



# **SOAS, University of London**

Institutional Review  
by the Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education

March 2013

## Contents

About this review .....	1
Key findings .....	2
QAA's judgements about the SOAS, University of London .....	2
Good practice.....	2
Recommendations .....	2
Affirmation of action being taken .....	3
Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement.....	3
About the SOAS, University of London.....	4
Explanation of the findings about the SOAS, University of London .....	5
<b>1 Academic standards .....</b>	<b>5</b>
Outcome .....	5
Meeting external qualifications benchmarks.....	5
Use of external examiners .....	6
Assessment and standards.....	6
Setting and maintaining programme standards .....	8
Subject benchmarks .....	9
<b>2 Quality of learning opportunities .....</b>	<b>9</b>
Outcome .....	9
Professional standards for teaching and learning.....	9
Learning resources .....	9
Student voice .....	10
Management information is used to improve quality and standards .....	11
Admission to the School.....	11
Complaints and appeals.....	12
Career advice and guidance .....	12
Supporting disabled students.....	12
Supporting international students.....	13
Supporting postgraduate research students.....	14
Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements .....	15
Flexible, distributed and e-learning.....	16
Work-based and placement learning.....	16
Student charter .....	16
<b>3 Information about learning opportunities.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Summary .....	16
<b>4 Enhancement of learning opportunities .....</b>	<b>17</b>
Outcome .....	17
<b>5 Thematic element.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement .....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Glossary .....</b>	<b>20</b>

## About this review

This is a report of an Institutional Review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) at the SOAS, University of London (referred to in this report at times as 'the School'). The review took place on 4-7 March 2013 and was conducted by a team of four reviewers, as follows:

- Mr Simon Pallett
- Ms Penny Renwick
- Mr James Lovett (student reviewer)
- Ms Jackie Gresham (review secretary).

The main purpose of the review was to investigate the higher education provided by the SOAS, University of London and to make judgements as to whether or not its academic standards and quality meet UK expectations. In this report the QAA review team:

- makes judgements on
  - threshold academic standards<sup>1</sup>
  - the quality of learning opportunities
  - the information provided about learning opportunities
  - the enhancement of learning opportunities
- provides commentaries on the theme topic
- makes recommendations
- identifies features of good practice
- affirms action that the institution is taking or plans to take.

A summary of the [key findings](#) can be found in the section starting on page 2. [Explanations of the findings](#) are given in numbered paragraphs in the section starting on page 4.

In reviewing the SOAS, University of London, the review team has also considered a theme selected for particular focus across higher education in England and Northern Ireland. The [themes](#) for the academic year 2012-13 are the First Year Student Experience and Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement and the institution is required to elect, in consultation with student representatives, one of these themes to be explored through the review process.

The QAA website gives more information [about QAA](#) and its mission.<sup>2</sup> Background information about the SOAS, University of London is given at the end of this report. A dedicated page of the website explains the method for [Institutional Review](#) of higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland<sup>3</sup> and has links to the review handbook and other informative documents.

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<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of terms, see the [glossary](#) at the end of this report.

<sup>2</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>3</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx)

## Key findings

### QAA's judgements about the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

The QAA review team formed the following judgements about the higher education provision at the SOAS, University of London (the School).

- Academic standards delivered by the School on behalf of its awarding body **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards.
- The quality of student learning opportunities at the School **meets UK expectations**.
- Information about learning opportunities produced by the School **meets UK expectations**.
- The enhancement of student learning opportunities at the School **meets UK expectations**.

### Good practice

The QAA review team identified the following **features of good practice** at the SOAS, University of London:

- the quality of postgraduate research supervision, in particular the quality and promptness of feedback and accessibility of supervisory support (paragraph 2.29)
- the students' contribution to the development of and the School's responsiveness to the Students' Union Educational Priorities (paragraphs 2.8, 4.2 and 5.3).

### Recommendations

The QAA review team makes the following recommendations to the SOAS, University of London.

By the end of the academic year 2012-13 it should:

- update its information for applicants and current students with a physical disability regarding access to its facilities (paragraph 2.23)
- undertake fuller recording of the outcomes of Annual Research Programme Reviews to enable good practice to be disseminated (paragraph 2.30).

By the start of the academic year 2013-14 it should:

- implement fully its plans to ensure that feedback is returned to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in the stated time frame (paragraph 1.14)
- put in place a system for the approval of nominations of external advisers for programme approval which is independent of the proposing department (paragraph 1.18)
- redesign the external adviser's report form for proposed new programmes to require specific comments about alignment with relevant subject benchmarks and *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* (FHEQ) (paragraph 1.19)
- record more fully the deliberations that take place in the approval of a new programme (paragraph 1.20)

- develop a minimum standard for the timely upload of material to the School's virtual learning environment (paragraph 2.3)
- ensure that steps are taken to improve the systematic and demonstrable use of data and the outputs of its quality assurance processes to drive the enhancement of learning opportunities (paragraphs 2.10 and 4.3)
- ensure that a more effective system is put in place at School level to facilitate the dissemination of good practice (paragraph 4.4).

By the start of the academic year 2014-15 it should:

- ensure the use of the FHEQ is made explicit and consistent in programme specifications, course outlines and other associated documentation and that students are provided with course outlines that give clear information about the level of study (paragraph 1.4)
- review its programme approval and review documentation to ensure that appropriate work-based learning opportunities are considered as part of curriculum design and development (paragraph 2.36).

### Affirmation of action being taken

The QAA review team **affirms the following actions** that the SOAS, University of London is already taking to make academic standards secure and/or improve the educational provision offered to its students:

- progress to date and ongoing plans of the Doctoral School to improve facilities for research students and to enhance the research community by seeking to minimise variability and promote inter-disciplinarity (paragraph 2.28)
- progress in developing a Student Charter to be completed and implemented within the planned timescale (paragraph 2.37)
- its stated plans to streamline and improve its provision of information for a range of users (paragraph 3.2).

