Birkbeck College, University of London

JUNE 2005

Preface

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

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

The purpose of institutional audit

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

- providing HE, awards and qualifications of an acceptable quality and an appropriate academic standard, and
- exercising their legal powers to award degrees in a proper manner.

Judgements

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

- the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution's present and likely future management of the quality of its programmes and the academic standards of its awards
- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

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

Nationally agreed standards

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

- *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), which include descriptions of different HE qualifications
- The *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*
- subject benchmark statements, which describe the characteristics of degrees in different subjects
- guidelines for preparing programme specifications, which are descriptions of the what is on offer to students in individual programmes of study. They outline the intended knowledge, skills, understanding and attributes of a student completing that programme. They also give details of teaching and assessment methods and link the programme to the FHEQ.

The audit process

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

The main elements of institutional audit are:

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

The evidence for the audit

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

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

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

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

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

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Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) visited Birkbeck College, University of London (the College) from 6 to 10 June 2005 to carry out an institutional audit. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the opportunities available to students and on the academic standards of the awards that the College offers.

To arrive at its conclusions the audit team spoke to members of staff throughout the College and to current students, and read a wide range of documents relating to the way the College manages the academic aspects of its provision.

The words 'academic standards' are used to describe the level of achievement that a student has to reach to gain an award (for example, a degree). It should be at a similar level across the United Kingdom.

Academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their awards. It is about making sure that appropriate teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them.

In institutional audit, both academic standards and academic quality are reviewed.

Outcome of the audit

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

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

Features of good practice

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

- the effective integration of sessional lecturers into the life and work of the College.

Recommendations for action

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

- expedite the planned review of its committee system to ensure the effective and efficient conduct and minuting of business

- clarify the location of ultimate responsibility for quality management and academic standards

- implement a College-wide procedure for managing late submissions and extenuating circumstances in student assessment

- expedite the implementation of its planned common awards framework

- review the programme approval process to ensure that it operates effectively and efficiently, and that approval takes place at an appropriate level

- ensure that responsibility for actions arising from annual monitoring, internal review and external examiners' reports is clear, and that progress on those actions is monitored and recorded at College level.

It would be desirable for the College to:

- review its current understanding of quality enhancement and then develop a formal and coordinated quality enhancement strategy

- undertake a systematic analysis of generic College-wide issues arising from monitoring and review, and ensure that these, together with issues identified in external examiners' reports, contribute to the quality enhancement strategy

- agree a minimum standard of virtual learning environment use for all courses

- ensure the timely achievement of more coordinated provision of academic and personal support services for students.

Summary outcomes of discipline audit trails

The audit team looked at the following areas of provision: biology; classics; film and media; and management, to establish how well the College's systems and procedures are working at the discipline level. The College provided the team with documents, including student work, and the team spoke to staff and students. As well as confirming the overall confidence statements given above, the team considered that the standard of student achievement in the four discipline areas is appropriate to the title of the awards and their place in *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ). The team considered the quality of the learning opportunities available to students is suitable for programmes of study leading to those awards.

National reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings the audit team also investigated the use made by the College of the Academic Infrastructure which QAA has developed on behalf of the whole of UK higher education. The Academic Infrastructure is a set of nationally agreed reference points that help define both good practice and academic standards. The findings of the audit suggest that the College has responded generally appropriately to the FHEQ, subject benchmark statements, programmes specifications and the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education*, published by QAA.

In due course the institutional audit process will include a check on the reliability of the information set published by institutions in the format recommended in the Higher Education Funding Council for England's documents, 02/15: *Information on quality and standards in higher education*, and 03/51: *Final guidance*. The findings of the audit are that, at the time of the audit, the College was alert to their implications and was addressing its responsibilities in this respect.

Main report

Main report

1   An institutional audit of Birkbeck College, University of London (the College) was undertaken during the period 6 to 10 June 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility as an awarding body.

2   The audit was carried out using a process developed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in partnership with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) and Universities UK (UUK), and has been endorsed by the Department for Education and Skills. For institutions in England it replaces continuation audit, undertaken by QAA at the request of UUK and SCOP, and universal subject review, undertaken by QAA on behalf of HEFCE as part of the latter's statutory responsibility for assessing the quality of education that it funds.

3   The audit checked the effectiveness of the College's procedures for establishing and maintaining the standards of its academic awards, for reviewing and enhancing the quality of the programmes of study leading to those awards and for publishing reliable information. As part of the audit process, in accordance with protocols agreed with HEFCE, SCOP and UUK the audit included consideration of an example of the operation of institutional processes at programme level through discipline audit trails (DATs), together with examples of those processes functioning at the level of the institution as a whole. The scope of the audit encompassed all of the College's provision and collaborative arrangements leading to its awards.

Section 1: Introduction: Birkbeck College, University of London

The institution and its mission

4   Birkbeck College has its origins in the London Mechanics' Institution, founded in 1823 to provide 'education, instruction and means for research' for people unable, for employment or other reasons, to undertake full-time study. The College was incorporated into the University of London by Royal Charter in 1926, and has occupied its current main premises since 1952.

5   Of the College's student population of slightly over 18,000, almost 7,500 (comprising over 4,000 undergraduates, almost 2,800 taught postgraduates and 644 research students) are following degree programmes, with 10,640 engaged in further and continuing education at sub-degree level. Virtually all undergraduates and 80 per cent of postgraduates study part-time; 94 per cent of students are United Kingdom based, and half the remainder are from other European Union countries. Since 1999 the College has been organised into four faculties: Arts (3,480 students in seven schools), Science (1,440 students in four schools), Social Sciences (2,187 students in four schools) and Continuing Education (11,005 students, including 365 degree students, in a single School).

6   In its emphasis on delivering predominantly part-time teaching in a research-led environment, the College, which scored at least five in over half the units it submitted to the most recent research assessment exercise, is adhering to the vision of its founder. This vision is still echoed in its mission statement, which, in summary, defines the College's principal aims as providing part-time higher education to meet the changing needs of adults from diverse backgrounds, facilitating their participation, maintaining and developing excellence in research and research training, and disseminating high quality research for the public good.

Collaborative provision

7   The College does not engage in validation, franchising or other similar arrangements with other institutions. It does, however, have a number of formal links, mainly with prestigious London-based bodies in the arts and the psychotherapies, which provide and deliver specialist or practical off-campus elements of some programmes.

Background information

8   The published information available to the audit team included the extensive information on the College's website, the report of a continuation audit, published in October 2002, and reports from four developmental engagements - in Law, Chemistry, Computer Science and History - and from a review of the Foundation Degree (FD) in Information Technology, all of which took place after the continuation audit.

9   The College initially provided QAA with an institutional self-evaluation document (SED) and appendices and discipline self-evaluation documents (DSEDs) or their equivalents for each of the four selected discipline audit trails (DATs). During the briefing and audit visits the audit team was given access to a range of internal documents, both in hard copy and electronically. During the audit visit the College made available a range of documentation relating to the DATs, including examples of students' assessed work. The team was also given access to internal documents, including working papers and committee minutes.

The audit process

10   Following a preliminary meeting at the College in September 2004, QAA confirmed that four DATs would be conducted during the audit visit. The SED, prepared especially for the audit, was received in January 2005. On the basis of this and other published information the audit team determined that the DATs would focus on biology, classics, film and media, and management. The DSEDs or their equivalent, all based on internal reviews, were received in April 2005.

11   At the preliminary meeting the students of the College were invited, through the Students' Union (SU), to submit a separate document expressing views on the student experience at the College and identifying matters of concern or commendation with respect to the quality of programmes and the academic standards of awards. They were also invited to give their views on the level of representation afforded them and on the extent to which their views

are noted and acted upon. In generating the student written submission (SWS) the SU made use of a previous survey, to which, however, the response rate was modest, and consulted focus groups of randomly chosen students. The submission was received by QAA in February 2005 on a non-confidential basis; the audit team thanks those responsible for preparing it.

12   A briefing visit took place at the College on 25 to 27 April 2005, the purpose of which was to explore with the Master (represented on this occasion by the Vice-Master), senior members of staff of the College and student representatives matters of institutional-level management of quality and standards raised by the SED, the SWS and published documentation. At the end of the visit a programme of meetings was submitted to the College in preparation for the audit visit. The audit team did not select any area for thematic enquiry.

13   The audit visit took place on 6 to 10 June 2005. Seven institutional meetings were held with groups of staff; further meetings took place with staff and students in the DATs. The audit team comprised Professor J Feather, Mr C Griffiths, Mrs C Penna, Dr H Rattle and Professor R Usherwood, auditors, and Mrs S Gregory, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Professor R Harris, Assistant Director.

Developments since the previous academic quality audit

14   The College was subject to a continuation audit in 2002, which expressed broad confidence in the quality of the education provided by the College, the procedures it employs to maintain oversight of quality management and the security of the standards of individual awards, but expressed doubts as to whether there was yet a fully reliable, central overview by Academic Board (AB) of academic standards.

15   In summary the report commended the College for having introduced a Quality Assurance Committee (QAC); for the thoroughness of its admissions process; for explaining clearly its expectations of the standard of undergraduate assessed work; for

the commitment of its staff to tutoring, student support and to meeting the needs of its particular students; and for introducing a virtual learning environment in some schools. The report also made a number of recommendations, including advising the College to consolidate and rationalise its quality assurance processes and committee structures; to exploit the potential of its new student information system; to expedite the development of College-wide procedures for monitoring the progress of postgraduate research students to enable AB to oversee research degrees effectively; and to ensure that AB oversees and analyses visiting examiners' reports and monitors departmental responses.

16   In its SED the College described in some detail how it had addressed these recommendations. In general the audit team concluded from the evidence provided that the responses have been responsible and appropriate.

17   At the time of the 2002 audit, the College was finalising its Corporate Plan for academic years 2002 to 2005. Other subsequent developments have included the appointment of a new Master in 2003, certain adjustments to the roles of the Vice-Master and pro vice-masters, the introduction of a number of FD programmes and the establishment of a Business Relations Unit to develop and enhance relations with business and the community.

Section 2: The audit investigations: institutional processes

The institution's view as expressed in the SED

18   The College stated in its SED that its quality assurance strategy aims to meet the distinctive needs of its students and staff; to integrate, as far as possible, quality assurance into routine procedures; and to provide a visible, accessible and effective infrastructure, owned by schools but compliant with institutionally agreed standards. It further stated that its quality assurance mechanisms focus on ensuring

compliance with the Academic Infrastructure, key elements of which have been consolidated into its own Quality Assurance Code of Practice; organising internal reviews of all programmes of study and their related processes and arrangements; coordinating annual programme reports on all degree programmes for scrutiny by the QAC; and providing advice to schools and providers of interdisciplinary programmes on quality, standards and the provision of learning opportunities, including engagement with the Academic Infrastructure.

