



QASL 24/14

Thematic Review of Student Handbooks

Purpose

This paper provides an overview of the actions taken in response to the recommendations from the November 2010 Thematic Review of Student Handbooks.

Discussion

A Thematic Review of student handbooks took place in November 2010. The QASL is invited to **note** the following actions which have been taken forward as a result of the recommendations of the review and consultation with stakeholders.

- The division of the student handbooks into two separate publications – general and programme specific – differentiating between general guidance given by the University of London International Academy across all programmes, and programme specific academic guidance given by Lead Colleges on individual programmes.
- The development of minimum information requirements, which can be found in Appendix C, which will be incorporated into all student handbooks produced by the International Academy.
- The development of a framework for the inclusion of minimum information requirements and quality assurance which can be found in Appendix B.

Recommended Action

No action required

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Background

A Thematic Review of student handbooks took place in November 2010, with the following aims and terms of reference:

1. To critically review the student handbooks produced by the University of London International Programmes with respect to compliance with any policy, process and procedure; the reliability of information and completeness of practice;
 - With specific references to the different stages of the production process: the drafting, proof reading and the responsibilities of involved parties in producing student handbooks;
 - Taking into consideration and evaluating the content, medium and any variation in publicly available student handbook documentation;
 - Taking into consideration the collaborative nature of the University of London International Programmes and that 'Lead' Colleges produce their own student information.
2. To establish that current policy and practice is fit for purpose, and informed by developing knowledge and practice in the relevant external arena;
 - With specific references to the QAA Code of Practice Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning) - September 2004 (paragraphs A25-A27) <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2/default.asp#students>
 - Taking into consideration examples of sector good practice.
3. To make recommendations as to the enhancement of the production of student handbooks, the content, actual artefact and its medium.
 - To produce a template for a student handbook contents page.

The Panel commended a number of areas of good practice in the production of student handbooks and made several recommendations which can be found in Appendix A.

In April 2013 QASL received a follow up report on the progress that had been made following the recommendations arising from the review (QASL 22/23).

Consultation

The recommendations made by the Panel in the course of the Thematic Review can be found in Appendix A. In taking forward recommendation 4 – 'that minimum requirements be set for the common sections of the handbook'; Programme Directors, Heads of Department and other relevant members of staff from the International Academy were consulted on proposed content and asked for contributions and suggestions. Through this process broader discussion developed around the purpose of the handbooks and what alterations could be made to make them more user friendly, clearer and to better define the separation of functions between the University of London and Lead Colleges.

Separation of content

The current format of having the general and programme sections written separately yet contained in the same document was considered potentially confusing for students as it clouds the separation of functions between the University of London International Academy, and the Lead College. It was proposed that students would benefit from a complete separation of programme and general information into separate publications, each with a clear and defined purpose. The separation and re-branding of the two sections to create a general *Student guide to the University of London*

International Programmes and a programme specific *Programme handbook*, will have the following benefits:

- Give students a clear understanding of the University/Lead College structure and the separate functions and responsibilities;
- Create a clear distinction and understanding of where students should go for information or assistance with specific issues;
- Consolidate the International Programmes brand by clearly showing what the University does for students;
- Allow us to provide the same general information to all students regardless of whether the International Academy produces the handbooks of the Lead College;
- Establish clear lines of responsibility for ensuring that the quality and accuracy of the content is maintained by the relevant individuals.

Therefore, from 2014 onwards the general publication, or *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes*, will provide practical information which is common across all programmes, such as how to pay fees, transfer registration and apply for accreditation of prior learning. The programme publication, or *Programme handbook*, will give programme specific and academic guidance such as advice on assessment and planning your studies. The two publications will be styled differently to avoid confusion and the handbook page of the International Programmes website will clearly explain their different functions and what students should use each publication for. Each publication will signpost the reader to where they can find the information which is not included in the publication and clearly explain where information pertaining to the University of London's functions and services can be found. We will therefore be creating a comprehensive directory of where relevant information is held across different platforms and materials including the International Programmes website, VLE, Student Portal, Programme Specification and Regulations, *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes* and *Programme handbook*.

The dividing of the handbooks into two separate publications may result in a slightly increased cost if Lead Colleges wish to provide them in hard copy. However this is predicted to be relatively marginal and the production of e-publications, as discussed below, is expected to result in a greater move towards online only publication.

