



**University of London
External System Academic Committee**

Minimum Expectations: Review and Consideration

1. This paper is presented to ESAC for initial discussion on some broad issues and questions. It is intended to stimulate further discussion among programme directors and EISA colleagues for onward consideration by sub-committees, with a view to reporting findings to the next meeting of ESAC. Some key questions requiring consideration are introduced at appropriate points in the text.
2. The External System is rightly able to celebrate its achievements in making awards of the University accessible to students worldwide. It can be characterised as highly cost efficient and flexible in terms of approaches to learning, and internationally renowned for maintaining the highest academic standards. Our examination arrangements are recognised as being second to none and are jealously guarded.
3. However, the External System is subject to a number of drivers and influences. Competition is intense and students are more familiar with a range of alternative opportunities and more forthcoming in expressing their interests. The enabling effect of new technology as it impacts on the learning experience of students has been exciting and challenging. Professional accreditation bodies and the QAA seek assurance in respect of our effectiveness in establishing and maintaining academic standards and in reviewing and enhancing the quality of our programmes of studies. The Vice Chancellor's own review of the External System considered a number of significant issues and made recommendations as to its future direction.
4. One important consequence of exposure to such drivers and influences is an appreciation of the evolving nature of responsibilities in relation to students. The External System is no stranger to evolution: after all, it has been successful and in continuous existence for 150 years. Since 2005, work has been undertaken throughout the External System to enhance support to learners. Such work has included developments at the individual programme level (particularly for the undergraduate programmes attracting large numbers of students registered with third party institutions). The e-Benchmarking project and the Teaching and Research Awards have informed these developments. Service level standards are being identified across EISA and key performance indicators are being introduced. Additionally, the business transformation project is making considerable progress in determining new and alternative approaches to administrative practice.
5. Nevertheless, it is useful periodically to review purposes and processes and it is in this context that it is timely to do so, given the QAA recommendation that we consider the issue of minimum expectations in relation to academic guidance and personal support of students.
6. In essence, the QAA audit report distinguished between 'academic guidance, support and supervision' and 'personal support and guidance' (Sections 86-95). Whilst

recognising the particular circumstances of the External System, the QAA report drew attention to some issues which have been distilled below:

Academic guidance

- variation in the level of support from programme to programme
- some variation in the role of programme directors in providing regular advice or tuition
- that some students had indicated that they would have liked more support in their first year of undergraduate studies
- that there is a challenge in providing feedback on student performance and progression on large-scale undergraduate programmes
- variation in the standard of guidance offered by third-party institutions

Personal support

- that information on assessment regulations, mitigating circumstances, appeals and complaints was rather dispersed
- there appeared to be little evidence of academic involvement in personal support
- that the student-to-student network could be more prominent
- that in terms of a point of contact there was less evidence of personal support at undergraduate level of provision
- that some students felt the University of London to be remote

7. Given the nature of the External System, guidance and support may be provided at individual programme level or through central services, and a 'one size fits all' approach may not be wholly suitable in establishing minimum expectations. Nevertheless, we should endeavour to ensure that consideration is given to identifying and establishing appropriate and adequate support across the student lifecycle with respect to all programmes and associated central services.
8. Indeed, there are several dimensions associated with academic guidance and personal support. Not only will it be essential to arrive at a consensus on the nature and range of application of academic guidance and personal support, but it will be important to articulate minimum expectation in terms of pre-enrolment and post-enrolment stages in the student life cycle. Equally, there should be articulation of these expectations in the context of responsibility for programme-specific support, and generic and central administrative support.
9. Several of the issues raised above refer to variation in the degree of guidance and support. In some cases, the variation appears to relate to the level of study. For example, it is reported that students 'commented positively on the tutor support ... for postgraduate study'. In respect of academic guidance and support, consideration of any variation should focus on whether it is important to differentiate between undergraduate provision and postgraduate provision, particularly in terms of their respective and predominant approaches to delivery.
10. In others cases, reference to variation relates to the role of third-party institutions. Many of our undergraduate students are known to attend third-party institutions although there is no requirement for them to do so. However, a new policy designed to formalise relationships with designated third-party institutions is emerging and it is expected that the Institutions Sub-committee will lead on discussions in relation to appropriate levels of academic guidance and support.

How useful is it for us to operate with an understanding of minimum expectations that seeks to ensure that students across the External System should have an equivalent experience in relation to both academic guidance and personal support?

Is it possible to determine a single set of minimum expectations for use System-wide?

11. There is the challenge of providing support to large-scale programmes in terms of feedback, academic involvement and point of contact. In one sense, this is a question of resource; in another sense, this also relates to a judgement about who best should engage with what issues and to what end. Feedback may take many forms and may include formative assessment or examiner commentaries. In any case, the feedback should provide an opportunity for students to assess their progress and consequently their chances of overall success in the programme.
12. Whilst this challenge draws attention to the mode of delivery associated with our two largest undergraduate programmes which are subject to ongoing development, we should not ignore the arrangements for the older undergraduate low population programmes which compete for development resources.

Given the diverse nature of our programme portfolio, how can we be assured that feedback is adequate for its purpose?

Where it is appropriate, what means could be at our disposal to encourage or assist programmes to enhance their provision in this regard?

13. Attention was drawn to the student-to-student network, to expressions of feeling remote, and to the management of information on regulations and procedures. The student-to-student network was designed primarily for students that were not required to attend an institution and it was always anticipated that the original arrangement would be superseded as more sophisticated opportunities arose. Thus, whilst web-based social networking sites are prevalent, the new portal development will allow students to engage systematically with each other. The emerging policy on institutions should also go some way to obviating further a sense of remoteness from London on the part of the student. If the information in relation to personal support remains dispersed then consideration should be given to addressing any difficulties students may have in accessing or assimilating the information.
14. Taking the above considerations into account, it would be useful to unpack what we might mean by establishing minimum expectations. On the one hand, it is evidently the case that students should be the ultimate beneficiaries. On the other, it may be helpful to develop second order minimum expectations in order to establish any first order minimum expectations. That is, programme teams and associated support teams will work to ensure that programme development, delivery and administration fulfils the requirements of first order minimum expectations.

Do we have an adequate portfolio of academic guidance and personal support for students?

How necessary is it for the External System to articulate second order minimum expectations in relation to programme delivery and administration?

15. Following discussion and steer at ESAC, aspects of this paper should receive more detailed consideration by the respective sub-committees. Such consideration would be informed by the consultative discussions that are taking place with EISA Directorates and with programme teams. These consultative discussions are intended to assess current guidance and support throughout the student lifecycle and identify the potential for further developments.