with quality assurance processes. It also noted LTPC's concern about problems encountered in producing summaries of annual programme reviews. The team concluded that the closer inspection of evidence coming from faculties to the relevant School committees, and particularly LTPC, was necessary to ensure that processes were being followed, gaps identified and appropriate correction being taken. It would advise the School to address this issue as a matter of urgency.

35 In its scrutiny of documents, the audit team was able to confirm that QAAC conducted thorough Departmental and Programme Reviews (DPRs) and had put in place structures for receiving 'one-year on' reports on the progress made in response to Review recommendations

36 More generally, the audit team found that although the primary responsibilities of LTPC and QAAC were distinct, there was some operational overlap between them, not least in the consideration of DPR. Although regular liaison between the chairs of these two committees could be considered a strength, the team was not convinced that the School's committee structure, as operated, gave the team sufficient confidence that its processes were robust enough to manage the quality of learning opportunities with the detail and concern that the School wished to achieve. The team notes that, at the time of audit, the School was considering proposals for radical changes to its committee structure in order to align its work more effectively alongside the SOAS 2016 strategy. The team urges the School to use this opportunity for change to revisit the objectives of committees concerned with quality and standards both at faculty and School level.

37 The audit team advises the School to ensure that deliberative structures operate with full oversight of the Quality Assurance Framework and have the capacity to assure its effectiveness.

### **External examiners**

38 Under the University of London Ordinances, the School appoints its own visiting examiners, excluding those for distance-learning programmes. Every examination board includes at least one examiner entirely external to the University of London. The Registry is responsible for administering the visiting examiner system, in collaboration with the faculty administrators, who provide support for the chairs of examination boards and academic staff. The one exception to this arrangement is the Department of Financial and Management Studies distance-learning programmes, where administrative support is provided by the External and Internal Student Administration Examinations Department of the University of London. The LTPC is responsible for the appointment of visiting examiners to the School's examination boards.

39 Visiting examiners are appointed for a period normally not exceeding four years, and are not eligible for re-appointment until after a lapse of two further years. The criteria for nomination and appointment state that only persons of seniority and experience who are able to command authority should be appointed. It became clear to the audit team that the School followed the guidance of the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining*. However, in terms of only appointing external examiners with appropriate levels of academic and, where appropriate, other professional expertise and experience in relation to the relevant subject area and assessment, the School may wish to consider revising the published criteria for appointment to reflect this effective practice.

40 There is one School-level board for the award of undergraduate degrees, and individual sub-boards for each subject. Sub-boards must include at least one external examiner and, where possible, at least one examiner drawn from one of the other University of London colleges. At least one of the visiting examiners must be present when recommendations in respect of finalists are made to the School Board of Examiners. The audit team noted that, in the case of degrees involving a significant range of specialist components, notably those involving a number of languages, the number of visiting examiners required could sometimes be considerable. For example the BA in South East Asian Studies required four examiners in the academic year 2005-06. It is also the case that for some subject areas suitable visiting examiners cannot always be appointed from within the United Kingdom (UK), and this sometimes creates practical difficulties in securing the attendance of all visiting examiners from outside the UK at sub-boards making classification recommendations. Although there have been situations where non-attendance by an examiner was unavoidable, these should be regarded as exceptional and any instances subject to careful monitoring and reporting.

41 Responsibility for briefing and induction of visiting examiners lies with the appropriate head of department and the chair of the examination sub-board concerned. Whereas the information provided to the audit team in meetings with staff and from scrutiny of a sample of visiting examiner reports suggest these responsibilities are being appropriately discharged, the scope and nature of these key processes are not formally articulated in the School's documentation. Consideration could usefully be given to the production of explicit guidelines and the introduction of more robust mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the suitability and effectiveness of these arrangements; the School may find the *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* a useful point of reference in this respect. Broadly similar arrangements apply for the appointment of visiting examiners and the conduct of examinations for postgraduate taught degrees, the primary difference being the appointment of a single Board of Examiners annually for each postgraduate taught programme.

42 The report of the previous institutional audit advised the School to take steps to ensure that it received the reports of its external examiners in a more timely fashion. The effectiveness of the new procedures for improving the response rate is recorded quantitatively in an Annual Report on Visiting Examiners' Reports prepared for the University of London. In the case of reports for the academic year 2003-04 the audit team noted that only 34 of the 38 undergraduate reports, 35 of the 41 taught master's reports and just five of the 10 postgraduate distance-learning reports for which the School has lead responsibility had been received, amounting in an improvement in the overall return rate to only 83 per cent. The Institutional Briefing Paper notes that despite further improvements in the academic year 2004-05 some reports had not been submitted after a follow-up letter, and it has been agreed to do a second follow-up letter from the academic year 2006-07. Although response rates have risen markedly since 2003 there is still some way to go before achieving the expected 100 per cent rate of return.

## **Approval, monitoring and review of award standards**

### **Programme approval**

43 The basis of the academic structure at SOAS is the department. All departments are located in one of three Faculties: Arts and Humanities (which comprises five departments); Languages and Cultures (which comprises seven departments and a Language Centre); and Law and Social Sciences (which comprises five departments). Heads of department report to the Dean of their faculty. Deans report to the Pro-Director, who has responsibility for teaching and research and chairs the LTPC and the Research Policy Committee.

44 Each faculty has a faculty board, which is a subcommittee of Academic Board to which it reports regularly. The School appoints chairs of its Regional Centres, currently eight in number. Chairs are members of relevant faculty boards. The School appoints chairs of its Regional Centres, currently eight in number. Chairs are members of relevant faculty boards. They are responsible, in cooperation with the Vice-Principal (External Affairs), for encouraging, developing and coordinating interdisciplinary and regional initiatives.

45 Faculty boards are empowered to approve new courses and to develop, but not approve, new programmes within the curriculum range agreed by Academic Board. Faculty learning and teaching committees and research committees, each chaired by the relevant Associate Dean, are subcommittees of faculty boards. These committees undertake detailed consultative and preparatory work related to quality and standards. Faculty learning and teaching committees monitor matters relating to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students; faculty research committees do likewise in respect of postgraduate research students

46 Each faculty has a senior faculty administrator who acts as secretary to the faculty board and administers quality assurance procedures at faculty level. The audit team heard in meetings that faculty administrators consider it a key element in their work to ensure that school policies and practices are well understood and implemented at faculty level. The administration of each Faculty Office is arranged in two teams, responsible for Student Support and Academic Support respectively. The Deputy Registrar (Distance Learning) supports the administration of distance-learning programmes offered by the Department of Financial and Management Studies in the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences.

47 The School's programme approval process begins in a department, and involves the completion of an outline proposal which, once supported in principle by the Faculty Board, is further developed and presented to the faculty learning and teaching committee, which makes a recommendation to the faculty board. If faculty board approves the proposal, it makes a recommendation to the LTPC, which must approve the proposal before informing the Academic Board and before the School can advertise or offer places to candidates. There is a pro forma for each stage in the approval process and, where appropriate, the proposing department must also take cognisance of the requirements of any relevant professional, statutory and regulatory bodies. If a programme is to be delivered through the University of London's External System, programme approval requires an additional range of information (including the department's plans for trialling materials) on a separate pro forma which, together with the other documentation, is submitted for approval by the University's External System Academic Board. At the time of the audit visit, 'Programme Approval Procedures 2006/7' were published on the Learning and Teaching Unit website.

48 Students are encouraged to be in attendance at department meetings at which course and programme approvals proposals are made and they are also members of faculty learning and teaching committees, faculty boards and the LTPC, all of which consider new programme proposals.

49 In accordance with external national guidance including those of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies such as the Law Society, the School's approval procedure requires that there be external involvement in the proposal process. Its procedures ask for 'comments from subjects specialists, reviewers, alumni, employers'; the School's interpretation of external involvement is the receipt of a written assessment of the proposal rather than a discussion at a meeting at which an external member is present. The School's definition of externality would appear to be that the subject specialist providing comments should be external to the School, rather than to the University. Since October 2006, LTPC has required evidence that new proposals demonstrate the relationship of the proposal to the School Strategic Plan and Research Strategy and the Faculty Learning and Teaching Strategy and address the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. If a proposed new programme falls outside the School's existing range of subjects (disciplines and regions), there is an additional requirement for a special case to be made to the QAAC. A disabilities provision statement is also required.

50 While the School has a pro forma for new programme proposals, the audit team noted the absence of any written guidelines for programme design, any statement of the criteria used in the appointment of external subject specialists, or any guidelines provided to such specialists, or alumni or prospective employers, about their roles and duties in the process. In response to a request for further information, the team was informed by way of a written explanation during

the audit visit that 'There are as yet no written criteria for the selection or approval of external subject reviewers above known expertise in the subject area, but further overall guidance for programme proposers (including the matter) will be developed with the coming on-line of a web-based version of the process. This will also provide an opportunity to develop detailed guidelines for external advisors'.

51 The audit team asked for an example of a recent programme closure and was informed that at a faculty Learning and Teaching Committee on 8 February 2007, Chair's Action had been taken by both the Associate Dean and the Dean to delete two MSc programmes on the grounds of low recruitment, and the Faculty Board was informed on 28 February 2007, by which time the LTPC had approved these deletions. The audit team was told that a proposal to withdraw a programme can be initiated at any of department, faculty or School levels, but must be considered at all three levels. Similarly, a proposal to withdraw a course must be considered at both department and faculty level. The audit team noted that in January 2007 the QAAC had approved a DPR report of 7 December 2006, which commented that the decision to withdraw the teaching of a particular language 'without discussion within the Department'.

52 While the School has approved its official pro forma for new proposals, it devolves the responsibility for managing the process of all but major amendments to existing programmes, including proposals for new courses and for the deletion of existing courses, to faculties. Proposed amendments are subject to approval by a formally-minuted departmental meeting before consideration by faculty learning and teaching committees and the relevant Faculty Board, but the School does not appear to have developed a systematic procedure for monitoring and reviewing the incremental effect of amendments on the character or academic viability of its approved programmes other than six-yearly DPR. The School may wish to consider whether this period of time is appropriate.

53 The audit team was provided with examples of the approval process for new programme proposals. In November 2006, a Faculty Board observed that 'some of the items' in the paperwork tabled by its Learning and Teaching Committee were still incomplete and that these included 'input from an external academic reviewer'. In addition, the audit team noted that, while part of the Department's case for the introduction of the programme was that the Year Abroad would enhance graduate employability, no comments by employers or alumni had been included in the proposal, as required by the proposal form. Subsequently, a thorough, considered and detailed set of written comments from a suitably qualified and experienced reviewer from another university was submitted and the proposal was approved at LTPC by Chair's action. For a different proposal from another faculty, however, the submitted expert advice was a very brief email of support from elsewhere within the University.

