



Institutional audit

Birkbeck University of London

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Preface

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Audit teams also comment specifically on:

- the institution's arrangements for maintaining appropriate academic standards and the quality of provision of postgraduate research programmes
- the institution's approach to developing and implementing institutional strategies for enhancing the quality of its educational provision, both taught and by research

- the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy and completeness of the information that the institution publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

If the audit includes the institution's collaborative provision the judgements and comments also apply unless the audit team considers that any of its judgements or comments in respect of the collaborative provision differ from those in respect of the institution's 'home' provision. Any such differences will be reflected in the form of words used to express a judgement or comment on the reliance that can reasonably be placed on the accuracy, integrity, completeness and frankness of the information that the institution publishes, and about the quality of its programmes and the standards of its awards.

Explanatory note on the format for the report and the annex

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

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

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

Summary

Introduction

A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an Institutional audit of Birkbeck University of London (the College) from 7-11 June 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the College's management of the academic standards of the awards it offers and the quality of learning opportunities available to students.

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 about the ways in which the College manages the academic aspects of its provision.

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

Outcomes of the Institutional audit

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

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

Institutional approach to quality enhancement

The College's approach to quality enhancement is to integrate enhancement as far as possible into routine quality assurance procedures. Enhancement is prominent in the College's Quality Strategy 2009-12, and in its procedures for programme approval, annual monitoring, peer observation of teaching, external examining and periodic review.

Postgraduate research students

The College has succeeded in establishing and sustaining a vibrant research environment for its research students, underpinned by a Code of Practice which fulfils the expectations of the relevant parts of the Academic Infrastructure.

Published information

The audit team found that reliance can reasonably be placed on the accuracy of the information the College publishes about the quality of its educational provision and the standards of its awards.

Features of good practice

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

- the integrated advice, support and guidance provided by My Birkbeck
- procedures for the peer review of teaching
- the integration of the former Faculty of Lifelong Learning into the restructured schools, and the attendant benefits to progression, pedagogy and curricula across the College.

Recommendations for action

The audit team recommends that the College considers action in certain areas.

It would be **advisable** for the College to:

- ensure that it adheres to the University of London's regulations regarding the University's approval of collaborative provision
- ensure that all collaborative links are underpinned by a signed written agreement whose contents are informed by the guidance in Section 2 of the *QAA Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* (the *Code of practice*)
- ensure the full implementation, with regard to collaborative provision, of the College's policy and guidance on the role of external examiners
- achieve full implementation of the College's policy on the annual monitoring of programmes as it is described in the Quality Assurance/Enhancement Code of Practice 2009-10.

It would be **desirable** for the College to:

- resolve those issues associated with the implementation of the Common Awards Scheme which remain outstanding
- establish minimum standards for the use of the virtual learning environment by teaching staff
- reflect on the operation of the new programme approval process, and consider if the overwhelming use of the fast track procedure in 2009-10 will continue to be appropriate in the future
- develop an explicit definition of a minor amendment to a programme
- pursue the systematic use of quantitative data in internal review
- expedite the production and publication of definitive programme specifications
- assess the needs of all postgraduate research students who are engaged in teaching, and provide appropriate training where necessary
- consider introducing student membership of school teaching quality and enhancement committees (TQECs)
- develop comprehensive support for the training of student representatives.

Reference points

To provide further evidence to support its findings, the audit team investigated the use made by the College of the Academic Infrastructure, which provides a means of describing academic standards in UK higher education. It allows for diversity and innovation within

academic programmes offered by higher education. QAA worked with the higher education sector to establish the various parts of the Academic Infrastructure, which are:

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

The audit team found that the College took due account of the Academic Infrastructure in its management of academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities available to students, with the exception of parts of Section 2 of the *Code of practice*.

Report

1 A team of auditors from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) carried out an institutional audit of Birkbeck University of London (the College) from 7-11 June 2010. The purpose of the audit was to provide public information on the College's management of the academic standards of the awards that it delivers and the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

2 The audit team comprised Professor R Allen, Professor M Cook, Dr A Mackenzie, Ms E Savage and Professor M Whitby, auditors, and Ms J Lyon, audit secretary. The audit was coordinated for QAA by Mr W Naylor, Assistant Director, QAA Reviews Group.

