



# Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) of the School of Economics and Law

February 2017

## Contents

<b>About this review .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Key findings.....</b>	<b>2</b>
Judgements .....	2
Good practice .....	2
Recommendations .....	2
Affirmation of action being taken .....	2
<b>About the provider .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Explanation of findings.....</b>	<b>4</b>
1 Judgement: The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards .....	4
2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities.....	19
3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities .....	41
4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities.....	44
<b>Glossary.....</b>	<b>47</b>

## About this review

This is a report of a Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the School of Economics and Law (SOEL). The review took place from 20 to 23 February 2017 and was conducted by a team of two reviewers, as follows:

- Ms Alexa Christou
- Professor Graham Romp.

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provision and to make judgements as to whether or not academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. These expectations are the statements in the [UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) (the Quality Code)<sup>1</sup> setting out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and of each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

In Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - the setting and maintenance of academic standards
  - the quality of student learning opportunities
  - the information provided about higher education provision
  - the enhancement of student learning opportunities
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the provider is taking or plans to take.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#)<sup>2</sup> and explains the method for [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\)](#).<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of terms see the glossary at the end of this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The UK Quality Code for Higher Education is published at: [www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code).

<sup>2</sup> QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk](http://www.qaa.ac.uk).

<sup>3</sup> Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers): [www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews-and-reports/how-we-review-higher-education).

## Key findings

### Judgements

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision.

- The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards offered **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The quality of the information about learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities **meets** UK expectations.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following feature of **good practice**.

- The design of programmes in law and management with an explicit focus on social responsibility that articulates well with the School's mission and philosophy (Expectations B4 and Enhancement).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following **recommendations**.

By June 2017:

- appoint external examiners to SOEL-approved programmes to provide external scrutiny of academic quality and standards (Expectations A3.4 and B7)
- ensure that the award of credit through Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) is made through a rigorous assessment process providing explicit evidence of the achievement of learning outcomes (Expectation B6)
- ensure that where an award certificate includes reference to another awarding body, the nature of the partnership is made clear (Expectation C).

By September 2017:

- revise the governance structure, and subsequently the QA Handbook, to reflect recent organisational changes and levels of staffing (Expectation A2.1)
- improve the rigour of annual monitoring to ensure the review of provision against the definitive record of the programme, and systematise reporting through the deliberative structures (Expectations A3.3 and B8)
- Ensure that all aspects of working with others that support the student achievement of learning outcomes are appropriately considered, approved and monitored through the academic governance structure (Expectation B10).

### Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team affirms the following action already being taken to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to students:

- the steps being taken with EduQual to accredit the School's programmes and to become an approved centre (Expectation A3.1).

## About the provider

The School of Economics and Law (SOEL) was established in 2005 as the London College of Business Management and IT (LCBMIT), changing its name in 2016 as part of a rebranding exercise. It was established to provide affordable accredited education, to create dialogue and collaboration between the third and education sectors, and to ensure that its community development work remains sustainable. SOEL embodies a community ethos and works with local community organisations, universities and governments on a national and international level. The School recruits students from all backgrounds but particularly those who are disadvantaged by background or financial circumstances. SOEL aspires to create graduates who are socially responsible.

At the time of the Review for Educational Oversight in 2012, the College had bases in North Cheam and Balham and had a total of 1,137 students studying a range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in subjects including Management, Law, Accountancy and Healthcare, the majority under the auspices of the Association of Business Executives (ABE), or ACCA. The College acknowledges in its self-evaluation document that since that time it has undergone significant change, and this in turn has led to a renewed focus on diversification strategies, including moving to online learning, as well as a physical relocation to the current premises in Camberwell. The School has also moved to other awarding bodies and universities for partnerships. A partnership arrangement is currently in place with Buckinghamshire New University (BNU), which recognises the SOEL Postgraduate Diploma in Commercial Law as having advanced standing for progression to the BNU LLM in Commercial Law programme.

In the 2016-17 academic year, the College has 13 students, 12 of whom are studying either the SOEL Postgraduate Diploma in Commercial Law (10 students), or the SOEL Postgraduate Diploma in Management (Social Enterprise - two students) on an online basis. The remaining student is studying the level 6 Awards for Training in Higher Education (ATHE) Diploma in Healthcare Management on a face-to-face basis. Students are supported at SOEL by 13 faculty and six professional support staff (15 FTE).

The 2012 review identified four areas of good practice, two advisable recommendations, and five desirable recommendations. The follow-up monitoring review in 2014 commended the School on the progress made in implementing and taking forward these actions, and the effectiveness of the School's action plan in this regard. Notwithstanding the significant changes in the School's size and composition since that time, the current review has reflected that it has continued to seek to address the points made, and to build upon the areas of good practice.

## Explanation of findings

This section explains the review findings in greater detail.

### 1 Judgement: The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards

**Expectation (A1):** In order to secure threshold academic standards, degree-awarding bodies:

**a) ensure that the requirements of *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) are met by:**

- positioning their qualifications at the appropriate level of the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- ensuring that programme learning outcomes align with the relevant qualification descriptor in the relevant framework for higher education qualifications
- naming qualifications in accordance with the titling conventions specified in the frameworks for higher education qualifications
- awarding qualifications to mark the achievement of positively defined programme learning outcomes

**b) consider and take account of QAA's guidance on qualification characteristics**

**c) where they award UK credit, assign credit values and design programmes that align with the specifications of the relevant national credit framework**

**d) consider and take account of relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A1: UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards**

#### Findings

1.1 At the time of the review SOEL offered an Awards for Training in Higher Education (ATHE - an-Ofqual regulated awarding body) programme at levels 5-7, and two level 7 internally awarded postgraduate diplomas, one in International Commercial Law (PG Dip ICL) and one in Management (Social Enterprise) (PG Dip Man - SE).

1.2 For the ATHE programmes the awarding organisation is responsible for academic standards. ATHE is responsible for the approval of these programmes, including the production of definitive documentation such as programme and module specifications that specify the intended learning outcomes, indicative content and assessment guidelines for each programme.

1.3 In contrast, SOEL has full responsibility for the setting and maintenance of academic standards on its own internally awarded programmes. In the design and approval of its own internal awards, programme teams are required to make use of relevant external reference points, including *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ), the *Master's Degree Characteristics Statement*, and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. As part of the approval process for these

programmes the School is required to produce programme and module specifications using an approved template that identifies the programme's level, credit structure, learning outcomes and alignment to external reference points.

1.4 Subsequent to its approval, SOEL's PGDip ICL programme has been recognised by Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) via an articulation agreement for progression purposes on to its top-up LLM International Commercial Law programme. At the time of the review visit SOEL were in discussion with BNU to agree a similar articulation agreement for the PG Dip Man (SE) on to BNU's top-up MBA programme.

1.5 The School's approval processes and definitive documentation allow it to position its own programmes appropriately with the FHEQ and align the intended learning outcomes against relevant qualification descriptors.

1.6 To determine the effectiveness of these processes the review team scrutinised the School's quality assurance procedures, programme and module documentation and held meetings with staff and students.

1.7 SOEL's quality assurance arrangements make full use of external reference points and there is clear and consistent evidence that qualification learning outcomes align with the relevant quality frameworks. In particular, the School makes extensive use of the Quality Code, the FHEQ, the *Master's Degree Characteristics Statement*, and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements.

1.8 The programme specifications viewed by the review team confirm that learning outcomes for each award are consistent with the relevant qualification descriptor. The level of each programme and the appropriate benchmark statements are referenced within the programme specification. Programme specifications set out the volume of study for each award in terms of credit and notional learning hours. The module level, credit rating and assessment requirements are set out in the approved module descriptors.

1.9 Based on this evidence the review team concludes that SOEL effectively ensures that its internal awards align with relevant external reference points to ensure that appropriate academic standards are set and maintained. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A2.1): In order to secure their academic standards, degree-awarding bodies establish transparent and comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations to govern how they award academic credit and qualifications.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.10 The School maintains a Quality Assurance (QA) Handbook which contains the policies and procedures for academic quality assurance, with relevant sections mapped against the Quality Code.

1.11 The Academic Standards Board (ASB) has ultimate responsibility for the oversight and maintenance of academic standards for the School's internal programmes. This Board includes members appointed from external higher education institutions.

1.12 The Faculties Board, which is a sub-board of the ASB, is responsible for overseeing the delivery of the student experience. There are then three subcommittees that inform the Faculties Board. These are the Academic Standards Quality Enhancement Committee (ASQEC), the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee (LTAC), and Student Support Experience Committee (SSEC). The terms of reference and the required frequency of meetings is contained in the School's QA Handbook.

1.13 For its internal programmes the School has developed and approved its own assessment regulations that specify the general requirements that students need to satisfy in order to be awarded credits and the qualification. The School requires that assessment results be confirmed at an appropriately constituted Assessment Board. For ATHE programmes SOEL adopts the awarding body's policies and procedures. On this programme students are given a grade profile and can only be awarded an overall pass for a module and qualification if they successfully demonstrate all of the specified learning outcomes.

1.14 SOEL has developed comprehensive academic frameworks and regulations for the award of credit associated with its internal programmes, and has designed a quality assurance committee structure that allows the Expectation to be met.

1.15 The review team scrutinised SOEL's processes and their effectiveness through consideration of the documented quality assurance procedures, minutes of meetings, and assessment regulations. The team also met staff at the School, including senior management, teaching and support staff.

1.16 The review team found that the School has a comprehensive governance structure and academic frameworks but these are not always fully implemented. In particular, due to organisational constraints, committees have not met as frequently in recent years as prescribed in the School's QA Handbook. This has resulted in some decisions associated with the approval of programmes and academic regulations being processed through Chair's Action rather than through the formal deliberative committee structure. To address weaknesses in the operation of its academic governance structure the review team **recommends** that the School reviews the governance structure, and subsequently the QA Handbook, to reflect recent organisational changes and levels of staffing.