54 At its meeting on 8 November 2006 the LTPC's minute 9 records the Committee's decision to not approve a new programme proposal on the grounds of inadequate and missing paperwork. At its next meeting, on 14 February 2007, the LTPC's minute 37a records its decision to not approve five further new programme proposals on the grounds of inadequate and missing paperwork. While this indicated to the audit team that the LTPC recognised and acted upon its responsibilities, it also indicated that, up to February 2007, paperwork remained of variable quality and, despite efforts made by the QAAC, the Learning and Teaching Unit and LTPC, the School's approval process was not always being followed at every stage.

55 The audit team was provided with a list of all programmes submitted to Learning and teaching policy committee for approval since the start of the 2004-5 academic year. The list recorded the fact that 11 out of 36 proposals (30 per cent) from faculty boards to LTPC failed to gain approval at the first attempt. This statistic, the fact that, at its meeting in October 2006, QAAC 'noted that the School had been slow to respond to recommendations concerning the programme approval process following the 2003 Institutional Audit' and the Briefing Paper's statement that since October 2006 the QAAC had demanded evidence that the approval process was being followed, together indicated to the audit team that, since the previous institutional audit, the School's approval process had not been sufficiently embedded at faculty level.

56 Annual Programme Review is delegated to faculties. Heads of departments complete an Annual Programme Review form for each programme, incorporating the Head of Department's comments on the delivery and assessment of the programme during the relevant year and relevant statistical data which is meant to be supplied by the department or faculty, along with the head's summaries of, comments on and proposed actions in the light of visiting examiner recommendations and student feedback. Faculty learning and teaching committees consider all programme reviews and the Associate Dean reports to the faculty board which reports to the LTPC: action points are reviewed in the next year's Annual Programme Review report. The QAAC reviews Annual Programme Review forms during DPR.

57 All departments and all programmes are subject to Internal Periodic Review.

58 Where programmes are offered by a department, DPR operates every six years. The process is overseen by the QAAC, which normally conducts four reviews a year (working through a seven-year schedule of 23 reviews between 2004 and 2010). Under the procedure, a panel is established, normally chaired by the Chair of the Committee, and including in its membership two assessors external to the School, selected from pool of at least three experts nominated by the department. This panel meets for a day and scrutinises the department's self-evaluation statement, which includes, among other elements, an analysis of statistical information (including student numbers, cohort analyses, degree results, staff-student ratios, teaching hours and publication records) and a statement of the programme's alignment with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. Students, who are present at the drafting of a department's Self-Evaluation Statement, make their own independent written submission.

59 Having met with the Head of Department, department members, Dean, associate deans and some students on the programme, the DPR panel produces a report for the QAAC, including recommendations for action: the head of department and the relevant dean are given three months to act on the recommendations before they go to the QAAC for consideration (copied to the LTPC and the Research Policy Committee) and publication on the intranet. One year later, the Committee gets a report from the head of department on actions that have been taken, and any outstanding issues are brought to the attention of Academic Board and other relevant committees.

60 Some cross-disciplinary programmes are not operated solely by one department, or even within one faculty, and these are subject to Non-Departmental Programme Review. The process is as similar as possible to DPR, but the self-evaluation statement is written by the programme convenor rather than the head of department. Guidelines on both DPR and Non-DPR processes and for the authors of the self-evaluation statements and student submissions are available on the School intranet.

61 While the School's detailed implementation of its systems for approval, monitoring and review has clearly still yet to bed down, the audit team concluded that they were sufficiently sound in their basic design for them to support effectively the School's management of academic standards.

### **Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points**

62 The Briefing Paper states that all SOAS awards meet the expectations of FHEQ, and the Academic Infrastructure, that all relevant curricula take into account QAA subject benchmark statements, and that the School will address the European Standards and Guidelines along with the Bologna process. Where the School is involved with external professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (at the time of the audit, only the Law Society and the Bar Council), it states in the Institution Briefing Paper that it 'complies with their method of accreditation, which recognises national quality assurance arrangements while working with universities' own quality assurance systems'

63 Programme specifications for all undergraduate and postgraduate taught programmes are published on the School intranet and these state that, in the design of the programme, reference has been made to the FHEQ and, when appropriate, to the relevant subject benchmark. Programme approval requires departments to ensure that proposals for new programmes not only 'conform' to the FHEQ but are consistent with the precepts of the *Code of practice*. DPR requires departments to address the Academic Infrastructure in their self-evaluation statements, and the December 2006 DPR on the Department of the Languages and Cultures of South East Asia duly reported that the Department's programmes 'met the level and progression requirements of the QAA's Framework' and that the Department had taken account of the QAA's Subject Benchmark Statement for Languages'. The audit team noted that the published programme specifications include the statement that 'more detailed information on the learning outcome...of each course/unit module can be found in the department course handbook' but this information was not always to be found in these handbooks or elsewhere. Further commentary on the significance of these omissions is to be found in the following section.

### **Assessment policies and regulations**

64 SOAS has one set of degree regulations and an associated classification scheme for the BA and BSc degrees, with a different set for the Bachelor of Law degree. The use of a School-level Board for the award of undergraduate degrees provides an important mechanism for monitoring and assuring standards in this context, responding in turn to the recommendations put forward from the subject-specific sub-boards. Although at taught master's level there are separate boards for each programme or group of related programmes, the majority of degrees are subject to one set of degree regulations and an associated classification scheme, with slight variations in respects of some MSc degrees. Prior to 2003 practices varied from department to department in terms of marking conventions. With a view to securing more consistent standards in the measurement of student achievement the School introduced blind double-marking for all courses in the academic year 2003-04, applying both to examinations and also coursework. Concerns were subsequently raised during discussions between the LTPC and the QAAC about the additional burden this requirement placed on examiners and the potential for inconsistency in marking where the second-marker was not a specialist in the subject, and the policy was reviewed during the academic year 2005-06. Second-markers still are expected to reach an independent judgement, but may see the first-marker's marks and comments.

65 The School produces guidance and procedures relating to the consideration of Representations concerning decisions of boards of examiners and appeals by candidates. These are published in its undergraduate and postgraduate taught master's handbooks.

66 The procedure indicates that such Representations can be made on the grounds of irregularity and administrative error and should be addressed to the Academic Registrar who, consulting with appropriate School staff members, will investigate procedures in respect of the conduct of the examination and write to the candidate giving the outcome of the Representation.

67 Appeals against such decisions are considered by a School Representations Panel, comprising an associate dean unconnected with the student (who will act as Convenor), a nominee of the appellant and a chair of a board of examiners unconnected with the appellant. This Panel may dismiss the appeal or require the Board of Examiners to reconsider its original decision. It does not have the authority to direct or overturn the decision of a board of examiners.

68 Through scrutiny of documentation, the audit team was able to confirm that the process worked as identified in the published handbooks. Representations were few in number and were handled efficiently. Very few proceeded to the second stage of appeal about the outcome of the Representation.

69 As noted in the section above, the report of the previous institutional audit advised the School to review its present template for programme specifications to ensure that programme specifications produced from it provide, for each programme, a concise description of the

intended learning outcomes, the means by which these outcomes are achieved, and the assessment methods and criteria employed. All three faculties have published and implemented generic marking criteria with, in the case of one faculty, a few variations in terms of subject-specific needs. A scrutiny of these criteria found them to be appropriate in terms of their associated level descriptors and also suitably consistent across the faculties.

70 Progress with programme specifications, however, has been slow. Concerns were expressed in this regard by the QAAC in June 2006 and it was noted by the LTPC as recently as November 2006, that whereas all taught master's programme specifications had been completed a few undergraduate programme specifications were still in preparation. These delays have in turn impeded the expected articulation of learning outcomes at course level as well as programme level, and significant work remains to be done producing clearly articulated learning outcomes for all courses within each programme. Whereas appropriate descriptions of the intended learning outcomes and the means by which these outcomes are achieved are provided for some courses, other descriptions are less than complete, notably in terms of specifying the means by which the stated outcomes are achieved. At the time of the audit some courses still had no learning outcomes. The *Code of practice, Section 4: External examining* and *Section 6: Assessment of students* place significant emphasis on the need for students to demonstrate the intended learning outcomes in their assessed work.

71 The School is advised to ensure that, at the earliest opportunity, all remaining programme specifications are completed, and suitably comprehensive learning outcomes produced and published for all courses, both undergraduate and taught master's programmes.

### **Management information (including progression and completion statistics)**

72 The School's main management information system for the monitoring of academic standards is the student record system UNITe, supplementary data for statutory requirements such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) return being provided by other systems such as the finance system Agresso. The report of the previous institutional audit noted that the School recognised that its systems for collecting data on student retention and progression required enhancement and the report encouraged the School to continue to develop the means available for it for the statistical analysis of such measures. The audit report identified a number of key areas where improvements in data collection and analysis would prove of particular value. In the context of the Annual Programme Review process, for example, it was noted that consideration of statistical data at programme level was problematic, and that there was an intention to automate much of the production of statistical data when the new student records system was introduced.

73 The audit trail of a 2006 DPR provided a useful opportunity to monitor progress in this regard since the 2003 QAA audit. The audit team noted that from 2005-06 onwards the revised School pro forma for Annual Programme Review for the first time explicitly requires departments to comment on the attached statistics where appropriate. However the 2005-06 pro forma for the Department of the Languages and Cultures of South East Asia makes no reference to the consideration of statistical data, and it was confirmed at a meeting with heads of department that statistical data is still not routinely available in time for consideration as part of the Annual Review process. The expectations of the new pro forma in this regard thus cannot yet realistically be met. In terms of the progression and completion data that is made available for consideration at department, faculty, and School level subsequent to the Annual Programme Review the team noted that the information provided was still not sufficiently detailed to allow departments to monitor progress by programme or course. This situation was noted in the report of the previous audit and the lack of progress in this context led the team to conclude that the School was still not able to make systematic and effective use of progression and completion data to monitor its quality management and the academic standards of awards.



74 A similar lack of progress was noted in the context of admissions data. Whereas external statutory requirements such as those of HESA are evidently met, at the time of the audit, significant progress had yet to be made internally in analysing and evaluating this data in ways that would allow it to be used effectively. The Briefing Paper stated that the School was working towards more analysis of these data to demonstrate the high academic achievements of its diverse student body. As recently as May 2006, however, the School's Equality Committee noted that it was important that statistics were generated in a way that could be more beneficial to the School in terms of its own monitoring of statistical data in terms of equality and diversity.

75 The School is advised to make more consistent and purposeful use of management information for admissions, progression, completion and achievement at all levels.