Section 1: Introduction and background

3 Birkbeck was founded in 1823 as the London Mechanics' Institute. It was incorporated into the University of London in 1920 and continues to award degrees of the University.

4 The College's principal aims are to provide part-time higher education programmes to adults, in particular those who live and work in the London region; enable adult students from diverse social and educational backgrounds to participate in its programmes; maintain and develop excellence in research; and make the results of research available through teaching, publication, partnerships with other organisations and the promotion of debate.

5 Most of the College's provision is located on its campus in central London. It also has provision in Stratford, East London, launched in 2007. Teaching takes place across a broad range of disciplines, organised into five schools: Arts; Business, Economics and Informatics; Law; Science; and Social Sciences, History and Philosophy. The schools comprise a number of smaller units, most of which are called departments. The schools also host 30 research centres.

6 In 2009-10 the College had a total of around 18,500 students (equating to approximately 7,500 full time equivalents). Of these, about 900 were on research degree programmes.

7 The most significant development since the last audit in 2005 has been a strategic review and a subsequent restructuring of the College's deliberative and academic framework (including the replacement of faculties with the five schools described in paragraph 5). The review was prompted by the withdrawal, in 2007, of funding for equivalent and lower qualifications, which was followed by the provision to the College of significant new student numbers. This led the College to initiate a portfolio review with the aim of breaking down the additional student numbers into achievable targets for each school, department and programme.

8 QAA's last audit of the College, in 2005, resulted in a judgement of broad confidence 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. The report noted one feature of good practice, and made six recommendations where action was considered advisable and four where action was considered desirable. The advisable recommendations related to: the expedition of the planned review of the College's committee structure; clarification of the location of ultimate responsibility for quality management and academic standards; the implementation of a College-wide procedure for managing late submissions and extenuating circumstances in student assessment; the expedition of the implementation of the common awards framework; a review of the programme approval process; and the clarification of responsibility for actions arising from annual monitoring, internal review and external examiner reports. The desirable recommendations related to: a review of the

College's understanding of quality enhancement; an analysis of generic College-wide issues arising from monitoring and review; a minimum standard of virtual learning environment use for all courses; and the achievement of more coordinated provision of academic and personal support services for students.

9 The introduction to the Briefing Paper summarised the College's response to the advisable recommendations. The most significant development has been the review and restructuring outlined above, which had the effect of streamlining committee business and clarifying the location of ultimate responsibility for standards and quality. The College had also implemented its Common Awards Scheme, which includes regulations on late submissions and mitigating circumstances, and introduced a new programme approval process from the beginning of the 2009-10 academic year.

10 In general, the audit team regarded the College's response to the advisable recommendations as satisfactory. It noted, however, ongoing discussions within the College about the clarity, and consistency in application, of the regulations on late submission and mitigating circumstances; it also noted that the new programme approval process had been introduced too recently for the team to take a definitive view of whether or not it met the concerns of the last audit team.

11 With respect to the desirable recommendations from the 2005 audit report, the audit team noted the considerable progress which the College had made in the coordination of support services for students. The team also noted that the College had successfully adopted new software for its virtual learning environment, which was regarded positively by students and staff. However, the College had not agreed a minimum standard of virtual learning environment use for all programmes.

12 The Academic Board is empowered constitutionally as the body responsible for the College's academic affairs. It is a large collegial body with some 200 members. The Academic Board Executive Committee steers and manages the Academic Board's work and makes recommendations to it on academic policy, regulation and strategy.

13 The College's Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC), chaired by the Pro-Vice-Master for Learning and Teaching, is responsible to Academic Board, through Academic Board Executive Committee, for the quality of the content and delivery of new and existing taught programmes. The College Research Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Master for Research, is responsible for the quality assurance of research programmes. Other committees of Academic Board with important roles in the management of standards and quality include: the Student Experience and Widening Participation Committee, chaired by the Pro-Vice-Master for Student Experience, which is responsible for developing and delivering strategies for recruitment and retention; and the College boards of examiners, which are responsible for overseeing the work of the sub-boards of examiners and for approving awards.