The institution's framework for managing quality and standards

19   The Governing Body is legally responsible for the College's management and takes final decisions on constitutional, financial and academic affairs. AB, however, has substantial delegated powers in respect of the last of these. The Master, as the College's chief academic and administrative officer, is supported by the Vice Master, whose wide-ranging responsibilities as the Master's deputy include links with business and the community, and three pro vice-masters, appointed for fixed terms and respectively responsible for widening participation and community partnerships, learning and teaching, and research. These officers, the Dean of College, the deans of faculty, the College Secretary as the head of the Central Administration, the heads of the individual administrative departments and the Head of the College Research School constitute the Senior Management Team (SMT) which meets monthly. Faculty deans are accountable for the management of faculty resources and staff, including heads of schools, and for representing the faculty within the College. Heads of school, who are not members of SMT but have regular informal meetings with the Master, manage their school's activities and have strategic oversight of course and programme development. Responsibility for the day-to-day quality management of programmes rests with programme directors.

20   SMT monitors student recruitment and considers strategic planning and other administrative and policy issues, the outcome

of its discussions being fed into the formal committee structure as appropriate. AB, a body of over 150 members, is acknowledged by the College as being too large to be an efficient forum for detailed debate of business. It has therefore delegated much of this role to its Executive Committee (ABExCo), composed of senior academic officers, the elected academic staff representative governors and student representatives, enabling the Board itself to become more of a forum for major strategic decisions. Other AB subcommittees take responsibility for the oversight of research, quality assurance and teaching, although they report to AB through its Executive Committee.

21   Both input from, and communication with, faculties and schools are secured through constituency representatives on all College committees. Papers for meetings are widely circulated or available electronically, and the faculty meetings which take place shortly before AB act as a forum to canvass views. School committee systems are not formally linked to College governance and academic management structures, and, while some variation is permitted, a teaching committee or equivalent is recommended.

22   The College explained in its SED that QAC, chaired by the Pro Vice-Master (Learning and Teaching), is responsible for developing policy, strategy and procedures, and for monitoring standards and the quality of provision. Teaching Committee, chaired by the same Pro Vice-Master, is the parent committee of all boards of examiners, degrees committees and the Awards Committee of the Faculty of Continuing Education (FCE) (the counterpart to degrees committees). It is therefore responsible for teaching-related policy and regulations, codes of student rights and, in conjunction with QAC, monitoring academic standards. The two degrees committees and the Awards Committee exercise College-level responsibility for considering new programmes and amendments to existing programmes, matters relating to visiting examiners' reports and ensuring compliance with relevant parts of the Academic Infrastructure. The QAC and Teaching Committee are supported by

the Quality Assurance Office, which is responsible for coordinating and ensuring the effective operation of the College's quality assurance arrangements.

23   The College also acknowledged in its SED the need to review the effectiveness of all committees of the AB, a view highlighted by its own staff survey, which reported a widespread wish to reduce bureaucracy. The audit team learned that the proposed committee review will address these points, and that a research team is currently gathering information on the work of Teaching Committee and QAC to aid its deliberations. The team, noting that the College intends the review to be progressed with 'some urgency', was unable, however, to find the review's terms of reference, and it learned that it is not due to commence until January 2006, that it will be led by the newly appointed College Secretary and that it has no target completion date.

24   The audit team found evidence of duplication of reporting among committees, the non-sequential timing of meeting dates and variable recording practices such that, while some minutes are so detailed that they create difficulties in tracking decision-making through the system, others give little indication of any discussion having occurred. The team also formed the view that in some cases committees are used more for communication than for informed decision-making. These issues, which, in the team's view, reflect quite deep-seated cultural norms, can lead to considerable delays in progressing business and therefore in decision-making. Some of these delays affect the implementation of matters of significance to quality and standards, and the team believes the system as a whole requires streamlining. It therefore advises the College to expedite its planned review of its Committee system to ensure the effective and efficient conduct and minuting of business.

25   The College is authorised to award University of London degrees subject to certain requirements, which include the establishment of quality assurance procedures. The requirements for programme delivery,

assessment and quality management specified in the Quality Assurance Code of Practice and its research postgraduate counterpart, apply to all degree-level and postgraduate provision. The Codes, which the College described in its SED as comprehensive reference manuals for staff, are available electronically and as hard copy, and reflect all relevant elements of the Academic Infrastructure. The College claimed in its SED that its quality framework offers a robust set of procedures, maintains a balance between an intensive and a light touch approach and injects higher levels of accountability into what were previously predominantly informal and collegial arrangements.

26   While FCE's FD, degree and postgraduate provision follows the quality processes and the requirements of the Code of Practice, its continuing education and sub-degree provision is the subject of a separate Quality Assurance Handbook, is supported by a separate quality assurance office and is overseen by Awards Committee, which reports direct to the College Teaching Committee. As an adjunct to the Code, the Handbook codifies practices to guide staff to ensure, as far as possible, the proper application of procedures. The audit team was assured that the policy, currently under way, of optimal integration of FCE provision into College structures and procedures, will have been completed within three years.

27   The audit team sought to establish where ultimate responsibility for quality management and standards lies, and whether AB's responsibility has been affected by the work of ABExCo. It was advised that many decisions are in practice taken at ABExCo, but are subject to ratification by the Board and can be rejected. The team also noted that the terms of reference of both QAC and Teaching Committee assign them responsibility for monitoring standards, but was also advised in the course of the audit that responsibility for standards rests with the Pro Vice-Master (Learning and Teaching) personally, as Chair of QAC.

28   The audit team saw evidence, in particular in the course of the DATs, of academic staff engaging actively with quality assurance, and

demonstrating commitment to ensuring the best quality student experience. Nonetheless the framework does not always appear to connect systemically, and further work is needed to clarify, extend and embed it. In particular, in the team's view the lack of a formal link between the College and school committee systems diminishes the effectiveness of QAC's coordinating role, heightening the importance of the interface between the Pro Vice-Master (Learning and Teaching) and the deans. While the team appreciates that the composition of QAC includes both deans and degrees committee chairs it notes that heads of school do not have ex officio membership, and that this may reflect an uncertainty as to the locus of school-level responsibility for quality matters, as between heads of school and quality representatives. In the light of these considerations the team advises the College to clarify the location of ultimate responsibility for quality and standards in order to ensure its responsibility for standards is fully understood and discharged.

29   College assessment regulations and procedures are guided by the Code for Assessment, and comply with University regulations. The audit team noted, however, that procedures vary across programmes and, in particular, that senior staff are aware of inconsistencies in the management of late submitted assessments and extenuating circumstances cases across schools and programmes. The team considers that these inconsistencies are such as to raise issues of equity and fairness, and accordingly advises the College to implement a College-wide procedure for managing late submissions and extenuating circumstances in student assessment as soon as possible.

30   The College has for some time been considering a move to a common awards framework to comply with national and international developments. It has now determined to introduce a 12-course unit structure which will ensure its compliance with the FHEQ, and is planning a systematic remodelling of individual degrees, to be completed by 2009, to ensure College-wide

compliance with the Academic Infrastructure. This process, while in some cases entailing only minor changes, will elsewhere necessitate significant restructuring. While recognising the need for wide debate of any major change, the audit team is of the view that progress on agreeing and adopting a common awards framework has been unnecessarily slow, and that, while some progress has been made, particularly following the appointment of the Pro Vice-Master (Learning and Teaching), the College should move quickly to ensure full compliance with *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and to facilitate and ensure consistency in assessment practices for students. This will also ensure that its quality framework fully engages, and as necessary complies, with the Academic Infrastructure which, in spite of the College's claims (see paragraphs 18 and 22), is not the case at present. Accordingly the team advises the College to expedite its implementation of a common awards framework.

The institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

31   The College stated in its SED that its recent academic quality assurance strategy, for which responsibility lies with QAC, involves integrating quality assurance and enhancement, regarding them as part of normal business. The strategy identifies six areas for quality enhancement: developing evaluation processes which will identify opportunities for enhancement, and incorporating them into forward planning; developing mechanisms for disseminating good practice; improving staff development and reward structures; developing and implementing a common awards framework; supporting interdisciplinary programmes; and continuing to revise the strategy. The College acknowledged, however, that the strategy is not yet effectively translated into action and that the need to strengthen quality enhancement remains.

32   The audit team believes the College has made progress since continuation audit, noting in particular its intention to move from a

compliance-based to an integrated enhancement-led approach to quality assurance. But, while it accepts that introducing such an approach is an objective of the key committees and officers of the College, it found only limited evidence of a systematic approach yet being taken to quality enhancement, of the existence of a College-wide shared understanding of what it is, or of great priority being given to it. This view receives support from the statement in the learning and teaching strategy that developments in quality enhancement will be reviewed 'around 2007'. Accordingly, while developments since continuation audit represent the beginnings of a change in approach, the team believes it would be desirable for the College, as a step towards developing a formal and coordinated quality enhancement strategy, to review its current understanding of quality enhancement and to take a more holistic view of the issues and processes involved.

33   In addition the audit team believes the College has yet to exploit to the full the information it is gathering in processes such as internal review and external examiners' reports, and considers it would be desirable for it to undertake a systematic analysis of generic issues arising from them so that they can contribute to the quality enhancement strategy (see also paragraph 47).

Internal approval, monitoring and review processes

34   Programme validation is a committee and paper-based procedure which follows specified procedures set out in the College's QA Code of Practice. New programme developments are discussed at School staff meetings. The design stage involves wide consultation, consideration and securing of resources required, and scrutiny and endorsement from an external subject specialist. Proposals approved by the School are passed for comment to the relevant faculty dean, the Librarian and the Director of Central Computing Services before being submitted to the appropriate faculty degrees or awards committee. Proposers have the opportunity to attend this meeting, which gives detailed

consideration of all aspects of the proposal and effective approval. Proposals then go to the College Teaching Committee for verification that the correct procedures have been followed and for endorsement; to ABExCo; and finally to AB for formal approval. The process normally takes one term, though a fast track paper-based procedure exists to accommodate unexpected changes in the external environment.

35   The audit team was told that the main strength of this procedure lies in the detailed work undertaken at school and faculty level. The team's scrutiny of relevant committee minutes, however, gave little indication of this or of the challenging dialogue said to take place at the College degrees committees. In addition, the team was not convinced of the value of each stage. It noted an example of a proposal being referred back by AB because of missing information, an omission which it was surprised had not been identified earlier. Accordingly the team believes there would be merit in simplifying the system.