1.17 To further strengthen its quality assurance processes, at the time of the review visit SOEL was in advanced discussions with the awarding body, EduQual, to accredit the School's internal programmes. This will involve scrutiny and external approval of SOEL's

quality assurance policies and processes and provide external assessment moderation.

1.18 The review team concludes that the Expectation is met but that due to evidence of weaknesses in the implementation of the School's quality assurance governance structures the level of risk is moderate.

**Expectation: Met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**



**Expectation (A2.2): Degree-awarding bodies maintain a definitive record of each programme and qualification that they approve (and of subsequent changes to it) which constitutes the reference point for delivery and assessment of the programme, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and alumni.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A2: Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards**

**Findings**

1.19 For its internal programmes SOEL has developed standard templates for programme and module specifications. The programme specification template requires programme teams to indicate the relevant FHEQ level and Subject Benchmark Statements used to inform the design of the programme. The module specification template requires programme teams to specify the level and volume of credit, indicative content, module learning outcomes, learning and teaching methods and the assessment methodology. These specifications are to be formally approved and there is a modification process to consider and approve subsequent changes.

1.20 The School's Academics Department maintains a Programme Approvals and Modifications Register. Subsequent to approval the School maintains electronic copies of the definitive programme specifications and module descriptors. When modifications are approved the School requires that documentation is updated and stored according to its version control policy.

1.21 These documents are then to be used as the definitive reference point for the delivery and assessment of its internal programmes, its monitoring and review, and for the provision of records of study to students and other stakeholders. For the ATHE programmes the School adopts the definitive programme and module information provided by the awarding body, and assessment briefs are approved by ATHE.

1.22 The School's requirements concerning the definitive record of each programme and qualification are appropriate and sufficiently robust to allow the Expectation to be met.

1.23 The review team scrutinised SOEL's processes and their effectiveness through consideration of evidence provided in documented quality assurance procedures, programme specifications, module descriptors, student handbooks and meetings with staff and students.

1.24 The programme and module specifications viewed by the review team contained the required definitive information as specified in the School's QA Handbook. The School acknowledges that it needs to enhance its process to ensure that all module modifications are properly captured on the Programmes Approvals and Modifications Register, as some changes have not been properly recorded in a timely fashion.

1.25 Students confirmed that they are provided with access to programme and module specifications via the School's virtual learning environment (VLE). Teaching staff confirmed that these documents are used to inform learning, teaching and assessment, and that this is checked through the School's internal verification process. The definitive record of each programme and qualification is used consistently to provide accurate records of achievement on student transcripts and award certificates.

1.26 The review team found that SOEL has robust processes to ensure the maintenance of definitive records for all programmes of study and for individual student records.

The review team therefore concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.1): Degree-awarding bodies establish and consistently implement processes for the approval of taught programmes and research degrees that ensure that academic standards are set at a level which meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification and are in accordance with their own academic frameworks and regulations.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards***

**Findings**

1.27 The School offers a range of awards designed, developed and approved by ATHE. These awards are at levels 4-7 in Management and in Health and Social Care, and levels 4-5 in Travel and Tourism. They are delivered as approved under ATHE's own processes. ATHE awards provide successful students with progression opportunities to ATHE's university partners.

1.28 SOEL's internal programmes are approved through a five-stage process, which begins at Stages 1 and 2 with a business case for planning approval, set in the context of SOEL's strategic objectives. In meetings with staff the review team was advised that this then permits the design and development of the programme to proceed, drawing on external expertise. Proposed programme specifications and module specifications are then presented to the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee (LTAC) at Stage 3 for consideration and approval. LTAC has delegated authority from the Academic Standards Board (ASB) to approve programmes on its behalf. Approval is notified to the Faculty Board and subsequently to the ASB.

1.29 The SOEL QA Handbook states that the Faculty Board has the final authority to approve a programme and to confirm that resources are available and appropriate to the successful operation of the programme. The QA Handbook also discusses the need for externality in the design of proposals and an external adviser's commentary to be included in the deliberations of the LTAC as good practice.

1.30 A procedure for the development of new modules is available, under which proposals are considered by the Faculties Board with recommendation to the ASB. A record of approvals and modifications is retained in the Programme Approval and Modifications Register and Faculty Boards have the authority to approve minor modifications to modules on SOEL-approved programmes.

1.31 The policies and guidance on programme approval included in the Quality Assurance Handbook, set in the context of deliberative structures as described, allow this Expectation to be met.

1.32 The team reviewed the available documentation provided in the approval of the two SOEL PgD programmes and confirmed centre approval in the case of ATHE awards. Discussion with the CEO, members of the Advisory Board and Academic Standards Board, senior staff and academic staff also informed the conclusions of the reviewers on the process for programme design, development and approval.

1.33 There are comprehensive guidance documents in the Quality Assurance Handbook with regard to programme design and modification to modules. There is guidance in the Handbook relating to the use of external advisers in the design and development stage of programme approval. However, there is no guidance on the use of externality in the formal programme approval process. This was confirmed in meetings with staff.

1.34 A key function in setting academic standards is the formal approval of academic programmes leading to an award. While Stages 1 and 2 of the SOEL approval process are appropriate in their consideration of matters relevant to business and planning approval, there is an over-reliance on the efficacy of external input at the design and development of the programme. The location of authority for programme approval was made clear to the review team as resting with the LTAC. Despite clear guidance in Q22 of the QA Handbook of the criteria against which programme proposals are assessed in the programme approval process, there was insufficient evidence at Stage 3 of rigorous consideration by the LTAC. Minutes did not reflect deliberation to ensure that threshold academic standards are met, that credit is assigned in line with the Qualifications and Credit Framework, and that the assessment scheme adequately tests the intended learning outcomes. The minutes reflect a discussion of primarily operational matters. Approval by the Faculty Board for both postgraduate diploma programmes was granted by Chair's Action.

1.35 The recent challenges that have impacted SOEL mean that, with significantly reduced staffing capacity, it has not been possible for decisions on approval to be taken independently of those involved in developing and delivering the programme, to ensure objectivity. There has been no use made of external expertise at the programme approval stage. A good degree of confidence in the case of the PgD in International Commercial Law has been provided through the mapping exercise undertaken by Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) against its own PgD in Law for admission purposes as part of the articulation agreement with SOEL. While not an approval or validation process, the mapping has confirmed the design of the programme as appropriate to academic level and standards. Objectivity in the case of the PgD in Management (Social Enterprise) is currently being provided by EduQual as part of its evaluation of both postgraduate diploma programmes for endorsement.

1.36 The ATHE provision is approved through external processes recognised as fit for purpose for an awarding body. External expertise has been used in the design and development of SOEL programmes and the articulation agreement with BNU for the PgD ICL has provided sufficient confidence that academic standards are set at a level that meets the UK threshold standard for the qualification at level 7. The review team **affirms** the process currently in progress with EduQual to accredit the School's programmes and to become an approved centre. This process is at an advanced stage and will be concluded by the end of March 2017. As such, the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.2): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that credit and qualifications are awarded only where:**

- **the achievement of relevant learning outcomes (module learning outcomes in the case of credit and programme outcomes in the case of qualifications) has been demonstrated through assessment**
- **both UK threshold standards and their own academic standards have been satisfied.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.37 The achievement of learning outcomes for ATHE programmes is demonstrated through externally verified assessment instruments. Student performance for the award of credit is internally and externally verified. ATHE has moved from a pass/fail assessment strategy to pass, merit and distinction and the School has recorded modifications and adjustments to accommodate this change. Opportunities for recognition of prior learning (RPL) exist for students registered on ATHE awards and centres are advised to contact ATHE to discuss the requirements for RPL.

1.38 For the postgraduate diploma programmes, credit and qualifications are awarded by SOEL. There are clear statements in module specifications and student information on the VLE of the intended learning outcomes to be achieved and the criteria against which judgements will be made for the award of credit. For staff, there is extensive guidance in the School's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and policy about expectations for good practice, mapped closely to the indicators for B3 and B6 of the Quality Code.

1.39 Staff implement a system of internal verification to review the design of assessment instruments and provide double marking of coursework assessment. Students are assessed on the basis of either meeting or not meeting the learning outcomes. Credit is awarded for a threshold pass, which requires all learning outcomes to be achieved. At the discretion of the Academics Department, a student may be reassessed in a module on two further occasions and is required to be reassessed on failed learning outcomes only. Application for accreditation of prior learning is addressed at the admission stage for postgraduate students, although students are advised that applications will also be considered in-programme. The assessment regulations state that generally a maximum of 50 per cent will be exempted through APL undertaken through the process described in the APL policy. APL of more than 50 per cent must be approved by the Director of Academics. The APL policy included in the QA Handbook is comprehensive.

1.40 The articulation agreement with BNU recognises SOEL's award of credit for the PgD ICL as advanced standing equivalent to 120 credits at level 7 in its admission to the BNU LLM. There are regular meetings between the BNU Link Tutor and SOEL faculty to review student progress and advice and guidance from the Link Tutor through briefings with students and staff. The BNU Link Tutor monitors the progress of SOEL graduates on the LLM and the SOEL Director of Academics attends assessment board meetings at the University.

1.41 The School's implementation of ATHE requirements, the establishment of SOEL-based regulations and policies on academic practice, assessment board operation, and the strong relationship between the School and its university partner allow this Expectation to be met.

1.42 The review team considered an extensive range of provider documentation and correspondence with awarding bodies, and spoke with staff, students, the QA Lead, members of the Advisory Body and the BNU Link Tutor to establish the efficacy of the School's policies and systems and the consistency of their implementation.