### **Other modes of study**

76 The Department of Financial and Management Studies offers master's degrees and diplomas in distance-learning mode. The distance-learning programmes are managed according to University of London generic and SOAS programme regulations. Although there are differences between distance-learning and on-campus courses and programmes, the Briefing Paper maintained that these are not significant in respect of quality and standards. The audit team did however find disparity in the level of support between full-time students and distance-learning students.

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

### **External examiners**

77 All visiting examiners are required to make a written report each year using an approved form. As noted briefly in the section above, once received the Registry sends the reports to the appropriate faculty office which circulates them to the relevant head of department, examination board chair and associate dean for consideration and the head of department is responsible for taking any immediate action required at departmental level. A summary of the key issues is prepared and reported by the appropriate associate dean to the relevant faculty learning and teaching committee and faculty board at their second meeting in term one, and also passed to the relevant department for further consideration. The Associate Dean also reports on the key issues arising from Annual Programme Reviews (APRs) to the School Learning and Teaching Policy Committee (LTPC). Action on each report is formally reported back to the Examination Sub-Board the following year as an agenda item. Clear evidence of due consideration and response to issues raised could be identified by the audit team at department level in the context of the Annual Programme Reviews consulted as part of the audit trail, and also a sample of faculty minutes and reports. Although these mechanisms for giving further consideration to issues raised in these reports are satisfactory the team could not find evidence of any systematic approach to identifying and sharing good practice across faculties or indeed within faculties.

### **Approval, monitoring and review of programmes**

#### **Annual Programme Review**

78 The audit team found that statistical data is not being used in APRs. At meetings with staff there appeared to be some misunderstanding as to whether or not there was a requirement to comment on statistical data applied for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The team was also informed that data was not always supplied. The team also noted that there was some evidence of APRs and Visiting Examiner Reports not being completed on time or at all.

79 The audit team read 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06 APRs for BA South East Asian Studies, Indonesian and Thai, and noted that they recorded comments from visiting examiners, course tutors and students on a number of important issues, including contact hours, staff and student workloads, the effects of team teaching, the appropriateness of the curriculum, the

quality of course material and library holdings, the maintenance of standards in assessment, and the accuracy of websites. It was not always clear what the procedure for following up such issues had been. The Briefing Paper acknowledged that the LTPC had identified some APR forms where departments had not demonstrated followed-up actions, so the LTPC is designing a template to check that follow-up has taken place.

80 The audit team could only conclude that the current process of internal APR was not providing its appropriate committees and office-holders with sufficient information for the School to assure itself and its stakeholders that all its courses and programmes are providing the necessary learning opportunities for students to achieve its programmes' approved learning outcomes.

### **Internal programme review**

81 The audit team studied in detail the records of two Departmental and Programme Reviews (DPRs), each from a different faculty, and concluded that the procedure has the potential to work effectively, but that it needs further strengthening.

### **Departmental and Programme Review 1**

82 The Review was conducted in December 2006. Its external members were from London Metropolitan University and the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), Paris, and met 11 Department staff and nine students, along with the Dean, associate deans and Faculty Administrator.

83 The self-evaluation statement stated that the Department was small, having lost expertise and posts in several key languages, postgraduate research students were few and some overseas students needed so much help with English that completion rates had suffered.

84 The student written submission included the following points from four undergraduates: one thought the teaching was efficient and clear, and the staff helpful and responsive to feedback, but the other three criticised the quality of language teaching and complained that contact time was too short, some staff were not open to student input, and the website was out of date. Nevertheless, the Report identified as examples of good practice, the Department's 'fine record in teaching and research' and 'the informal and highly supportive environment offered to students on an individual basis, and success in communications with students'. It was not clear whether (a) the evidence leading to these commendations was itself identifiable, (b) what was being commended were practices susceptible of the kind of analysis that might make dissemination possible, or (c) whether or not the Quality Assurance and Audit Committee (QAAC) was intending to take any deliberate steps to use its commendations as material for the enhancement of other programmes in the School.

85 The written Report and subsequent minute of QAAC did not always fully explain the full extent of evidence considered by the panel; in one case there appeared to be a conflict between the nature of some of the student written submission and the panel's conclusions. Most importantly, in the audit team's view, while the DPR procedure requires the panel to identify any items of good practice in the operation of the department and programme over the period of the review had resulted in valuable commendations of work and achievements, it was not obvious to the audit team how these identifications might be, or had been disseminated to other departments or programmes across the School.

86 The Report concluded that 'quality and standards are being achieved'. It nevertheless felt obliged to make 12 recommendations. The audit team was provided with evidence that each of the 12 had resulted in a written response from the appropriate officer or committee. One recommendation was that 'as a matter of extreme urgency' external examiners for all programmes have experience of university teaching (not necessarily within the United Kingdom (UK)), and are provided with detailed briefing on the curriculum of the programmes under

assessment. Another recommendation was that, in light of the facts that APRs were not provided for all years of all programmes, and those provided had some omissions in the evidence provided of follow-up action, the Department should ensure that APRs 'are in future completed and followed up'.

## Departmental and Programme Review 2

87 The earlier Review, conducted in March 2005, also involved external members, but both were from within the University of London and both were from the same college. Its Report to QAAC made 10 recommendations, one of which was that the Department needed to 'consider formal methods of responding to student feedback received through course assessment forms'. The Report recalled that the issue had been raised by an internal review much earlier (in 1999), and again by the QAA Subject review report on Politics in the Department, in 2001. This latter report had emphasised 'The need to embed new quality management and enhancement procedures into the Department in order to ensure closure of quality assurance loops and the dissemination of good practice' and cited not just the absence of formal feedback to external examiners' comments, but the problem created for feedback to students resulting from the confidentiality of student course evaluation forms. The Academic Board at its meeting in November 2006 'endorsed and strengthened' the recommendation from the LTPC that more timely feedback should be provided to students on the response to their course evaluations. This was six years after the issue had first been raised.

88 The issue of responses to student feedback clearly applies to more than one department. As recently as December 2006, the DPR Report on the Department of the Languages and Cultures of South East Asia observed that, until an Academic Board ruling the previous month, there had been no formal method in place.

89 The School's Briefing Paper contains the statement that the QAAC reviews the Departmental and Programme Review process 'regularly' and considers it works.

90 The audit team acknowledged the work of QAAC in respect of DPRs. However, it noted that in January 2006 the Committee had observed that 'although the School had made significant progress in recent years in the development and management of its quality assurance mechanisms, there remained room for improvement, especially in ensuring that the Committee received more timely responses to the recommendations made in its Department and Programme Review reports'. The team further noted that the School had found through Departmental and Programme Review that some departments had not completed or updated programme specifications on the Learning and Teaching Unit website. The Briefing Paper comments that it believes one of the School's current tasks is to ensure the School's quality assurance procedures 'are understandable, open and transparent to all' and that these procedures need to be 'better co-ordinated, disseminated, monitored and embedded across the School'.

91 The audit team not only supports these comments but believes that the School could develop further its Quality Assurance Framework and system to make them still more comprehensive, coherent and robust.

92 The audit team considered it advisable for the School to develop a consistent and effective procedure for ensuring that the annual review of programmes meets the requirements of its Quality Assurance Framework.

## Academic Infrastructure and other external reference points

93 The *Code of practice* is explicitly invoked at various points in the School's published descriptions of its quality assurance system. In addition, the audit team was informed that the Quality Assurance Officer draws a Head of Department's attention to the *Code* at the start of DPR as well as including such advice as an element in the annual induction of any new heads of departments, and it noted an example of the *Code* being used when the Briefing Paper described

the drafting the School's Disability Equality Scheme, published in December 2006.

94 The School has been systematically monitoring its 'adherence' to the *Code of practice* and has recently published on its intranet a grid summarising each element in the *Code* and the extent to which the School's provision adheres to it. The Briefing Paper explains that, as an element in an ongoing process of monitoring, 'Departmental and Programme Reviews will check adherence'. Nevertheless, the published grid reveals areas of non or only partial alignment with some precepts as at February 2007. These include the monitoring of postgraduate research programmes against indicators and targets which was only partial in February 2007; only partial alignment with 13 out of the 24 precepts for *Students with disabilities*; no system for Registry to refuse ratification of appointments of external examiners on grounds of poor performance; lack of clarity in documentation about the locus of responsibility for fully briefing external examiners, and providing feedback on their reports; no publication of the membership of examination boards; inadequate documentation on the School's system for notifying and protecting the interests of students registered for, or accepted for admission to, programmes which are withdrawn; only partial alignment with four out of the 14 precepts for *Career education, information and guidance*.

95 The audit team noted that a procedure for an applicant's appeals against the outcome of a selection decision was only being drafted at Student Recruitment Committee in February 2007.

96 At a meeting of Learning and teaching policy committee on 13 May 2005, it was noted that the 1997 Dearing Report had suggested the introduction of progress files and that 'QAA had asked that Personal Development Plans (PDP) be operational across the whole Higher Education system for all Higher Education awards by 2005-06 entry'. The LTPC had resolved that a pilot via the Blackboard virtual learning environment (VLE) be introduced for 'a number of first year undergraduate students' from the start of the 2006-07 academic year and that the Head of Learning and Teaching Strategy report back to the Committee in the first term of 2007-08. The audit team noted that logbooks fulfilling the role of PDPs had been introduced for postgraduate research students, but it did not appear that the School had implemented the introduction of PDPs for all programmes.

97 QAAC appears to be charged with providing the School with information on the work of QAA and monitoring the School's practice in relation to QAA guidance. The LTPC in November 2003 merely 'noted' the QAA audit report. Under an agenda item titled 'QAA Action points' papers were received at a meeting the following May. In February 2005 under 'QAA Action Points' the committee considered a paper and 'Associate Deans were asked to ensure that clear criteria for the marking and grading of assessments had been produced within their Faculty'. This appears from the LTPC minutes to have been the extent of the Committee's response to the Audit, however, all minutes begin with the statement that they are 'for information only and are not a formal record of the meeting'.

### **Assessment policies**

98 As noted in a previous section, delays in the development of programme specifications have in turn led to a situation where a significant number of programmes do not yet have clearly articulated learning outcomes for each course. A key consideration in terms of learning opportunities is a clear understanding on the part of the student of the learning outcomes for each course and the criteria to be used in terms of assessment, suitably reinforced in terms of the processes of learning and teaching by formative assessment and feedback. The lack of clarity and/or completeness in terms of the published learning outcomes for some courses undermines the attainable quality of these learning opportunities. The audit team noted in this context that the report prepared by the Learning and Teaching Unit in response to student feedback for the academic year 2005-06 produces a lower than average level of student satisfaction in terms of their understanding in advance of criteria to be used in marking (67 per cent). The advice given to the School on the further articulation of learning outcomes in the context of the institutional

management of academic standards also has the capacity to enhance the associated learning opportunities in terms of formative feedback.