36   The audit team was informed that the College has recently reviewed its overall quality assurance strategy and plans to review the role of the committees involved in considering new programmes or amending existing ones to achieve greater clarity and effectiveness and, by means of Registry involvement, a more assured engagement with the Academic Infrastructure. The team supports this move and the College is therefore advised to review the programme approval process to ensure that it operates effectively and that approval takes place at an appropriate level.

37   Annual review involves a brief annual programme report completed to a standard template. Reports are discussed at school level before being scrutinised by a QAC panel, which writes to the school concerned, drawing attention to perceived strengths and weaknesses in a form to which a written response is required. The resultant documentation forms the basis of internal review. The team noted that this procedure now extends to FCE extramural certificate and diploma courses, and that the College is

currently integrating the FCE and College review cycles to facilitate unification.

38   Annual review was described to the audit team as focussing on enhancement, but, while it does encourage programme directors to reflect critically on major aspects of teaching provision, the team did not regard quality enhancement as central to the process. The team noted that, while in practice schools respond responsibly to annual review action plans, and that good practice is posted on the College website, little College-level monitoring of responses occurs, or any systematic overview of outcomes such as would enable the College to identify and respond to areas of concern. The team also noted that the cycle lasts a full academic session, leading potentially to a two-year time lag between report and action.

39   QAC conducts internal reviews of all taught and research programmes at least once every four years. The College stated in its SED that such reviews are effective in identifying good practice and innovative approaches to the enhancement of quality, and in identifying weaknesses and risks. Aided by a substantial SED submitted by schools, reviews focus on the quality of the student experience, progression and achievement, and compliance with internal and external codes of practice. All review panels include an external subject specialist; their reports are submitted to QAC, which monitors responses, produces an overview of school-level activity and posts good practice on the College website.

40   The audit team saw evidence that internal reviews are being completed to schedule but noted that in the past a lengthy delay in producing a response and action list had occurred. The summary of commendations is helpful, but there is little evidence that QAC's overview contributes systematically to quality enhancement. It is not clear how the process ensures the implementation of the College Code of Practice, who is responsible for ensuring that action lists are addressed, or how responses are monitored by the College in such a way as to enable it to have confidence that quality and standards are being maintained. Hence the College is advised to ensure that responsibility

for actions arising from annual monitoring, internal review and external examiners' reports is clear, and that progress on those actions is monitored and recorded at College level.

External participation in internal review processes

41   The College stated in its SED that it regards the involvement of external subject specialists in programme approval and internal review as key to ensuring academic standards. There is a long-established system for external involvement in internal review, though external participation in programme approval was introduced only with effect from academic year 2004-05. Schools are required, other than when they can demonstrate that their own specialist external advisory group has already provided a satisfactory critical scrutiny of the proposal, to recommend an external subject specialist to comment on and sign off proposals prior to submission to the relevant degrees committee. The audit team confirms that due consideration is given by degrees committees to the appropriateness of external nominations.

42   The audit team confirms that, in both approval and review, College procedures and requirements for external involvement are consistently applied, and that the College is benefiting from the feedback external representatives have provided on the review process itself.

External examiners and their reports

43   The College places great store by the contribution of visiting examiners to maintaining standards. 'Visiting examiners' is a generic term for intercollegiate examiners, who are independent of the programme being examined but members of another college of the University of London, and external examiners who are from outside the University. College regulations require at least one external examiner and at least one intercollegiate examiner to be appointed to all undergraduate boards and sub-boards which determine honours classifications, and at least one external examiner to be appointed to each postgraduate board of

examiners. The same requirements apply to collaborative and distance-learning programmes.

44   Visiting examiners are nominated by schools on an annual basis and appointed according to regulations designed to prevent conflicts of interest. On appointment they are informed in writing of their roles, powers and responsibilities, and provided with information by the relevant school. The College is currently giving preliminary consideration to introducing a generic induction programme for new visiting examiners; at present no such arrangements are in place.

45   Visiting examiners report on a pro forma on a wide-ranging list of assessment issues, including whether standards are consistent with national norms and engage with the Academic Infrastructure, as well as some broader programme-related topics. Examiners in a position to do so are invited to compare present and past cohorts, and to report on whether their previous reports have been appropriately addressed.

46   The audit team saw a number of completed external examiners' reports, including some for programmes covered in the DATs, and these, together with discussions with staff, confirmed that external examiners' advice is given proper attention and that appropriate changes have been made as a result of it. Overall, in the team's view, arrangements for external examining are appropriate, procedures contribute to the assurance of quality and standards, and, generally, matters raised in external examiners' reports are dealt with effectively at course and programme level.

47   Visiting examiners' reports are submitted to the Registry, where critical or other comments requiring a response are identified. They are then sent to the chair of the examining board or sub-board concerned, with a covering letter itemising all points needing to be addressed, specifying a response date and asking that the response be copied to the visiting examiner concerned. The correspondence is copied to the head of school and the Chair of the College Board of Examiners to provide an opportunity for comment, and to

the appropriate degrees committee. This latter committee is responsible for considering and reporting on the adequacy of responsive action, corresponding with the chair of the board where responses appear inadequate, noting issues requiring special action, and providing Teaching Committee and QAC with an overview and a note of thematic issues identified.

48   The Registry, which is also responsible for following up delayed responses from boards of examiners, is charged with preparing a summary report for the University of London, an activity where some delays have occurred, and with compiling a database of matters raised by visiting examiners and promised actions by schools. The College, which acknowledged in its SED a need to monitor such matters more rigorously, intends to initiate a major review of the reporting process. The audit team, welcoming this initiative, believes it would be desirable for the College to ensure that the review addresses how best to ensure the timeliness of actions arising from external examiners' reports and that these actions are more effectively monitored and recorded at College level. In particular, the team, noting that the database will aid this process but aware also of the demands involved in maintaining it, believes it will be better able to contribute to quality enhancement if its currency and implications are monitored as a totality than, as presently intended, in annual review.

External reference points

49   Schools' responsibilities in giving preliminary consideration to new programme proposals at design stage (see paragraph 34) include taking account of the views of public and professional bodies appropriate to the discipline including, where appropriate, research organisations, and the Disability Discrimination Act and other relevant legislation.

50   The College stated in its SED that its quality assurance processes are designed to ensure that schools take account of external reference points in the development and review of subject provision, including all relevant precepts of the *Code of practice for the assurance of academic*

quality and satndards in higher education, (Code of practice), published by QAA. The audit team notes that the Head of Academic Services has begun a review of postgraduate programmes in the light of the FHEQ, and that programme proposal and specification forms, as well as internal review procedures, require comment on how programmes comply with the FHEQ and take into account all relevant benchmark statements. Programme specifications seen by the team suggest that programmes have been carefully prepared with FHEQ levels and benchmark statements in mind.

51   The audit team is satisfied on the basis of its enquiries that the College's engagement with the Academic Infrastructure is developing, and that, while there is some way to go before it can be described as comprehensive, the College is moving towards full engagement and currently meets all its formal obligations.

Programme-level review and accreditation by external agencies

52   Since the continuation audit the College has been subject to four developmental engagements, with generally favourable outcomes. Its FD in Information Technology was reviewed by QAA in May 2003, and, while the review identified certain strengths in the programme, it expressed concern over the lack of employer involvement in design, delivery and assessment, the lack of work-based experience and personal development planning, teaching styles and the fact that quality assurance processes had not identified the level of disquiet amongst the students. Overall, the review expressed no confidence in emerging standards, emerging student achievement or learning opportunities.

53   The College responded by instituting an internal review of FDs in October 2004. This considered not only the issues raised by QAA but also its general operation of FDs and future strategy. The internal review made a number of recommendations aimed at ensuring programmes contain the distinctive features of FDs, including work-relevant activities and employer involvement (to be achieved through

the establishment of an Employer Advisory Panel, closer involvement with Foundation Degrees Forward and enlisting the advice and support of the College's Business Relations Unit), personal development planning and the integration and assessment of appropriate skills. An FD manager has been appointed, and appropriate school committees have been asked to include FDs as a standing agenda item.

54   QAA's follow-up visit took place in February 2005, and the resulting report, while noting that the College has taken some steps to address the review's concerns, confirmed the original judgement of no confidence, identifying a number of areas for urgent action, noting that many of the responses to the report are in their initial stages and observing that the College still needs to ensure appropriate oversight of its FD programmes.

55   College staff who met the audit team acknowledged that difficulties have arisen in accommodating work-based learning within the FD, but rejected the suggestion that they reflect inadequacies in quality assurance arrangements. They claimed, rather, that they result from the facts that, first, most students on the programme are not working in the field but taking the degree to change career, secondly the programme predated the relevant FD qualification benchmark, and thirdly interpretations of work-based learning were still evolving at the time of programme approval. They also claimed that broadening the scope of the internal review, engaging in dialogue with QAA to ensure issues were fully understood, and ensuring full debate through the College committee system had proved time-consuming.

56   The audit team confirms that the College is now addressing the action points emerging from the internal review, has reflected on its approach and is increasingly involving employers in FD planning. It would, however, be premature to assess the impact of these responses, and the team believes appropriate College-level oversight will be necessary to ensure that all identified actions are completed in a timely and appropriate manner. While the team appreciates the reasons for the College's

decision to extend the remit of the internal review, it is surprised, given the seriousness of the situation, that, while the outcome of the FD review was known shortly after May 2003, the internal review was not established until October 2004 and did not report to AB until June 2005. It concludes that this is a further example of the protracted timescales for progressing business to which reference has already been made (paragraph 24) and which the College has been advised to address.

57   The College claimed in its SED that the requirements of professionally or statutorily accredited programmes play an important role in the development and review of programmes, and that professional accreditation contributes to the maintenance of standards. Changes made in response to such requirements are scrutinised by relevant College committees (in particular QAC), detailed in annual programme reports, examined by internal review panels and, where appropriate, publicised within the College. While not all the areas covered by the DATs involve professional recognition, the audit team confirms from its investigations that issues raised by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies are included in the College review process.

Student representation at operational and institutional level

58   At institutional level, primarily through the Birkbeck College Students' Union (SU), students are represented on almost all College committees, including AB where six elected representatives sit with full voting rights. The College stated in its SED that, in spite of having only one sabbatical officer, the SU makes a significant contribution to the quality of the student experience. One example of this contribution was the establishment, following a SU initiative, of the Student Services Committee, a body chaired by the SU President, which considers all student welfare and support issues and acts more generally as a bridge between SU and College.