### Student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

The SOAS, University of London systematically engages students at all levels across a wide range of quality assurance and enhancement processes.

Further explanation of the key findings can be found in the operational description and handbook available on the QAA webpage explaining [Institutional Review for England and Northern Ireland](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/InstitutionReports/types-of-review/IRENI/Pages/default.aspx)

## About the SOAS, University of London

The SOAS (the School), University of London was founded in 1916 as part of the University of London and was first known as the School of Oriental Studies, becoming the SOAS in 1938 to reflect its development and growth in regional expertise. The School is known worldwide by its abbreviation, SOAS, University of London. Recently SOAS, University of London has grown considerably and is considered one of the world's leading centres for the study of a range of language-based humanities and social sciences subjects concerned with Asia, Africa and the Middle East. The School sees its intellectual combination of language scholarship, regional focus and disciplinary skills as the most distinctive feature of its research and teaching activities. The purpose of the School as stated in the *Vision and Strategy for the Centennial and Beyond* is to provide 'resources and knowledge about Asia, Africa and the Middle East to equip people for a global economy and a multicultural world'.

The previous QAA Institutional Audit in 2007 resulted in a judgement of confidence in the management of academic standards but limited confidence in the quality of student learning opportunities. The School's response to the recommendations enabled the QAA Board to sign off the audit as complete in July 2008 and, in early 2009, the School made a successful application for degree awarding powers. These powers were held in abeyance until August 2012 for the School to exercise its degree awarding powers from 2012-13 onwards. Degree awarding powers are considered fundamental to the School's stated intention to be an autonomous, self-directed and sustainable institution as described in its Vision and Strategy. Since the previous audit and the granting of degree awarding powers, the School has continued to evolve and recent changes include:

- the development of a new strategy, entitled *2020: A Vision and Strategy for the Centennial and Beyond*
- a review of governance arrangements and effectiveness of its governing body
- reviews of the undergraduate and postgraduate taught curricula, academic structures and committee structures to improve and streamline quality assurance and other processes
- the development of a new Doctoral School
- the acquisition of the North Block of Senate House to enable the creation of a single-site campus in the heart of Bloomsbury.

## Explanation of the findings about the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

This section explains the key findings of the review in more detail.<sup>5</sup>

Terms that may be unfamiliar to some readers have been included in a [brief glossary](#) at the end of this report. A fuller [glossary of terms](#)<sup>6</sup> is available on the QAA website, and formal definitions of certain terms may be found in the operational description and handbook for the [review method](#), also on the QAA website.<sup>7</sup>

### 1 Academic standards

#### Outcome

The academic standards that the SOAS, University of London delivers on behalf of its awarding body **meet UK expectations** for threshold standards. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

#### Meeting external qualifications benchmarks

1.1 The School offers awards at Higher Education Certificate, Honours Degree, Master's and Doctoral levels, which map to the appropriate levels in *The framework for higher education qualifications* (FHEQ). The School now has the power to award its own degrees and will be conferring its awards from 2013-14: this will not result in major changes to current regulations or practices.

1.2 The programme approval, periodic programme review and external examining processes all reference the FHEQ but do not do so consistently. The School does not allocate FHEQ levels to the course outlines produced for students even though the levels are recorded in the course listings in the programme specification. Given the degree of flexibility available to students in the choice of courses across years, the level and appropriateness of each course is not always clear to students. Despite a lack of transparency for students, the database underpinning course choices does enforce the rules of progression from one year to another, and the choices must be approved by the Faculty Office, which checks that these are appropriate for the year of study and in line with the programme regulations.

1.3 In programme approval, external advisers are asked to comment on alignment with subject benchmarks and with the FHEQ, but the reports did not always explicitly confirm alignment. Overall confirmation that standards are appropriate is provided via the comments of two external subject experts. Issues such as volume of study in relation to credit are explored at departmental level in course and programme approval processes, although these discussions were not always recorded in sufficient detail in committee minutes or outcomes of these processes. Similarly, periodic programme review reports contained overt references to alignment with subject benchmarks, but did not always refer to the FHEQ. Visiting examiners' report forms request comments on the appropriate level of awards, but do not explicitly mention the FHEQ.

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<sup>5</sup> The full body of evidence used to compile the report is not published. However, it is available on request for inspection. Please contact QAA Reviews Group.

<sup>6</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/glossary/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>7</sup> See note 4.

1.4 The review team **recommended** that with effect from the beginning of the academic year 2014-15, the School should ensure the use of the FHEQ is made explicit and consistent in programme specifications, course outlines and other associated documentation and that students are provided with course outlines that give clear information about the level of study.

### **Use of external examiners**

1.5 The School has sound procedures for the appointment of external examiners (or 'visiting examiners' as they are known at the School) which are broadly in line with the relevant Chapter of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code). The criteria for appointment are set out clearly and the nomination and approval process is overseen by the Learning and Teaching Quality Committee (LTQC). Currently, previous members of staff are only exempted from appointment for three years following departure rather than the five years as indicated in the Quality Code; however, the School intends to amend this rule to five years' exemption in the near future.

1.6 In response to an internal audit report noting a lack of external engagement at the meetings of the School-level Board of Examiners where all borderline cases are considered, the School has recently appointed six Chief External Examiners to attend this Board in order to secure consistency of practice and provide external rigour for the process.

1.7 There is clear guidance defining the role of the visiting examiners and the duties they are expected to perform. The pro-forma Visiting Examiner's report form requires 'yes or no' answers to a series of questions on standards and procedures, and includes space to provide further text if there are any issues in relation to standards or other issues. Visiting examiners' reports are reviewed in the relevant department, and are responded to and subject to faculty overview as part of the annual programme review (APR) process. APR templates confirm that examiners' reports have been considered and handled appropriately. Serious concerns can be reported to the Director.