1.43 For ATHE provision, systems are in place that enable the School to demonstrate to stakeholders that credit and qualifications are awarded only where the achievement of relevant learning outcomes has been demonstrated through assessment. Both the UK threshold standards and the academic standards of the ATHE as the awarding body are satisfied. It is possible to confirm that for ATHE awards SOEL internal markers and internal verifiers are operating systematically and consistently under the auspices of objective external scrutiny. Where adjustments are necessary, there is opportunity for the external verifier to identify issues and propose appropriate action. The review team saw evidence of this in practice through the external verifier's reports.

1.44 The team was assured by the BNU Link Tutor that the academic capability and standards achieved by progressing students on the BNU LLM had increased steadily year on year, and this provided some objective confirmation that postgraduate student achievement and the award of level 7 credit is calibrated relative to external benchmarks and threshold standards in a consistent and systematic manner. With the imminent accreditation of the postgraduate diplomas by EduQual, confirmed in the correspondence seen, the review team was advised that formal external scrutiny of academic standards and quality will soon be in place through the appointment of external verifiers (see also Expectation B7 below).

1.45 The availability of APL for the postgraduate diploma programmes is considered by the School to be an important factor in changing the profile of recruitment towards a more professional student base. APL is dealt with at the admissions stage, supported by the academic team. The School accepts that there is further scope to align the guidance in the APL policy with the assessment regulations, samples of evidence of APL and transcripts for PgD graduates.

1.46 The established policies and processes in this area ensure that the School meets the Expectation, and the associated risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (A3.3): Degree-awarding bodies ensure that processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are implemented which explicitly address whether the UK threshold academic standards are achieved and whether the academic standards required by the individual degree-awarding body are being maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.47 The Academic Standards Board (ASB) has overall responsibility for the monitoring and review of academic standards and quality. It is constituted with the inclusion of external members from other higher education institutions. A system for annual reporting, described in the Quality Assurance (QA) Handbook, facilitates the structured review of each programme, or group of programmes, to the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee (LTAC), sharing of good practice, and identification of areas of concern for action through recommendations on enhancement to the ASB.

1.48 Faculty Boards are responsible for assuring standards and the quality of delivery for modules that fall within their responsibility, and the guidance specifies conditions for explicit reporting requirements, for example poor student performance or following modifications arising from previous review. At module level, the reports are required to include evaluation of the student experience based on student feedback received through representative structures, student outcomes and the distribution of marks, feedback from external verifiers/examiners and comments from the Examinations Board. Reports are also expected to comment on the content and delivery of the module, the resources available, an evaluation of adjustments made in response to previous feedback and a rationale for any actions proposed.

1.49 The LTAC receives and considers annual reports produced by Course Leaders at its first meeting of the year, together with quantitative and qualitative data. The LTAC reports back to Faculty Boards on the annual monitoring outcomes. Faculty Boards are then required to report to the ASB on process, good practice for dissemination and issues identified that require action at an institutional level.

1.50 For ATHE accredited programmes, the School has successfully met the conditions for centre approval. Centre approval is renewed annually based on a health check undertaken by an external verifier that considers curriculum plans, application of policies, staff CVs and available resources and evidence of monitoring and verification. A comprehensive document, the Delivering ATHE Qualifications Handbook, is available for centres, detailing guidance for practitioners to facilitate monitoring and review against the threshold academic standards required of the awarding body.

1.51 Based on the policy and procedures described above, processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are in place at SOEL to enable the Expectation to be met.

1.52 Reviewers spoke to senior staff, the academic team, students and advisers external to the School on their responsibilities and contribution towards systematic review and monitoring of academic provision. The review team scrutinised the self-evaluation document and supporting evidence provided. Sample review reports included reflection on academic provision in 2013-14, 2014-15 and 2015-16, a results report to ASB on student performance, an annual report from ASB and an annual report on provision in partnership with BNU.

1.53 Most review reports considered by the review team reflected the style of reports used under the end-of-semester reporting format prior to a transition to annual reporting. The template and logo are still those of the former LCBMIT identity of SOEL. One annual report shared with the team focused on student completion and progression data and student performance on the LLM at BNU. The report provides feedback on the quality of partnership arrangements and the support available to students to make an effective transition. It also addresses progress on actions identified in the previous year's report, and shows evidence of consideration given to student feedback, confirmed in both student meetings, and staff reflection on how to improve their learning experience as a consequence.

1.54 It was not possible to track the progress of annual reports through the deliberative structures as described in the QA Handbook. The reviewers meeting with the senior team confirmed that reports are forwarded to the Academic Lead and then to the Director of Academics. They are not currently considered formally by committees although reviewers were told that information and outcomes are used in planning processes. Reviewers were also advised that the focus for ASB had been on student achievement and progression data, and this was reflected in the results report to ASB seen by the team. The review team therefore **recommends** that the School improves the annual monitoring process to ensure the review of provision against the definitive record of each programme, and to systematise reporting through the deliberative structures. This recommendation cross-references to Expectation B8 below.

1.55 Based upon the evidence above, the review team concludes that the Expectation is met, but the overall risk is moderate, as the quality assurance procedures relied upon by the ASB have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**



**Expectation (A3.4): In order to be transparent and publicly accountable, degree-awarding bodies use external and independent expertise at key stages of setting and maintaining academic standards to advise on whether:**

- **UK threshold academic standards are set, delivered and achieved**
- **the academic standards of the degree-awarding body are appropriately set and maintained.**

**Quality Code, Chapter A3: Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards**

**Findings**

1.56 The School's Advisory Board, chaired by an external member, is a positive feature providing external, professional perspectives on the strategic development of SOEL and experience of practice from a range of relevant sectors. Members come from other higher education providers, including SOEL's partner university, and from occupational sectors served by the School's portfolio. A small number of members also sit on the Academic Standards Board.

1.57 For externally awarded programmes such as those of the ATHE, the awarding bodies themselves engage with the employers and others as part of their own programme development processes, which is a requirement of Ofqual. As an awarding body, ATHE confirms that its internal requirements are being consistently implemented by SOEL through its centre approval and external verification processes.

1.58 SOEL-approved awards do not align with this Expectation. Policies and procedures do not allow for impartial advice or recommendations to be sought either when new programmes are being approved or when existing programmes are being reviewed. External examiners are not appointed to provide external objectivity regarding the achievements of students through assessment, either in taught modules or through the APL process, and thereby the award of credit through the School's Examination Board.

1.59 Systems supporting ATHE awards allow this Expectation to be met. The design of systems for SOEL awards does not allow the Expectation to be met.

1.60 Reviewers scrutinised a wide range of documentation, policies and procedures, cross referencing systems and processes to determine whether there was a belief that external expertise was desirable or required. Reviewers met with staff, the QA Link Tutor and BNU Link Tutor to clarify policies and understand fully the current position.

1.61 SOEL programmes constitute the vast majority of the student numbers currently registered with the School and it is the strategic objective of the School to grow its online provision in these awards. It was clear to the team that much store is set on the QA Handbook by SOEL's university partner. The Handbook makes explicit in a number of policy areas the role of external examiners. If approval of articulation arrangements rests on a scrutiny of the Handbook, it could be misconstrued as representing a reality which does not exist. Although external examiners may shortly be appointed should the EduQual accreditation complete, at this point in time there is no formal externality. The approval of the postgraduate diploma programmes has not involved external expertise, and the veracity of assessment practice is not tested to establish whether regulations are consistently and equitably applied, or that assessment demonstrates that threshold academic standards are achieved and that academic standards relative to the threshold are calibrated in accordance with sector-wide external benchmarks and the awarding body's own reference points. It was clear in meetings held with staff and in the self-evaluation document that there is a

realisation that the absence of independent external scrutiny is problematic.  
This cross-references to Expectation B7 below.

1.62 The review team concludes that the Expectation is not met, as insufficient emphasis or priority has been given to assuring standards or quality through external scrutiny. While QA procedures are broadly adequate in their articulation, there are shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied, resulting in a risk which must be mitigated. The review team **recommends** that external examiners are appointed to SOEL-approved programmes to provide the currently absent external scrutiny of academic quality and standards.

**Expectation: Not met**

**Level of risk: Moderate**

## The setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards: Summary of findings

1.63 In reaching its judgement the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

1.64 Six of the seven Expectations in the judgement area are met, and four of these have a low level of risk. The review team identified a moderate risk in relation to Expectation A2.1, and recommends that the School reviews and clarifies its governance structure, and subsequently the QA Handbook, to reflect recent organisational changes and levels of staffing. The review team also identified a moderate risk in relation to Expectation A3.3, having identified some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which the quality assurance procedures relied upon by the ASB are applied.

1.65 Expectation A3.4 was judged not to be met, as the review team felt that the School has placed insufficient emphasis or priority on assuring standards or quality through external scrutiny in relation to the diplomas that it awards. A linked recommendation with Expectation B7 was made, relating to the appointment of external examiners for these diplomas.

1.66 There are no features of good practice in this judgement area. The review team affirmed the actions taken by the School in partnership with EduQual to accredit the School's programmes and to become an approved centre.

1.67 The review team concludes that the setting and maintenance of the academic standards of awards at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

## 2 Judgement: The quality of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (B1): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective processes for the design, development and approval of programmes.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval**

#### **Findings**

2.1 In the last two years, SOEL has moved from provision of higher education to over 700 students through six programmes accredited by an awarding body to principally online delivery of its own two postgraduate diploma awards. The Postgraduate Diploma in International Commercial Law was first approved in 2013 and is the basis for the articulation agreement for progression to BNU. The Postgraduate Diploma in Management (Social Enterprise) was first offered in 2015 and is currently undergoing mapping from BNU to allow for progression to BNU's MBA.

2.2 The School's Strategic Plan (2015-18) makes clear SOEL's intention to focus on the development of a vocational, professional portfolio of provision that will enable it to grow student numbers steadily through online and CPD provision. Strategically, SOEL seeks to retain a particular flavour in its portfolio consistent with its community ethos and aligned with its Socially Responsible Graduates Framework. The PgD in Management (Social Enterprise) was developed from the School's programme in Global Community Entrepreneurship, while the PgD in International Commercial Law includes an International Human Rights pathway.

