



Concerns about standards and quality in higher education

London School of Science & Technology Ltd and Fairfield School of Business Ltd, July 2014

Introduction and background

1 This report is of a full investigation at both London School of Science & Technology Ltd and Fairfield School of Business Ltd into: (i) the effectiveness of recruitment and admission procedures; (ii) the effectiveness of systems for managing student attendance; (iii) the effectiveness of staffing resource management; (iv) management oversight of the schools; (v) the monitoring of academic standards; (vi) the effectiveness of systems for ensuring the validity of student work and the management of academic misconduct; and (vii) accusations of an attempt to mislead a QAA review team.

2 The investigation took place in response to an application to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's (QAA's) Concerns Scheme by a former member of the London School of Science and Technology staff.

3 The London School of Science and Technology Ltd (LSST), Alperton, was incorporated as a private limited company on 17 January 2003. Its higher education provision consists of three courses awarded by Pearson Plc (Pearson); an HNC/HND in Business; an HNC/HND in Computing and Systems Development; and an Extended Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership. LSST also offers a top-up degree awarded by the University of West London: the BA(Hons) in Business Studies.

4 The Fairfield School of Business Ltd (FSB), Croydon, was established in 2006 and is a private limited company. The current higher education provision consists of one course: an HND in Business awarded by Pearson.

5 LSST and FSB share the same Director but FSB has only been under the same ownership as LSST for 18 months. Both Schools operate according to the same policies and procedures but act as independent companies in terms of resource management and academic decisions.

6 The investigation was conducted under QAA's Concerns about Academic Standards and Quality Scheme (Concerns Scheme). The investigation was conducted by a review team comprising Professor Mark Davies (University of Sunderland), Mr Philip Lloyd (independent) and Mr Alan Weale (the QAA Coordinating Officer). The review team visited LSST on 26 March 2014 and FSB on 27 March 2014. The team was accompanied by a representative of UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) attending in the capacity of observer.

7 Following the visits to the Schools, QAA postponed the publication of this report to take account of additional information that emerged in the press and other sources. This included a further visit to LSST by the QAA Coordinating Officer on 23 July 2014.

8 The evidence used in the investigation included, but was not limited to:

- a written response from the Director of both Schools
- documentary evidence supplied during visits to both Schools

- documentary evidence available on the Schools' websites, including policy documents
- meetings with senior members of the management of both Schools, teaching staff, administrative and support staff, and students
- observations of teaching sessions, chosen by the team at short notice.

9 Staff and students met by the review team were chosen at random by the team at short notice on the days of the visits.

10 Both Schools appeared busy and well used by staff and students. The standard and quantity of resources was appropriate to the portfolio of courses on offer.

Findings

Recruitment and admission procedures

11 The Schools recruit from a diverse and ethnically-mixed population. Students span an age range from under 20 to over 70 years old. A relatively large proportion of these students have a partial barrier to their education, be it financial, family or domestic in nature.

12 For the Higher National programmes, all students who apply at either LSST or FSB are invited on-site for an assessment of their basic English and numeracy skills. The assessment is conducted under examination conditions. Potential students are then asked to complete a form specific to the intended course of study, providing diagnostic information about how much they already know about the proposed subject of study. This form is referred to as an APEL (accredited prior experiential learning) form, and while it is used diagnostically to assess prior learning, it is not used to confer course credit. Some students complete the form at the School, though others take the form away to complete. Although the form is used only as a diagnostic assessment, the fact that some students take the form away with them introduces the possibility of a lack of authenticity. The team **recommends** that the Schools clarify the diagnostic nature of the current form and process referred to as APEL, rename them to more accurately reflect their purpose and ensure forms are completed on School premises.

13 The team observed four teaching sessions at short notice. In each session students and the teaching staff communicated well and, in general, there was a participative atmosphere. There was no suggestion that the language abilities of students or staff were hampering study, even where staff or students' native language was not English.

14 The team discovered no evidence to suggest that the admissions team was under pressure to recruit students such that it recruited students who were not suitable for the courses. It is, however, the case that according to LSST's own records a significant proportion of students had failed to complete their intended course of study (see paragraph 18).

15 The team concluded that the Schools' admissions practices were consistent with their desire to be inclusive and to offer education to all who can benefit. However, the team noted that the Schools' 'Admissions regulations for undergraduate awards' set out in the Admissions Policy, Procedures and Regulations document focuses on applicants with formal pre-entry qualifications rather than those who do not. The team therefore **recommends** the Schools to revise the Admissions Policy, Procedures and Regulations document so that it takes account of the full range of applicant profiles likely to be encountered as a consequence of the Schools' missions.

Attendance

16 All students study full-time and both Schools require a minimum of 80 per cent attendance. Staff strongly defended this as setting an important standard of attainment, not least to align with Home Office study requirements for overseas students. The review team noted, however, that even though it is specified in the student handbook and is a formal policy, a majority of students do not achieve this. In practice, it acts as a benchmark rather than a requirement. The Schools maintain detailed registers which track attendance weekly. Data is collated and presented both cumulatively and individually for each cohort. This contributes to ongoing performance monitoring, for example as an indicator of lack of engagement.