1.8 The reports have recently become available to students via the virtual learning environment (known as the Bloomsbury Learning Environment or 'BLE'), but none of the students met by the team had seen them. Reports are also shared with the student representatives via the relevant departmental committees. Student awareness of the role of visiting examiners is low and there is little detail provided in the Faculty Handbooks or the Undergraduate or Postgraduate Handbooks that explains the role of visiting examiners to students. There are no current plans to provide names and affiliations of examiners to students other than through the reports themselves. The School has plans to produce a briefing note for students and to publish responses to visiting examiners' reports on BLE.

### **Assessment and standards**

1.9 Programme specifications set out learning outcomes and teaching, learning and assessment strategies. However, the programme approval process produces such minimal documentation that it is difficult to see where the link between learning outcomes and assessment is considered. Although the team heard that these are thoroughly tested at both course and programme level, there is little in the way of a documentary trail of this discussion, which must in turn make it more difficult for the relevant School-level deliberative committees to assure themselves that a thorough discussion has been undertaken.

1.10 There are detailed rules for sub-boards for the consideration of examination results, and for the School Board which determines all cases that require a consideration of borderline cases, thus securing a high degree of consistency. Board of Examiners' minutes



record deliberations and outcomes, as well as recommendations to the School's Board of Examiners. There are also rules for dealing with mitigating circumstances, although the School will be introducing a requirement for students to declare themselves 'fit to sit' from 2013-14 in order to reduce the number of submissions of mitigating circumstances. The School will also offer more resit opportunities so that students are not disadvantaged as a result of the new regulations.

1.11 There is extensive guidance for staff and students on plagiarism and what happens if it is suspected. Serious cases are dealt with by Registry, whereas minor cases may be referred back to the Board of Examiners. A review of plagiarism has recently been undertaken, but is yet to go through full consideration via the committee cycle. The School intends to produce a new code of practice for 2013-14. Student handbooks cover student conduct and the disciplinary process fully.

1.12 Course unit design guidance provides some information on the amount and timing of assessment, but the student written submission (SWS) commented on student concerns about overuse of unseen examinations and lack of variety in assessment. The programme approval process looks carefully at the quantity of assessment, seeking a rationale for anything that lies outside the norm, as well as looking at the mix across a programme. However, assessment norms as stated in the guidance relate mainly to examinations; there is no equivalent guidance on essays and reports, although the team was advised that at least one faculty had developed more detailed guidelines. The School is also due to embark next academic year on a review of assessment with a strong focus on increasing its variety.

1.13 There is detailed guidance on marking and grading, including moderation and recording. There are also marking descriptors, including ones that have been recently revised in response to feedback from visiting examiners and approved by LTQC in October 2012 for immediate use. Students were not particularly clear about how moderation or external examining processes operate and this is not covered in undergraduate and postgraduate handbooks.

1.14 Feedback is due within three weeks of submission, but this is not always achieved according to both staff and students. The School has taken action to improve the situation, but needs to monitor more closely how it is being implemented. Examination feedback is an important issue for students, which the School has started to address through pilot projects, but as yet there is no general requirement. The School is encouraging the use of online submission and feedback, but practice varies from area to area. In part this reflects differences in subject matter, as it is more difficult in some areas to exploit the technology fully, but it also reflects different local decisions. The review team **recommends** that by the start of the academic year 2013-14 the School implements fully its plans to ensure that feedback is returned to undergraduate and taught postgraduate students in the stated time frame.

1.15 The Professional Development in Higher Education (PDHE) and Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) programmes cover issues relating to assessment and feedback for new staff and GTAs; there are also guidelines on the assessment of undergraduates. The language of study is always English.

1.16 Professional body requirements have limited impact on the operation of assessment strategies at the School, as only the LLB (Bachelor of Laws) is affected and this has different regulations to reflect the professional requirements. Periodic Programme Review of this area also involves a nominee of the accrediting body.

1.17 Regulations are included in the undergraduate and postgraduate handbooks and cover the necessary issues. However, degree classification is considered by students to be complex and not clearly understood across the School.

### **Setting and maintaining programme standards**

1.18 LTQC signs off the programme approval process on behalf of the School. External advisers are involved in the programme approval process and are asked to comment upon engagement with the Quality Code and the appropriateness of standards for the level of study. Appointments to this role are made by the proposing department and do not require independent approval. The review team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2013-14 the School should put in place a system for the approval of nominations of external advisers for programme approval that is independent of the proposing department.

1.19 The reporting format provided for external advisers is very open, but requests advisers to comment on how the School has taken account of subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ. However, this is not a specific reporting requirement and means that the School cannot be assured that key questions on standards have been addressed. The review team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2013-14 the external adviser's report form for proposed new programmes be redesigned to require specific comments about alignment with relevant subject benchmark statements and the FHEQ.

1.20 School policy on programme approval is set out in the Quality Handbook. The approval process starts in one of the faculties, with outline proposals on pro-formas approved by Faculty Management Groups before they are reviewed by Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees (FLTCs). FLTCs then submit recommended new programmes to a Joint Faculty Programme Panel (JFPP), which also involves professional services in the process of reviewing the proposal prior to the final approval by LTQC. Although minutes of these committees indicated that a number of issues were picked up, they provided little evidence of detailed scrutiny. Staff assured the team that substantive discussion did take place at departmental level. As noted in earlier paragraphs, the review team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2013-14 the School record more fully the deliberations that take place in the approval of a new programme.

1.21 The system of annual monitoring is well documented and involves hierarchical review. APR pro-formas are minimal, but seek confirmation that key processes are in place; these are reviewed at faculty level by an Associate Dean (Learning and Teaching) and the faculty summaries are considered by LTQC. In particular, there is confirmation at programme level that visiting examining procedures are working effectively, together with a report on any matters of concern identified and correspondent actions needed. Departmental and faculty reports seek confirmation that there are no threats to standards and that appropriate action is being taken.