59   At school level the SU promotes and supports the class representative system, whereby elected students represent their course

year on mandatory student/staff exchange committees, described by the College in its SED as valuable forums for information-giving and two-way communication. The SU produces useful information both for student representatives and for administrators, tutors and secretaries, which emphasises the benefits for all of active engagement with such committees. The audit team also noted, however, that, while the College stated in its SED that training for class representatives is available from the SU, and that the SU advertises such training in its information pack, no such training has taken place during the current academic year.

60   While the audit team found some evidence of the value of staff/student exchange committees and noted that students on the whole speak highly of them, it also learned that the pressures facing many students lead to variable levels of attendance, and that at school level formal systems are not necessarily students' preferred choice for communicating their views. Nonetheless, the team concludes that, overall, the College's student representative system in general and the Student Services Policy Committee in particular are fit for purpose, although it anticipates that the College will continue to explore the challenges facing some part-time mature students in engaging with the representative system.

Feedback from students, graduates and employers

61   Feedback from students is obtained through internal reviews, student/staff exchange committees, course and programme questionnaires from both undergraduates and postgraduates, informal contacts and, where time permits, special seminars at the end of a course to elicit opinion. The College stated in its SED that comments received through these mechanisms influence schools' thinking and lead to amendments and enhancement.

62   Questionnaires are analysed by course directors, who, with another member of academic staff, formulate a response. This response is reported to the relevant student/staff exchange committee and school teaching committee, and relayed to students before the unit is next delivered. Annual programme reports give details of how responses to student feedback have been managed, and heads of school are responsible for raising relevant learning resource issues with appropriate managers.

63   Post graduation questionnaires elicit the views of graduates six months after completion; the Academic Quality Assurance Office analyses and reports on responses to QAC and thence to AB. Although relatively low response rates invite caution in interpreting the results of these questionnaires, the College is understandably gratified that over 60 per cent of respondents report a high level of satisfaction with their programme, and a similar proportion claim to have embarked on, or to intend to embark on, further study. A number of issues arise in the responses seen by the audit team, however, to which the College could appropriately give attention. These include matching programmes to student expectations, providing pre-degree study skills courses and increasing the availability of on-line material for individual course units, a matter to which reference is made elsewhere in this report (paragraphs 78 and 83). Overall the team considers the College's mechanisms for collecting information from graduates helpful, though the data gathered would be of greater value were they more systematically integrated into a College-wide quality enhancement strategy.

64   The College stated in its SED that its learning and teaching strategy includes the objective of building links with employers and the wider community, and provided a detailed account of how it is developing such links through its Business Relations Unit, the Foundation Degree Programme's Employer Advisory Group and the work of the relevant Pro Vice-Master. At programme level a major source of curriculum development derives from the College's association with partner institutions and agencies such as the London Consortium (which includes also the Tate Gallery, the Institute of Contemporary Arts and the Architectural Association) and the British Museum. In addition some schools provide

externally accredited programmes or specialist training for employers, which also, the College claimed in its SED, spur curricular innovation. The audit team notes that some programmes have established effective, and potentially very fruitful, liaison with employers, though the evidence from the FD in Information Technology in particular is that, in spite of the increasing contribution of the Employer Advisory Group, not all these links are as yet systematically developed at institutional level.

Progression and completion statistics

65   In 2002 the College's continuation audit report, identifying weaknesses in the use of statistical data in annual and internal reviews in particular, advised the College to use its new student information system to achieve a better articulation of quality assurance processes and committee structures. The College reported in its SED that this system currently permits staff to monitor student progress, access examination board data and record course unit choices, and that other functions, including personalising examination timetables, creating on-line enrolment and fee payment facilities and developing an updateable web prospectus, are earmarked for future development.

66   The system, due to be deployed College-wide in its entirety in academic year 2005-06, has been piloted by FCE since academic year 2003-04, and used by five pilot schools since academic year 2004-05, mainly to monitor admissions and progression. The audit team saw evidence from the DATs of these data being analysed in school annual reports, and was advised that they are, in addition, considered by SMT, which follows up matters of concern with heads of school.

67   The audit team concluded that the College is making significant, albeit slightly slow, progress towards the institution-wide adoption of a standardised and robust record system. Although reliable cohort data are only now becoming available, the team has seen evidence of progression and achievement data being used with increasing confidence at school level,

particularly in a number of pilot retention projects, and considers they are increasingly contributing to informed discussion at annual review.

Assurance of the quality of teaching staff, appointment, appraisal and reward

68   The College claimed in its SED to have robust recruitment processes and to be able to recruit very able academic staff, often from an impressive field of candidates. A probation system, normally of three years' duration, operates, with formally recorded mentoring support, oversight from the Head of School, a reduced teaching load, mandatory training (see paragraph 73), additional support where a successful outcome appears in doubt, and a formal annual review conducted by the high-level Probationary Review Panel.

69   Promotion to senior lecturer is through an annual procedure involving taking up external references, at least one of which must be external to the University of London. Following a recent change permitting excellence in teaching to lead to promotion, candidates must show excellence in at least one out of three of research, teaching, and administration/management, and satisfactory levels of achievement in the others.

70   In the view of the audit team, the College's appointment, probation and reward procedures are thorough, transparent, well-documented, equitable and effectively implemented.

Assurance of the quality of teaching through staff support and development

71   The College's human resources strategy is informed by issues emerging from both appraisal and peer teaching observation. Specific and generic needs identified in appraisal across the College are monitored by the Staff Development Team; the outcomes of peer observation are monitored by heads of school.

72   At present staff development programmes, funded by the Staff Development Office and heads of schools, services and sections, are available to all staff. The College takes particular

care to ensure that they are available to the many part-time, and in particular sessional, staff vital to the delivery of many of its programmes, particularly but not exclusively in FCE. The College also stated in its SED that its recently enhanced Staff Development Plan, which involves a system of individual development plans, constitutes a more effective way of identifying and responding to professional development needs in respect of teaching and learning as they arise.

73   All newly appointed academic staff without substantial prior experience are required to take FCE's Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching in Lifelong Learning, recognised for registration for the Higher Education Academy, which all qualified staff are expected to join; all staff are eligible for consideration for the Birkbeck awards for innovation in teaching.

74   The audit team confirms that the College's staff support and development systems are robust and fully implemented, and considers the integration of sessional lecturers into the life and work of the College to be a feature of good practice.

Assurance of the quality of teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods

75   While the College's primary concern is to provide face-to-face education for adults living or working in the London area, it stated in its SED that a small number of programmes may be taken by distance methods. Models of delivery vary, and include one programme where materials are produced on CD-ROM but supported by email, another based entirely on networked learning, and others offering combinations of distance learning and block attendance.

76   The College's e-learning strategy, perceived as especially applicable to its overwhelmingly part-time clientele, is implemented and coordinated by a dedicated member of staff charged with establishing and supporting e-learning networks to support blended learning. This staff member will, from the start of the next academic year, be

supported by a new Centre for Learning and Professional Development.

77   Normal validation, monitoring and internal review procedures apply to teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods, and the College's Quality Assurance Code of Practice also requires all proposals to include design and management features which take full account of the intended modes of delivery. Accordingly, in programme approval the relevant degrees committee explores programme coherence, the appropriateness of the proposed learning medium, how the needs of distant students are accommodated and how student support and interaction are achieved.

78   The audit team confirms that quality assurance procedures are in place and that the quality of the learning experience, as recorded in annual monitoring and periodic review, appears satisfactory. Nonetheless, it noted that much teaching delivered through distributed and distance methods has been developed by individual schools largely on their own initiative, so that while some areas of the College use such methods extensively, elsewhere their enhancement potential is not fulfilled. The team considers, therefore, that it would be desirable for the College to extend the development of its virtual learning environments (VLEs) to the benefit of all its students.

Learning support resources

79   Student learning is supported and facilitated by the Library, Central Computing Services and the estates strategy, whose brief includes enhancing the learning and teaching facilities.

80   The College Library provides a useful web-based tutorial, Library Induction for Everyone (LIFE), which offers advice not only on the materials and resources available for study and how to contact library staff for help, but also on how to search electronic journals and other e-resources. The Library contains a range of paper-based and electronic services. The audit team was informed that the Library has a target of spending 50 per cent of funding for collection development on electronic services. Students

have borrowing rights at other higher education libraries as well as access to the Senate House Library, the fee for which will be covered by the College from academic year 2005-06.

81   Subject librarians work in partnership with academic staff, and may be invited to appropriate meetings. More formally, library provision and services are monitored through the College's internal review processes and the Library's annual user satisfaction survey, the results of which are considered by the Library Management Team and Library Policy Committee. The audit team saw evidence of criticisms of an aspect of service having been appropriately identified and addressed, leading to improved levels of satisfaction.

82   The Central Computing Service, responsible for providing information technology (IT) facilities and accountable to Computer Policy Committee, works in close collaboration with the Library and the e-learning coordinator to meet the targets specified in the College Information Strategy. The Service obtains formal feedback by means of its annual user survey, the results of which are communicated, together with a summary of the main findings of, and responses to, the previous year's survey, to students, school computer representatives and Computer Policy Committee.

83   The SWS did not address learning resources, but students who met the audit team expressed broad satisfaction with them. They confirmed the finding of the most recent Central Computing Services satisfaction survey that IT provision has improved, and stated that their comments (for example, about the suitability of some teaching accommodation) generally receive an appropriate response. They also noted, however, the unevenness in take-up of the VLE to which reference has been made elsewhere (see paragraph 78).

84   Overall, the audit team concluded that the College has in place appropriate institutional and local level mechanisms to identify and respond to user need, and that it effectively supports student learning.

Academic guidance, support and supervision

85   Academic advice and guidance commence with the provision of information to applicants, while induction evenings for new students offer them opportunities to meet staff and fellow students and to receive a wide range of general and programme-specific information. Students are allocated a personal tutor whom they meet at least termly, and who is responsible for offering guidance, initiating specialist support and monitoring performance. In addition, the College, aware of the need to minimise the numbers of prospective students who fail to take up offers of places made to them as well as the need to improve retention and progression among present students, is supporting two school-level pilot projects aimed at enhancement.

86   The College Research School oversees the support and guidance of research students on the basis of the College Code of Practice on Postgraduate Training and Research for the MPhil and PhD Degrees and the *Code of practice*. Full engagement with the latter is being pursued actively, and in the audit team's view effectively, by the Research School's steering committee. Discipline-specific training for research students is provided by schools, which are also responsible for fostering an appropriate research atmosphere in ways such as providing weekly staff-student 'work in progress' seminars. The Research School complements discipline-specific training by offering generic skills workshops, coordinating College-wide generic research facilities, liaising with external research training providers and providing both a resources room with appropriate learning support facilities and a room for informal, including student-led, activities.