### **Management information (including completion and progression statistics)**

99 Whereas, as noted in a previous section, examples of the effective use of such data can be cited in the context of specific reviews of issues such as student skills needs, the induction process, and the student retention, the lack of mechanisms for the systematic evaluation and monitoring management information in terms of the quality of learning opportunities further confirm the recommendation made to the School in the previous section in terms of securing more consistent and purposeful use of management information.

### **Management information (including student representation, feedback and National Student Survey outcomes)**

100 The institutional audit report of 2003 recommended that the School review its arrangements for collecting and analysing feedback from its students, on their learning experiences, in order to ensure greater consistency across programmes. It also recommended that the School consider the merits of more formal arrangements to gather feedback from students, graduates and employers.

101 The Institutional Briefing Paper states that the School considers student feedback to be a significant element in gauging the quality of teaching, learning and support systems. The School has made some progress in meeting the recommendation made in the 2003 report. From 2004-05 the Learning and Teaching Unit has been responsible for course (or module) level evaluation in collaboration with the faculties and departments that are responsible for its implementation. A standardised form is used for the process referred to as the Student Evaluation of Courses (SEC) and questions are based on those in the National Student Survey (NSS). Students are asked to respond to 10 sets of questions, including views of teaching, learning resources, course organisation and management and academic support. This is completed anonymously for each course attended and analysed by the Learning and Teaching Unit using specialised data capture software. A summary report on the SECs is posted on the Learning and Teaching Unit website and a separate report, with commentary, is provided for consideration by LTPC, Academic Board, Academic Services Committee and the relevant faculty learning and teaching committee.

102 A summary on the SECs is posted on the Learning and Teaching Unit website and a separate report, with commentary, is provided for consideration by LTPC, Academic Board, Academic Services Committee and the relevant faculty learning and teaching committee.

103 This report also contains the details of, and a commentary on, the NSS. The summary of student responses to the NSS is also published on the website with a brief commentary from the Director and Principal. However, the receipt of the data from the NSS and the SEC by the Committee structure does not, at present trigger, in response, any systematic process of action planning.

104 A detailed breakdown from the SECs, by course, is provided to the head of department, who also scrutinises the forms for individual courses and has responsibility for meeting with the course convenor to address any issues raised. The students in their written submission expressed concern that this process occurs too late in the year to effect change for the following year's delivery of programmes.

105 Programme convenors/heads of department are asked to provide a commentary on student feedback when completing the pro forma for APR. However, this mechanism has not produced a consistent level of programme-level commentary for consideration through the APR process as the pro formas are not always completed and, when completed, include varying degrees of detail. For DPRs, students are invited to submit written submissions and a group of students is interviewed by the Panel. The School does not currently take a systematic approach to gathering the views of employers and graduates (other than its analysis of the NSS). The

Institutional Briefing Paper claims that the Careers Service is in, 'continual research and dialogue with a large range of employers including major national recruiters, specialist firms and local, smaller employers'. However, the audit team could identify no mechanism by which this information was fed back to and considered by the academic areas to support the process of programme design and evaluation.

106 The School is yet to establish a consistent approach to the dissemination of outcomes and actions from its course evaluations. Students report that they are not currently informed of action taken in response to this process. The Institutional Briefing Paper recognises that this is largely because, at departmental level, the outcomes of the student evaluation of courses are considered as a confidential matter, for discussion between a head of department and the member of staff concerned. Hitherto, student feedback has been accorded the status of highly sensitive information. It is only recently that the LTPC has recommended that course convenors and teachers should themselves be allowed to see the course level feedback and that action points should be agreed with heads of department and formally recorded.

107 The Periodic Review of Politics, in March 2005 revealed that a requirement made by the QAA Subject Review Panel some four years earlier, to ensure closure of this particular quality assurance loop (Subject review, Politics 2001) had not yet been met because student feedback on courses was regarded by the Department concerned as confidential information. Nor does the self-evaluation statement produced by the Department for the DPR (or Periodic Review) make any systematic report on student evaluation of courses or programmes. In November 2006, in response to similar outcomes from other Periodic Reviews, the Academic Board ruled that student feedback on courses should appear as an annual agenda item for all departments at the first departmental meeting of the year. Student representatives at the meeting would then hear discussion of the outcomes of course evaluations. Whilst this is a positive step in itself, it seems unlikely that this mechanism will ever provide comprehensive information to the student body of the detailed response to its course-level evaluation nor demonstrate to students that their views have been taken into account in the enhancement of courses.

108 By contrast, the Centre for Financial and Management Studies carries out a detailed on-line survey of its courses, using a detailed standard questionnaire issued at the end of each of its five annual sessions, administered through the Deputy Registrar's Office. The outcomes are published through the Online Study Centre. The experience derived from operating this system might well prove helpful in informing the development of a more systematic approach across the School.

109 Student feedback is also gathered routinely for the Annual Report of the central Student Services. Similarly the Careers Service collects feedback for its Annual Report. However, the Institutional Briefing Paper recognises that the information gathered in the Careers Service and the Alumni Office, on destinations of graduates and any feedback on their experience is not systematically transmitted to faculties and departments. Over the last year, the Head of the Careers Service has attended faculty and department meetings to discuss this data. The library holds a termly user's forum and has targeted the improved usage of user data in its development plan for 2006-07. A Student Experience Coordinator has been appointed, with a brief to implement a cross-School survey of academic, pastoral, and estates issues. It is intended that a Student Retention Project will draw upon these surveys to identify, what the project brief describes as 'areas for improvement'. The School feels that it 'is moving to a more coordinated approach to student surveys'

110 However, in order to further this process of coordination, the audit team advises that the School challenges, more directly than it has done so far, the issue of confidentiality that still surrounds student feedback at course level. The School should establish and implement mechanisms to ensure that students are made aware of the outcomes of their evaluations of the courses and programmes that they are undertaking. The School's current Strategic Plan includes the Key Goal, 'To improve standards of teaching at all levels drawing on peer observation and

student feedback'. This laudable aspiration is likely to be compromised by the residual sense in some of its departments that some aspects of student feedback cannot be discussed transparently with students and used within the public domain. The School should recognise the stake that students have in their own learning, by ensuring that they are enabled to play a full part in the process of enhancement. This involvement should be reflected in a fuller dialogue at departmental level. This dialogue should also be more fully reflected in the arrangements for APR than it is at present.

111 The audit team advises the School to ensure that students are made aware of the outcomes of course and programme evaluations.

### **Role of students in quality assurance and quality enhancement**

112 In the 2003 report, it was recommended that the School consider how it might achieve greater consistency in arrangements for student representation at all levels. The Institutional Briefing Paper states that 'Student input is crucial to the School's everyday workings'. The operation of the student representative system is based on a 'Code of Practice' agreed by Academic Board in 2001. This provides for the election, support, induction and training of student representatives and sets out the nature of the responsibilities of the School, the department and the student within the representative system. Whilst this document is recognised as being in need of some updating, (it does not, for example, recognise the existence of the faculty system established after 2001), it does, however, provide a substantial basis for the operation of the representative system. The School is encouraged to update its 'Code of Practice' as a framework for the continuing support of the system in the future.

113 Students are provided with full opportunities to express their views throughout the deliberative structure and the approach taken by the new Director and Principal is widely felt to affirm this process. A minor modification was made to the School's Royal Charter in 2002, to allow student membership of Governing Body and the Academic Board. In addition, significant numbers of student representatives are present throughout the committee structure, notably on the LTPC, faculty boards, faculty learning and teaching committees, and faculty research committees. One or two course representatives are elected for each year of undergraduate programmes, one or two representatives for each postgraduate programmes and one representative per department for postgraduate research students.

114 The Students' Union's Representation Assistant works with the faculty offices to ensure that these places are filled. The Students' Union also issues a leaflet of guidance for representatives, and encouragement is given to students to become representatives in the School Student Handbooks. The Students' Union provides training to representatives to support committee work and the role of the programme or course representative. Students report that the system of representatives has been adapted to support language students on their placement year abroad.

115 Students report some difficulties in the timing and nature of the elections of programme representatives. In particular, the provision in the *Code of practice* prescribing the 'democratic election' of programme representatives in the first three weeks of the autumn term has been difficult to deliver in practice and students report occasions where student representatives have been appointed by staff rather than elected.

116 In addition, the Institutional Briefing Paper recognises that the effectiveness of the student representative system varies across the School 'some of the departments have a better established culture of representation than others'. The School also recognises that this was the situation when it was last subject to audit, in 2003. This point is also made in the student written submission and was reinforced by the students that met the auditors. In addition, representatives for postgraduate research students have registered difficulties in identifying and engaging with their constituency. This point was confirmed by the postgraduate research students' representative that the auditors met and also through the student submissions to the Departmental and Programme Review of Politics in 2005.

117 These points notwithstanding, the student written submission fully endorses the School's maintenance of, and support for, its student representative system, stating that this works particularly well at departmental level. Minutes of departmental meetings indicate that the extent to which student concerns are raised and discussed varies considerably, but that some good practice exists, for example, in the Department of Anthropology.

### **Links between research or scholarly activity and learning opportunities**

118 The School is proud to be 'one of the top UK universities for research' and 'regards it as axiomatic that in universities, research and teaching are inseparable...mutually dependent'. The Briefing Paper emphasises that teaching in the School 'is informed and replenished by high level research'. However, the Paper also states that some elements in the School's teaching provision is not supplied by research-active staff but by 'teaching-only staff': the teaching of this latter group is informed and replenished, not by their high level research, but 'by a professional approach to pedagogy'.

119 The Director and Principal assured the audit team that the School was committed to the appointment of staff who were both good researchers and good teachers, and that all candidates for academic posts were required to give presentations at interview. The School's promotions criteria include the requirement that staff produce evidence of the quality of their teaching as well as the quality of their research, although it is not explicitly stated in the procedure for promotion that candidate's must demonstrate the link between their research and the quality of their teaching.

120 The Briefing Paper cites the October 2006 special issue of Research News as 'demonstrating how academic staff's research projects inform teaching'. The audit team read the special issue but could only find in it an article on the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008 data collection and a description of 72 current research projects, only two of which referred to the dissemination of results through seminars or lectures. There did not appear to be any discussion of how research informs teaching.

121 The School's emphasis on research, and its belief that research should feed teaching, is reflected at all levels. The DPR Report on the Department of the Languages and Cultures of South East Asia delivered to QAAC in December 2006 described the Faculty's plans for moving introductory-level languages teaching to the Language Centre because it would 'allow research-active staff to give more time to research and to developing courses more closely linked to their research interests'. The School's eight Regional Centres (African Studies, Chinese Studies, Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus, Japan Research, Korean Studies, Near and Middle Eastern Studies, South Asian Studies, South East Asian Studies), aim to 'emphasise and enhance the specialist regional focus of SOAS by contributing to the School's regional research and teaching/learning environments...They are especially important in the recruitment of students' and 'provide a focus point for activities...which are attended by under- and post-graduate students, staff and other interested persons outside SOAS'.