1.22 Programmes are also required to undergo Periodic Programme Review (PPR) every six years. The APR/PPR documentation makes appropriate reference to the constituent elements of the Quality Code in a section of the PPR report. As noted in earlier paragraphs, PPR reports do not consistently confirm that overall standards are appropriate or that they align with the FHEQ. The linkage between learning outcomes and assessment is tested in the course approval process. The PPR process takes full account of APRs, visiting examiners' reports and student feedback; each PPR panel includes two external experts.

## Subject benchmark statements

1.23 Subject benchmark statements are applied to provision, although not all the detailed subjects taught have their own benchmark and so the School has made effective use of more generic benchmark statements, for example for languages or area studies. Benchmark statements are referred to in the programme approval process, but the open nature of the external adviser's report pro-forma means that the benchmark statement is not always explicitly addressed in detail. The programme specification shows which reference points have been used and the PPR process addresses alignment with benchmarks, which is referred to in the outcome reports. Only one programme, the LLB, is subject to professional accreditation. The regulations reflect this engagement and a representative from the relevant professional body is also involved in the PPR of Law.

## 2 Quality of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The quality of learning opportunities at the SOAS, University of London **meets UK expectations**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

### Professional standards for teaching and learning

2.1 Due to the School operating in a specialised niche in the education marketplace, it attracts uniquely qualified, expert staff. There is high student satisfaction in the area of teaching quality, as reflected in the National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes and SWS, and this was also reflected in meetings between the review team and students across the levels of study. There are robust procedures for induction, review and mentoring of new and established staff. Many development courses made available for staff are accredited via the Professional Development in Higher Education Programme (PDHE). The School has also applied the UK Professional Standards Framework effectively across its provision. Teaching is reviewed on an annual basis via compulsory peer observation for all full-time members, which includes probationary staff. There is some evidence, albeit relatively informal, of the dissemination of good practice at departmental level, and of the potential for the Learning and Teaching Strategy to provide a more effective means of dissemination.

### Learning resources

2.2 As outlined above, the quality of teaching is highly regarded at the School, although students would benefit from an explicit explanation of the role and contribution of GTAs in a research-led institution, and the mutual benefit that is derived from their involvement in teaching.

2.3 There has been a recent significant emphasis on improving online learning services (via the Bloomsbury Learning Environment or 'BLE') and the provision of information on the School website. There has also been demonstrable progress towards online submission of coursework to facilitate students' learning. The 'Learning and Teaching Strategy Action Plan' has provided an effective strategy for deployment of learning resources, with a detailed timeline for improvements with named ownership of tasks. Students commented that the BLE and materials placed on Moodle were welcomed as an important development in teaching and learning resources available to support their studies. The consistency in employment and fullness of the virtual learning environment, however, was seen to be variable and at times dependent on the technical ability and willingness of individual tutors. While recognising that materials associated with subject disciplines do not equally lend themselves to ready online adaptation, the review team **recommends** that by the beginning

of the academic year 2013-14 the School should develop a minimum standard for the timely upload of material to its virtual learning environment.

2.4 The SWS expressed some students' concerns regarding difficulty in accessing some teaching staff outside of set teaching hours for advice and assistance. Although there is a policy that staff must display their office hours clearly, this is not consistently displayed in the staff directory. Staff explained in meetings that most appointments are organised by email outside of office hours, and that although there is some monitoring of the hours, it is not systematic.

2.5 Although there has been recent and extensive library development, some concerns were raised in the SWS about access for disabled students to this building; however, listed building legislation which applies to some of the premises means that there are limitations to improving further physical access. Surveys conducted in relation to learning resources indicate that facilities such as increased accessibility and availability of PCs and a new printing system have improved the resources available to students. There is effective engagement with the Students' Union regarding ongoing dialogue about the provision of IT, and the School is responsive to feedback received. The School has large-scale capital investments underway to improve provision of resources, and has successfully invested in the development of new property and audio-visual equipment in the last few years.

## **Student voice**

2.6 There is a good level of student representation on institutional bodies at departmental, faculty and school level, and there is extensive interaction between the Students' Union and senior management on both a formal and informal basis. Training is provided for elected representatives in each department, although it is not compulsory. The team heard that, in spite of the training, there remains an element of the representative scheme being highly dependent on the input and dedication of the individual representatives, rather than relying on the strength of the system itself.

2.7 Feedback from students is gathered in many ways, including: at departmental meetings, in course evaluations, quality assurance processes such as programme reviews, and via the consideration of the outcomes of NSS and other surveys via formal and informal means within departments. The School makes effective use of the NSS; there are examples of its outcomes being used to drive strategy within the institution and to formulate action plans for departments based on the results. There are also opportunities for regular staff/student forums in many departments, with this idea due to be promulgated across more departments during this academic session. There are some limitations to the use of more formal forums, particularly in small departments where the intimate nature of the courses means they are unnecessary. Students agree that the forums are a useful means of feeding back to the staff and of enabling simple issues at a departmental level to be addressed.

2.8 Since 2010, the Students' Union has produced an annual 'Educational Priorities' paper. The priorities are considered throughout the School's deliberative structure and have made an effective contribution to policy development and quality enhancement. The Director commented that approximately half of the initiatives raised in the first of these papers have already been addressed, and the team saw considerable evidence of the percolation of the priorities into decision making within the School (see also comments made under the Enhancement section).

2.9 The School is proactive in its efforts to promote the student contribution to quality assurance, as evidenced in its responses to such issues as extension of the library opening hours, and a redesign of marking sheets to allow clearer and more detailed comments by internal markers. The School makes a concerted effort to engage with its more difficult-to-

reach students, particularly those who are physically remote and out on fieldwork activities, via the provision of online feedback facilities and the introduction of part-time student representatives.