Action on Thematic Review recommendations

The following actions have been taken forward in response to the recommendations of the student handbook Thematic Review:

Recommendations 1, 2 & 3

1. *That a set of standards and framework be developed that clearly outlines the minimum requirements for all student handbooks of the International Programmes. It should be noted that establishing a minimum level of quality criteria and a support structure does not necessarily entail that all student handbooks have to be the same.*
2. *That a central quality assurance process be established that requires all student handbooks of the International Programmes, i.e. the final artefact, be verified against the minimum requirements (see also recommendation 1 above).*
3. *That a line of accountability both locally within programme teams and centrally within divisions of the International Academy be identified whereby the content of student handbooks is verified and authorised, i.e. a 'signoff' process.*

The general information contained in the student handbooks is circulated annually to Heads of Department within the International Academy and other relevant members of staff for update, whilst the programme information is circulated to Programme Directors for their revision. Appendix B presents the framework detailing the process by which information is updated annually and signed off by the relevant individual thus ensuring the standard of the information in the publications is maintained. Programme

Directors and Heads of Department will be asked to sign off relevant content annually to verify that it is accurate, up to date, and includes the minimum required information.

Recommendation 4

4. *That minimum requirements are set for common sections of student handbooks and that these requirements are agreed with stakeholders (partners) and implemented (see also recommendation 2 and 3 above).*

In 2009 prior to the Thematic Review taking place, an audit of student handbooks was conducted which compared the content across all handbooks produced by the International Academy. Using this as a starting point, staff of the International Academy and Programme Directors were consulted over what should constitute the minimal information a student needs to guide them through their student life cycle; this minimal required information can be found in Appendix C.

Recommendation 5

5. *To better utilise the existing structures within the International Programmes for the sharing of good practice with regards to student handbooks.*

The Programme Teams' Forum and Annual Programme Planning and Review process provide opportunities to discuss and share good practice.

Recommendation 6

6. *To consider retaining the facility for obtaining hard copies of student handbooks and explore further the opportunities for moving content online in a more personalised, interactive and interesting manner.*

From 2014 the Publications Team will begin producing the handbooks and guides in e-Pub format as well as PDF and hard copy where necessary. E-pub format is smaller in size than PDF and easier to use on portable devices. It will also include clickable links between pages and an interactive table of contents which will allow students to click straight through to the desired section. Whilst hard copies can be easily reproduced from the PDFs, it is expected that the more interactive and accessible format of the e-Pub will result in Lead Colleges choosing to move further towards online production.

Recommendation 7

7. *To address and formalise a process for the recognition of minimum standards with respect to issues of accessibility, inclusion and language in student handbooks.*

The Publications Team adhere to an *Author guide* and a *Style guide* to ensure that publications are as accessible as possible. The guidelines cover accessibility in terms of font and layout for visual impairments, choice of language, tone of voice and sensibilities. Editors use this guidance as a matter of course when checking through material in the publication process. PDF versions of the handbook are readable using screen reader software for students with severe visual impairments. The International Academy will consider the possibility of submitting the *The Student guide to the University of London International Programmes* for Plain English editing in the future.

Recommendation 8

8. *To ensure that student handbooks include and address cultural aspects, such as culturally specific language, studying, examination and the UK higher education system in general.*

As above, the Publications Team edit material to ensure culturally inclusive language and concepts are used. Images within publications are chosen to include people of both sexes and from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. Editors also check that material is not written with a presumption of prior knowledge which is not appropriate to the readership.

Review

The above actions will be kept under review in the coming years to ensure that the minimum information requirements remain comprehensive and current, and that processes remain effective.

Recommendations of Thematic Review of student handbooks

1. That a set of standards and framework be developed that clearly outlines the minimum requirements for all student handbooks of the International Programmes. It should be noted that establishing a minimum level of quality criteria and a support structure does not necessarily entail that all student handbooks have to be the same.
2. That a central quality assurance process be established that requires all student handbooks of the International Programmes, i.e. the final artefact, be verified against the minimum requirements (see also recommendation 1 above).
3. That a line of accountability both locally within programme teams and centrally within divisions of the International Academy be identified whereby the content of student handbooks is verified and authorised, i.e. a 'signoff' process.
4. That minimum requirements are set for common sections of student handbooks and that these requirements are agreed with stakeholders (partners) and implemented (see also recommendation 2 and 3 above).
5. To better utilise the existing structures within the International Programmes for the sharing of good practice with regards to student handbooks.
6. To consider retaining the facility for obtaining hard copies of student handbooks and explore further the opportunities for moving content online in a more personalised, interactive and interesting manner.
7. To address and formalise a process for the recognition of minimum standards with respect to issues of accessibility, inclusion and language in student handbooks.
8. To ensure that student handbooks include and address cultural aspects, such as culturally specific language, studying, examination and the UK higher education system in general.