2.3 As stated earlier (Expectation A3.1) Stage 1 and 2 of the programme approval process deals with business and planning approval. The process requires consideration of fit with the School's strategic plan, that there is evidence of demand and that adequate evaluation is made of the physical and human resources required to support the programme. The programme can then be developed and presented to the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee for Stage 3. Guidance on the design of new programmes sets out criteria against which programme proposals are assessed for approval by LTAC. These include appropriate staffing, physical and learning resource requirements, proposals to meet student support needs and the availability of extracurricular learning opportunities. LTAC is guided to consider the coherence of the overall aims and outcomes of programme proposals relative to relevant QAA external benchmarks, including appropriate subject benchmarks and the FHEQ. The content, organisation, Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy are intended to be embodied and clearly articulated in the module and programme specifications that are required to be submitted to the Academic Registry prior to deliberation by the LTAC. Guidance includes an expectation of external expert input at the design stage and external adviser commentary at the LTAC approval stage.

2.4 Additionally, in line with its ethos and community focus, the LTAC is asked to consider the programme proposals in light of the demands of graduate employment, employability and entrepreneurship.

2.5 The guidance in the Quality Assurance Handbook enable this Expectation to be met. It is comprehensive and has been articulated to align with the relevant indicators of the Quality Code.

2.6 Reviewers considered the Stage 1 and 2 documentation provided and scrutinised available minutes of the LTAC, Faculty Boards and Academic Standards Board (Stages 3, 4 and 5). The review team also scrutinised module and programme specifications and the programme information provided to students on the VLE. In meetings with academic staff, the BNU Link Tutor and QA Lead discussions allowed the review team to deconstruct the approval process to identify the responsibilities and the basis for decision making at each stage.

2.7 Stages 1 and 2 follow the guidance closely and were sufficiently detailed in their documentation to provide evidence of the system at work. Stages 3, 4 and 5 were not, in practice, operational. The LTAC minutes recorded the programme approval meeting for the PgD in Management (Social Enterprise) in January 2015. The programme had been developed by an external academic based at the University of Huddersfield. All attendees were internal to the School and there is no evidence that an external adviser's comments were received for consideration. Discussion focused on the resources available for learning and teaching, the availability of staff to teach on the programme, and access to community links. No discussion was recorded regarding the academic coherence overall, the relationship of learning outcomes to overall aims, the appropriateness of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy, student support and many of the other criteria provided in the QA Handbook guidance.

2.8 There is a heavy reliance on the mapping process undertaken by BNU, the partner university, to confirm that the postgraduate diploma programmes are appropriate in terms of their academic coherence and level of academic challenge. The BNU mapping process and discussions with the BNU Link Tutor provided evidence that BNU, following its scrutiny of the programme design, content and organisation, was able to confirm that the PgD in ICL is robust. BNU is undertaking a similar exercise with the PgD in Management (SE). Staff accepted that the deliberative structures were perhaps too complex for the number of staff available to operate within them and that decision making had been taken at meetings called online and on a more needs-led basis. The strength of the partnership has served the School well to protect students and minimise risk. The EduQual accreditation is likely to result in the augmentation and consolidation of the extensive SOEL-based quality assurance documentation, which is internally inconsistent in terms of both statements about where responsibility lies for decision making and the nomenclature used to describe processes, deliberative structures and the institutional title.

2.9 The strength of the ship with BNU has served the School well to protect students and minimise risk. As a consequence, and with the EduQual accreditation in progress, the review team concluded that this Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B2): Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures adhere to the principles of fair admission. They are transparent, reliable, valid, inclusive and underpinned by appropriate organisational structures and processes. They support higher education providers in the selection of students who are able to complete their programme.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education**

**Findings**

2.10 The School's mission is to 'alleviate poverty through making people employable' and it seeks to provide an inclusive learning environment which nurtures academic and personal development, particularly for those who might otherwise not have had the opportunity to benefit from higher education because of social or economic disadvantage. Admission to the School is based on the merit of the applicant and on their ability to achieve.

2.11 The School has clear Admission Procedures that are mapped against the Quality Code. The Quality Assurance Lead is responsible, on behalf of the Academic Standards Board, for monitoring recruitment and admissions policies and practice. The Faculties Board and its Academic Standards Quality Enhancement Committee are responsible for setting entry criteria for the School's internal programmes as part of the programme approval process. For external qualifications, the awarding body sets the entry standards for its programmes.

2.12 Applications are initially considered by the School's Admissions Department and reviewed against formal entry criteria. UK NARIC is used as a reference source to check international qualifications. The School recognises the need to ensure that students admitted to its distance learning programmes are fully informed of the study requirement and have the resources available, such as IT facilities, to benefit from their study and the VLE. Admissions staff are provided with regular training on admissions issues, including the current policies and practices of UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI).

2.13 In January 2015 the School entered into a partnership agreement with the Shahid Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto University of Law (SZABUL) in Pakistan. This agreement allows the SZABUL to recruit students onto the PG Dip ICL programme, but the final admission decision remains with SOEL.

2.14 The clear Admission Procedures, along with the training and support provided to relevant staff, allows Expectation B2 to be met.

2.15 The review team explored SOEL's approach to the recruitment, selection and admission of students by viewing documentation and meeting with students and staff, including senior and professional support staff.

2.16 The School's website has a How to Apply page for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. This page informs students of the various stages of the admissions process and the potential outcomes. The School highlights the UKVI requirements for international students. The website provides information for prospective distance learning students so that they are aware of the programme study requirements.

2.17 The School has recently reviewed its admission processes to further ensure the suitability of students admitted on to its programmes. The School interviews all applicants using an interview question matrix focused on assessing students' English language ability and suitability for the programme. Admissions staff undertake appropriate pre-admission

checks including the confirmation of academic and English language qualifications. Where necessary the authenticity of students' documents is confirmed with the relevant awarding body. Final admission decisions are made by senior admissions staff with involvement from academic staff where required. Students are recruited in line with approved entry criteria and are invited to disclose any learning disabilities so that additional support needs can be assessed and reasonable adjustments implemented.

2.18 Students met by the review team commented positively on the admissions support and information that they received from SOEL staff. All students met by the team stated that they were fully supported throughout the decision-making and application process and that they received regular and helpful contact from staff. Admissions staff met by the review team are fully aware of admission processes and gave examples of how they had been supported and trained in their role.

2.19 Recruitment, selection and admission policies and procedures are implemented fairly and consistently to ensure that enrolled students can benefit from their programme of study. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B3): Higher education providers, working with their staff, students and other stakeholders, articulate and systematically review and enhance the provision of learning opportunities and teaching practices, so that every student is enabled to develop as an independent learner, study their chosen subject(s) in depth and enhance their capacity for analytical, critical and creative thinking.**

### **Quality Code, *Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching***

#### **Findings**

2.20 The Academic Standards Board (ASB) has ultimate responsibility for assuring the quality of the learning opportunities available to students across the School, but this is operationalised through the Faculties Board and the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Committee (LTAC).

2.21 The School aims to support every individual learner, regardless of their social, religious or economic background, to develop to their full potential in an engaging and supportive learning environment. To support this aim the School has produced a Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy (LTAS), informed by the Quality Code, to set School-level priorities designed to provide students with a high quality learning experience. This strategy emphasises student-centred learning with a focus on meeting individual learner needs and aspirations. The School has developed an audit tool used to review ongoing progress against the LTAS goals and to facilitate the sharing of good practice across programme teams.

2.22 In response to the School's recent focus on, and future planned growth of, its distance learning provision it has updated its Online and Blended Learning Policy. This policy outlines the minimum requirements to be provided on distance learning programmes, including the information and learning resources to be made available to students and the requirements for staff engaged in delivering distance learning. For its distance learning provision the VLE is the main platform through which programmes are delivered and use is made of online recorded lectures and live webinars to support student learning.

2.23 The School's learning and teaching strategies and policies allow the Expectation to be met.

2.24 The review team examined documentary evidence relating to the School's overall strategy and support of learning opportunities for students and examined how effectively these have been implemented. The review team met with students studying both on campus and online, as well as senior staff and those directly involved with learning and teaching.

2.25 Students met by the review team were very positive about their learning experience and the support made available to them. In particular, students highly regard the quality of formative feedback provided to them to enhance their learning, and distance learning students were positive about the resources made available to them, including the use made of online lectures and quizzes. Feedback provided to the School from the ATHE external verifier process affirms that learners are well supported to achieve the learning outcomes, and where specific recommendations are made these are followed up by the School.

2.26 The School has recently developed a new VLE to promote greater interactive learning. In their meeting with the review team, online students made recommendations for how their learning may be further supported and the School has committed to further enhancing its online provision. In response to this goal the School has developed a Student



Portal Stage Development Plan for 2015-2018 and has established a VLE Steering Group to oversee implementation of this plan.

2.27 SOEL has formally agreed that the Shahid Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto University of Law (SZABUL) in Pakistan provides support and resources to supplement those provided via the VLE to students recruited onto the PG Dip ICL programme through this organisation. This support is designed to help students in Pakistan contextualise the information provided through the VLE and to help with the development of skills such as computer literacy, academic writing, research skills and referencing.

2.28 The School has a range of processes for monitoring the quality of learning and teaching, including the annual monitoring process. Student feedback on learning and teaching is obtained through various mechanisms including questionnaires, student representatives and student/staff consultative committees. Students met by the review team were able to give examples of where the School had responded positively to student feedback.

2.29 Teaching staff are appointed with appropriate qualifications and often bring a strong practitioner focus to their learning and teaching. The School implements both peer and student observation schemes for teaching staff and produces an annual staff development calendar with a recent emphasis on designing and utilising online learning materials. The School provides staff induction and supports staff to attend and contribute to learning and teaching conferences and to gain HEA Fellowship recognition.