### **Management information is used to improve quality and standards**

2.10 Management information is generated, collated, analysed and distributed by the central Planning Department and, along with data from NSS outcomes, is used to explore trends over different metrics for areas such as achievement, admissions, etc and to highlight differences between different types/cohorts of students. The Planning Department prepares reports known as 'office builders' for Faculty offices or via the Faculty's shared file store. These reports allow users to extract specific data directly from the student records system. Faculty offices and teaching staff use this information to monitor student numbers on courses and their attendance. Regular absences trigger automatic messages to students and inform staff and the Faculty Office. The information is widely considered by senior decision-making bodies at programme, department and faculty level. While there is considerable evidence of generation and analysis of management information across the School, there is currently less demonstrable evidence of this information being used to drive enhancement of learning opportunities (see Enhancement section).

2.11 Specific examples of the use of management information by the School were explored in relation to equality and diversity and widening participation. The Equality and Diversity Committee bears responsibility for oversight of provisions in relation to students with disabilities and effectiveness of provision and opportunities for enhancement. It produces a statistical report, the Student Diversity Report, containing information relating to attainment and progression. The Widening Participation team also monitors under-represented groups at the application stage and uses data to identify groups requiring further academic support as they pursue their studies.

2.12 A report on complaints and disciplinary action is provided on an annual basis by the Academic Development Directorate (ADD) to the Academic Development Committee (ADC), and training is provided for Associated Deans, Heads of Department, and other staff who have responsibility for these, along with briefings to the Students' Union on these matters.

### **Admission to the School**

2.13 The School has admissions policies and procedures that are clear, fair, explicit and consistently applied. All applications to the School are considered in accordance with the School's Admissions Policy and Access Agreement. The School's Admissions Policy and Access Agreement are robust and the School tracks and analyses application profiles as part of its Widening Access policies. All applications for undergraduate and taught postgraduate programmes are dealt with by the Admissions team, while postgraduate research applications are dealt with by the Postgraduate Research team: both teams lie within the Student and Registry Services Directorate.

2.14 The entry requirements for all programmes are specified on the School website and in the prospectuses. Decisions on most undergraduate and some postgraduate taught applications are taken by Admissions Office staff who apply criteria agreed with the relevant academic department. These criteria are reviewed annually at the start of the academic year. In cases that lie outside of normal procedures, admissions decisions are considered by named academic Admissions Tutors within relevant departments.

2.15 Admission procedures have previously been audited on an annual basis by the School's internal auditors in order to review the effectiveness of controls within the student admissions process. The team heard that with effect from 2014, the admissions audit will be carried out as part of a forthcoming review of student recruitment and retention.

### **Complaints and appeals**

2.16 The complaints and appeals procedures are readily available to students via the School website. The current student complaints procedure emerged as a result of a review of the School's Grievances Procedures in 2010-11 and is available on the website. The procedures are overseen by the Information Compliance Manager (ICM) in the Directorate. There is supplementary guidance provided for both staff and students on the procedures, and this is also available via the website. Despite this, complaints and appeals procedures are raised as an area of concern in the SWS as there appears to be poor integration and inconsistency of application across departments, and the Self-Evaluation Document acknowledges that there is a lack of general awareness among staff. The team heard that in order to address this, the ICM is raising awareness via training for Associate Deans, Heads of Department and staff who act as investigators, and is also providing briefings for senior staff and Students' Union sabbatical officers.

2.17 A report on student complaints and disciplinaries is provided annually to the ADC. The team heard that a further review of the procedures is planned for 2012-13, with any resulting changes being introduced in 2013-14. The School anticipates that the introduction of the 'fit to sit' policy (see paragraph 1.10) should reduce the number of formal appeals.

### **Career advice and guidance**

2.18 SOAS, University of London Careers Service has been awarded the Matrix kitemark as part of The Careers Group, University of London. The Careers Service is a member of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and of the Association of Graduate Recruiters and regularly liaises with a wide range of employers. It collects, reports and makes effective use of data on destinations and disseminates a wide variety of relevant employer information to faculties. The service has also created Destinations and Employability webpages for every department in the School, and has made use of Moodle to provide extensive resources to support online, self-directed learning for employability and professional skills development.

2.19 The Careers Service office is the focal point of careers education, information, advice and guidance activity in the School and operates as a 'one-stop' information and guidance point for students. Staff receive extensive training including in-house continuous professional development courses and disability training. The School's Statement on Employability and Employability Operating Plan is overseen by the Careers Service and this focuses specifically on the specialised needs of SOAS, University of London students. This is also part of the drive to embed employability within the curriculum across the School for the wider benefit of students. This is reflected in the revised Learning and Teaching Strategy, which has an enhanced focus on embedding employability in the academic experience. There is also a dedicated Internship Officer at the Careers Service.

### **Supporting disabled students**

2.20 Students with a declared disability are under-represented at the School at 6.5 per cent of the student body. Support for students with a disability is provided from within Student Services. Students report variability in the support they receive.

2.21 The School has an Equality and Diversity Committee that monitors an Equality and Diversity Sub-strategy. The Sub-strategy has identified that the uptake of disability equality training is not as high as intended. New staff are expected and encouraged to attend Equality Overview Training, and 73 per cent of new staff attended in 2011-12. The GTA Training Programme Module 1 contains an element of disability issues, but the uptake by GTAs of training opportunities is also quite low.

2.22 Disability issues are considered as part of the programme design and approval process, and the Student Disability Officer or Diversity Advisor is consulted on new programme proposals. The School has produced guidance for staff relating to assessment approaches in the context of students with disabilities and has in place a Special Assessments Panel which meets regularly to ensure the needs of students with disabilities are considered when undertaking assessment. Students receive briefings on disability issues during induction and the SWS commented positively on the work of Student Services in this area, although its services are not known among the wider student body.

2.23 The School is based within a number of locations, some of which are listed buildings. The SWS highlighted issues regarding access to buildings and some students reiterated concerns in meetings. There is evidence that the School has made a concerted effort to take the needs of disabled students fully into account, despite the legislative restrictions regarding listed buildings. The review team agreed that communication between the School and students with disabilities could be improved in order to convey this level of consideration more effectively. While students commented that communication about Learning Support Agreements to academic staff has on occasion lacked clarity, the review team heard that the protocol has recently been changed to place this responsibility on the students themselves. The review team **recommends** that by the end of the academic year 2012-13 the School should update its information for applicants and current students with a physical disability regarding access to its facilities.