Framework for the inclusion of minimal information requirements and quality assurance of student handbooks and guides

Background

The majority of University of London International Programmes have a handbook to help guide students through their time on their programme. Most of these are, or will by 2014, be produced by the University of London. A process of consultation with stakeholders following a Thematic Review of student handbooks resulted in the recommendation that the handbooks be divided and re-branded into two separate publications each with distinct and defined purposes. It is proposed that from 2014 onwards the International Academy produces a general *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes*, written by the University providing practical information which is common across all programmes, such as how to pay fees, transfer registration and apply for accreditation of prior learning, and a programme specific *Programme handbook* written by the Lead Colleges giving programme and academic guidance.

Purpose

This framework has been established to ensure that all students of the University of London International Academy have access to the essential information required to guide them through their student lifecycle, whether it be general or programme specific, and that this information is accurate, up to date and signed off appropriately. The framework provides a quality assurance process that ensures that student handbooks be verified against the minimum information requirements for students to progress through their studies.

Minimum information requirements

A set of minimum information designed to address potential student queries or signpost them to relevant sources of information has been drawn up in consultation with University of London International Academy Heads of Departments, Programme Managers, and Programme Directors. The information is divided into 'general' – to be included in the *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes* and 'programme specific' – to be included in the *Programme handbook*. The minimum information requirements can be found in Appendix B.

Annual update of publications

The information provided to students in both the *Programme handbooks* and the *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes* will be reviewed and updated annually to ensure the accuracy and relevancy of information and signed off by the relevant individual for quality assurance accountability purposes. The update process is coordinated by a member of the Programme Management Team designated as Handbook Coordinator.

Programme handbooks produced by the International Academy

The International Academy reviews, updates and re-publishes programme information in the quarter before the start of the student year. For calendar year programmes this is between August and December, and for academic year programmes this is between December and April. Between four and five months before the re-publication of the *Programme handbooks*, the Handbook Coordinator will obtain hardcopies of the current year's handbooks and distribute them to the relevant Programme Managers for initial review. Programme Managers will identify if there is any content in their handbooks which needs updating by teams within the International Academy and if so forward the copy to the relevant Head of Department for update. Updates are signed off by the Head of Department and logged by the Programme Manager. Programme Managers will then send the hardcopy onto Programme Directors for review and update and sign off on any changes. The sign off will be logged by the Programme Manager. The Handbook Coordinator will send all updated handbooks down to the Publications Team, who review the content before publishing the final article.

Handbooks produced by Lead Colleges

A small number of Lead Colleges produce their own handbooks and their timescales vary from that of the International Academy's. Programme Managers will annually request a copy of the current year's handbook and ensure that the minimum required information is available to students either in the handbook itself or elsewhere in other publications, guidance or websites. Programme Managers will suggest the publication of missing information if it is not available to students. The *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes* will also be available to students of Lead Colleges producing their own handbooks.

Student guide to the University of London International Programmes

The Handbook Coordinator will organise the annual update and review of the *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes*. Heads of Department and relevant individuals will be sent sections of the guide relating to the area of their teams' work to update. After review and update, these will be returned to the Handbook Coordinator with an email signoff, who will compile the sections and send to the Director of CPQ for final signoff. The final document will be sent to the Publications Team who will review the content before publishing the final article.

Annual update of publications

Programme information
(*Programme handbook*)

Programme handbooks
produced by the International
Academy

Handbook Coordinator to obtain hardcopies of all *Programme handbooks* and distribute to Programme Managers.



Handbook Coordinator to coordinate the Programme Managers checking of any information that needs to be updated by International Academy departments. Relevant information to be sent to **Heads of Department for update and sign off** via email.