2.30 The School has developed an overall strategy that supports high quality learning opportunities and has effective mechanisms to support student learning. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B4): Higher education providers have in place, monitor and evaluate arrangements and resources which enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement**

**Findings**

2.31 As part of its mission the School seeks to improve the wellbeing of individuals and organisations through high quality education and training. To achieve this aim the School sets out to create a vibrant learning community, enriched by the active participation of both students and staff. SOEL seeks to complement students' academic study with a strong focus on social responsibility and community engagement. SOEL's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy reflects the School's mission and this is reinforced by its Socially Responsible Graduates Framework, designed to inform programme design and development. The implementation of these policies is overseen by the Faculties Board and by the LTAC.

2.32 The School provides information and support to enable students to develop their academic, personal and professional potential. This includes the School's commitment to providing access to high quality staff and materials that promote learner development. The School evaluates the effectiveness of these processes through its annual monitoring process, which is overseen by the ASB through reports received from its subcommittees.

2.33 There are appropriate processes in place to support and evaluate student development opportunities that allow the Expectation to be met.

2.34 The review team investigated the effectiveness of SOEL's policies and processes to support student development and achievement through consideration of documentation provided by the School, including committee minutes, student-facing resources and the students' written submission to this review, and in meetings with staff and students.

2.35 Professional and academic staff at the School work effectively to support student needs and aspirations. This support is provided at different stages of the student journey with pre-arrival guidance, induction sessions and academic support on personal development and reflection.

2.36 The School's internal programmes embed elements of personal development planning with a focus on enhancing student employability and social responsibility. Through its Socially Responsible Graduates Framework the School provides all students with opportunities to enhance their social and civic responsibility, with an appreciation of how to address global issues. In line with this ambition the School has previously provided opportunities through its Executive Lecture Series programme and other activities for students to engage with politicians and policy makers including councillors, members of parliament and peers of the realm. While this remains an important commitment for the School it is recognised that it remains a challenge to fully embed such activities on its distance learning programmes. The School's commitment through curriculum design and activities to developing socially responsible graduates is addressed as a feature of **good practice** under the Enhancement section below.

2.37 While the School does not operate a personal tutor system the students met by the review team were able to state how they would seek support for both academic and non-academic issues if required. The School has stated that it plans to introduce a designated programme tutor to provide additional pastoral support to students. Student attendance is monitored carefully to ensure UKVI compliance, and student progress

appraised so that intervention is provided if required.

2.38 Through its committee structure and monitoring processes the School has in place effective systems to gain and evaluate student feedback in support of student development.

2.39 The School has effective processes to enhance students' academic, personal and professional development, and mechanisms to ensure that these are evaluated and enhanced. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B5): Higher education providers take deliberate steps to engage all students, individually and collectively, as partners in the assurance and enhancement of their educational experience.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B5: Student Engagement**

**Findings**

2.40 The School has a Student Feedback Policy which provides for formal student feedback through the student survey, and a Student Support and Experience Committee (SSEC) on which students are represented, including online learners. Nominations are invited and student representatives are trained to perform their role and carry out their responsibilities in line with the Student Charter, which sets out how students can participate in the process of the School's operations, both on a day-to-day basis and at a strategic level. There are currently three student representatives. Student Support Liaison Group meetings provide further opportunities for students who are not representatives to attend more open meetings to raise matters for discussion at the SSEC.

2.41 SOEL feedback forms are aligned to the National Student Survey (NSS) and feed into annual reporting and into the ASB in the form of a report by the student member. SSEC minutes indicate that the School plans to move to the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES).

2.42 The Strategic Plan expects that, in future, students will become involved in contributing to new course development as members of programme approval events and in the ongoing development and implementation of the Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. To that end, students are included in the peer observation process. A particular focus will be the use of IT and the VLE as online provision grows and new policies and processes will need to be developed to support solely online and blended learners.

2.43 The student submission to this review considered the mechanism through which the School communicates with its student body and encourages participation and reflection on the student experience. It also provides examples of changes that have taken place as a consequence of student engagement in the deliberative processes of the School.

2.44 Based on the mechanisms and opportunities made available to students, an environment is created within which student engagement can be positively encouraged, and therefore this Expectation is met.

2.45 Reviewers considered the student written submission relative to minutes of relevant committees and discussions with staff and students to explore the extent to which both informal and formal opportunities were available to and taken by students to engage with, and make a constructive contribution to, the School.

2.46 The development of the student submission report exemplifies students' enthusiasm for engagement at the School. The submission was compiled from data collected via student survey questionnaires, Staff-Student Liaison Group and focus group meetings, an online feedback form and a comments and suggestions box at reception. The student submission was shared with other current and former students for comment and amendment. The writers also reached out to students based abroad through video-conferencing and email.

2.47 Students provided examples in the written submission of changes that had occurred as a direct consequence of their feedback to the School. These included the introduction of a Human Rights pathway on the PgD ICL; specific time periods for online learners to speak with administrative staff; extending the range of case studies used in teaching to provide

more diverse and international examples; extension of progression opportunities; and the introduction of discussion boards to promote peer-to-peer integration. Students and staff spoke of regular communication between the SSEC student members and staff members via email. The minutes of the June 2016 meeting of SSEC show a good range of topics discussed in a collegial way, with appropriate actions emerging.

2.48 Overall, the student body is satisfied with the learning opportunities provided by the School, the well qualified academic staff and the emphasis placed on student welfare. Therefore, the team concludes that the Expectation is met and the risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B6): Higher education providers operate equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment, including for the recognition of prior learning, which enable every student to demonstrate the extent to which they have achieved the intended learning outcomes for the credit or qualification being sought.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning**

**Findings**

2.49 Assessment practice at SOEL is framed by its Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy and policy. Design of assessment instruments and decisions on assessment of student work for ATHE awards are conducted through internal and external verification procedures that are scrutinised by the awarding body. For SOEL awards, assessment design and assessment decisions for the award of academic credit and/or qualifications are reached through processes and regulations approved by the Director of Academics and by decisions through a formally constituted assessment board with responsibility for determining and approving awards. There is no externality in these processes or at this Board. The assessment board reports to the ASB, where student performance overall and the award of credit is discussed and reviewed.

2.50 The School's Internal Verification Policy specifies the role of the internal verifier (IV) and emphasises its importance in ensuring that the School is accurately and consistently designing and marking assessments. The IV process provides peer review of assessment design and double marking of samples of students' work collated by the Academics Department. The Academics Department provides support and training to academic staff and liaises with the awarding body to ensure that internal verification records are maintained accurately and that awarding body requirements are met.

2.51 SOEL programme documentation, the QA Handbook and associated policies and regulations set out the forms of assessment permitted, including those for the recognition of prior learning, and the mechanisms through which individual assessment tasks are approved. There are no examinations; assessment is by a variety of coursework modes. Student handbooks contain module specifications that detail the assessment strategy and the criteria to be applied in the assessment of learning outcomes. Policies exist for reasonable adjustments and special circumstances.

2.52 Section Q9 of the QA Handbook states that the APL process is not concerned with exceptional entry to, or exemption from, a programme of study. It is a process that focuses on assessment and certification of prior learning, which may count as evidence towards either a part of a unit or unit(s) accumulated towards a full qualification, or a full qualification in its own right. The regulations speak of 50 per cent APL as the norm. Exemptions for the PgD ICL are advertised on the SOEL web site as available based on previous learning and work experience. For evidence of previous learning, applicants are asked to provide transcripts and certificates for subjects studied at bachelor's degree level or higher (or equivalent, QCF levels 5-7). For evidence of work experience, applicants are asked to complete a form providing details of roles and duties, a CV and a letter from their employer. Applicants who have already completed an LLB, LLM, LPC, or BVC/BPTC may be given exemptions for a significant part of the programme. The APL policy explicitly discusses the need for applicants to compile an APL claim with guidance and support from trained staff and a clear knowledge and understanding of the relevant assessment requirements of the modules against which they are making a claim. The claim should include reflection on experience or evaluation of prior learning relative to the specific requirements of modules. A mapping is proposed, supported by a portfolio of evidence. The policy provides guidance

on the assessment of claims and emphasises that the standard required of an APL learner is identical to that demanded of a learner pursuing a conventional study route and that there should be both internal and external verification of the assessment.

2.53 Policies, procedures and regulations exist that provide the basis for effective assessment, marking and internal moderation. Deliberative structures exist that support operational processes and there is the potential to enhance assessment processes through reports to Academic Standards Board. Taken together, these allow the Expectation to be met.

2.54 The review team investigated the operation of equitable, valid and reliable processes of assessment through programme documentation, guidance and reports from ATHE, the SOEL Quality Assurance Handbook, and information available to students on the SOEL website and VLE. The reviewers discussed assessment practice in meetings with staff and students and reviewed the students' written submission.

2.55 Discussions with the academic staff confirmed the process by which assessment instruments are designed and peer reviewed. Staff commented that they had received constructive support in this regard from BNU early in the partnership. Staff also highlighted their development of formative assessment to support learning and to help students develop new skills, for example in presentation. Good academic practice is a feature of lectures early in the programme and guidance is provided to students in handbooks and on the VLE in addition to in taught sessions. Students referred to the School's policy on plagiarism, helpful quizzes on the VLE and the notification regarding malpractice stated clearly on each assignment. A short presentation is emailed to students on what is defined as plagiarism and how to avoid it, and SOEL uses Plagscan software to detect levels of similarity with previously submitted work. Referencing conventions are taught and specific guidance is provided for use of OSCOLA, a legal referencing system. The review team was satisfied in discussions with staff and students that the key elements of good academic practice for taught modules are well understood.