## **Supporting international students**

2.24 There is a vibrant international student community at SOAS, University of London with just under half of the population classified as coming from the EU or as international students. There are also significant numbers of staff from a wide variety of international backgrounds. International students commented that they felt integral to the wider SOAS, University of London community. The website provides a range of information for students and there is also a helpful handbook for international students which is provided at induction.

2.25 Pastoral support for international students is provided by the International Student and Welfare Adviser. The Annual Report 2011-12 identified extensive support provided through face-to-face, group and online approaches. There is a Study Skills and Learning Development Programme with good uptake by students and the School has plans to enhance provision for Master's students. English language support is provided to large numbers of international students and demand is rising.

2.26 The SWS identified that international students can often have particular difficulty understanding issues concerning plagiarism. Study skills training is provided by the ADD for all students, including advice on how to avoid plagiarism. An Annual Plagiarism Report produced by the Registry analyses plagiarism cases but currently this does not give detailed analysis of home versus international student incidents. The plagiarism policy is currently under review and brief mention is made of the need to ensure international students understand the issue sufficiently.

## Supporting postgraduate research students

2.27 There is a vibrant research student community at SOAS, University of London with 15 per cent of the students studying for research degrees. Postgraduate research students are registered for MPhil/PhD degrees which are currently subject to the regulations for the University of London Awards. The University of London regulations will be replaced with the School's own regulations prior to the 2013-14 academic session, following devolution of the administration from the University at this point. Information relating to the regulations, as well as other information including the School's Code of Practice for Research Degrees, the Postgraduate Research Handbook and links to other relevant information, are available and accessible to students through the Postgraduate Research Section Website. The Code of Practice is also provided in hard copy to new and returning students during enrolment week. Following the establishment of the Doctoral School, the Doctoral School website and the Research Students' Portal provide additional information for research students.

2.28 The Doctoral School has recently been established and this has enhanced facilities for research students. The Doctoral School is also working actively to improve coordination across SOAS, University of London. The School's commitment to the enhancement of its research environment has been underpinned by a new physical location in Gordon Square which has significantly increased working space and enhanced available library space and facilities. The SWS highlighted significant variability in support, differences in access to resources and complexity in navigating systems across the School. The Doctoral School is in the process of formalising the informal relationships across the School in order to reduce variability. Progress to date includes bringing all of the training opportunities together onto a single webpage in a transparent way, and plans are underway for the development of a more coordinated approach to training. The review team **affirms** the progress to date and ongoing plans of the Doctoral School to improve facilities for research students and to enhance the research community by seeking to minimise variability and promote inter-disciplinarity.

2.29 Students commented positively about the supportive and responsive pre-admissions information and guidance, although they commented that more clarity could be provided regarding opportunities for funding. Feedback from students indicates that the unique academic expertise of research supervisors is valued among students and considered as a strength. All new supervisory staff are invited to a one-day skills-based supervisors' training which is compulsory for supervisors who do not yet have a PhD completion. Continuing and new staff are encouraged to attend the annual briefing on research supervision to highlight, for example, any changes to the Code of Practice. The School is looking at other ways of highlighting developments to supervisors of longer standing beyond making information available on the website, including attendance by the Postgraduate Research Manager at departmental meetings when issues have been raised. Students commented positively on their experience of supervision and particularly the responsiveness of first supervisors in providing valuable and prompt feedback on work. The review team found postgraduate research supervision, in particular the quality and promptness of feedback and accessibility of supervisory support, to be **a feature of good practice**.

2.30 Arrangements for the monitoring and support of student progress are clearly set out in the Code of Practice for Research Degrees and include tools such as electronic logbooks and an annual research programme review. The School is working through improvements to the current annual review process. Currently, there is evidence of annual reports being completed at faculty level and of these being noted at faculty Research Committees, but little evidence to date of issues being directed to School level (i.e. to the Research and Enterprise Committee). Reports identify variability in training, but also highlight that more specialised local training may be preferable. Although staff commented on enhancements that have



arisen as a result of the annual review mechanisms, these are not well documented. A Postgraduate Research Administration Group has been established to enhance coordination and improve clarity. The review team **recommends** that by the end of the academic session 2012-13 the School should undertake fuller recording of the outcomes of Annual Research Programme Reviews to enable good practice to be disseminated.

2.31 The ADD offers a range of support for research students which is well utilised, and further advice and support is provided through the Careers Service, which has begun to offer a professional skills training programme. Students are encouraged to apply for Graduate Assistant Teaching posts and are supported in their teaching duties with training and professional development. It was reported that feedback from surveys conducted among the undergraduate community is often positive about the standard of teaching from GTAs, although more could be done to promote the positive benefits of their contribution to the overall learning and teaching strategy at the School (see paragraph 2.2). Many students conduct fieldwork overseas as part of their research and they are guided by the School Research and Ethics Policies and Procedures. Prior to time spent on fieldwork, supervisors and students undertake a risk assessment process and students are currently required to take out their own insurance for such activities. The Doctoral School Management Group has recently identified that insurance requirements need to be better communicated to students.

2.32 The Research Students Association provides peer support for research students and following a period of some inactivity is currently re-organising itself; its contributions are valued by the Doctoral School. There is a satisfactory level of student involvement in the committee structures. Staff identified improvements in the student experience concerning opening hours, and changes to training that have come about as a result of student engagement.