14 Each school has a school executive, a school teaching and quality enhancement committee (TQEC) and a school research committee. The school TQECs and research committees report both to the school executive and to the counterpart College-level committee.

15 Prior to the recent restructuring, the provision of short and sub-degree programmes came under the purview of the Faculty of Lifelong Learning. The abolition of the faculties led to the integration of the Faculty of Lifelong Learning and its programmes into the new schools, meaning that taught programmes are now coordinated by subject as well as level. The audit team noted the clarification which the new arrangement gave to progression routes from short and sub-degree programmes to higher study. The team also noted the pedagogical benefits of distributing the College's expertise in lifelong learning, which had previously been largely confined to the dedicated Faculty, across the College as a whole.

The team regarded the focus on pedagogic and curriculum advantage in the integration of the former Faculty of Lifelong Learning into the schools (with attendant benefits in inter-departmental working and progression) as a feature of good practice.

16 Operational responsibility for the College's quality assurance and enhancement structures and mechanisms lies primarily with the Quality Enhancement and Validation unit. The unit's website hosts the College's key sources of information about the policies and procedures underpinning the management of quality and standards: the Quality Assurance/Enhancement Code of Practice 2009-10 (hereinafter the College's Code of Practice), the Postgraduate Code of Practice, and the Quality Strategy.

17 Overall, the audit team regarded the College's recently revised framework for managing academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities as robust in its design and effective in its early operation.

Section 2: Institutional management of academic standards

18 The College established a new programme approval process for the 2009-10 academic year; it covers a period of 18 months or more before new programmes are open for student enrolment and the audit team was not, therefore, able to assess its effectiveness in practice. In principle, it meets the needs of the various stakeholders: academic staff are free to propose programmes and must consider pedagogy as they do so; Schools make an input on financial and strategic issues as well as academic grounds; and the College has an opportunity to consider the strategic value of a proposal at the earliest stage. External standards are taken into account and the opinion of external subject specialists is sought as a matter of course.

19 Alongside the full approval procedure is a conflated 'fast-track' process, which may be invoked exceptionally where the programme proposal is being submitted in response to a new funding opportunity, a new and clearly defined market opportunity or strategic need, or an unexpected change in key staffing. The audit team noted that in 2009-10 the fast-track process had been invoked on 46 occasions, owing to the outcome of the portfolio review and the pressure to increase the number of programmes outlined in paragraph 7. It had, therefore, in practice become the standard route for programme approval. The team acknowledged the special circumstances underlying the use of the fast track process in the current session and took into account that the use of the full process would not have allowed new programmes to be introduced until 2011. It confirmed that the process had been effective in enabling the College to balance meeting a strategic need and maintaining academic standards. In this context, however, the team also found evidence which it felt would give the College itself some concern: for example, one school, following consultation with the Chair of the College Programmes Committee, declaring optional the involvement of external subject specialists where a new programme was largely based on existing material. The team, therefore, considered it desirable for the College to reflect on the operation of the new programme approval process and consider if the overwhelming use of the fast track procedure in 2009-10 will continue to be appropriate in the future.

20 The portfolio review makes it more likely that programmes will be amended or withdrawn. Restructuring has enabled the College to develop a new mechanism for approval of minor modifications to existing programmes (including approval of new modules). Responsibility is now devolved to school TQECs with the safeguard that they report decisions to the Registry. However, the team was concerned that there was no formal definition of a minor amendment and that, in theory at least, substantial changes could be made to a programme by this route. The audit team considered it desirable for the College to develop an explicit definition of a minor amendment to a programme.

21 The College has a formal process for securing approval for the withdrawal of a programme. The team noted that proposers did indicate the implications of withdrawal for students, but that this was not systematically required. The team encourages the College to formalise this consideration to ensure consistency across the College.