87   International students receive pre-sessional language courses and, like all students, have access to the course units on academic writing and general study skills provided by FCE. Further academic advice is available in study skills workshops provided by the SU, principally directed at students new to, or long away from, higher education, and in schools' own study skills arrangements, which can also take the form of stand-alone course units.

88   Students who met the audit team appreciated the guidance provided by members of staff, which they believed was enhanced by the latter's research expertise. The audit team noted, however, that guidance is given mainly by staff with whom students have regular direct contact rather than by designated personal tutors. There appears only limited student awareness of College-wide support systems, and some research students, who appear relatively dependent on their supervisors, understand only very generally the facilities offered by the College Research School. Students spoke to the team of the helpfulness of formative assessment, whose developmental purpose they understood, some saying, however, that other pressures on them restrict their capacity to take advantage of it, and others expressing concern about the time taken by some tutors to return work.

89   The audit team was informed that the College intends reviewing the current level and nature of academic support early in academic year 2005-06 as part of a more general review of its widening participation strategy consequent upon its decision to recruit greater numbers of full-time international and part-time 18 to 21 year-old students and FD students. It was suggested that the prospective Centre for Learning and Professional Development may act as a focus for a more coordinated approach to academic support, as well as overseeing the implementation of personal development planning. While the team fully appreciates the logic of such a review, as noted in the next section it is conscious of a degree of fragmentation in the current provision of academic and personal support. This contributes to the view, expressed elsewhere (see paragraph 92) that it would be desirable for the College to take steps to ensure the timely achievement of more coordinated provision of academic and personal support services for students.

Personal support and guidance

90   The College Dean has general oversight of student welfare, though responsibility for specific areas of support falls to different departments or agencies. The Student Financial Support Office advises low income candidates and students who would otherwise be prevented from entering or continuing in higher education, administers College grants and bursaries and directs students to other sources of finance. The Disability Coordinator manages disability support, advises on special support and examining arrangements and liaises with school disability officers, and is now also charged with raising awareness and developing appropriate policies in respect of mental health issues. The Birkbeck Nursery, open during weekday evening teaching hours, serves students with child care responsibilities. The University of London Careers Service is represented in the College on a weekly basis, and, the audit team was told, offers targeted advice to Birkbeck students, many of whom aspire to use their studies to develop or change their career; the College intends to include careers information in all school handbooks from the start of academic year 2005-06. The Students' Union Advice Centre, open three nights a week, offers further support, as does its Counselling Service, now available to full-time students over the summer vacation.

91   Although the audit team did not form the impression that support services are extensively used, it confirms that their existence is widely known, and students who met the team said that such experience they or their colleagues have had of the services has been highly satisfactory. Staff working in support services claimed there have been recent increases in take-up, especially in the area of finance, but the team was unable to detect any systematic means of measuring either take-up or satisfaction. Nor does any formal network for information exchange among service providers, of a kind which might ensure a coordinated or enhanced service, appear to exist.

92   In addition to the College's proposed review of academic support (see paragraph 89) the team was informed that a prospective 'one-stop shop' for student services and support, resulting from the physical restructuring of the main entrance areas and a review of the

respective support roles of the SU and the College Dean, is intended to create a more coordinated framework for student support. The team, welcoming the general direction of the College's proposals, considers it would be desirable for the College to ensure that these separate initiatives should be brought more closely together to increase the likelihood of achieving effective coordination of academic and personal support.

Collaborative provision

93   The College does not operate validated or franchised activity as defined by the *Code of practice*, and what it defines as its collaborative provision mainly involves a small number of programmes where elements of teaching, particularly specialist and practical elements, are delivered off-campus by an external partner. It views such links as innovative sources of curriculum development and an efficient way of delivering programmes where such elements of teaching are needed, whether or not for the purpose of professional accreditation.

94   Historically schools have been prime movers in developing partnerships, though the College's stated intention of taking a more proactive approach is reflected in its introduction of FDs as a means of widening participation, its development of links with further education colleges to ensure progression routes to its programmes and its encouragement of FCE to increase its outreach focus. The audit team was told that the College's Business Relations Unit has become increasingly significant in undertaking market research and developing and facilitating contacts with, and support from, employers, and is working closely with the recently appointed Foundation Degrees Manager.

95   Though schools have, for the most part, taken the initiative in developing collaborative programmes, such programmes are subject to normal quality assurance procedures, with the College as a corporate body responsible for memorandums of agreement, programme management and academic standards. Overall, the audit team confirms that the College's

quality assurance procedures operate satisfactorily for programmes defined as collaborative, and that memorandums of agreement are in place. It does note, however, that some agreements have been signed by the Registrar or at school level rather than by the College Secretary, which the team had been advised is the formal requirement; accordingly the College may wish to ensure that due process is followed in all cases.

Section 3: The audit investigations: discipline audit trails

Discipline audit trails

Biology

96   The DAT for biology covered the following programmes in the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences: BSc Biological Sciences, BSc Molecular Biology, MSc Applied Biology, MSc Microbiology, MSc Physiology and all MPhil and PhD programmes. The DSED was based on an internal review conducted in December 2003, and comprised the internal SED document, the subsequent report of the review panel and action plans prepared for QAC. Programme specifications were provided for the three MSc and two undergraduate programmes. Only one such specification refers to the FHEQ and one other references the biosciences benchmark statement, from which its main aims and learning outcomes are drawn. No specification refers directly to the *Code of practice*, published by QAA. Course unit or module learning outcomes are helpfully mapped to course learning outcomes; programmes are not credit rated.

97   The DSED provides progression statistics for each programme, but little accompanying analysis or discussion, even though some programmes report considerable year-on-year fluctuations. The audit team appreciates the difficulties involved in constructing cohort analyses for relatively small numbers of part-time students who may take breaks from study, however, and notes that fuller analysis and discussion occur in some annual programme

reports, with a discernible emphasis on improving retention rates. These reports, together with additional data provided for the audit, support the conclusion that retention in biology is greater than College norms.

98   The 2003 internal review was based on a well-prepared and fully referenced internal SED. A detailed report and recommendations from the review panel was submitted to QAC, addressed by a School action plan prepared in April 2004, updated in January 2005 and almost wholly implemented by the time of the audit. Staff affirmed the particular benefits of the internal review in aligning practices following the formation of the School from the Departments of Biology and Chemistry.

99   Annual reports are submitted to QAC using a standard pro forma. Those seen by the audit team were satisfactory, although the team noted evidence that QAC consideration and approval can be slow. The School follows the College's elaborate programme approval procedures, with proposals being discussed at Teaching and School Staff Committees before being forwarded to Science Degrees Committee (these committees have significant membership overlaps) and eventually to AB.

100 The audit team saw evidence of detailed exploration of programmes at all levels having taken place, and noted that this is supported by the University's dual visiting examiner system (see paragraph 43). Reports from visiting examiners confirmed the standards of degrees in biology and were predominantly complimentary, while offering also a number of critical comments. The sub-board of examiners' detailed response to any issues raised follows their analysis of the reports and is copied to the visiting examiners themselves, with subsequent actions being summarised in the next annual report.

101 Following an internal review recommendation an appropriate assessment strategy is now in place. This contains detailed marking criteria for assessing coursework and examinations at each level and is incorporated into student handbooks. The School recognises the undue complexity of its handbook

arrangements, however, and is currently taking steps to simplify them.

102 The student work seen by the audit team appeared to confirm visiting examiners' comments that standards are being maintained. Scripts and course work were appropriately annotated, and a transparent marking scheme for honours-level projects, both experimental and literature-based, showed clear rationales for marks awarded.

103 The audit team saw student handbooks, which appeared thorough and helpful; their contents, which included information on study skills and learning support, are supported and updated by pages from the College's VLE. Materials available to research students include a handbook and logbook providing a structured framework for recording progress reviews. Students affirmed the usefulness of the handbooks and particularly of the VLE pages, extending these comments to the School's VLE and on-line assessment and feedback project, which, with its regular computer-based assessments and feedback, enables them to assess their own progress. They were satisfied with academic and personal support and the accessibility of academic and support staff, commenting particularly on the helpfulness and approachability of library and computing staff and the benefits of the School's research ethos.

104 Student feedback, collected at the end of each course unit and sent to the School Teaching Committee and to visiting examiners, contributes to the annual programme report if major issues emerge. Meetings of the School's Student/Staff Exchange Committee, chaired by a student, are timetabled to feed into School Teaching Committee to enable concerns to be considered there. Students who met the audit team cited examples of actions taken in response to this feedback.

105 From a study of samples of assessed work, external examiners' reports and other documentation, and from discussions with students and staff, it is concluded that the standard of student achievement in biology is appropriate to the levels of the awards and their location within the FHEQ.

Classics

106 The DAT for classics covered the undergraduate programmes in Classics and Classical Studies, the master's programme in Classical Civilisation and the MPhil and PhD programmes in Classics. The DSED was based on an internal review conducted in June 2004, the subsequent report of the review panel, and action plans prepared for QAC. In addition an update covering such matters as an additional staff appointment, the initiation of a retention project and the expansion of the Classics library stock by the integration of the former FCE stock were provided. Programme specifications, which are clearly located within the FHEQ and make appropriate reference to the subject benchmark statement, were provided for the undergraduate programmes, as was a programme specification for the MA Classical Civilisation, which had been commended by the internal review panel for conveying the distinctiveness of the programme and for so clearly linking learning outcomes to the teaching programme.

107 Progression and completion data formed part of the internal review documentation, and, in spite of some concerns expressed by members of the School as to their reliability, it was clear that they had been carefully analysed and that discussion within the School and with external examiners had led to appropriate action to address the issues identified while protecting quality and standards.

108 The audit team formed the view that internal review had been rigorously conducted, with external participation, student involvement and the active engagement of academic staff, the latter having a clear understanding of the procedure's purpose and function. Annual monitoring, which also appeared to the team to be effective, covers an appropriate range of topics, including all issues raised by external examiners and the responses made to them, but places particular emphasis on student evaluation of course units and school-level responses. The evaluations are initially considered by the Head of School and then discussed by the School's Teaching and Student/Staff Exchange

Committees, the minutes of which are publicly available electronically.

109 External examiners' reports, sent to the School by the Registrar, are overwhelmingly positive, commenting favourably not only on the appropriateness of standards achieved to the levels of the awards given, but also on such matters as the range of options available to undergraduates, the quality of master's level work and academic staff's careful assessment of it. Reports are discussed by relevant programme directors and teaching staff, who formulate a response for Degrees Committee, the body responsible for ensuring that all issues are properly addressed. The audit team noted that external examiners had commented in particular on the reflective approach taken within the School and on the willingness to consider making changes thought likely to enhance the quality of provision.