2.56 Assessment for SOEL awards is on a pass/fail basis and candidates must demonstrate evidence of achievement in each of the assessment criteria specified for each learning outcome. Students confirmed that the criteria are made explicit to them both in lectures and in assignment surgeries and acknowledged that the range and volume of VLE resources has grown beyond the initial dissertation writing guide and plagiarism and referencing guides. Students are also permitted to submit drafts for formative feedback prior to summative assessment. Students who had progressed from undergraduate-level study to the postgraduate diplomas reiterated a discernible increase in the level of academic challenge. The student written submission discussed the assignment scenarios as examples of increasing difficulty. For example, in a level 5 assignment, the student may adopt the role of a trainee but in a level 7 assignment, the student would take on the role of consultant or manager. Students also recognised that command words used in assessment criteria denote particular expectations. These are made explicit for each assignment. Feedback on assignments is considered constructive and helpful by students. Formative feedback is returned quickly; however, feedback on summative assessments can take four to six weeks. Students were familiar with the regulations regarding reassessment, reasonable adjustments and special circumstances. If unsure, they were clear about where to find relevant information.

2.57 Reviewers explored with students, senior staff and teaching staff the process by which prior learning is assessed and accredited. Samples of evidence were requested for students who had been awarded 70 credits APL towards 120 credits for the postgraduate diploma programme. These modules were listed as 'exempted' on their transcript. Reviewers were provided with copies of undergraduate and postgraduate diploma certificates,

professional qualifications (at level 6) and employer references, and a professional body associate membership certificate. The formal assessment of APL evidence was recorded on a witness attestation form. Part 1 of this form is completed by the applicant and asks for the achievement claimed by APL mapped to the assessment requirement of the units being claimed by APL. In two of the three forms, professional body membership and work experience as a solicitor is claimed against four modules. In the third form a prior PgD is also presented for prior certificated learning. Part 2 of the form presents summary notes of an interview undertaken by the Director of Academics. Students confirmed that interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes duration. The APL process demonstrated by the documentation provided does not meet the requirements of the SOEL APL Policy. There is no mapping of evidence by the applicant against the learning outcomes of the modules claimed and no explicit assessment in terms of relevance, sufficiency, authenticity and currency as expected in the APL policy statement. There is no indication that the applicant was made aware of the module learning outcomes and assessment criteria prior to their application or was supported to reflect on their experience and prior learning to compile an evidenced-based application at the appropriate academic level. The evidence provided to demonstrate the assessment of APL suggests that it is a less than rigorous process and does not align with SOEL's own policy. While quality assurance procedures are broadly adequate, there are shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which they are applied. APL assessment is not internally verified or confirmed by the assessment board and, without external examiners, is not subject to independent and objective scrutiny.

2.58 Discussions with the academic team, evidence of internal verification and peer review of assessment design, regular communication and support from the BNU Link Tutor and the imminent accreditation of SOEL by EduQual allow the review team to conclude that this Expectation is met. However, there is a moderate risk presented by shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which the APL procedures are applied. The review team **recommends** that SOEL ensures that the award of credit through APL is made through a rigorous assessment process providing explicit evidence of the achievement of learning outcomes.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**



## **Expectation (B7): Higher education providers make scrupulous use of external examiners.**

### **Quality Code, Chapter B7: External Examining**

#### **Findings**

2.59 Centres delivering ATHE qualifications are required to demonstrate that they assure the quality of the units and qualifications they deliver through effective standardisation of assessors and verification of assessor decisions. ATHE monitors the application of quality assurance processes in centres through centre approval and external verification. On approval a centre is allocated an external verifier (EV) who will visit at an early stage in the programme to ensure that an appropriate assessment plan is in place. Centres are required to undertake training and standardisation activities as agreed with ATHE.

2.60 ATHE EVs report regularly throughout the year, both through site visits and remote assurance activities. EVs review samples of student work to confirm achievement of learning outcomes, the application of accurate referencing skills, avoidance of malpractice and the application by students of theory to practice. They also confirm that the centre is using the relevant ATHE assignments and that there is robust practice in internal assessment, resulting in sound judgements based on consistent application of assessment criteria and constructive feedback to students. Each centre's internal verification system is scrutinised and there is an expectation that centres can demonstrate that they meet the required quality assurance standards.

2.61 There are no external examiners appointed to SOEL's postgraduate diploma programmes.

2.62 For ATHE awards, systems are in place to allow the Expectation to be met. For SOEL awards, the Expectation cannot be met since no external examiners have been appointed since the 2013 approval.

2.63 Reviewers scrutinised a sample of EV reports for 2014-15 and 2015-16 together with the School's report on action taken in response to one of the reports. The team also saw confirmation from ATHE that assignments in use were approved. In addition, the team spoke with students about assessment practice and read their written submission. Meetings with SOEL staff, the Quality Assurance Lead and BNU Link Tutor informed the review team's evaluation of this Expectation.

2.64 Student data for 2014-15 indicates 748 students registered on six ATHE awards ranging from Levels 5-7. The break in recruitment to the School during 2015-16 has meant that student numbers for ATHE programmes are minimal at present, although SOEL is seeking to rebuild its profile and re-establish growth. A number of reports by EVs were completed for the 2014-15 academic year and, overall, ATHE was satisfied that SOEL met the quality assurance requirements set by the awarding body. Some areas for improvement are identified in the reports and these are tracked from one visit to the next to monitor progress. The February 2015 report raised concerns about consistency in marking at level 5 but is otherwise very positive overall, providing detail of formative tests, guidance on drafts and feedback to students against assessment criteria. SOEL had devised its own marking scheme for most of the modules, with detailed guidelines for the assessor to follow to mark student scripts. The EV commented positively on the level of detail and guidance provided to the assessors. However, the overall judgement did comment on a tendency to make generous assessment judgements when in reality the learners' work is often marginal. This had not been identified at internal verification. The School provided evidence of a report on action taken to address these matters raised by the EV visit in February 2015, for example

adoption of the ATHE Internal Verification template, training for staff and the appointment of a Lead Internal Verifier to coordinate and standardise practice. It is not clear from the minutes of committee meetings seen by the reviewers where this report was considered or where the EV reports themselves were discussed in the deliberative structures of the School. Discussions with staff and members of the Advisory Board and ASB confirmed that committee meetings were less frequent and systematic during this period. Students also confirmed through their written submission that ATHE external verification reports are made available to students after being discussed at an SSLG meeting but there is no record of discussion, for example at the March 2015 meeting.

2.65 The PgD in ICL was approved in 2013 and the PgD Man (SE) in 2015. The School is responsible for the standards of its qualifications. In its self-evaluation document the School expressed its intention to appoint external examiners for its postgraduate diploma awards. At the time of the review, this intention had not been accomplished. Staff commented that internal verification practice, comparable to that implemented for ATHE programmes, is in place for the postgraduate diploma provision. Nevertheless, the appointment of an external examiner is explicitly the responsibility of the body making the award to ensure impartial and independent advice, as well as informative comment on the awarding body's standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards.

2.66 Based on the evidence seen, and the ongoing approval of the centre by ATHE, the quality assurance requirements of the ATHE are met. However, SOEL has not made scrupulous use of external examiners for either of the two postgraduate diploma programmes, which constitute the substantive focus for recruitment currently and into the future. The Expectation is therefore not met. The risk is considered moderate, mitigated only by an extension of established practice based on ATHE quality assurance requirements. The review team **recommends** the appointment of external examiners to SOEL-approved programmes to provide external scrutiny of academic quality and standards. This recommendation is cross-referenced to Expectation A3.4 above.

**Expectation: Not met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B8): Higher education providers, in discharging their responsibilities for setting and maintaining academic standards and assuring and enhancing the quality of learning opportunities, operate effective, regular and systematic processes for monitoring and for review of programmes.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review**

**Findings**

2.67 SOEL states that Annual Programme Monitoring Reports have been a staple part of the academic process at the School since 2012. The policy is articulated in section Q25 of the QA Handbook and is titled Annual Assessment Reporting. The purpose of annual reporting is articulated very clearly as formal reporting of the review and evaluation of provision aimed at enhancing the student learning process and to monitor the actions taken in response to previous reports. A brief description of the process is provided in A3.3 above.

2.68 Based on the policy and procedures described in A3.3, processes for the monitoring and review of programmes are in place at SOEL to enable the Expectation to be met.

2.69 Reviewers spoke to staff, students and advisers external to the School on their responsibilities and contribution towards the review and monitoring of academic provision. Reviewers considered a wide range of documents and looked for evidence-based reflection to promote continuous improvements, monitored and evaluated year on year.

2.70 The Annual Programme Monitoring Report template promotes consideration of progress on actions taken following the previous report, feedback from students, feedback from external verifiers as appropriate, evaluation of physical and human resources, enhancement opportunities and proposed amendments or modifications. Although a small selection of reports was provided to the team, only the May 2015 and May 2016 reports for the PgD in ICL could be read consecutively.

2.71 The Course Leader has taken care to follow through on actions raised in the previous year and it is clear that the student voice is considered very important in the review process. Student feedback is gathered via student representatives, questionnaires and through discussion at the Staff-Student Liaison Group. Much of the students' feedback in May 2016 inevitably focuses on suggestions for enhancement of the VLE and accessibility of resources given the transition from on-campus delivery. Communication tools and effective technological solutions to IT problems are increasingly a priority for staff and students alike. Nevertheless, examples are provided of developing practice using digital technology that is supporting and motivating student learning.

2.72 However, none of the summary plans had been completed for ease of reference and monitoring of progress on action proposed and taken. The purpose of programme monitoring and review is also to consider the continuing currency and validity of the programme, to evaluate whether students are attaining the intended learning outcomes and whether the assessment regime enables this to be appropriately demonstrated. Current practice does not fully reflect a process that addresses all aspects of the programme as approved, using the definitive record of the programme as the reference point with explicit reference to ongoing alignment with UK threshold standards and the School's own academic frameworks and regulations.