22 The College's Code of Practice stipulates that all programmes are monitored annually, and are subject to a regular more reflective internal review every four years. The Registry collects and analyses various data to support these reviews. In annual monitoring, programme directors are asked to provide a commentary on the data, but the commentary is not compulsory and, for the last few years, a significant number of directors have failed to provide one. There is evidence that the College is renewing its efforts to involve programme directors in annual monitoring through revisions to the College's Code of Practice and the new report template, which expresses the College's preference that directors participate. Nonetheless, given the scale of the problem and its longevity, the audit team considered it advisable for the College to achieve full implementation of the policy on the annual monitoring of programmes as it is described in the College's Code of Practice

23 Periodic internal reviews benefit from contributions from external reviewers; the only issue here is that sometimes discursive review of the curriculum dominates at the expense of assessment of effectiveness based on the statistical data provided. The audit team considered it desirable for the College to pursue the systematic use of quantitative data in internal review.

24 Awards made to students benefit from scrutiny by intercollegiate examiners (drawn from other institutions in the University of London) and external examiners from outside the University. There are clear guidelines as to who may be appointed and the induction they receive. Similar guidelines also ensure that reports from external examiners are submitted promptly. First scrutiny is by the Registry; reports are then considered by the programme concerned and the appropriate school. Chairs of sub-boards of examiners have formal responsibility for responding to external examiners and setting out action taken in response to issues raised. The College is required annually to submit a report on the working of the external examiner system to the University of London Senate.

25 The outcomes of examination boards for individual programmes are monitored and scrutinised by a set of College boards of examiners which report to the Academic Board. The five-school structure which is now in place has prompted a reorganisation of these boards for 2009-10, which should contribute to their further effectiveness in safeguarding the standard of awards.

26 The Common Awards Scheme introduced by the College in 2007-08 includes regulations for assessment, and this ensures a unity of practice across programmes. The Scheme is written in accessible language and is available to students through My Birkbeck, the online gateway to the College's new student support centre. Here students will also find the policies governing marking and moderation, plagiarism, late submission of assignments and mitigating circumstances. The team noted, however, that although the policies are spelt out definitively in My Birkbeck, evidence elsewhere shows the College struggling to achieve full consensus across all schools; uniformity of process has been agreed, but each school makes decisions on its own principles. The team considered it desirable for the College to resolve those issues associated with the implementation of the Common Awards Scheme which remain outstanding.

27 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards.

Section 3: Institutional management of learning opportunities

28 The College's Code of Practice is closely aligned with the *Code of practice* published by QAA, and is updated annually to ensure that it remains congruent with QAA documents. Responsibility for keeping abreast of changes to the *Code of Practice* lies with TQEC. The audit team had some concerns about the College's engagement with Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice*, which are discussed in Section 5 below.

29 The College's procedures for programme approval, monitoring and periodic review each expect College staff, and external experts where they are involved, to consider the availability of appropriate learning opportunities for students alongside academic standards. The audit team's scrutiny of these processes confirmed that, in most cases, this expectation was being met effectively; however, the team had some reservations about use of the fast-track programme approval process in 2009-10, and the lack of contribution to annual monitoring reports from a large number of programme directors. These are discussed in Section 2, above.

30 There are several ways for students to provide feedback on their learning experience, including module evaluation questionnaires; user surveys run by specific service areas, such as the library; an annual end of year survey; and through student involvement in internal review. Departments are expected to summarise action taken in response to student feedback in their annual programme reports. The audit team noted that, although reference to student feedback from surveys is made in these reports, it is sometimes unclear what action has been taken in response. The team also noted the low response rate for several end of year surveys, which it felt might lead to College-wide problems or examples of good practice going undetected.

31 The College has participated in the National Student Survey since 2005 and enjoyed consistently high rankings. Survey results are analysed by the relevant administrative team at an institutional level before being distributed to departments for comments on any issues highlighted as areas of concern.

32 Students are represented on the College's central committees, with the majority of places filled by elected officers of the Students' Union. It was noted that at the intermediate level - the school teaching quality enhancement committees - there is no provision for student representation. This was regarded as anomalous, and the audit team therefore considered it desirable for the College to consider introducing student membership of school teaching quality and enhancement committees.