110 Student handbooks, described by students as helpful and informative, contain appropriately detailed information about programmes and course units. Despite reservations about library provision having been expressed in the 2004 internal review, students advised the audit team that they are largely content with the stock, very happy with the opportunity to access e-resources remotely, and find the work of the subject librarian, who offers one-to-one tutorials on the effective use of e-resources, especially helpful. The team was told that reading lists are available on the web but that little teaching is currently supported by the College's VLE.

111 All the students who met the audit team, some of whom had little or no prior experience of higher education, valued the opportunities that studying at Birkbeck College afforded them, though some found the challenge of part-time study greater than they had anticipated. Nevertheless, they considered that, for the most part, provision matched their expectations, they spoke warmly of the support and guidance they received from members of staff, they appreciated their adult-to-adult relationship with them, and understood both how research-led teaching enhanced their learning and how such skills as organisation

and time-management are not only essential to their success as students but also transfer into other aspects of their lives. Although their awareness of the class representative system appeared a little limited, they expressed confidence in the evaluation procedure and quoted instances of their responses having led to beneficial change.

112 From a study of samples of assessed work, external examiners' reports and other documentation, and from discussions with students and staff, it is concluded that the standard of student achievement in Classics is appropriate to the levels of the awards and their location within the FHEQ.

Film and media

113 The DAT for film and media covered the BA in Film and Media in the Faculty of Continuing Education. The DSED consisted of papers prepared for, or generated by, an internal review conducted in 2003 and a report on subsequent developments. Supporting documentation was later made available, but these did not include a formal written self-evaluation of the programme. The programme specification follows the College format and is available on the intranet. It includes a formal articulation of learning outcomes, with course units as part of the specification, and while it does not link explicitly to the FHEQ or the relevant benchmark statement, the programme meets the content requirement.

114 Application, progression and completion data were made available to the audit team, together with analyses of cohorts by gender, disability, ethnicity and highest qualification on entry. The programme shows an exceptionally high retention rate against the College average, which staff attributed to great care being taken in selection and to the fact that progress monitoring is their responsibility, a policy which, they argued, in the team's view persuasively, had a beneficial effect.

115 The audit team noted that, while the programme team has adopted a number of internal review recommendations, some responses have been slow, and little systematic attempt has been made to expedite matters.

In particular, a recommendation relating to the penalisation of late submitted course work, which had been the subject of extended debate, has only now been adopted for implementation in academic year 2005-06, a matter which reflects the team's view that it would be advisable for the College to introduce an institution-wide procedure for handling this issue (see paragraph 29). Similarly, the annual review of academic year 2003-04 led to a number of recommendations and an action plan for academic year 2004-05. Staff acknowledged that not all parts of this plan had been progressed, though the team did find some evidence of progress monitoring at faculty level.

116 Assessment typically consists of coursework assignments, with some 'own-time' examination essay questions. Some assessment takes the form of creative work, one first year unit has an unseen examination, and a compulsory final year project is undertaken through independent research with supervisory support from a member of the programme team. Although the fact that only multimedia units involve practical work has in the past led to comment by the Staff/Student Exchange Committee, the students who met the audit team did not regard this as a major issue, pointing out that applicants know this is primarily an academic not a practical programme. Marking guidelines, which the audit team considers clear, robust and consistent, exist in respect of all work. Staff are aware of the College's development of a common awards framework and recognise that it will facilitate full articulation with the FHEQ.

117 External examiners' reports, which, while generally complimentary, have in the past raised questions about the lack of variety in assessment strategies, are discussed in lecturers' meetings and contribute to the planning process for subsequent programme delivery. The audit team noted that these reports often provoke lively debate, involving staff challenging their recommendations. The team tracked the school's response to one such criticism, concerning the absence of formal group work, and found ample evidence, including student

feedback, that it had been responsibly debated and that defensible grounds existed for the decision not to proceed with it.

118 Examples of student work indicated to the audit team that topics for assessment are relevant and appropriate, that double marking is in place and responsibly conducted (evidence of inter-marker iteration was seen) and that marking is rigorous and consistent with the assessment guidelines. Written feedback provided to students has been commended by both external and intercollegiate examiners. It appears both useful and consistent among modules and markers, and is well regarded by students, who confirm that it can be supplemented by oral feedback on request.

119 Programme information, both hard copy and electronic, appears both accurate and comprehensive. The Student Handbook includes both practical and academic information, and was commended by students as being exceptionally helpful. Students consider learning resources adequate and, given occasional problems with access to books for units with large classes, that availability is good. As well as the College library and other library resources of the University of London, students have access to the specialist British Film Institute Library.

120 Student feedback is sought for each unit, and analysed, summarised, commented on and addressed as part of the planning process for next delivery. Overall, the students who met the audit team indicated that they find the programme stimulating and hold the professionalism and expertise of staff in high regard. They were also complimentary about staff accessibility, saying that they use their personal and year tutors when appropriate, though without always being exactly clear as to their respective roles. The Student/Staff Exchange Committee meets regularly, and the team is satisfied that agreed actions are taken and reported back at the next meeting, and that significant issues have been debated and appropriate changes made.

121 The BA Film and Media is delivered to comparatively small cohorts, with an annual

entry of 30-40 students. A small full-time team is importantly augmented by sessional and associate lecturers, most of whom are in professional practice, and whose involvement provides valuable links into the media industries. The evidence of this DAT reflects the audit team's view that the College has successfully integrated part-time staff into programme teams and that they play a full part in its deliberations and in programme development and monitoring (see paragraph 74). The team noted, however, a cultural preference for informal over formal interactions even where more formal procedures might be expected, and of slowness of response to recommendations following annual and internal review (see paragraph 40).

122 From a study of samples of assessed work, external examiners' reports and other documentation, and from discussions with students and staff, it is concluded that the standard of student achievement in film and media is appropriate to the levels of the awards and their location within the FHEQ.

Management

123 The DAT for management covered the following programmes in the Department of Management: BA Accounting and Management; BA Management; BA Organization of Work, Economics and Labour Law; MSc/MSc (Res) MRes/PgDip Management in the Public Sector; MSc/MSc (Res) MRes/PgDip Business Strategy, Politics and the Environment; MSc/MSc (Res) MRes/PgDip Corporate Governance and Ethics; MSc/MSc (Res) MRes/PgDip Sport Management and the Business of Football; MSc/MSc (Res) MRes/PgDip Management and Organizational Analysis; MSc/MSc (Res) MRes/PgDip International Business; MSc/MSc (Res) MRes/PgDip Innovation Management and Technology Policy; MPhil/PhD programmes.

124 The DSED consisted of papers prepared for, or generated by, an internal review conducted in December 2004 and a report on subsequent developments. The programme specifications seen by the audit team make use of the College template, show that the Department has been

guided by the appropriate benchmark statements and the FHEQ, and demonstrate appropriate external involvement by trades unions, professional bodies and commercial and business organisations.

125 The internal review report was received in mid-January 2005 and discussed at a departmental meeting later that month. The Department states, and the audit team confirms, that progress has already been made on some recommendations and that others are being dealt with according to the time frame stipulated in the report. Staff indicated to the team that internal monitoring has led to a greater reflection on practice and has encouraged staff to make procedures more explicit. The team considered the Department's involvement with College systems to be measured, and noted an instance where advice to pursue a particular enhancement initiative had been rejected after full debate. The team also formed the view that the Department has not yet fully engaged with the proposed common awards framework.

126 The Department claimed in its DSED that student attendance and progress at all levels are monitored, formally and informally, throughout their study, though the College acknowledged in its SED that withdrawal rates on the BA degrees in particular are high, especially in the first year. The internal review panel encouraged the Department to undertake an extensive review of the relevant statistics and take appropriate action, and the team understands that this will be done from academic year 2005-06. The data suggest that workload is the major factor causing students to withdraw, and the Department is responding by including more information on the demands of part-time study during its open evenings.

127 Assessment procedures vary across the Department. Some programmes are assessed solely by examination, others include course work or an autumn term test as well as a summer examination. The audit team saw a sample of assessed work at postgraduate and undergraduate levels, and confirms that student performance is determined in line with stated learning outcomes. The Department complies

with College regulations in respect of nominating external examiners and considering and responding to their reports. The team saw a range of such reports and confirms that, overall, they are positive in tone and that examples exist of action having been taken as the result of external examiners' comments.

128 Students who met the audit team confirmed that the information supplied to them before they had joined the College had been complete, accurate and useful, and had fully explained the workload involved. They considered the student handbooks clear and comprehensive, a view which concurs with that of the team. The handbooks provide departmental and college-wide information, together with details of degree classification, regulations and marking guidelines, and programme and course descriptions. While they also contain information on referencing, students described the information they had been given on this as variable.

129 Apart from a number of administrative concerns, the students who met the audit team were satisfied with their learning resources. The Department supplies, at cost, reading packs to meet a previously perceived lack of books; there was particular praise for the helpfulness of the library staff, and it is clear to the team that the Department has developed effective working relations with library and computing services, though it currently makes no use of the VLE. Students told the team that, while they are aware of the available support services, the nature of their engagement with the College is such that it is normally more appropriate for them to draw on their own support networks; though they do value the informal departmental support they receive from members of staff.

130 Students' views on course units are elicited through questionnaires, the results of which are collated and returned to staff and student representatives. Broader views are sought through the Staff-Student Liaison Committee (the Department's nomenclature for the student/staff exchange committee) the effectiveness of which, however, appears to the audit team to be restricted by the fact that,

while issues raised with the Committee are usually dealt with, responses are not invariably reported back. There are no student representatives on departmental teaching committees.

131 Students told the audit team that they find their programme content well focussed, though they were critical of the time taken by some (but not all) markers to return assessed work. The team found evidence to support the claim, made by students as well as staff, that research-led teaching is beneficial to their learning experience. It may be that in view of this, the Department would find it helpful to explore the possibility of forging closer links with the College Research School.

132 From a study of samples of assessed work, external examiners' reports and other documentation, and from discussions with students and staff, it is concluded that the standard of student achievement in management is appropriate to the levels of the awards and their location within the FHEQ.

Section 4: The audit investigations: published information

The students' experience of published and other information available to them

133 Students who met the audit team expressed the view that the pre-entry information available to them and the further information provided when they joined the College are accurate and appropriate. They consider the College website informative, comprehensive and current, a view which reflects that of the team. The team also noted that the External Relations Office is currently preparing a new suite of student support material, both as hard copy and electronically, to help students in the enquiry-to-enrolment period, including advice on matters such as finance, study skills and child care.