2.73 During 2014-15, each of the School's key committees met twice, with the exception of LTAC which met three times. In 2015-16, the Faculties Board, SSEC, LTAC and ASQEC met only once. There were no formal scheduled meetings for the Advisory Board or for the ASB. Members of these two committees confirmed that less formal communication meetings

were taking place given the challenges that the School was facing at the time. Strategic oversight of monitoring and review processes requires a planned cycle so that outcomes are reported at the appropriate organisational level to determine whether strategic action is required.

2.74 The primary focus of the programme monitoring and review process is currently on student feedback and discussion of resource requirements. While this contributes to improvements in the quality of student learning opportunities, there is a need to consider the balance between opportunities for enhancement and assurance of academic standards. As such, the School needs to improve the rigour of annual monitoring to ensure the review of provision against the definitive record of the programme, and systematise reporting through the deliberative structures. This recommendation cross-references to Expectation A3.3. The Expectation is met; however, there is a moderate risk due to shortcomings in the strategic oversight of the processes for, and outcomes of, programme monitoring and programme review.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Moderate**

**Expectation (B9): Higher education providers have procedures for handling academic appeals and student complaints about the quality of learning opportunities; these procedures are fair, accessible and timely, and enable enhancement.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints**

**Findings**

2.75 The School has an Academic Appeals Procedure that permits appeals on explicit grounds in relation to assessment procedures and available information not taken into account or unreasonably rejected. There is no appeal against academic judgement. Appeals must be made directly to ATHE where applicable and students are asked to advise the School that they have lodged an appeal so that its progress can be monitored. Academic appeals are made to the relevant Course Leader for SOEL awards within five working days of receiving results. The appeal is recorded in the Appeals Register and progress is documented at each stage. The policy sets out clearly the process by which an appeal will be investigated, how and when decisions are communicated, and the mechanisms by which a student may make a further appeal if they remain dissatisfied.

2.76 A comprehensive complaints policy seeks to resolve complaints quickly and fairly in line with the Quality Code guidance. A register of complaints is maintained by the School and the policy is published in student handbooks and on the VLE. In their written submission, students confirmed that the complaints procedure is published and made easily accessible with an online form. An anonymised summary of complaints on record and how they have been managed is reported to the Advisory Board of the School. The policy provides guidance to students as individuals or groups and encourages constructive engagement to resolve complaints quickly, informally and amicably wherever possible. It makes clear distinctions between formal definitions of complaints and academic appeals, and frames the guidance as a series of questions that might be asked by students in an accessible format.

2.77 Information about the Office of the Independent Adjudicator is provided to students in an information poster for circumstances where all other avenues have been exhausted.

2.78 Policies and procedures are in place that enable the Expectation to be met.

2.79 The review team considered the effectiveness of the measures for academic appeals and student complaints through the scrutiny of policies and procedures and in discussion with staff and students.

2.80 Students spoke warmly of the accessibility of support and academic staff. They confirmed that they are able to contact staff privately by email and raise matters of concern through the Staff-Student Liaison Group. Students were familiar with the policies and procedures and their location in student handbooks and on the VLE. The student written submission prepared by more recent students acknowledges that some complaints have been registered, but emphasises the responsiveness of the School in resolving matters informally and quickly. Data recorded on the complaints register relates to relatively minor matters dating from 2013-14 and 2014-15. The register shows sensitive and considered management and resolution of student complaints within the remit of the School.

2.81 The negligible volume of formal matters raised by students suggests that the lines of communication between the staff and students are open and transparent. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B10): Degree-awarding bodies take ultimate responsibility for academic standards and the quality of learning opportunities, irrespective of where these are delivered or who provides them. Arrangements for delivering learning opportunities with organisations other than the degree-awarding body are implemented securely and managed effectively.**

**Quality Code, Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others**

**Findings**

2.82 In recognition of the risks associated with collaborative arrangements the School has established a Collaboration Committee as a subcommittee of ASQEC. The purpose of this committee is to monitor the quality of provision with partners. The School has also established a Collaborative Provision Policy and an associated Collaborative Provision Approval Chart. This policy details the different stages of approval for collaborative partnerships, including consideration by the Collaboration Committee and ASQEC before final approval is considered by Faculties Board on behalf of ASB. This policy also confirms the annual monitoring processes applicable to evaluating School partnerships.

2.83 At the time of the review visit the team was informed that the School is in the process of finding additional university partners to extend its portfolio of courses via articulation agreements, progression agreements, and jointly delivered courses, and the possibility of establishing overseas study centres to support students on its programmes.

2.84 By developing the Collaboration Committee and its Collaborative Provision Policy the School has designed a governance structure and policies that allow this Expectation to be met.

2.85 To evaluate the effectiveness of the School's management of its higher education provision with others, the review team examined legal agreements, policies, procedures and committee minutes and met with staff and students.

2.86 At the time of the review visit the School stated that none of its programmes were offered in partnership with any other organisation within the definition of this Expectation. Consistent with this statement, it was confirmed that SOEL's partnership with BNU is limited to an articulation agreement whereby students successfully completing the School's PG Dip ICL programme are eligible to apply only for entry onto the University's top-up LLM programme. This partnership is managed at SOEL by its Director of Academics and Corporate Affairs, and communication between the two institutions benefits from the appointment of a Link Tutor from BNU who is also a member of SOEL's Advisory Board. The Academic Director attends the University Examination Board for the LLM top-up. As BNU makes no contribution to the student achievement of learning outcomes this partnership does not relate to this Expectation.

2.87 In January 2015 the School entered into a formal agreement with the Shahid Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto University of Law (SZABUL) in Pakistan to enable it to act as a SOEL Study Centre for students recruited through SZABUL on to SOEL's PG Dip ICL programme. The agreement specifies different levels of Study Centre activity, many of which have not yet been enacted for this partnership. The agreement does not permit SZABUL to deliver SOEL programmes in full, nor undertake any summative assessment, but it does permit SZABUL to provide support and resources designed to help students achieve the learning outcomes associated with their programme of study, in addition to the resources provided by the School on its VLE. Given this involvement this partnership is covered within this Expectation. The School confirmed that students have benefited from this arrangement since the start of the 2015-16 academic year. As this agreement was not viewed by SOEL to be a

collaborative partnership under the definition of this Expectation it was not considered by its Collaboration Committee nor subject to the approval process specified in the School's Collaborative Provision Policy. Instead, the School received a completed Application Form from SZABUL, which included details of facilities of SZABUL's premises and staff CVs. An onsite evaluation of the partner's ability to provide the required support and resources was undertaken in December 2014, followed by the partnership agreement being approved through the School's executive structure.

2.88 As this agreement was not formally considered and approved through its governance structure the review team **recommends** that the School ensures that all aspects of working with others that support the student achievement of learning outcomes are appropriately considered, approved and monitored through the academic governance structure.

2.89 The School has established an appropriate governance structure and policies to oversee the management of its provision with others, but these processes have not been consistently implemented. As this lack of oversight only relates to a small part of the School's provision the review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

**Expectation (B11): Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.**

**Quality Code, *Chapter B11: Research Degrees***

**Findings**

2.90 SOEL does not offer any research degrees and therefore this Expectation is not applicable.

**Expectation: Not applicable**

**Level of risk: Not applicable**



## The quality of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

2.91 In reaching its judgement about the quality of student learning opportunities, the review team evaluated its findings against the criteria in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

2.92 There are 10 applicable Expectations in this judgement area, and nine of these are met, seven with low risk and two (Expectations B6 and B8) with a moderate risk. In one area, the Expectation is not met, and has an associated moderate risk. This relates to Expectation B7 (external examining), where the review team identified that there are no external examiners appointed to either of the School's diploma programmes, which currently make up the majority of its curriculum offer. A recommendation regarding the need for such an appointment is made in relation to Expectation B7, linked to Expectation A3.4.

2.93 A total of three other recommendations are also made in relation to this judgement area. The first arises from the need to ensure a rigorous application of the processes for accreditation of prior learning (Expectation B6). The second recommendation relates to Expectation B8 (linked to Expectation A3.3), and the need to systemise and improve the rigour of the annual monitoring processes. Finally, and in relation to Expectation B10, the School is recommended to ensure that all aspects of working with others that support the student achievement of learning outcomes are appropriately considered, approved and monitored through the academic governance structure.

2.94 The review team identified a specific feature of good practice in relation to Expectation B4, linked with Enhancement, involving the explicit focus on social responsibility that articulates well with the School's mission and philosophy.

2.95 The review team concludes that the quality of student learning opportunities at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

### 3 Judgement: The quality of the information about learning opportunities

**Expectation (C): UK higher education providers produce information for their intended audiences about the higher education they offer that is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy.**

#### Quality Code, Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

##### Findings

3.1 The School has an Information Policy that sets out the processes to be followed for the approval and modification of information published by the School in electronic or printed form and which is made available to current and prospective students and other stakeholders. This policy has been informed by both this Expectation and CMA (Competition and Markets Authority) guidelines. The School also has a Document Control Policy concerning the production and version control of records and documents maintained on its Information Register. The School requires that regular reviews are undertaken to ensure the accuracy of all published information. There are also regular meetings that update ASQEC on issues relating to the provision of information.

3.2 The information policy requires centralised oversight of marketing communications including prospectuses, website and online media, communication with the press/media and content of the VLE. Overall responsibility for the accuracy of the information about the School's provision is delegated to its Marketing Team, but Heads of Department are required to sign off all documentation that is made available to staff and students. Faculty staff are responsible for advising the Marketing Department of changes to provision to be included in published information.

3.3 The School has comprehensive policies and procedure to allow this Expectation to be met.

3.4 The review team explored the effectiveness of SOEL's processes for the approval of information by viewing a wide range of information including, its website, handbooks, programme and module specifications, transcripts and award certificates. In addition, the review team met with senior and professional staff and students.

3.5 SOEL has rigorous processes for collating, checking and approving public information. Staff were able to explain how these processes are implemented and students value the high quality and accurate information provided to them.