122 The audit team noted that the School's draft Learning and Teaching Strategy 2006-07 to 2009-10 proposed as a key strategic objective 'to deliver a research-informed teaching environment that reflects the specialist nature of the institution'. It also includes the observation that 'it may be that the Learning and Teaching Strategy should include developing research-teaching linkages further'. The draft was presented to the LTPC at its meeting on 19 May 2006, and the Committee expressed the view that the strategy 'would need to be informed by the research strategy'.

123 The audit team confirmed that the School was engaged in exploring further and articulating for its stakeholders the mutual dependence of research on teaching and teaching on research.



## Other modes of study

124 Undergraduate degrees can only be studied full-time, but part-time students are welcomed for postgraduate degrees and a range of certificates and diplomas. The Department of Financial and Management Studies offers master's degrees and diplomas in distance-learning mode. The distance-learning programmes are managed according to University of London generic and SOAS programme regulations.

125 In addition to its portfolio of certificate, diploma and degree programmes, the School offers bridging courses, summer schools and short and tailor-made one-to-one language courses. The Language Centre runs timetabled and tailored courses in over 50 African and Asian languages. The Department of International Foundation Courses and English Language Studies (IFCELS) provides preparatory and in-session support for international students, such as the Intermediate Certificate in Comparative International Studies, the Foundation Diploma for Postgraduate Studies and Diploma/Certificate in English Language and Academic Studies. It also offers a course in Teaching English for Academic Purposes at undergraduate or postgraduate levels. The Department's academic strategy is the responsibility of the Pro-Director, as Chair of the LTPC, and its programmes' assessment procedures are regulated by examination boards and External Examiners in the same way as those of any other department. It is subject to Internal Periodic Review, with a DPR due in 2008-09.

126 The School has approximately 1,500 students registered on those master's programmes delivered by distance learning, for which SOAS is the lead college for the University of London External System. The arrangement between the School and the University is detailed in a service level agreement between the two organisations. Students are registered with the Centre for Financial and Management Studies, located in the Department for Finance and Management Studies in the Faculty of Law and Social Science. The most recent overview of 'live' students indicates that these are spread throughout the world, with the largest concentrations in Europe (433 students), Africa (308 students) and the Americas (271 students).

127 The School intends to increase the number of students on these programmes. In some cases, students have the opportunity to link their programme with a tutorial support programme delivered by an in-country partner institution (referred to by the School as 'additionality') under a Memorandum of Agreement. The auditors scrutinised the approval and partnership arrangements with the University of Hong Kong for an MSc in International Management (China), a programme that also runs, by attendance, at the SOAS Campus.

128 Students are supported on the distance-learning programmes by study packs that are generally based on a central text book, augmented by readers and research papers and articles supplied on CD-ROM. Students also receive a well-structured unit study programme. Students have access to considerable on-line journal material. The study packs seen by the auditors were well designed and were considered, by the students interviewed, to be sufficient to support their study without necessary recourse to the Online Study Centre. The comprehensive Student Feedback Surveys, which are undertaken every session, support this generally positive view of the learning materials. The School has calibrated the provision against *Part B: Aspects specific to flexible and distributed learning* of the Code of practice, *Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)* and auditors share the School's view that it reflects the expectations of the sector for such provision.

129 However, the students located within London raised concerns that they were allowed 'reference only' status at the SOAS Library. The School sees this as an issue of parity between distance-learning students in different locations. However, the given the fact that some distance-learning students enjoy the benefits of 'additionality' with other in-country institutions, the exclusion of London-based distance-learning students (some 12 per cent of the School's distance learning students) from full use of the library, might warrant review.

## Resources for learning

130 The Information Strategy Committee is responsible for policy concerning the library, with operational matters under the remit of the Academic Services Committee. There is also a Library Strategy Group which is a forum for debate on library issues for academics and students. The library has undergone significant physical and virtual expansion in recent years. A notable recent acquisition is a major new undergraduate collection in English Law. In 2006, 300 additional reader spaces were added, bringing the total space available up to the HEFCE norm of 1:4-6 students. Subsequently, a successful bid to the Wolfson Fund has enabled the library to go ahead with a project to extend the space allocated to its archives and special collections, a resource widely used by the academic community beyond, as well as within, the School. The extended area is expected to be in use from early 2007. Both the library and Information Technology (IT) Department conduct user surveys of their services.

131 The library has worked with the Learning and Teaching Unit to pilot electronic versions of study-packs for the MSc in Development Studies, and it is intended that study-packs for other programmes will be digitised and cleared for copyright in-house in 2007-08, and subsequently incorporated within the VLE. In 2006, SOAS was successful in its bid to join the prestigious Consortium of Research Libraries in the British Isles (CURL), providing access to the catalogues of other members' libraries. Another development has been the award of funding from the Joint Information Systems Committee to be part of a first wave of libraries implementing the Shibboleth environment which will in due course replace current access systems across the UK.

132 A Library Strategic Review was completed in May 2006 following a process of internal and external consultation, and its recommendations considered by Academic Board and also Governing Body. The library Strategic Review Group felt that the absence of a clear strategy for the School made it impossible for them adequately to address parts of their terms of reference, and the School has accordingly decided, whilst approving this report, to consider its findings further within the context of the wider School Strategic Review. A key issue raised in the Report is the inadequacy of the library opening hours both in themselves and when compared to other libraries, a view endorsed by the students in their written submission, and also the student representatives met at both the briefing visit and the audit visit. In 2006 the library, in conjunction with the Students' Union, was able to pilot a short period of 24-hour opening in the critical pre-examination period, and it is hoped to repeat the scheme in the coming year. A similar correlation between the Report's findings and the views of students concerns the lack of computers in the library, making it difficult to work with books restricted to the library, and also with the variability of access to core texts, especially in larger classes and where study packs were absent.

133 The IT Department supports the development of information tools and systems for research, learning and management within the School and between the School and the rest of the world. The School currently has a total of around 300 computers available for student use, of which approximately 45 are reserved for the use of research degree students. The needs of different categories of students are kept under review, informed by user surveys and from time to time adjustments to allocations are made to suit current circumstances. All computers provide a standard range of local and internet applications. Some provide additional facilities, for example non-Roman print, international broadcast television and radio, multimedia facilities for students submitting work using non-traditional media, and assistive technology of particular use to those with certain disabilities. Particular praise was forthcoming from students in the context of the work of the Learning and Teaching Unit in developing the VLE via Blackboard. This VLE, known as the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE) has been developed collaboratively between SOAS, the Royal Veterinary College (RVC), the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), and more recently the Institute of Education (IoE).

134 Further IT resources include three dedicated language laboratories for language students. The School has also invested in multimedia facilities and its new multimedia suite provides training for both staff and students in video, sound, image and DVD editing and production.

The Multi Media Project Board (MMPB), chaired by the Dean of Arts and Humanities, was established in 2004 specifically to address the issues surrounding multiple media, and to prioritise and progress work on digital media technologies at SOAS. A Research Centre was inaugurated at the Russell Square Campus in 2004. It includes a range of facilities for research students, including state-of-the-art computing facilities. In a strategic context the School has yet to implement a comprehensive and suitably integrated IT Strategy. A draft strategy was produced in 2005 but it has yet to be published and implemented. The 2003 QAA institutional audit noted the concern of students and staff that investment in IT facilities for teaching and learning was not keeping pace with the growth in student numbers. The audit team concluded that whereas some aspects of IT provision still required further attention, notably the provision of computers and wireless access points in the library, the overall quality and standard of resources had improved significantly since 2003. Nonetheless, it recognised that both in the case of the library and also IT-based resources for learning, the School will need to be vigilant in ensuring that the quality of provision is secured and enhanced to meet the rising expectations of students.

135 The audit team noted that the School does not allow those distance-learning students living within travelling distance from the School borrowing books from the SOAS library. The School may wish to consider reviewing this policy in the context of achieving a less disadvantageous environment for distance-learning students in terms of learning opportunities.

### **Admissions policy**

136 The School's Admissions Policy states that it believes that 'a diverse student population contributes to a challenging and stimulating environment. We therefore welcome...applications from all candidates with the potential to succeed, whatever their background. We are committed to equality of opportunity and aim to avoid unfair discrimination on any grounds, including disability, gender, age, ethnic background, sexual orientation, religion or belief'. At the same time, the School is involved in the HEFCE Aimhigher 'Focus on Higher Education' scheme, has been extending its provision of bridging courses and is 'progressively implementing' its Access Agreement.

137 While the School has published a Harassment Policy (dated December 2001), a Race Equality Policy (June 2003), an Equality and Diversity Policy (June 2004), a Racial Equality Policy Action Plan (March 2005), a Policy on Sexual Orientation (April 2005) and was drafting a Disabilities Policy in December 2006, the audit team learned that the Report of the Equality Committee 2005-06 to the Governing Body (due to be considered on 23 March 2007) described delays in updating the policies on Harassment, Disabilities, Gender and Race. Although an external agency had conducted a Staff Equality Survey in the autumn of 2005, the Equality Committee expressed reservations about its conclusions and hoped that the 2006-07 staff survey would be an improvement. At the same time, a report on Students' Diversity data for 2005-06, a Staff Diversity report for 2005-06 and a Governing Body Diversity report for 2006 would all be delayed until the summer term 2007.

138 The audit team asked a meeting of staff whether they felt they had sufficient control over student admissions at undergraduate and postgraduate levels to ensure that the School was admitting students who might be expected to be able to complete satisfactorily the programmes for which they were registered and was told that they did. SOAS Regulation 4.6 states that the School 'reserves the right to reject applications to study at the School on academic grounds or if places are no longer available and to give no reasons to such applicants' but there does not appear to be a procedure for applicants who wish to appeal against such decisions.

139 In November and December 2005, Academic Board and the Governing Body were informed that, while enrolments were up on the previous year, overseas and postgraduate research targets had not been met. A year later they heard that postgraduate enrolments were below target. The DPR for Department of the Languages and Cultures of South East Asia in December 2006 took note of a decline in both applications and registrations in recent years. The

panel reported that it was 'concerned by the low level of recruitment' and suggested that the Department consider lowering its entrance requirements and recommended that the Department review recruitment generally.

140 Once recruited, the School has had difficulty in managing the registration of its students, finding that the growth in student numbers over the last 10 years has put an unacceptable strain on its human and physical resources at the point of registration. In the DPR report for the Department of the Languages and Cultures of South East Asia, 'Students,...particularly postgraduates, reported unfavourably on their experience of the admissions and enrolment system', and students whom the audit team met at a briefing meeting and audit meeting confirmed that registration needed to be better organised.