33 Departments are responsible for determining what means of student representation are appropriate and realistic for their students. Normal practice is for one student-staff exchange committees (SSEC) meeting to be held each term; elections of student representatives to serve on SSECs are held at the beginning of the academic year and are under the department's jurisdiction. SSECs operate in the same way at Birkbeck Stratford. The College practice is for departments to refer student representatives to the Students' Union for training and support; however, students whom the audit team met were not aware of any such training. The team considered it desirable for the College, in partnership with the Students' Union, to develop comprehensive support for the training of student representatives.

34 Research-led teaching is one of 12 quality enhancement priorities in the College's Quality Strategy, and the College has established a working group to take this agenda forward. Students whom the audit team met were enthusiastic about the vibrancy of the intellectual environment within which they were learning. The audit team noted that the working group appeared not to be drawing on research from some other institutions and

groups in this area, such as the 1994 Group and the Higher Education Academy, which could benefit its work.

35 The College has a small number of flexible and distributed learning programmes, which undergo broadly the same approval, monitoring and review processes as other programmes, but with particular consideration given to those areas, such as student support and assessment, where flexible and distributed programmes tend to differ from classroom-based provision. The audit team read an internal review of a department providing some flexible and distributed programmes, which demonstrated that the process paid appropriate, discrete attention to this provision.

36 The College has an extensive library and students also benefit from having access to several other libraries in central London, including Senate House. This provision is highly valued by students, and the audit team concluded that it was important for Birkbeck students to continue to have access to other college libraries, particularly Senate House.

37 Library provision is informed by an annual library survey, along with contributions from staff and student representatives at the Library Advisory Group. A new online Library and IT Services Student Forum is being developed at present, which the audit team anticipated would bring further benefits.

38 Students at Stratford have access to the library at the University of East London, but they can borrow from only a small collection of Birkbeck books. The College intends to build accommodation of its own in Stratford by 2013, including a new library. The audit team was satisfied that the College is taking forward plans for the new campus with an obvious concern for provision of adequate learning resources.

39 It was evident to the audit team that use of the virtual learning environment by teaching staff varied considerably across the institution. The last QAA Institutional audit in 2005 led to a recommendation that the College agree a minimum standard of virtual learning environment use for all courses; the current audit team concluded that the case for a minimum standard remained, particularly given that most Birkbeck students attend the College less frequently than their full-time counterparts in other institutions and may, therefore, have a greater need for learning materials which they can access remotely. The audit team, therefore, considered it desirable for the College to establish minimum standards for the use of the virtual learning environment by teaching staff.

40 The College is developing a formal Admissions Policy to replace the guidance on admissions in its Code of Practice, which the College recognises has not always been applied consistently. The new Policy, which the audit team saw in draft, while retaining legitimate variation by subject, is more prescriptive and enables the College to exercise greater oversight. The team regarded the draft Admissions Policy as a prudent development and encourages the College to finalise and implement it.

41 The College uses personal tutors as its primary means of providing academic and pastoral support to taught students. Students with particular academic or pastoral problems may be referred to a range of specialised central support services, under the umbrella of the new My Birkbeck Student Centre. Students whom the audit team met praised the creation of My Birkbeck for improving the accessibility of student support, and commended the level of service they had received from the individual services. The team identified the integrated advice, support and guidance provided by My Birkbeck as a feature of good practice.

42 The College has a team of learning support coordinators, covering the central London and Stratford campuses. The audit team heard from students that the work of the learning support coordinators was highly beneficial and greatly appreciated, particularly by those students studying at Stratford.

43 Staff training and development is provided by three key departments. Academic staff without substantial previous teaching experience are required to undertake a Postgraduate Certificate in Education: Higher Education; while a short programme, The Fundamentals of Teaching, is for research students and sessional teachers already involved in teaching. The audit team learned that some research students who were involved in teaching undergraduates had not completed the programme, or any other kind of formal training or preparation, despite their having no teaching experience. The team considered it desirable for the College to assess the needs of all postgraduate research students who are engaged in teaching and provide appropriate training where necessary.

44 The College has run the Birkbeck Excellence in Teaching Award since 2004, supporting and encouraging excellence in teaching and learning by recognising pedagogic achievement. The scheme has grown from a single award in 2004-5 to one award of £1,000 per school.