3.6 Since rebranding, much of the School's presence online has been revised and the School has recently developed a new website, new social media platforms and a new corporate branding identity. The new website contains information about the School's vision, mission and overall strategy. Programme-level information on the website is presented on standardised course structure pages that specify the awarding body, module credits, progression routes for students and assessment details. Further work is needed to ensure that all policies and related documents reflect the new name of the organisation.

3.7 All students are issued with a handbook that refers them to relevant academic policies, course information (such as learning outcomes and assessment criteria) and general information. The School also publishes a Student Charter which outlines what students can expect from the School and what the School expects of them. Distance learning students are inducted using the online portal, which also contains the student handbook and other programme-level information. Staff are provided with the quality

assurance handbook when they join and they are regularly updated about policy changes through briefings.

3.8 Upon completion of an internal programme the School issues students with a transcript that details their achievement and an award certificate using a standard centralised template. The award certificate for the PG Dip ICL programme states that this award is made by SOEL, but also states that this is in partnership with BNU. Given that BNU has no responsibility for academic standards on this programme, and the partnership only specifies that successful students are eligible to apply for the relevant University LLM programme, this has the potential to be misleading to students, employers and other stakeholders. BNU have confirmed their agreement to the use of their logo in this way. Nonetheless, the review team **recommends** that the School ensures that the award certificates produced by the School clearly state the nature of any partnership arrangements with other awarding bodies.

3.9 The provider has comprehensive processes for managing information and operates robust procedures to ensure their effective implementation. The review team concludes that the Expectation is met and the associated level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The quality of the information about learning opportunities: Summary of findings

3.10 In reaching its judgement about the quality of the information about student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

3.11 The one Expectation in this judgement area is met, with a low level of risk. There is one recommendation, and this relates to the clarification of the nature of partnership arrangements with other awarding bodies on the award certificates.

3.12 The review team concludes that the quality of the information about learning opportunities at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

## 4 Judgement: The enhancement of student learning opportunities

**Expectation (Enhancement): Deliberate steps are being taken at provider level to improve the quality of students' learning opportunities.**

### Findings

4.1 Quality enhancement is primarily achieved through an internal self-evaluation process designed by the School, the College Review on Quality Assurance (CROQA). The CROQA was instituted in 2010 and is now in its third iteration.

4.2 The CROQA process was previously considered by the School as a document that helped to shape its quality mechanisms, with a review every 12-18 months. However, the CROQA process has now developed as a tool that delivers a strategic approach to enhancement of student learning opportunities. It is used to provide a more holistic review of the School and has a three-year evaluation cycle. CROQA 3 includes summary statements and recommendations and the November 2016 update makes reference to the most recent Annual Report from the ASB as submitted in November 2014.

4.3 The above structures and processes that the School has in place would enable this Expectation to be met.

4.4 The review team considered a range of evidence relating to enhancement initiatives, and discussed enhancement in meetings with the CEO, senior staff, academic staff and students.

4.5 A challenge for the School in its current position and size is sustaining and working with the level of complexity in its structures. The Quality Assurance Handbook is substantial and it is acknowledged by the School in CROQA 3 that the consistency in the use of nomenclature, institutional title, titles of posts and structures, and reference to ex-partnership organisations is still being reviewed and finalised to enhance clarity. This review will support further enhancement through reappraisal of quality assurance processes, reduction of the current level of annual reviews and audit reports, clarification of the relationship between the separate reporting processes, and synthesis of the outcomes of each to inform strategic overview.

4.6 Although summary statements in CROQA 3 are quite generalised, rather than a detailed and reflective statement of achievements and actions taken, its production does focus the School on a regular cycle of evaluation. Students recognise an ethos in the School which expects and encourages enhancement of their learning opportunities, and they are enthusiastic in responding with suggestions about the support they need. The self-evaluation document acknowledges that the CROQA had focused almost exclusively on student experience and is now moving deliberately towards an emphasis on staff experience and development and towards creation of a research environment and research-led teaching.

4.7 Historically, at School level, work has been undertaken to develop and integrate enhancement initiatives in a planned and systematic manner. These initiatives are now under reconsideration or review in the context of SOEL's strategic objective to become a predominantly online provider. The School continues to improve its curriculum, and the team found in particular that there is **good practice** in the design of programmes in law and management, with an explicit focus on social responsibility that articulates well with the School's mission and philosophy.

4.8 Enhancements cited by staff and evidenced to the reviewers include the improvements in learning opportunities for on-campus students, dependent on the development of VLE materials; the opportunities and support for students and staff to present and co-chair a session at an international legal conference in Pakistan, with papers published in conference proceedings; and the opportunities for School staff to mentor secondary school students through The Prince's Trust MOSAIC scheme.

4.9 The existing processes and ongoing developments ensure that the Expectation is met and the level of risk is low.

**Expectation: Met**  
**Level of risk: Low**

## The enhancement of student learning opportunities: Summary of findings

4.10 In reaching its judgement about the enhancement of student learning opportunities, the review team matched its findings against the criteria specified in Annex 2 of the published handbook.

4.11 The School currently has a focus on student learning opportunities, driven by the regular College Review on Quality Assurance (CROQA) process.

4.12 The team recognises the good practice within the School, linked to Expectation B4, whereby the design of programmes with an explicit focus on social responsibility articulates well with the School's mission and philosophy.

4.13 The review team concludes that the enhancement of student learning opportunities at the provider **meets** UK expectations.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Definitions of key operational terms are also given on pages 21-24 of the [Higher Education Review \(Alternative Providers\) handbook](#).

If you require formal definitions of other terms please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality: [www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality).

User-friendly explanations of a wide range of terms can be found in the longer Glossary on the QAA website: [www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Pages/GlossaryEN.aspx).

### Academic standards

The standards set by **degree-awarding bodies** for their courses (programmes and modules) and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

### Award

A qualification, or academic credit, conferred in formal recognition that a student has achieved the intended **learning outcomes** and passed the assessments required to meet the academic standards set for a **programme** or unit of study.

### Awarding organisation

An organisation authorised to award a particular qualification; an organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

### Blended learning

Learning delivered by a number of different methods, usually including face-to-face and e-learning (see **technology enhanced or enabled learning**).

### Credit(s)

A means of quantifying and recognising learning, used by most institutions that provide higher education **programmes of study**, expressed as numbers of credits at a specific level.

### Degree-awarding body

A UK higher education provider (typically a university) with the power to award degrees, conferred by Royal Charter, or under Section 76 of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or under Section 48 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 1992, or by Papal Bull, or, since 1999, granted by the Privy Council on advice from QAA (in response to applications for taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers or university title).

### Distance learning

A course of study that does not involve face-to-face contact between students and tutors but instead uses technology such as the internet, intranets, broadcast media, CD-ROM and video, or traditional methods of correspondence - learning 'at a distance'. See also **blended learning**.

### Dual award or double award

The granting of separate awards (and certificates) for the same **programme** by two **degree-awarding bodies** who have jointly delivered the programme of study leading to them. See also **multiple award**.

### e-learning

See technology enhanced or enabled learning.



### **Enhancement**

The process by which higher education providers systematically improve the quality of provision and the ways in which students' learning is supported. It is used as a technical term in our review processes.

### **Expectations**

Statements in the **Quality Code** that set out what all UK higher education providers expect of themselves and each other, and what the general public can therefore expect of them.

### **Flexible and distributed learning**

A programme or module that does not require the student to attend classes or events at particular times and locations. See also **distance learning**.

### **Framework**

A published formal structure. See also **framework for higher education qualifications**.

### **Framework for higher education qualifications**

A published formal structure that identifies a hierarchy of national qualification levels and describes the general achievement expected of holders of the main qualification types at each level, thus assisting higher education providers in maintaining academic standards. QAA publishes the following frameworks: *The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) and *The Framework for Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions in Scotland* (FQHEIS).

### **Good practice**

A process or way of working that, in the view of a QAA review team, makes a particularly positive contribution to a higher education provider's management of academic standards and the quality of its educational provision. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

### **Learning opportunities**

The provision made for students' learning, including planned study, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, and resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios).

### **Learning outcomes**

What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning.

### **Multiple awards**

An arrangement where three or more **degree-awarding bodies** together provide a single jointly delivered **programme** (or programmes) leading to a separate **award** (and separate certification) of each awarding body. The arrangement is the same as for **dual/double awards**, but with three or more awarding bodies being involved.

### **Operational definition**

A formal definition of a term, establishing exactly what QAA means when using it in reviews and reports.

### **Programme (of study)**

An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

**Programme specifications**

Published statements about the intended **learning outcomes** of programmes of study, containing information about teaching and learning methods, support and assessment methods, and how individual units relate to levels of achievement.

**Quality Code**

Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is the UK-wide set of **reference points** for higher education providers (agreed through consultation with the higher education community, and published by QAA), which states the **Expectations** that all providers are required to meet.

**Reference points**

Statements and other publications that establish criteria against which performance can be measured.

**Self-evaluation document**

A report submitted by a higher education provider, assessing its own performance, to be used as evidence in a QAA review.

**Subject Benchmark Statement**

A published statement that sets out what knowledge, understanding, abilities and skills are expected of those graduating in each of the main subject areas (mostly applying to bachelor's degrees), and explains what gives that particular discipline its coherence and identity.

**Technology enhanced or enabled learning (or e-learning)**

Learning that is delivered or supported through the use of technology.

**Threshold academic standard**

The minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic **award**. Threshold academic standards are set out in the national **frameworks** and **Subject Benchmark Statements**.

**Virtual learning environment (VLE)**

An intranet or password-only interactive website (also referred to as a platform or user interface) giving access to **learning opportunities** electronically. These might include such resources as course handbooks, information and reading lists; blogs, message boards and forums; recorded lectures; and/or facilities for online seminars (webinars).

**Widening participation**

Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds.

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