### **Learning delivered through collaborative arrangements**

2.33 The School has recently developed and approved a Framework for Academic Partnerships which sets out clear principles, procedures and monitoring arrangements. The Framework lists the School's current collaborative arrangements and sets out the procedures for extending or increasing these. The number and scope of arrangements defined as collaborative provision has been extremely limited up to this point, but it is anticipated that the School's recently acquired degree awarding powers should facilitate the future development of collaborative agreements. The exploration of such partnerships is identified in the *Vision and Strategy* as an essential strategic priority.

2.34 The majority of existing agreements relate to Year Abroad programmes. For such programmes, language coordinators take the initiative, and the Head of Student Recruitment is responsible for the maintenance of a Memorandum of Understanding for each agreement. The arrangements themselves can vary according to the individual factors governing each arrangement such as student numbers, the cost of living and education in host countries, and political instability. Programmes are constantly monitored by Year Abroad coordinators in the Faculty of Languages and Cultures. An Annual Report on Year Abroad programmes identified a range of practical problems, which has led to the provision of student guidance on emergencies and general practicalities in the Year Abroad Procedures. In addition, country-based guidance for Year Abroad students is provided in a Year Abroad briefing document and via the website. This sets out the academic requirements and provides practical guidance for students.

## Flexible, distributed and e-learning

2.35 The School currently has two Centres that deliver postgraduate distance learning programmes on behalf of the University of London: the Centre for Development, Environment and Policy, and the Centre for Financial and Management Studies. All distance learning programmes are classified as University of London Awards and administered under the jurisdiction of the University of London's International Academy (ULIA), with students being registered with the University of London, not the School. Responsibility for the approval and management of these programmes rests with ULIA, which also holds and reports on primary student data.

## Work-based and placement learning

2.36 The School is currently taking steps to more actively promote the benefits of work-based learning through a range of approaches including the development of an internship scheme as part of its Learning and Teaching Strategy. This is being led by the Careers Service who indicate that they wish to deliver bespoke internships for departments and to determine the most efficient models for SOAS, University of London. Consideration of work-based learning or placements does not form part of the current programme specification structure, nor is it required as part of the approval process. The review team **recommends** that by the beginning of the academic year 2014-15 the School should review its programme approval and review documentation to ensure that appropriate work-based learning opportunities are considered as part of curriculum design and development.

## Student charter

2.37 Work has recently begun towards the development of a Student Charter, led by the Dean of Languages and Cultures in partnership with the Students' Union. It is intended that the Charter will be in place by July 2013 and an action plan has been drawn up. The Students' Union is encouraging students to get involved in the Student Charter discussions via its website and there is evidence of consultation with students. The review team **affirms** the School's progress in developing a Student Charter to be completed and implemented within the planned timescale.

# 3 Information about learning opportunities

## Summary

The SOAS, University of London **meets UK expectations** that the information it produces for its intended audiences about the learning opportunities offered is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. The review team's reasons for this conclusion are given below.

3.1 The School has procedures in place to ensure that public information is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy. Responsibility for oversight of information is vested in the Communications Team in the External Development Directorate, which has responsibility for both internal and external communications. The website is the main tool for this and is comprehensive, containing material for prospective and current students, as well as for alumni and the public. Responsibility for maintaining information on the website is devolved to faculties and departments with each having a designated member of staff responsible and accountable for ensuring that material remains up-to-date and accurate.

3.2 The School is working on a major revamp of its information in order to make it more streamlined and easily accessible to users. A separate intranet facility is also being

developed for staff and students. The overarching aim is to ensure that there is one single source of information and to ensure that information provision is oriented around users' needs. Surveys of user views have been conducted, the outcomes of which have led to changes to programme webpages (they now follow a template), and the development of country pages clarifying entry tariffs for admission to the School. The review team **affirms** the School's plans to streamline and improve its provision of information for a range of users.

3.3 Students commented that information was usually available but could be difficult to locate readily, and the School is responding to these comments as indicated above. Some students reported that pre-arrival information was at times inaccurate and out of date while others commented that they were content with its quality. The review team found a number of minor inaccuracies and out-of-date information on the website, and there was a lack of transparency for students about the regulations for their programmes. Some of the student documentation is highly generic in content rather than tailored to specific groups of students. While it may be efficient to produce School-wide documents, their generic nature can reduce their value to students. International students met by the team commented on the usefulness of the International Students handbook. The student webpage also contains comprehensive links to all central services in a user-friendly way.

3.4 There are some web-based materials such as programme specifications which are full, helpful and externally facing, in contrast to the course outlines available which are comparatively minimal. Documentation relating to courses on the virtual learning environment (BLE) is sometimes much fuller, containing a lecture schedule, assessment tasks, learning outcomes and detailed readings. However, use of the BLE is not compulsory and is, according to the students the team met, highly variable.

3.5 Visiting examiners' reports have recently become available internally on the BLE, but awareness of these reports among students met by the team was low. The reports are shared with student representatives at the relevant meetings (see paragraphs 1.8 and 1.13).

3.6 The Planning Office is responsible for the compilation of the Key Information Set (KIS) data which is accessible from the School's website and the fuller information required by the Wider Information Set (WIS) is available online. Aggregate NSS results are available on the website to external users.

## 4 Enhancement of learning opportunities

### Outcome

The enhancement of learning opportunities at the SOAS, University of London **meets UK expectations**. The review team's reasons for this judgement are given below.

4.1 The School has adopted a strategic approach to bring about enhancement through its *Vision and Strategy* and associated sub-strategies. These are actively managed via the committee structure, and the review team saw clear evidence of the strategic enhancement of student learning opportunities through developments such as the introduction of the new Bloomsbury Learning Environment - the BLE - and the development of the Doctoral School. Both developments have included consultation with and input from students.

4.2 The Students' Union annual Educational Priorities have enhanced the working relationship between the students and the School with the latter responding positively to the priorities raised, with examples including extending library opening times and payment of fees by instalments and sound progress achieved to date on online submission of coursework. The School acknowledged there were a number of areas in which they needed

to develop this work further, such as feedback from examinations, where a number of pilots are being trialled in this area in the coming academic year. The review team found the contribution of students via the Educational Priorities and the School's response in enhancing student learning opportunities to be a **feature of good practice**.