45 The College has an Academic Progress and Development Review system which was launched in 2005, but has suffered persistently low levels of participation. A newer version has been launched with more emphasis on mentoring and personal development, yet although it is compulsory for all staff to be offered the opportunity to take part, participation remains at their discretion. The College also runs a peer review of teaching scheme which the audit team regarded as a feature of good practice. This is discussed in Section 4 below.

46 The audit team concluded that confidence can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the College's present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students.

Section 4: Institutional approach to quality enhancement

47 The College has recently revised its framework for managing standards and quality to give more prominence to quality enhancement. Quality enhancement is defined by the College as '...institutional policies and practices to improve the student learning experience', and it aspires to integrate enhancement as far as possible into routine quality assurance procedures. Thus, enhancement is prominent in the College's procedures for programme approval, annual monitoring, peer observation, external examining and periodic review. The internal review process demands that schools present an example of enhancement to the review panel, and a selection of these are made available across the College on the Quality Enhancement and Validation unit's website. The audit team saw evidence of the effective management of the peer review of teaching process and regarded the College's procedures for the peer review of teaching as a feature of good practice.

48 The College has identified in its Quality Strategy a number of specific quality enhancement targets, including research-related teaching (covered in Section 3, above), transferable skills and employer engagement, and improved integration of learning support.

49 Relationships with employers, including employability and knowledge transfer activities, are co-ordinated by the College's Business Relations Office, and are supplemented by the Institute for Professional Studies, which seeks to provide adaptable and bespoke programmes of study for specific employers. The audit team saw evidence of this being effectively managed. Employer and employment-related talks are also delivered by the Research School as part of its support programme for postgraduate students. In 2008, the College established a Foundation Degree Network to support the development of Foundation Degrees, with particular attention to employment issues, including work-based learning. The team heard clear evidence from students of the direct employability benefits that they had gained from the College's programmes.

50 Postgraduate research students are offered a series of generic workshops, which include a focus on transferable skills. Both postgraduate and undergraduate students whom the audit team met were aware of, and had recognised benefit from, transferable skills training.

51 Student support arrangements have recently been reorganised into a one-stop-shop and supporting website, My Birkbeck, which the audit team recognised as a feature of good practice.

52 For academic staff new to teaching, a Postgraduate Certificate in Education: Higher Education is obligatory. The College is expanding an Excellence in Teaching Award to reward the active development of enhancement activities.

Section 5: Collaborative arrangements

53 The College's collaborative provision register of March 2010 recorded 487 students registered on 19 collaborative programmes at 10 partner institutions. The programmes include taught undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and research degrees. Collaborative provision is co-ordinated by the Central and Collaborative Provision unit. The unit was established in 2008-09 as part of the restructuring process and is encouraging the expansion of collaborative provision.

54 The College regards its collaborative programmes as 'collaborative ventures' rather than validations. However, the audit team noted that several of the College's collaborative ventures appeared to meet the University of London's definition of a validation arrangement and should, therefore, have been subject to the University's approval. The audit team considered it advisable for the College to ensure that it adheres to the University of London's regulations regarding the University's approval of collaborative provision.

55 Academic standards and quality of the College's collaborative programmes are assured through the same approval, monitoring and review processes as its home provision. The audit team saw evidence that these processes were generally operating satisfactorily, with some evidence of documented transference of good practice apparent.

56 Each collaborative provision arrangement is managed by a defined committee structure, including a joint steering committee. The audit team saw evidence of effective management at the programme level.

57 The College expects each collaborative arrangement to be underpinned by a memorandum of agreement that is regularly reviewed and revised. The audit team noted that several of the College's partnerships had not had such agreements in place for at least part of their life, and there were other examples where a signed agreement was thought to exist but could not be found. Furthermore, the structure, length and content of the agreements which were provided to the team varied. This presents an avoidable risk to the College and to its students. The audit team considered it advisable for the College to ensure that all collaborative links are underpinned by a signed written agreement whose contents are informed by the guidance in Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice*.

58 External examining arrangements are common across home and collaborative provision. The audit team noted two examples from the College's collaborative provision where it had departed from its own policy: one where an external examiner had a clear and significant conflict of interest, and another where the College had not concluded a formal agreement with an external examiner until well after the examiner had taken up the role. The audit team considered it advisable for the College to ensure the full implementation, with regard to collaborative provision, of the College's policy and guidance on the role of external examiners.

