

# Ensuring the high quality of international programmes

## Mary Stiasny

The University of London was founded in 1836, and, more than 20 years later, in 1858, a major strategic development took place when the university was awarded a charter by Queen Victoria to enable it to enrol students based in any part of the world, regardless of class, ethnicity, gender and religion – so that they could study for a University of London degree wherever they were located. They did not have to attend the university in person. These fundamental principles – a commitment to allow access, and a commitment to enable our students to study with us anywhere and everywhere – are still as strong today as they were in 1858.

In 1865 students in Mauritius became the first batch of students to take our examinations in their own country of abode – starting a century and a half of examinations that are tightly managed and regulated, and provided at a distance from the academic heart of the university here in London. Indeed, we shall be celebrating this 150th anniversary in Mauritius later this year.

The university also took an innovative approach to managing standards, yet enabling and supporting other providers, with the result that *all* universities founded in England between 1850 and 1950 initially offered University of London degrees. These were at the time known as external degrees and only in 2009 were they rebranded as University of London International Programmes. Today there are approximately 54,000 registered students studying more than 100 degree and diploma programmes across 180 countries globally.

## University of London model: An overview

We have two main models: the independent student model and the teaching institutions model. Students can move between the two models at their own pace and in their own home setting. A key feature of our provision, and a central keystone of our model and our maintenance of quality, is that we do *not* validate or franchise our programmes or our academic provision. All students are registered with us as University of London students, and all programmes are core University of London programmes.

How do these two models work?

### Independent students

Independent students follow the programme of study, working independently and receiving study materials in hard copy (with an increasing move to electronic provision). They also have access to a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). This is how Nelson Mandela was able to study towards our LLB while in prison on Robbin Island, and how groups of British soldiers in German prisoner of war camps during the World War II could study for degrees as independent students.

### Teaching institutions

In the second model, students at teaching institutions attend classes that run parallel to the programmes of study and materials provided by the University of London centrally. These students are also registered directly with the university, but have an additional contract with the teaching institution.

Local institutions can apply to become part of our Teaching Institutions Recognition Framework. They start off as candidate institutions, before moving through the two categories of recognition: registered and affiliate. On average it takes three to four years to become a registered or affiliate institution, and key criteria for approval includes standards of teaching, exam results, financial probity, facilities, and other contextual and central characteristics.

The institutions are inspected at least every five years, but more usually every three years, and the inspection teams are made up of academics from the colleges and senior administrators from the university. These inspections lead to formal reports that are presented through the university governance structures.

### Programme development

Development of programmes is based on a partnership model between the international section (the international academy) of the central University of London and the federal colleges (the lead colleges). Investment in programme development is provided by the University of London and approval to proceed must be granted by the University of London International Programmes Finance Committee with final approval through the Board of the International Programmes and, ultimately, Collegiate Council of the University. The academic content and structure of all programme proposals are assessed by an independent review panel that must include external non-University of London academics.

### Responsibilities and accountabilities

The responsibilities of each partner are set out in a quality schedule annexed to the contractual arrangement.

**The lead colleges** are responsible for all academic content including curriculum development, study material content and assessment.

**The international academy** of the central university is responsible for managing all administrative aspects of the student lifecycle.

### Modes of assessment

All undergraduate programmes are assessed predominantly by final examination. The percentages range from 100 per cent unseen examination for the LLB degree to a pattern of approximately 80

per cent to 20 per cent time-constrained exam to coursework ratio for our computing and information systems programme. Post-graduate programmes examination systems range from 100 per cent unseen examination for our LLM programme to 50 per cent unseen examination with 50 per cent coursework for a number of programmes in the fields of education and development studies. All summative assessment is set and marked by two examiners appointed by the University of London centrally.

All examinations are set by the University of London lead college academics, and the scripts are transported back to London under conditions of strict security for marking by the London academics after the students have taken them in one of the approximately 650 approved examination centres around the world. These examination centres are based either with the British Council or local universities worldwide, and all centres are independently inspected by the organisation SGS, which is world leading in the management of secure examinations. Reports are provided to the relevant committees within the University of London's governance structure.

## Governance

The International Programmes are governed through a committee structure with representation from lead colleges, university central bodies, students and external academics. We feel that this structure gives us a rigorous approach to strategy and oversight that underpins our founding principles in their implementation.

The most senior committee of the International Programmes themselves is the board, chaired by the vice-chancellor, who reports the business of the board to the Collegiate Council and the Board of Trustees, the two executive committees of the federal university.

## Academic standards in summary

The federal colleges that take on the role of lead college in relation to the academic provision through International Programmes must take a lead role in ensuring the academic standards of the particular programme to which they lend academic direction.

Every programme of study is developed and approved by a college or group of colleges to the same standards and requirements as would be applied in the college. To this end, colleges are responsible for the academic management and content of all programmes. Programmes are reviewed annually under the auspices of the key committees, using quality processes that include careful consideration of external examiner reports, student results and progress against agreed action plans. Periodic reviews of programmes are additionally undertaken on a rolling basis and incorporate subject specialist and student panel members alongside academic specialists from lead colleges.

Colleges approve programme regulations and syllabuses as described within programme specifications, and nominate boards of examiners. Learning materials are written and examinations set and marked by academic staff employed by the colleges who are required to apply the university's and lead college's academic standards. The university utilises a thematic approach to reviewing broad areas of the student experience thus enabling improved services and systems.

It is the colleges that nominate boards of examiners, and independent external examiners are appointed to every programme. Their role is to ensure that students have been assessed to the college standards and that the UK's national standards have been met. The university issues a diploma (certificate) identifying it as the registering and awarding body to candidates who have successfully completed the programme of study and passed the assessments required for a degree or other award.

After more than 150 years of global provision we are proud of the record we hold of providing high-quality, accessible degree programmes. Our alumni are in key roles all over the world.

**MARY STIASNY** is the pro vice-chancellor (international) and chief executive of the University of London International Programmes.