4.3 There is a significant amount of statistical information generated to facilitate the evaluation of provision, and examples include: the Annual Report on SOAS, University of London Student Diversity, the data that underpins the annual monitoring reports and the data provided to Boards of Examiners that enables areas of concern to be identified. However, the team found that evidence of staff being able to use the data to drive enhancement was less transparent, and formal records of discussions of the outcomes of the quality assurance processes were minimal (see paragraphs 1.9 and 1.21). Work is underway at the School to provide more helpful statistical reports and develop more effective mechanisms to use routine annual and periodic monitoring data as a means to encourage enhancement. The review team **recommends** that by start of the academic year 2013-14 the School should take action to improve the systematic and demonstrable use of data in quality assurance processes to drive the enhancement of learning opportunities.

4.4 The SWS highlighted that the sharing of good practice across the School needs to be improved, and the Learning and Teaching Strategy also identified an action required concerning the development of a more effective mechanism to track the dissemination of good practice. Opportunities to use initiatives such as the Director's Prize as a way of disseminating good practice are not systematically exploited. The review team **recommends** that by start of the academic year 2013-14 the School should take action to ensure more effective dissemination of good practice across the School.

## 5 Thematic element

Each academic year, a specific theme relating to higher education provision in England and Northern Ireland is chosen for especial attention by QAA's Institutional Review teams. In 2012-13 there is a choice of two themes: First Year Student Experience or Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement. The University, in consultation with its student body, elected to explore the theme of Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement.

### Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement

The review team explored Student Involvement in Quality Assurance and Enhancement at the SOAS, University of London. The School commented that its experience of working with students in the process of revising the Learning and Teaching Sub-strategy (which draws heavily on the newly published *Chapter B5: Student engagement* of the Quality Code) and in preparation for Institutional Review has confirmed its view that ever-closer engagement of students in quality assurance and enhancement activities is an effective approach.

#### Innovations in student involvement in quality assurance and enhancement

5.1 The School works cooperatively with the Students' Union to support the Educational Priorities which are produced annually by the Students' Union and which students are encouraged to contribute to. These set out 10 key issues relating to the quality of the student experience, such as exam feedback, for discussion and agreement with the School. The School's Learning and Teaching Strategy Action Plan includes a commitment to deliver on agreed priorities, and actions to achieve these are monitored through the appropriate School and Faculty committees. Students are also consulted on all aspects of the School's

development and are engaged in a wide range of issues, including plans to grow the institution, potential new areas of study, and facilities development.

### **Staff experience of/participation in student involvement in quality**

5.2 The School actively promotes partnership working and student representation. Staff encourage student participation in quality assurance and enhancement processes through informal and formal meetings. Staff-student forums have been established in some departments and there are frequent meetings between senior staff and Students' Union officers. Students are well represented on committees and other groups at School, Faculty and department level, although the system appears to be more effective at undergraduate level than at postgraduate taught level. Postgraduate research students are represented on the Doctoral School Management Group and on a range of other committees. Student contributions have been sought in relation to Strategic Review, the development of the Learning and Teaching Strategy and the development of the Student Charter. Service enhancements are also discussed with students, recent examples being the development of targeted pre-arrival information and branding. Students are also consulted by staff via email, online and email surveys, and through an online suggestion box.

### **Acting on student contributions and 'closing the feedback loop'**

5.3 There is a widespread use of student representatives in meetings at all levels which provides the main mechanism for reporting back to students. However, as the School is aware that this may be inconsistent, other methods are also used such as staff-student forums, emails, the School and department websites, and face-to-face feedback provided by academic staff. It is anticipated that plans to streamline communications through a critical path should ensure a greater level of consistency in closing the feedback loop.

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers. Most terms also have formal 'operational' definitions. For example, pages 18-19 of the handbook for this review method give formal definitions of: threshold academic standards; learning opportunities; enhancement; and public information.

The handbook can be found on the QAA website at:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/ireni-handbook.aspx).

If you require formal definitions of other terms, please refer to the section on assuring standards and quality:

[www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuringstandardsandquality/pages/default.aspx).

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

**Academic Infrastructure** Guidance developed and agreed by the higher education community and published by QAA, which is used by institutions to ensure that their courses meet national expectations for academic standards and that students have access to a suitable environment for learning (academic quality). It consists of four groups of reference points: the **frameworks for higher education qualifications**, the **subject benchmark statements**, the **programme specifications** and the **Code of practice**. Work is underway to revise the Academic Infrastructure as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education.

**academic standards** The standards set and maintained by institutions for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **threshold academic standard**.

**Code of practice** *The Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* published by QAA: a set of interrelated documents giving guidance for higher education institutions.

**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.

**enhancement** Taking deliberate steps at institutional level to improve the quality of **learning opportunities**. It is used as a technical term in QAA's audit and review processes.

**feature of good practice** A positive aspect of the way a higher education institution manages quality and standards, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

**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*.

**learning opportunities** The provision made for students' learning, including planned

**programmes of study**, teaching, assessment, academic and personal support, resources (such as libraries and information systems, laboratories or studios) and staff development.

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

**operational definition** A formal definition of a term, which establishes exactly what QAA means when using it in reports.

**programme (of study)** An approved course of study which 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.

**public information** Information that is freely available to the public (sometimes referred to as being 'in the public domain').

**Quality Code** Short term for the UK Quality Code for Higher Education, which is being developed from 2011 to replace the **Academic Infrastructure** and will incorporate all its key elements, along with additional topics and overarching themes.

**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.

**threshold academic standard** The minimum standard that a student should reach in order to gain a particular qualification or award, as set out in the **subject benchmark statements** and national qualifications frameworks. Threshold standards are distinct from the standards of performance that students need to achieve in order to gain any particular class of award, for example a first-class bachelor's degree. See also **academic standard**.

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

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