134 Overall, students perceive the information made available to them at different stages of their College careers to be full, fair and accurate.

Reliability, accuracy and completeness of published information

135 The College stated in its SED that the Publications Officer, who is responsible for ensuring the accuracy of all information provided by schools and departments, controls the production of the annual prospectus, and that a clear procedure exists for the resolution of ambiguities and disputes. These procedures apply also to FCE, though the time-frame for the publication of its prospectus, as well as matters of detailed content, differ somewhat. The accuracy of advertisements (especially important given the College's non-participation in the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service scheme and the need to advertise non-traditional programmes in non-traditional media) is coordinated by the Director of External Relations. The audit team formed the view, supported by students who met the team, that the College's published information paints a balanced and fair picture of the College, its programmes and modes of delivery, from which prospective students can form a judgment as to its suitability for their needs.

136 The audit team confirms that the College is preparing appropriately for the publication of the full datasets required by HEFCE's document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance.* Some data are already available through the teaching quality information website, including pages on the College's learning and teaching strategy, links with employers and the external examiner system. In addition, some external examiners' reports and internal reviews are available, and the information provided appears to be accurate. The College has chosen not to exercise its option to comment on HESA data.

137 The audit team confirms that the information made available by the College through printed and electronic sources is accurate and reliable, and that progress is being made towards compliance with HEFCE 03/51.

Findings

Findings

138 An institutional audit of Birkbeck College, University of London (the College) was undertaken during the period 6 to 10 June 2005. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the quality of the College's programmes of study and on the discharge of its responsibility as a degree-awarding body. As part of the audit process, and reflecting protocols agreed with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Standing Conference of Principals and Universities UK, the audit included consideration of examples of institutional processes at work at the level of courses through DATs, together with examples of these processes operating at the level of the institution as a whole. This section of the report summarises the findings of the audit. It concludes by identifying one feature of good practice that emerged during the audit, and making recommendations to the College for action to enhance current practice.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for assuring the quality of programmes

139 The College reported in its self-evaluation document (SED) that its quality assurance framework involves robust procedures for programme validation, annual review and internal (periodic) review. In the course of the audit programme approval procedures were found to be over-elaborate and lacking in precise definition as to the respective functions of different stages, leading to some uncertainty as to the nature of delegated powers. The College is therefore advised to review the programme approval process to ensure that it operates effectively, and that approval takes place at an appropriate level.

140 The paper-based annual programme monitoring process was found to be operating as claimed by the College. Nonetheless, while required actions appear to be taken by schools, they are not consistently monitored institutionally, there is no holistic overview of the outcomes of annual monitoring from which

particular trends or areas of concern can be identified and addressed, and the process takes up to a full academic session to complete, resulting in a two-year time lag.

141 Annual programme monitoring reports form the basis of documentation for the four yearly internal reviews of cognate subject groupings, carried out by panels with specialist external representation under the authority of the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC). It is confirmed that the process takes place as claimed, but, as with annual monitoring, there is no persuasive evidence of a College-wide overview of outcomes able to be utilised for enhancement or to promote and encourage the adoption of the good practice it posts on its website. There is also scope for uncertainty in the fact that action lists do not name those responsible for taking forward specific actions or for monitoring and recording their completion. The College is accordingly advised to ensure that responsibility for actions arising from annual monitoring and internal review is clear, and that progress on those actions is monitored and recorded at College level.

142 The progress and outcomes of the procedures for quality management are progressed through a strongly participative and inclusive committee structure headed in practice by Academic Board (AB), which has set up an executive committee to manage its affairs and deal with academic planning and operational matters. It emerged in the course of the audit that the terms of reference of a number of committees in this structure are such as to cause potential confusion, and that, in particular, both the Teaching and Quality Assurance Committees have responsibility for monitoring standards of provision which are, however, the responsibility of the Pro Vice-Master (Learning and Teaching). These and other uncertainties lead to the College being advised to clarify the location of ultimate responsibility for quality and standards to ensure its responsibility for standards is fully understood and discharged.

143 It also emerged in the course of the audit that the time taken to progress business

through the various committees is somewhat protracted, leading to delays in decision-making. It was particularly noted that the lengthy delay which occurred before the College responded to fundamental problems identified by a Foundation Degree (FD) review undertaken by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) led to further avoidable difficulties at the follow-up visit. In addition, the style in which committee meetings are minuted and papers presented is such that it is not easy to trace decision-making or to follow the lines of discussion. This, and the duplication of reporting (even between Academic Board and its Executive Committee) makes for a complex system which does not readily lend itself to speedy responses, and it may be that certain cultural changes are needed to create and maintain a more incisive and economical approach to committee business across the board. A review of the Committee system as a whole is currently scheduled to begin in January 2006, but the College is advised to expedite it to ensure the effective and efficient conduct and minuting of business.

144 The College plans to introduce a common awards framework which will ensure full compliance with *The framework for higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and University of London framework, and facilitate consistency in assessment. Since issues of equity and fairness arising from inconsistencies in handling late submitted work and extenuating circumstances cases were identified in the course of the audit, and since these matters can be rectified prior to the introduction of a common awards framework, the College is advised to implement an institution-wide procedure for managing late submissions and extenuating circumstances in student assessment as soon as possible. It is also advised to expedite the implementation of the common awards framework itself.

145 The College has, very understandably given the overwhelmingly part-time patterns of its provision, developed and supported an e-learning strategy. It was found in the course of the audit, however, that the very variable usage of the College's virtual learning environment (VLE) resulted more from school-level preference than strategic decision-making. It is considered desirable for the College to extend the use of its VLE to benefit all students.

146 Students are represented on almost all College committees. The audit found the representative system generally effective, though some variability of participation results from the competing demands on mature part-time students' time. Advice from employers and other stakeholders is secured at programme design stage, and may in future be enhanced by the recently established FD Employers' Advisory Group. This Group was instituted in part as a response to the outcome of QAA's review of the FD in Information Technology in May 2003, and confirmed as extant following a follow-up visit to the College in February 2005. QAA's review expressed no confidence in emerging academic standards, emerging student achievement and the quality of learning opportunities, and noted also the lack of employer involvement, work-based learning and personal development planning. While there is evidence that the Advisory Group has contributed to a recently approved FD, it would be premature to assess its present and possible future impact which the College will no doubt wish to scrutinise closely.

147 Overall, and in spite of the limitations of the quality framework, which have led to the identification of six areas in this section of the report where the College is advised to take remedial action, the findings of the audit confirm that broad confidence can be placed in the soundness of current and likely future management of the quality of programmes.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for securing the standards of awards

148 The College's continuation audit report (2002) referred to weaknesses in its use of statistical data in annual and periodic reviews, attributing this to the lack of capacity of its then existing system. The College responded by developing a new student record system,

currently being piloted, which will be available on an institution-wide basis from the start of academic year 2005-06. The College indicates that data are now available which can be used to monitor retention and progression, and it can be confirmed that such data are increasingly being scrutinised at school level. This represents significant, albeit slow, progress towards a College-wide adoption and use of a standardised management information system of a kind which will enable it to have increasing confidence in the maintenance and comparability of standards on an institution-wide basis. For the present it can be said that the College is progressing towards the effective analysis of data generated by its newly developed systems.

149 The appointment of visiting examiners (a generic term for external and intercollegiate examiners) is governed by appropriate policies and regulations. Their reports are scrutinised by the Registrar in the first instance, identifying comments requiring action or consideration and response, which are then forwarded to schools for action. The Registrar also prepares a summary of issues raised by visiting examiners for the University of London, but evidence from the audit gives cause for reservations as how promptly this is done. The Registrar's Department has also begun to compile a database of matters raised by visiting examiners which highlights promised actions by schools. Although the College envisages that this action will be followed up through annual programme monitoring, it is uncertain how systematically the monitoring will take place. The College does, however, acknowledge the need for a more rigorous follow-up of matters raised in reports, and plans to initiate a fundamental review of the reporting process which, it is hoped, will address these concerns.

150 Overall, notwithstanding these reservations it can be concluded that the arrangements for external examining are generally appropriate, that the procedures currently in place are contributing to the assurance of quality and standards and that matters raised in visiting examiners' reports are dealt with appropriately at course and programme level. Nevertheless,

particularly given the delays which have occurred in compiling a database to monitor responses at this level, the College is advised to ensure that responsibility for actions arising from external examiners' reports is clear, and that progress on those actions is monitored and recorded at College level.

The effectiveness of institutional procedures for supporting learning

151 The College claims to promote student learning through the delivery of high quality research-led teaching supported by well-managed learning resources and appropriately targeted general support. Academic guidance and support are delivered in one-to-one tutorials, the discussion of written work and other types of formative assessment, all of which form an essential part of the student learning experience and, together with research-led teaching, which students especially value, contribute to the College's strong sense of academic community.

152 The College's decision to support substantial developments in e-resources has contributed to the development of increasingly close links between the Library, Central Computing Services and schools, and to the improved accessibility of such resources for students. Students also have access to the learning resources of other higher education institutions as well as to the Senate House Library, the fee for which will, with effect from the start of the next academic year, be borne by the College. It remains the case, however, that schools have varied in their exploitation of the learning and teaching opportunities afforded by the College's VLE, and that as a result some students have less opportunity than others to benefit from the potential of a medium which would appear especially beneficial to the characteristic 'Birkbeck student'.

153 Academic staff are appointed primarily for their research record or potential, but receive training to develop appropriate teaching skills. The student perception is that well-qualified staff deliver up-to-date, stimulating and challenging teaching programmes; evidence from the audit confirms that staff are committed

to their students and available to offer appropriate advice and guidance. Nevertheless, some variation in the timeliness and extent of formative feedback was noted, and it would be helpful to clarify where, at institutional level, responsibility for the development of academic advice and guidance lies. This is especially so given the College's intention to increase its full-time international and part-time 18 to 21 year-old and FD student numbers, whose learning needs are likely to differ from those of the mature part-time students traditionally associated with the College.

154 Overall the audit finds that students have ready access to academic and personal guidance from a range of sources, for example in relation to disability issues, and finance and careers advice. Nonetheless it would be desirable for the College to take advantage of its planned review of the widening participation strategy and its proposed 'one-stop shop' for student services to develop the timely achievement of a more coordinated approach to service provision, addressing in particular the challenges likely to be posed by an increasingly diverse student population and an uncertain external environment.

The outcomes of the discipline audit trails

Biology

155 Each of the programmes considered in the DAT has a specification developed in line with the FHEQ, referenced to the appropriate subject benchmark and setting out appropriate educational aims and learning outcomes. External examiners report that courses are set at an appropriate level and that student achievement is comparable to that achieved in other institutions. The School complies with College procedures in terms of annual and internal programme monitoring; its procedures appear robust and give evidence of responsive action being taken where matters of concern are raised. Students confirmed to the audit team that they are provided with all information necessary to enable them to undertake assessment tasks.