141 In February 2007, the LTPC received a report on retention from the Widening Participation Coordinator, which was 'less than encouraging'. The report analysed statistical data including comparisons with national benchmarks and concluded that 'The issue is no longer one of retention but one of student success and experience'. The Head of Learning and Teaching Strategy explained that a Student Experience Action Plan 'emphasised the importance of improving the student experience, which was the way to address dropout rates'.

142 The audit team acknowledged that the School recognised that it had three problems: recruitment; registration; and retention, and the team was satisfied that the School was actively seeking to address them.

### **Student support**

143 The School approach to student support is articulated in the Institutional Briefing Paper and focuses on the fact that it is a small institution with a favourable staff-student ratio, facilitating good access to tutors by its students. The Learning and Teaching Strategy includes 'enhancing the student experience' as a 'Priority Area', placing its focus on better integration of systems for support: 'To develop integrated practices and procedures to ensure an excellent support network and to enhance student progression and success, particularly in relation to the personal tutoring system and implementing personal development planning'.

144 Whilst students confirm the general accessibility of tutorial staff, the School has registered concerns in recent years with the operation of its personal tutoring system. The Student Experience Action Plan makes the link between student drop-out and the system of personal tutoring, identifying a need to identify students that are defined as being 'at risk' in academic terms. The DPR in Politics, in the Faculty of Law and Social Science, in March 2005, identified similar concerns with the operation of the personal tutoring system in that Department. In particular, the Review highlighted the effect that the increasing tendency, for students to rely on one-to-one academic advice from course convenors, had to spread the load unevenly across the academic staff. The Department was advised under 'necessary action', to 'clarify the systems which the Department itself has in place to supplement the personal tutor system and to relieve the current pressure on the convenors of popular courses to provide academic guidance to undergraduate students'.

145 The system for personal tutoring is under the remit of the LPTC but the Committee delegates to the faculties the ability to make different arrangements for their own students and departments. The Faculty of Arts and Humanities has retained the personal tutorial system and allocates a personal tutor to each student. This person is a point of academic advice and referral to support services throughout the student's programme of study. The Faculty of Law and Social Science agreed to discontinue this system at a meeting of its Faculty Board in June 2006. Instead, students gain academic advice from course convenors and are directed, when it is needed, to the relevant central services through a faculty student support office. In May 2005, the Faculty of Languages and Cultures replaced personal tutors with a system of year tutors. Students are referred to their course convenors and year tutors for academic matters and, through the Faculty Office, to the central Student Services for non-academic matters. The Institutional Briefing Paper stresses the availability of academic advice to students with staff publishing their office hours.

146 The student written submission (SWS), written in late 2006, postdated all of these developments but still identified the School's personal tutoring system as 'a weakness in student support'. Whilst affirming that students, who were consulted in writing the SWS, felt that their 'learning experience was well supported in class', the SWS highlights the varying attitude of academic staff in the School towards giving academic support to individual students. These points were also confirmed in the auditors meetings with students. In discussion with academic staff, the audit team were told that the difficulties with the personal tutor system were seen partly as those of nomenclature. The term indicated that academic staff members are qualified to give advice on personal matters.

147 The devolution of the responsibility for personal tutoring to faculties has resulted in a range of approaches to the academic support of individual students. The indications are that this remains an unresolved issue in the minds of both staff and students at the School. Whilst the diversity of models for achieving advice for individual students is not necessarily problematic in itself, the potential for confusion on the part of students is greater within such diversity. The Undergraduate and Postgraduate Handbook provide little detail to students on the matter of individual academic advice across the three faculties. There is a real risk that students in need of advice may not know how to access it. Given the importance that the School Learning and Teaching Strategy attaches to supporting 'at risk' students, this is a matter of importance.

148 PDP is identified in the Learning and Teaching Strategy for 2003 to 2006 as an important element in its plans to enhance the student experience. However, at the time of the audit the School had not yet implemented its plans for PDP. It is currently exploring the possibilities of piloting PDP through its VLE, drawing advice from other colleges in the Bloomsbury Group. The School is reminded that it is now some way behind the timetable of national expectations and its own declared strategic intentions in this regard.

149 Learning and study support workshops are provided for students by the Learning and Teaching Unit, coordinated by the Co-ordinator for Learner Support working in close collaboration with other service providers, particularly counselling and specialist staff in IFCELS. Over the last year these have included workshops on essay and dissertation writing, note-taking, time management, making presentations and language acquisition. These workshops have been very successful in attracting student participation. In 2005-06, there some were 1,400 attendances at the Learning and Teaching Unit study support workshops and a further 450 at the Unit's one-to-one tutorial programme. This study support provision is identified as a strength of the School in the SWS. The audit team agreed that the support provided to both undergraduate and postgraduate students by the Learning and Teaching Unit is a feature of good practice.

150 Undergraduate students studying for language degrees undertake a compulsory year abroad, for example, in East Africa, Japan and China. The students are provided with some guidance on the location, key information and contacts and this is augmented by web-based support from Student Services. The provision has been calibrated by the School against the *Code of practice, Section 9: Placement learning*.

151 The central Student Services are managed by the Student Services Co-ordinator, reporting to the Deputy Secretary's office, based in Vernon Square. Professional advice and support is provided in all significant areas, including counselling, disability, welfare, student finance, visas and immigration. A Diversity Advisor has responsibility for action across the School under all equal opportunities legislation. Student Services lead staff development for academic and administrative staff, sometimes in collaboration with the Learning and Teaching Unit and the Students' Union. The SOAS Careers Service is based in Russell Square and is a member of the Careers Group, a University of London confederation, and accredited by the Matrix standard. The Institutional Briefing Paper demonstrates that the School is currently working towards a better integration of its central support services with its academic framework of faculties and departments. Recently the Learning and Teaching Unit and Student Services have established a working group to ensure the coordination of the services that they both offer to students. Students report that they are aware of the availability of such services and are able to access them when needed.

152 Incoming students are provided with an induction to the School, referred to as Orientation and incorporating Students' Union freshers' week activities. Students and staff have recently raised concerns about the effectiveness of enrolment and registration, that takes place at the same time. These concerns were confirmed by the meetings that the auditors had with academic and administrative staff and students. The School acknowledges the problems with the logistics of this procedure and has recently established a working group, consisting of Registrar, Academic Registrar, and Head of Learning and Teaching Strategy, to address them.

153 Students receive a comprehensive Student Handbook which acts as a work of reference for the formal framework within which the programmes are delivered. This includes the Academic Regulations, a good level of detail on all School support services (including the Learning and Teaching Unit, Counselling, Disability Co-ordinator, Health Service, Accommodation Service) as well as a range of relevant policies (including Appeals/Representation, Grievance, Disciplinary, Equality and Diversity, Sexual Orientation, Sexual and Racial Harassment, Freedom of Expression). At the level of programmes and courses, information to students could be made more comprehensive by ensuring the provision of Programme Specifications for all programmes. The LTPC, noted in November 2006 that 'There were a few undergraduate programme specifications still in preparation' whilst the DPR on South East Asia in December 2006 noted gaps in the completion and updating of this documentation. The School is also advised that students should be provided with intended learning outcomes for all modules. At present its web-based information indicates that students are not provided with this important information.

154 The audit team considers it advisable to ensure that the School establishes and monitors threshold requirements for the range of support mechanisms for individual students that operate in its three faculties.

### **Staff support, development and reward**

155 The Institutional Briefing Paper notes that all academic and administrative staff are supported by standard processes of induction, probation, the annual staff development and review interviews and opportunities for continuing professional development, offered in-house and externally. All staff are encouraged to apply for places on staff development and professional events. Financial support for academic conferences and seminars is provided by faculties, and a central staff development budget supports applications for seminars, workshops, conferences and professional accredited courses. The School's Code of Practice on Probation for New Academic Staff explains the arrangements for probation in terms of the role of the head of department in assessing progress, the arrangements for mentoring, and the criteria for confirmation to permanent appointment, normally after a probationary period of three years. The audit team noted that the School's Code of Practice, which dates from 2002, did not provide any guidelines for mentors but it was advised that as part of a review of the Code suitable guidelines had recently been drafted. A scrutiny of a copy of this draft led the team to conclude that appropriate steps were being taken to secure the delivery of this key aspect of staff development.

156 In the context of peer observation of teaching, a review group consisting of the Head of Learning and Teaching and the Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) met in February 2005 to review a pilot scheme in 2004-05. It noted that the pilot had not achieved the desired objectives and take-up had been minimal across the faculties. In response it put forward a series of recommendations for further consideration. It was agreed by LTPC in March 2005 that all probationary academic staff and extra academic assistants were to be observed once a year (ideally in the first term) and the observation of permanent staff was to be integrated into the DPR process (once every three years). The audit team also learnt that the annual Staff Development and Review interviews for post-probation staff are in practice biennial and not annual, and the take-up is only about 80 per cent. It became apparent from meetings with heads of department and new members of staff that at present there are no systematic processes in place for monitoring the effectiveness of the arrangements for probation, peer observation of teaching and annual (biennial) staff development and review. At the time of the audit in March

2007, there was of course no written evidence of peer observation reports having yet contributed to the DPR process. The School is thus at present unable to assure these processes securely.

157 The audit team advises the School to take the appropriate steps to ensure systematic implementation and monitoring requirements of peer observation of teaching, as agreed by the LTPC, staff development review, and the mentoring and training of new members of teaching staff.

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

### **The institution's processes for managing quality enhancement**

158 At the time of the audit the School was operating with a Learning and Teaching Strategy originally introduced in 2000 and updated and revised in 2003, just prior to the 2003 QAA institutional audit. This strategy thus predates the emergence of quality enhancement as a key indicator in the current round of institutional audits. The Strategy is predicated upon the basic precept of building on existing good practice in the School to improve the quality of learning and teaching at all levels. It aims to enhance the learning experience by investing in improved services and technologies, such as computer-assisted learning, but for understandable reasons given its age does not specifically engage with the emerging quality enhancement agenda. At the time of the audit a draft plan, 'SOAS 2016', including a new Learning and Teaching Strategy, was in the final stages of approval, and the School's approach to managing quality enhancement will be developed within the revised Learning and Teaching Strategy.

159 The audit team found occasional reference to enhancement in the Briefing Paper. For example, it states that 'The quality of teaching is...enhanced through the high calibre of the School's academic staff' but the team was unable to find evidence that the School had a method of testing the validity of such an assertion. The team had equal difficulty with the assertion that academic standards are 'enhanced by the intellectual attainment demanded of the students'. In both cases, the School appeared to be saying that its staff appointment policy was designed to ensure that enhancement was the inevitable function of appointment. It seemed to the team that the School was investing a great deal of trust in both the policy and those who administered it.