59 The College aims to ensure that responsibilities for public information are covered in collaborative agreements. However, this was not explicitly in place in the majority of agreements given to the audit team, and the team found several examples where programme descriptions or titles on partner websites differed from those approved by the College or did not clearly indicate the awarding institution. These examples indicate a need for the College to review its processes for the management and oversight of published information in respect of collaborative provision.

60 The College was engaged in a significant expansion of its collaborative activity at the time of the audit, with seven new partnerships planned to begin in 2010-11. Within this context, it will wish to ensure that the audit team's concerns are addressed.

Section 6: Institutional arrangements for postgraduate research students

61 The College has a vibrant community of postgraduate researchers pursuing both MPhil and doctoral degrees. The awards are University of London degrees, but the College takes responsibility for standards and quality, which are overseen by the College Research Committee on behalf of Academic Board. The College has developed its own Code of Practice for Postgraduate Training and Research for the MPhil and PhD degrees, which encapsulates the precepts of the relevant section of the QAA *Code of practice*.

62 The College is concerned to continue to enhance the experience of its postgraduate research students. To this end, a Research Student Sub-Committee has recently been created, reporting to the College Research Committee, to oversee the development of student-related policies, while the College Research School has been renamed the Birkbeck Graduate Research School and given wider responsibilities relating to the student experience and good practice.

63 One key to the high quality of the College's arrangements for its postgraduate research students is the network of research centres. These range from discipline-specific units to wide-ranging interdisciplinary ventures, and collectively contribute importantly to the goal of creating the sense of an intellectual academic community.

64 The College attracts applicants of very high quality, and has appropriate arrangements in place to identify those best-suited to take advantage of the opportunities in the College, but flexibility is also retained so that the College can admit and then support students in accordance with its commitment to educational inclusion. Arrangements for primary and secondary supervision, as well as for regular review of progress, are detailed in the College's Code of Practice. Discussion with current students indicated that these were working well, in line with the Code.

65 Development of research and other skills is recognised by the College to be an integral part of the training of successful researchers. To this end there is provision of training at three levels: departments or schools provide training that is most closely related to specific subjects; the College Research School offers more general courses; more broadly, the College can draw on provision in neighbouring institutions through the Bloomsbury Postgraduate Skills Network. The quality and relevance of this provision is monitored through periodic reviews, and has attracted various commendations.

66 For postgraduate researchers who are to participate in teaching, the Centre for Learning and Professional Development offers a short course on pedagogic issues. However, the team met some research students engaged in the teaching of undergraduates who were not aware of this programme and who had not been formally trained or prepared for teaching in any other way. This is discussed in more detail in Section 3 above.

67 Assessment is conducted in line with the University of London's regulations. The College's Code of Practice specifies procedures for appeals about transfer of status, while the University of London regulations clarify how representations relating to examinations are to be made.

Section 7: Published information

68 Applicants derive information about the College's programmes of study primarily from online and print prospectuses, which are revised annually under the auspices of the External Relations Department. Students are given information about their programmes, as well as details of support and guidance arrangements, principally through student handbooks, whose contents are the responsibility of schools. The audit team discussed prospectuses and student handbooks with groups of students, who regarded these documents as accurate and complete.

69 The College also publishes programme specifications for each of its programmes. The introduction of the new Common Awards Scheme in 2009-10, and the attendant changes to College regulations, meant that all programme specifications needed to be updated. Responsibility for overseeing these changes has been devolved to school TQECs with the support of the Quality Enhancement and Validation unit. By the time of the audit, some departments had successfully updated all of their programme specifications, but others continued to display old specifications alongside an update on the changes effected by the introduction of the new Scheme. The audit team considered that the presence of two documents could be confusing to students and other stakeholders. The team, therefore, considered it desirable for the College to expedite the production and publication of definitive programme specifications.

70 Institutional oversight of published information is provided by the Director of External Relations. The audit team saw a paper, 'Approval process for published information', which gave full details of the oversight provided centrally to information published on the web and in print.