17 Those students failing to meet the requirement without previously disclosed mitigating circumstances are discussed at a formal Attendance Panel each semester. A network of module, personal, academic and support tutors are in place to offer help and guidance to such students. Ultimately, persistent failure to reach the 80 per cent minimum attendance rate can result in implementation of the withdrawal procedure. Students can only request to re-enrol after withdrawal if they can evidence satisfactorily that there were circumstances that had reasonably prevented attendance. The review team was informed that, although submitting recommendations to examination boards, the Attendance Panel is not a standing committee forming part of either School's deliberative or executive structures and had no fixed membership. The LSST Executive Committee did establish panel membership in June 2013, although this does not seem to have been communicated to staff or adhered to in practice. The team therefore **recommends** that the Schools formally constitute panels submitting data and recommendations to progress/examination boards, both to follow agreed policy, and more clearly to integrate them within formal mechanisms for the maintenance of academic standards, for example by establishing fixed terms of reference and membership, identifying those staff eligible to participate.

18 The review team was informed that LSST's mission commits it to reach out to those potential students who would otherwise not have access to higher education and that such a constituency brings with it inevitable challenges. The team also heard from students that they strongly supported and much appreciated the unique opportunity this provides. Nevertheless, if the two Schools are to remain committed to pursuing this mission it is important to ensure that effective learning and support systems are in place to facilitate students to achieve their awards. While noting that attendance rates were improving and that withdrawal rates had reduced from 61 per cent to 21 per cent between January 2012 and November 2013 it remains the case that, according to LSST's own attendance monitoring scheme, large numbers of students are at risk of not completing their studies. The team therefore **recommends** that the Schools ensure learning support systems and resources are matched to the student recruitment profile, and remain fit for purpose in supporting students to meet attendance targets, learn effectively and achieve their intended academic awards.

Staffing

19 The Schools' management admitted, and students confirmed, that shortly after recruitment rounds a small number of classes had been cancelled and/or merged at short notice until the recruitment position stabilised. The Schools' management explained that such transient incidents were commensurate with an expansive strategy, though the team noted that similar incidents arose when staff resigned. Students confirmed that such incidents were very much a rarity and many could not recall any.

20 In general, the students were very supportive of both teaching and support staff. They reported that the teaching was typically of high quality and that they were adequately supported, both academically and personally.

21 Almost all of the premises are under closed-circuit TV scrutiny. Both the students and staff met by the team said that, on balance, they were reassured by the presence of such surveillance equipment, which made the Schools a safer place to study and work. The Schools' management confirmed that post addressed to staff at its premises was opened and read prior to being issued to the relevant staff member. They pointed out that this is accepted organisational culture where staff operate in teams and ensures that responses to queries can be dealt with effectively and quickly. In general, staff were enthusiastic and complimentary about their working environment, and displayed a degree of independence and creativity to be expected of staff teaching in higher education.

Management oversight and meetings

22 The review team found no evidence that LSST senior management meetings (Executive Committee Meetings) have not been held regularly or conducted effectively.

Monitoring of academic standards

23 The review team found no evidence of perverse or irregular practice in the operation of progress and examination boards. Staff who met the team were very open about the scale of the problems of non-attendance, non-submission, and the challenges in tackling them successfully, but they were also clear that they are taking deliberate and successful steps to address the issues. Data provided to the team indicated that those successfully completing Year 1 of their course had risen from 38 per cent in January 2012 to 71 per cent in January 2013.

Practice during QAA visits

24 There was no evidence to support the assertion that resources were moved during a QAA review from one business within the LSST group to another to give a false impression of resource allocation. Following discussions with staff and students the team formed the view that it is unlikely that such movements occurred and that, therefore, no review was prejudiced.

25 There was no evidence to support the assertion that the son of the Director and Chief Executive Officer of the LSST group was offered by LSST as a student that a QAA review team should meet during a recent review visit. This student in question was chosen by the review team as the sole person studying the Extended Diploma in Strategic Management and Leadership at that time. The student and group Director share a surname that is common.

Conclusion

26 LSST has a stated mission to be 'an inclusive Higher Education institution, meeting or exceeding the aspirations of local and international students, as well as responding to the social and economic demands of the region'. FSB's mission is 'to provide a supportive and inspiring student experience that is inclusive, seeks to reduce barriers to learning and equips students with the knowledge and skills they need to progress into further study or employment'. The review team concluded that the Schools are committed to reaching out to those potential students who would otherwise not have access to higher education. The managers, staff and students met by the review team acknowledged that the pursuance of these missions brings with it inevitable challenges. However, in adopting such missions the Schools have a duty to support students to achieve in every reasonable way. The team has therefore made recommendations that are designed to assist and encourage the Schools to improve and enhance their support for students and their management of academic

standards and quality. They do not, however, uphold the substantive nature of the complaints raised in the application to the Concerns Scheme.

Recommendations

27 The Schools are recommended to:

- clarify the diagnostic nature of the current form and process referred to as APEL, rename them to more accurately reflect their purpose and ensure forms are completed on School premises (paragraph 12)
- revise the Admissions Policy, Procedures and Regulations document so that it takes account of the full range of applicant profiles likely to be encountered as a consequence of the Schools' missions (paragraph 15)
- formally constitute panels submitting data and recommendations to progress/examination boards, both to follow agreed policy, and more clearly to integrate them within formal mechanisms for the maintenance of academic standards, for example by establishing fixed terms of reference and membership, identifying those staff eligible to participate (paragraph 17)
- ensure learning support systems and resources are matched to the student recruitment profile, and remain fit for purpose in supporting students to meet attendance targets, learn effectively and achieve their intended academic awards (paragraph 18).

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