160 At a Briefing meeting with staff on 15 February 2007, it was suggested that the creation of faculties and the Learning and Teaching Unit were examples of quality enhancement, but both of these developments predated the institutional audit of April 2003 and were therefore not in themselves evidence of the institution pursuing a continuing enhancement strategy. Indeed, the audit team found little evidence, in either the documentation supplied to the team or the team's meetings with staff, of a conscious and articulated engagement with the concept of enhancement as defined by QAA. The Briefing Paper states that there is 'a developing institutional approach to enhancing quality', but the audit team was not able to find any sustained explanation of what constituted that approach. The team considers it desirable that the School develops a strategic approach to quality enhancement.

### **Student support**

161 The School states that recent developments have given increased prominence to the enhancement of teaching and learning. Integral to this has been the quality of support systems for both campus-based and distance-learning students. While these have been important developments, the School recognises that this is an area which could be further improved.

### **Dissemination of good practice**

162 The Briefing Paper identifies three mechanisms for disseminating good practice. The consolidated Annual Report to the University of London, which is received by the Learning and Teaching Policy Committee (LTPC) and can be used by colleges to record, and therefore publicise to other colleges within the University examples of good practice, is a further mechanism, but

this is necessarily an indirect and non-directive mechanism. The School's membership of the Bloomsbury pedagogy group provides another opportunity for some staff to discuss and learn from one another's good practice, but this is restricted to good practice in eLearning.

163 The School considers the Departmental and Programme Review (DPR) process its prime mechanism for disseminating good practice, because DPR reports identify examples of good practice and faculty officers are involved in the review process. But while DPR provides an opportunity for dissemination, the audit team did not feel that this opportunity alone provided a sufficiently dynamic structure to ensure that good practice was necessarily brought to the attention of a wide audience and acted upon.

164 When reading the DPR reports, which had been produced since December 2004, the audit team found they almost always gave the same or similar examples of good practice couched in the same or similar words. Thus good practice in Politics and International Studies was a 'fine record in teaching' and a 'commitment to improvement in its RAE rating', Linguistics had 'innovative research and teaching', Development Studies had 'strength in teaching and research', and each of Languages and Cultures of Japan and Korea, Languages and Cultures of South Asia and Languages and Cultures of South East Asia had a 'fine record of teaching and research'.

165 Similarly, all of these departments except Politics and International Studies was noted either for its 'informal and supportive environment offered to students', or for its 'informal and highly supportive environment offered to students on an individual basis'. The Department of Politics and International Studies was noted for its 'buoyant student recruitment and retention numbers at undergraduate level'.

166 The audit team took the view that, while it was commendable that departments were being praised by colleagues for their activities, none of these commendations identified anything beyond the normal expectations of departments in higher education (innovative research, good teaching, support for individual students, healthy recruitment and retention). It took the view that such general statements afforded, at best, on very limited opportunity for effective dissemination of good practice. On occasion, some additional examples of good practice were provided, for example, 'the strong leadership shown by the Head of Department and other office holders', 'the development of a coherent and formal departmental organisational structure and allocation of duties', a 'willingness to examine its own provision, and sound mechanisms for internal review and improvement'. But, again, the audit team considered these to be the expected characteristics of any good department within the sector, and it was not clear how, as formulated, they could be reproduced or adapted for use by other departments. Furthermore the minutes of the Quality Audit and Assurance Committee, LTPC and Academic Board examined by the audit team did not reveal any evidence of these or other examples of good practice arising from DPRs being systematically discussed, commented on or taken further.

167 The audit team considers it desirable for the School to develop systematic mechanisms for routinely and effectively identifying and disseminating good practice.

### **Staff support, development and reward**

168 Responsibility for staff development initiatives resides with the Staff Development Office which reports to the SOAS Staffing Committee. In 2005, a new database Resourcelink was established linked to the Human Resource's database and this is used to record all centrally organised or funded training and development. The Learning and Teaching Unit takes a major role in this context, promoting innovative teaching and learning practices and other procedures through individual support to teaching staff and through the learning and teaching seminar series. From 2006-07 this series has been replaced by the Teaching Development Series, with a more practical emphasis. Part-time hourly paid teachers are supported via three-day training sessions in September, with the option of ongoing support in the form of drop-in sessions. New and/or inexperienced PhD supervisors are similarly supported via day seminars at the start of the academic year.



169 Academic promotions are considered by a Faculty Promotions Committee which ranks applications from within a faculty for the Schools Promotions Committee, whose decisions are put forward to the Governing Body for formal endorsement. In terms of promotion criteria the School places great weight on peer judgements as reflected in the Research Assessment Exercise and objective criteria relating to research output. A prerequisite for promotion to senior lecturer is academic achievement in both research and teaching, and the audit team concluded that the procedures adopted to ensure that achievements in teaching were appropriately recognised and rewarded in this context were appropriate. The School has produced guidelines on workloads and time allocation, and is conscious of the need for staff to achieve an appropriate balance between the competing pressures of teaching, research and administration. The School has yet to develop and implement quality enhancement objectives in the context of staff support, development and reward, however, the Director's Teaching Prize recognises excellence in teaching and the promotion of learning within the School, and discussions with staff confirmed is valued highly.

## Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

### The institution's processes for managing collaborative provision

170 There is currently no strategy specific to the management of collaborative provision, and there are no confirmed proposals to expand activity in this area. The Ordinances of the University of London allow colleges to offer degrees collaboratively. SOAS maintains such collaborative arrangements with several other University of London colleges, as follows:

Partner	Programme
University College London	BA History of Art (Asia, Africa, Europe)* BA in a SOAS language programme jointly with French
King's College London	BA in a SOAS programme jointly with Geography* MA in Turkish at SOAS jointly with Modern Greek Studies
Birkbeck College	BA in a SOAS language programme jointly with Management*

\* SOAS acts as the lead institution in these programmes.

171 In addition to these specific programme combinations, the colleges of the University of London, under the Ordinance which authorises them to offer degrees 'jointly or severally', operate a high level of flexibility in allowing undergraduate students to take courses from other colleges. SOAS both allows its own undergraduates to take advantage of this arrangement, and welcomes students from other colleges. Such 'external' courses can either make up the required number of units in the named degree subject, or count as a 'floater'. Students must be accepted by the course convenor before completing a registration form, which is then signed off by the relevant undergraduate tutor (who assesses the suitability of their chosen course for their programme of study, allowing for the taking of one 'floater' course per year) and by Registry staff (who assess the financial viability of the request).

172 In the case of postgraduate programmes there is less flexibility. Students may take courses at other colleges only if they have been previously approved as part of the syllabus of their programme. There is currently a small number of master's programmes with approved courses, of which one example is the MA in Media and Film Studies. For students enrolled for this new offering, from 2006, SOAS has entered into an agreement with two other colleges, Queen Mary and Westfield College and Birkbeck College, and approved several of their courses as suitable to its syllabus. The agreement is a reciprocal one, and is to be reviewed annually for the first three years of its operation to assess whether the exchange of students is equally balanced between the three colleges.

### **External examiners in collaborative provision**

173 The processes for appointing external examiners in collaborative provision, including programmes studied by distance learning via the University of London's External System, are identical to those used for School programmes. In the case of the collaborative degrees with other University of London colleges, responsibilities in this context extend only to those degrees for which SOAS acts as the lead institution. In the case of the distance-learning programmes offered by the Department of Financial and Management Studies, the timing of examinations require the appointment of separate subboards, and these may not necessarily have the same visiting examiners as those used for the corresponding full-time programmes. It is thus not always possible to ensure that external monitoring of an appropriate equivalence of academic standards in terms of the two modes of study is routinely provided. The School may wish to consider strengthening its assurance of this aspect by increasing the proportion of visiting examiners appointed to both boards. In the case of five degrees taught in collaboration with other University of London colleges the audit team noted that the lead college takes responsibility for all aspects of examining, including the appointment of visiting examiners and the subsequent consideration of all issues arising from their reports.

### **Assessment policies and regulations**

174 The assessment policies and regulations for collaborative programmes for which the School is the lead institution and the distance-learning programmes administered via the University of London External System are to all intents and purposes identical to those used with those used for School programmes.

### **Management information (including completion and progression statistics)**

175 Consideration of management information and its use in the context of assuring both quality and standards rests with the School department ultimately responsible for each collaborative or distance-learning programme and the associated faculty. Thus the Centre of Financial and Management Studies is responsible for the information derived from all the distance-learning programmes currently offered by the School. The comments and recommendations that have been made in previous sections thus apply equally to collaborative and distance-learning programmes. The audit team learnt, however, that Annual Programme Reviews currently do not compare student experience on distance learning and non-distance learning programmes and School is advised to include this aspect in its revised arrangements for more consistent and purposeful use of management information.

### **Resources for learning**

176 In the case of the collaborative programmes with other University of London colleges students have the same access to resources for learning as students registered wholly for SOAS degrees. The situation is somewhat different for distance-learning students. Department of Financial and Management Studies distance-learning students have for several years had the recommended option of learning online for the duration of their study. The institution utilises a bespoke virtual learning environment product created by the University of London External Programme called EFFECT, known within Department of Financial and Management Studies and by their students as the Online Study Centre. Students can take one course in each of the five 'study sessions' offered each calendar year and can pace their study over several years (up to a maximum of five). Course materials can be accessed directly from the Online Study Centre. The Online Study Centre enables students to submit assignments and receive marks online; and to contact academic, administrative and technical staff and fellow students via online discussion groups.

## **Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students**

### **The institutional arrangements and the research environment**

177 The School states that primary responsibility for the selection of research students lies with departments. Admissions decisions are taken by two members of staff, one of whom should be the departmental research tutor. It is the responsibility of the departmental research tutor and the relevant Faculty Associate Dean (Research) to ensure that applications are processed speedily and that students are only admitted to a research degree where an appropriate supervisor can be identified and provision made for regular supervision throughout the period of registration. Admission to a research degree is normally dependent upon submission and approval of a research topic which the applicant articulates, normally in a statement of up to 1,000 words.

178 Admissions tutors work within the framework of guidelines developed by the Registry, which vets admissions, ensuring that postgraduate research students have a United Kingdom (UK) master's degree or equivalent. If normal entry requirements do not appear to have been met, departments must make a case for admission to the Associate Dean (Research) in the relevant faculty. Decisions on applications are valid only if communicated by the Academic Registrar or authorised deputy. The Registry also ensures that supervisors and examiners are appropriately qualified and ensures that annual monitoring of research students is carried out.

### **Selection, admission, induction and supervision of research students**

179 Postgraduate research students normally have only one formal supervisor, although there is provision for dual supervision for topics which span departments or faculties. Supervision is managed via a Supervisory Committee, normally comprising the supervisor, the department's research tutor and one other member of staff from the same or a cognate department. Its function is to monitor the progress of each research student.