Section 8: Features of good practice and recommendations

Features of good practice

71 The audit team identified the following features of **good practice**:

- the integrated advice, support and guidance provided by My Birkbeck
- procedures for the peer review of teaching
- the integration of the former Faculty of Lifelong Learning into the restructured schools, and the attendant benefits to progression, pedagogy and curricula across the College.

Recommendations for action

72 Recommendations for action that is **advisable**:

- ensure that the College adheres to the University of London's regulations regarding the University's approval of collaborative provision
- ensure that all collaborative links are underpinned by a signed written agreement whose contents are informed by the guidance in Section 2 of the QAA *Code of practice*
- ensure the full implementation, with regard to collaborative provision, of the College's policy and guidance on the role of external examiners

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- achieve full implementation of the College's policy on the annual monitoring of programmes as it is described in the Quality Assurance/Enhancement Code of Practice 2009-10.

73 Recommendations for action that is **desirable**:

- resolve those issues associated with the implementation of the Common Awards Scheme which remain outstanding
- establish minimum standards for the use of the virtual learning environment by teaching staff
- reflect on the operation of the new programme approval process and consider if the overwhelming use of the fast track procedure in 2009-10 will continue to be appropriate in the future
- develop an explicit definition of a minor amendment to a programme
- pursue the systematic use of quantitative data in internal review
- expedite the production and publication of definitive programme specifications
- assess the needs of all postgraduate research students who are engaged in teaching and provide appropriate training where necessary
- consider introducing student membership of school teaching quality and enhancement committees
- develop comprehensive support for the training of student representatives.

Appendix 1

Birkbeck University of London's response to the Institutional audit report

Birkbeck University of London is pleased to receive the QAA's positive report, and welcomes its findings of confidence and its identification of features of good practice. The College views the recommendations as opportunities for enhancement and has already taken the following steps in response.

The College's strategy on collaborations is based on the development of programmes in light of its Mission, Corporate Plan and relevant strategies, and where academic standing of potential partners is assured. Its Central and Collaborative Provision unit will ensure a clear and consistent approach to the management and development of collaborative provision in line with University of London regulations, Birkbeck policy and Birkbeck's own Code of Practice, informed by Section 2 of the QAA *Code of Practice*.

The Teaching and Quality Enhancement Committee (TQEC) will consider a revised process for monitoring in line with the Quality Assurance/ Enhancement Code of Practice. This includes 'clustering' programmes, with cluster co-ordinators working with programme directors and facilitated through heads of departments.

College policies in relation to reassessment, late submission, mitigating circumstances and double marking were adopted during 2008-09 and are established and fully operational. Policies and regulations relating to reassessment, late submission and mitigating circumstances were reviewed during 2009-10. Further consultation on mitigating circumstances and late submission policies, and consultation on a double marking policy are scheduled for 2010-11. An annual review of the operation of the Common Awards Scheme will ensure that it continues to achieve its objectives.

Proposals to establish minimum standards for the use of the virtual learning environment will go out for consultation during 2010-11, with anticipated implementation in 2011-12. Fast-track procedures were operated in the exceptional circumstances that arose from the Strategic Review. The College established a group comprising the Chairs of TQEC and College Programmes Committee, the Academic Registrar, the Head of Quality Enhancement and Validation and assistant deans to undertake full scrutiny in a more condensed manner. The establishment of these procedures will enable fast-track procedures to be used with confidence in exceptional circumstances in the future.

The College will produce a clear definition of a major and a minor amendment in 2010/11. A shared drive has been developed to enhance recording and reporting of amendments.

The College is developing an explicit dataset to be provided for all internal reviews, and closer attention will be paid by panels to the full consideration of such data.

Schools are progressing with updating existing programme specifications for publication. A new system of online programme approval will ensure definitive recording of all new proposals.

The College provides a training programme for research students who are engaged in teaching and is currently reviewing the training and development needs for such students. The College has student membership in all of its key committees, including TQEC. Student membership of school TQECs will be implemented during 2010-11. The College is currently reviewing its work with the Student Union and arrangements for the training of class representatives form part of this review.

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