156 Students confirmed that their needs for academic and pastoral support are met, gave examples of constructive feedback which they have provided leading to improvements, and especially value the ways in which the VLE enhances their learning and the manner in which they are able to undertake it.

157 From a study of samples of assessed work, external examiners' reports and other documentation, and from discussions with students and staff, it is concluded that the standard of student achievement in biology is appropriate to the levels of the awards and their location within FHEQ.

Classics

158 Each of the programmes considered in the DAT has a specification, one of which has been commended by an internal review panel, developed in line with the FHEQ, referenced to the appropriate subject benchmark and demonstrating appropriate external involvement. External examiners report that programmes are set at an appropriate level, that student achievement is comparable to that achieved in other institutions and that the School is especially responsive to their advice.

159 There is evidence of active departmental engagement with College policies designed to improve retention and progression, and of a rigorous internal review procedure. Students speak highly of the quality of handbooks and other available information, both electronic and hard copy, though as yet the Department makes little use of the College's VLE. Some students have found part-time higher education challenging, but they value their adult-to-adult relationships with departmental staff, whom they regard as approachable and helpful. They believe their views are taken seriously and can cite instances when they have led to change.

160 From a study of samples of assessed work, external examiners' reports and other documentation, and from discussions with students and staff, it is concluded that the standard of student achievement in Classics is appropriate to the levels of the awards and their location within FHEQ.

Film and media

161 This DAT considered the BA Film and Media, which has a programme specification developed in line with the FHEQ and referenced to the appropriate subject benchmark. External examiners report that the programme is set at an appropriate level and that student achievement is comparable to that achieved in other institutions. The Department has been subject to normal College review procedures, but, while it is generally compliant with the outcomes of these reviews, some responses are considered slow, with little systematic attempt being made to expedite matters.

162 Assessment, which involves marking creative as well as academic work, is varied and appears appropriate, though some external examiners have considered it cautious. Assessment topics are relevant and appropriate; clear, robust and consistent marking guidelines are in place; marking is rigorous and consistent with the guidelines; and feedback is well regarded by students. Students are satisfied with their learning resources; they find the programme stimulating; they hold the expertise and helpfulness of staff in high regard; and they have confidence in the representative system.

163 From a study of samples of assessed work, external examiners' reports and other documentation, and from discussions with students and staff, it is concluded that the standard of student achievement in the BA Film and Media is appropriate to the levels of the award and its location within FHEQ.

Management

164 Each of the programmes considered in the DAT has a specification developed in line with the FHEQ, referenced to the appropriate subject benchmark and demonstrating appropriate external involvement. External examiners report that programmes are set at an appropriate level and that student achievement is comparable to that achieved in other institutions.

165 External examiners are appointed in accordance with institutional requirements, and there is evidence of appropriate responsive action following receipt of their reports.

Assessment methods are variable, and students expressed the view that this variability, which extends to the time taken to receive feedback, can lead to inequities. Nonetheless the questionnaire and representative systems in place give scope for the expression of student views, and there is evidence that, where possible, such views are responded to appropriately, albeit that not all actions taken are reported back. Students are generally satisfied with the quality of programmes (especially valuing research-led teaching), information, learning resources and support services. The Department does not currently operate a VLE, development of which would enhance provision.

166 From a study of samples of assessed work, external examiners' reports and other documentation, and from discussions with students and staff, it is concluded that the standard of student achievement in management is appropriate to the levels of the awards and their location within FHEQ.

The institution's use of the Academic Infrastructure

167 The College stated in its SED that its quality assurance processes provide a framework which ensures that schools take account of external reference points in the development and review of subject provision. This point is emphasised in the guidance provided in the College's Quality Assurance Code of Practice and other documents, and is confirmed in its academic quality assurance strategy.

168 An examination of the relevant documentation together with information obtained during meetings with staff permit confidence to be expressed that the College has undertaken a thorough consideration of external reference points and has made determined efforts to achieve compliance, albeit that in some instances such compliance is less than wholly explicit. While its engagement will be further assured when it adopts a common awards framework, it is nonetheless concluded that, thus far, the College has engaged appropriately with the Academic Infrastructure and other external reference

points, and that the programmes considered in the course of the audit have been assigned to a suitable level in the FHEQ.

The utility of the SED as an illustration of the institution's capacity to reflect upon its own strengths and limitations, and to act on these to enhance quality and standards

169 In its SED the College provided a clear overview of the structure and processes in place to manage quality and standards. The SED, which described, and in most sub-sections evaluated, a wide range of quality management and enhancement systems, was supplemented by a range of supporting documentation, to which it was also carefully cross-referenced. The SED summarised developments contingent upon and subsequent to continuation audit and other external engagements.

170 The SED appropriately reflected the College's ability to manage change and adapt procedures in the light of new internal priorities and external pressures, including reviewing management, academic and committee arrangements. It also accurately represented the executive and management structures of the College.

171 It is considered that, although the SED described many of the College's policies, procedures and practices, it might have gone further in describing overarching strategies, for example, for information technology and communication; it would also have been aided by the inclusion of a contents page and a glossary of abbreviations. However, overall the SED provided a sound review that acknowledged areas for further development and gave confidence of the College's capacity for self-reflection and its ability to develop appropriate responses.

Commentary on the institution's intentions for the enhancement of quality and standards

172 The College claims to be moving from a regime of compliance to one of enhancement. It intends to develop its academic quality

assurance strategy to include a greater element of quality enhancement, and is currently collecting a considerable quantity of information which could be usefully applied to the development of such a strategy. Nonetheless, as yet it lacks an agreed understanding of what, precisely quality enhancement is, and has also still to put in place all the systems necessary for this information to be considered holistically as a prelude to developing a more sophisticated quality enhancement policy and strategy.

173 Accordingly, while the College's enhancement aspirations are welcomed, it is considered desirable for the College to analyse further and define its understanding of, and approach to, quality enhancement itself, and then develop a formal and coordinated quality enhancement strategy.

Reliability of information

174 The College has procedures in place to ensure the accuracy of all published information, whether electronic or hard copy, including advertisements, which are especially important given the College's non-participation in the Universites and Colleges Admissions Service and the need to advertise non-traditional programmes in non-traditional media. It has plans for the future enhancement of these arrangements, but it is considered that, at present, its published information is such as to permit prospective students to form a balanced judgment as to the College's suitability for their needs, and to give a fair representation of its activities to others.

175 The College is preparing appropriately for the publication of the full datasets required by HEFCE's document 03/51, *Information on quality and standards in higher education: Final guidance*. Some data are already available through the teaching quality information website, including pages on its learning and teaching strategy, links with employers and the external examiner system. Some external examiners' reports and internal reviews are available, and the information provided is considered accurate.

176 It is confirmed, therefore, that the information made available by the College through printed and electronic sources is accurate and reliable, and that progress is being made towards compliance with HEFCE 03/51.

Features of good practice

177 Of the features of good practice noted in the course of the audit, the audit team identified in particular the effective integration of sessional lecturers into the life and work of the College (paragraph 74).

Recommendations for action

178 The College may wish to consider the advisability of:

i   expediting the planned review of its committee system to ensure the effective and efficient conduct and minuting of business (paragraphs 24, 56)

ii   clarifying the location of ultimate responsibility for quality management and academic standards (paragraph 28)

iii implementing a College-wide procedure for managing late submissions and extenuating circumstances in student assessment (paragraphs 29, 115)

iv   expediting the implementation of its planned common awards framework (paragraph 30)

v   reviewing the programme approval process to ensure that it operates effectively and efficiently, and that approval takes place at an appropriate level (paragraph 36)

vi   ensuring that responsibility for actions arising from annual monitoring, internal review and external examiners' reports is clear, and that progress on those actions is monitored and recorded at College level (paragraphs 40, 121).

179 The College may wish to consider the desirability of:

i   reviewing its current understanding of quality enhancement and then develop a formal and coordinated quality enhancement strategy (paragraph 32)

ii   undertaking a systematic analysis of generic College-wide issues arising from monitoring and review, and ensuring that these, together with issues identified in external examiners' reports, contribute to the quality enhancement strategy (paragraphs 33, 48)

iii agreeing a minimum standard of VLE use for all courses (paragraph 78)

iv   ensuring the timely achievement of more coordinated provision of academic and personal support services for students (paragraphs 89, 92).

Appendix

Birkbeck College, University of London's response to the audit report

Birkbeck is pleased to receive QAA's positive report and welcomes the report's findings of 'broad confidence' in the management of quality and standards, both now and into the future.

The College has already taken the following steps in response to the recommendations outlined in the report and views these as opportunities for improvement and enhancement.

- The College Secretary will carry out the planned review of the College's committee system to ensure the effective and efficient conduct and minuting of business. The terms of reference and timetable for the review will be established early in autumn 2005 and will include a review of the committees of the Academic Board together with the involvement of schools.

- Clarification of the location of ultimate responsibility for quality management and academic standards will also occur as part of the above review. A working party will also be established to examine how the College can assure itself of the following: that there is systematic follow up, monitoring and recording of action taken in response to its quality assurance procedures; that responsibility for such action is clear; that generic College-wide issues are identified; that these contribute to the quality enhancement strategy.

- A review is to be undertaken to examine current practice for managing late submissions and extenuating circumstances in student assessment with a view to developing a possible College-wide procedure. This will be considered through the committee structure in spring 2006.

- A detailed timetable for the implementation of a common awards framework will be considered through the committee structure in autumn 2005, for implementation at the earliest practicable dates but no later than the 2007/08 academic session.

- A preliminary review has already been undertaken of the programme approval process to ensure that it operates effectively and efficiently, and that approval takes place at an appropriate level. Detailed proposals for the future operation of this process will be considered through the committee structure in autumn 2005.

- A draft Quality Enhancement Strategy outlining the College's approach to this area has been produced by a working party of the Quality Assurance Committee. This has been developed in line with the QAA's Code of practice to review the current understanding of quality enhancement and to develop plans for action during the period 2005-8. This will be considered through the committee structure in autumn 2005.

- An eLearning Working Party will be examining the possibility of implementing a minimum standard of virtual learning environment use for all courses to be incorporated into the revised eLearning Strategy in 2005/06.

- A working party, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Master for Widening Participation, and to include the College Dean and other key members of staff, will examine the achievement of more coordinated provision of academic and personal support services for students. This will be considered in relation to the work of the new Centre for Learning and Professional Development which has within its remit provision of study skills for students.