180 The School is aware of the need, identified in the relevant section of the *Code of practice*, to safeguard students against the consequences of a supervisor taking on an excessive volume of research students and/or an unusually heavy range of administrative responsibilities. The School's Guidelines suggest that a supervisor should be responsible for no more than six postgraduate research students at any one time. Its Learning and Teaching Policy Committee (LTPC) recently affirmed that this needed to be applied sensibly. Some level of flexibility would be needed to ensure that well-qualified candidates were not turned away. The audit team appreciated that this issue is not straightforward but it urges the School to put procedures in place to monitor supervisory workloads with a view to ensuring that the requirements reflect the *Code of practice*.

181 The QAA Review of research degree programmes (RDP) in 2006 concluded that the School's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its RDP provision was appropriate and satisfactory. It encouraged the School to give further consideration to: the requirement that admissions decisions should involve at least two staff members trained in selection and admissions procedures; the provision to research students of sufficient information to begin their studies effectively; and the provision of training for supervisors.

182 In response, the School has established a Working Group to review its current arrangements. An established programme of training for those involved in the admissions process is not yet in place and, but the audit team learnt that the School is considering how such training might be integrated with existing programmes, including those for training supervisors and for the induction of new staff. The team noted that the Recruitment and Admissions Office had recently held a voluntary training session for supervisors. A mentoring scheme is also provided for new staff. The team also notes that a working group on postgraduate research degrees has recommended to the LTPC that refresher sessions are also offered to experienced research supervisors. The team encourages the School to continue its work in this area. The School will wish to put mechanisms in place to monitor that all relevant staff receive appropriate training.

183 The School believes that the QAA RDP Review was labouring under a misapprehension about its induction processes. It states that a dedicated induction session for research students has been part of the School's activities for several years. It organises a general orientation weekend for international students. These students may attend any sessions they wish. The audit team was able to confirm that induction is available, although it noted considerable variability in student take-up. It considered that the Postgraduate Research Handbook provided much useful guidance in an accessible form.

### **Progress and review arrangements**

184 The standard means of monitoring progress of postgraduate research students is by an Annual Report. This is completed by the Supervisor for scrutiny by the Associate Dean for Research and return to the Registry. The associate deans also produce summary reports to the faculty research committees. A document written by the associate deans clarifies to departments and faculty administrators the importance of annual reporting as the essential benchmark for monitoring student progress.

185 All research students are required to attend a research training programme and, in order to proceed, fulfil the stated requirements of the programme. The audit team noted that these programmes conformed with relevant research-council requirements. Student and supervisor should also at an early stage identify any further training or skills required and, as appropriate, notify the relevant Associate Dean (Research) so that resource and other implications could be considered. The postgraduate research student survey showed that a majority of those responding found research-training programmes either very good or excellent. Some, however, found them either excessively generic or involved the acquisition of skills which students felt they did not need for their own research projects. In meetings, the team heard similar views expressed.

186 Students are also strongly encouraged to complete a 'Research Students' Logbook'. This has been designed to encourage research students to take responsibility for monitoring their own progress by keeping regular records of supervisory meetings, attendance at research seminars and other research-related activities. Use of the Logbook was variable and the evidence of a recent postgraduate student survey indicated that, while some felt that it acted as a useful prompt to organised study, others considered it a bureaucratic intrusion. Nevertheless, linked to annual reporting, the audit team considered the Logbook to be an example of good practice and likely to assist both general student progress and timely submission of research dissertations. It notes that discussion about the optimal use of logbooks is ongoing and that one faculty is piloting an electronic version, supported by the Blackboard VLE. Consideration is being given to putting annual supervisor reports online.

187 The audit team concluded that the introduction of a logbook for postgraduate research students as a means of tracking progress and supporting the development of appropriate skills is a feature of good practice.

188 The *Code of practice* requires institutions to monitor the success of postgraduate research programmes against appropriate internal and or external indicators and targets. The School recognises that it currently has no mechanism to achieve this, although statistics relating to submission are compiled once every six years for the purpose of Department Programme Review. The School has recently asked its faculty Associate Deans (Research) to draw up proposals designed to meet the requirement of the *Code*. The audit team urges the School proceed without delay both to identify appropriate indicators and targets and to ensure that robust mechanisms are put in place to ensure that statistical and other indicators are regularly monitored.

189 All incoming research students are registered for the degree of MPhil. Those wishing to proceed to the degree of PhD must undergo formal assessment for transfer, normally no later than the end of the third term of full-time study, or part-time equivalent. This process is handled by the student's Supervisory Committee. The Postgraduate Research Handbook informs students that progression requires them to be assessed in three elements of research and research presentation: successful completion of the MPhil Training Programme; submission of core chapters to an appropriate standard and in making oral presentations to a satisfactory standard.

190 The audit team scrutinised the upgrade process in its study of documentation and in meetings. It noted that a survey of Training and Study Support for MPhil students had revealed varying perceptions. Some students considered the process exemplary while others felt that they had been given insufficient support in preparing for it, or had relied excessively on a supervisor's advice. In meetings with staff and postgraduate students, the team was able to confirm evidence of variability in the demands made on MPhil students applying for upgrades. Oral presentations were a requirement in some departments but not in others. It also learned that variability of demand is permissible at the discretion of departments. The team advises the School to revisit its processes to ensure that the demands made on postgraduate research students seeking to upgrade are comparable across departments and faculties.

191 The audit team advises the School to ensure that the process of upgrading research students from MPhil to PhD status operates consistently across departments and faculties.

192 The School is an active participant in the Bloomsbury Learning Environment (BLE), formed by three colleges of the University in 2004 to promote e-learning and a VLE. Six colleges now participate and the School has taken a significant role in contributing modules to its Postgraduate Skills Network. Recent developments designed to aid postgraduate research student progress include a three-session course on 'Writing and Editing PhD Thesis Chapters'. Dedicated BLE pages have been developed for the use of postgraduate research students. These include downloadable resources, information and a discussion board.

193 Since the QAA Special Review of RDPs, a skills audit has been carried out across the six Bloomsbury colleges. This has revealed demand for courses in data analysis, intellectual property rights and reference management software.

### **Feedback arrangements**

194 The School requires regular meetings to be held between research student and supervisor. These should normally be of at least one hour's duration. A record of supervisory meetings should be kept and this provides the primary opportunity for feedback. Supervisors should respond to any written work, either orally or in writing, within one month of its being submitted.

195 The next point of contact for a research student is the departmental research tutor, whose responsibilities include addressing concerns which cannot be resolved within the relationship between student and supervisor. Students are also encouraged to submit feedback to the Associate Dean (Research), who follows up specific points and reports any wider issues or concerns to the Faculty Research Committee.

196 Postgraduate research students are also routinely represented at departmental, faculty and School level on all committees concerning them. The audit team learned that attendance at, and therefore direct involvement in the business of, some of these committees was variable but it is clear that the School has made considerable efforts to provide direct channels of communication for postgraduate research students. The team's scrutiny of documents indicates that research students have raised significant issues, not least about the frequency of supervision meetings and consequentially limited feedback.

197 In meetings, and in scrutinising the student written submission, the audit team confirmed that practice was variable. Most research students appreciated the feedback and general support they received. However, particular concerns were raised about the support available during fieldwork away from the School and about being 'unaware of where they fitted within the School; outside taught courses but not as fully fledged research staff'. The School is aware of these problems and will wish to keep them under review, ensuring particularly that research students are made aware of channels of communication available to them at both departmental and faculty level either when feedback or progress-monitoring from supervisors is considered unsatisfactory or in cases when they feel isolated from the work of the School. Overall, however, the team confirmed that feedback arrangements were working satisfactorily.

## **Assessment of research students**

198 The School's research students are assessed within a federal framework administered by the University of London and specifically by the University's Research Degrees Committee, on which sits a School member with academic management responsibility for research degrees. The University's Ordinances prescribe the criteria for the award of research degrees and also instructions for the appointment of examiners for research degrees. It is a requirement that at least one of the examiners be external to the University of London.

199 The audit team concluded that, although the University of London's structure is a distinctive feature of the assessment process, arrangements for assessment of research students are broadly in line with those covering assessment at other research-intensive institutions and are appropriate and satisfactory.

## **Representations, complaints and appeals arrangements for research students**

200 The University's Regulations specify the requirements for research leading to the degrees of PhD and MPhil. Arrangements for representations and appeals by postgraduate research students are handled not by the School but directly by the University of London. The University provides students with guidelines to use when making an appeal against the outcome of an examination. Appeals are heard by a University Appellate Committee, whose decision is final.

201 The University's Research Degrees Committee monitors, and reflects on, the number and nature of appeals and the University follows up on issues related to appeals which might suggest improvements in practice.

## **Section 7: Published information**

### **The institution's processes for ensuring the accuracy and completeness of published information**

202 Corporate publications are the responsibility of the Marketing, Publications and Publicity Department, for which purpose it liaises with the academic departments to ensure accuracy of information. Faculties and departments provide programme and course level information for students. Information on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) website has previously been managed by the Deputy Secretary's office and the Registry System's Team. But with the reconfiguration of the arrangements for publishing this material, this will now come under the sole responsibility of the Registry.

### **Accuracy and completeness of published information, including Teaching Quality Information**

203 The School is bringing its website construction and management in-house. This 'Web-first' policy has been triggered by acknowledged inadequacies in the existing website. In particular, the School has found it difficult to maintain accurate information on programmes and courses and to maintain the currency of all information. The auditors saw a good example of these difficulties in the Departmental and Programme Review (DPR) of the Department of the Languages and Culture of South East Asia, in December 2006, at which one of the recommendations to the Department was that it 'continue the review of its web provision giving due attention to methods of ensuring it is kept up to date'. Other departments have signalled similar difficulties through the minutes of departmental meetings. The new website will be operational from April 2007 and be the responsibility of a new Web and Publications Editor.

### **Students' experience of published information and other information available to them**

204 The student written submission (SWS) reports that students feel that information provided by the School is 'at least fairly accurate'. Concern is registered that a published selection of courses might not run in practice, as a result of low take-up. The SWS cites the examples of

courses in Law, Social Science, and Languages and Culture. The same point was also made by students interviewed by the School panel in the DPR on Languages and Cultures of South East Asia, where students claimed that non-viable courses had been regularly subject to late cancellation.

205 The SWS concludes that students consider the existing website to be inadequate in supporting course-level information and this point was confirmed by students during the audit. Programme and course level information, given in other forms, is also considered, by students, to be often out of date. Students met by the audit team attributed this partly to adjustments made in light of course recruitment and partly to late changes occasioned by staff sabbaticals.

**RG331a 09/07**

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ISBN 978 1 84482 728 2

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786