Programme Managers to send Programme Directors the *Programme handbook* for review and amendments. Changes to be signed off by Programme Director or relevant individual on the Quality Schedule and returned to the Programme Manager



Handbook Coordinator to send revised *Programme handbook* to Publications Team



Publications to edit and format *Programme handbooks* and return to **Programme Managers for sign off**

Handbooks produced by Lead Colleges
(time scales may depend on when the College updates their materials)

Programme Managers to obtain copy of handbook which is being worked on from Lead College and ensure that the minimum programme information is available to students, be it in the handbook or in another publication or format. Programme Managers to make suggestions as necessary.

General information
(*Student guide to the University of London International Programmes*)

Handbook Coordinator to send sections to Heads of Departments for review. **Heads of Departments to sign off** updates via email



Heads of Departments to return sections to Handbook Coordinator for compilation.



Complete General section **signed off by Director of CPQ**. Handbook Coordinator to send revised section to Publications Team.

Minimum required information for the *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes* and *Programme Handbooks*

Student guide to the University of London International Programmes

The following is a list of information which will form the *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes*, not necessarily in the order or arrangement displayed below. This practical information is applicable to all students registered on the International Programmes across all fields of study. It is written by relevant teams within the International Academy and updated by them annually.

- **Introduction**
A short explanation of the purpose of the guide and what information it contains; a link to where students can find their *Programme Handbook* and what information they will find in it.
- **An explanation of the relationship between the University of London, the International Academy and the Lead Colleges**
The structure of the University of London and how the International Academy and Lead Colleges fit into it.
- **New developments (if applicable)**
Information about any major changes within the International Academy
- **Programme Specifications and Regulations**
What they are and their importance; how often they are updated and periods of notice for change; where they can be found; old and new versions; students' responsibilities in terms of the regulations
- **Quality Assurance**
An explanation of what the Qualifications Framework is; an explanation of the purpose of the FHEQ in respect of shared and common understandings of awards; the FHEQ levels; the alignment of the International Programmes; the role of External Examiners.
- **Contacts**
How to contact the University
- **Student Charter and engagement**
What the Student Charter is and where it can be found; student engagement in QA and enhancement processes, student membership on committees and in the Student Voice Working Party; a link to the Student Affairs team webpage
- **Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)**
What APL is; how to apply for it and what the deadlines are
- **Transfer procedures**
Information on transferring to another International Programme or another University; information on changing course/modules
- **Resource requirements**
Information on computer and internet requirements

- **Teaching institutions**
What they are and why students may wish to enrol with one; where students can find the directory of institutions; guidance on choosing an institution; what the difference is between registered and affiliate institutions; what the institution framework is and why it is used
- **Study materials, resources and support**
Information on when study materials are supplied; student responsibilities in ensuring they have the correct versions; tracking and receiving study materials; what to do if there are delays in receiving materials or problems with the materials received; what information and resources students can find on the student portal and International Programmes website; how to access the student portal; where to find technical support.
- **Libraries and bookshops**
The importance of the online library, what it is and how to access it; Senate House library; directions to the list of bookshops
- **Online etiquette**
Suggestions of how to communicate appropriately online via email and VLE discussion, Moodle code of conduct
- **Continuing registration and requesting materials**
How to maintain registration and receive updated materials
- **Examinations**
Information on examination centres and how to contact them; how and when to make an examination entry; when advanced examination timetables will be published; what to do if special examination arrangements are required and the deadline for requesting them; how to notify the University of a change of address; when examination admissions notices will be received; what students must take when they sit an examination; being absent; how to apply for mitigating circumstances and the timeframe this must be done in; receiving results and what to do if they aren't received; how to apply for an administrative re-check; the importance of producing legible scripts; local examination fees; feedback on assessment
- **Assessment offences**
Different types of assessment offences and how to avoid them
- **Certificates, transcripts and Diploma Supplements**
What they are and their purpose; when they are received; how to apply for transcripts at other times and who to contact; how to obtain replacement certificates and official letters confirming the award
- **Graduation ceremony**
What it is, where it is and when; how to obtain tickets and who can apply for them; what students can do if they can't get tickets for the year they graduate
- **Careers**
Information on what careers advice is available

- **Alumni Association**
The purpose of the association and what it enables graduates to do; where to get further information
- **Fees, refunds and financial assistance**
When and how to pay; consequences of non-payment or not paying on time; information on debtors and the penalties; reference to the Regulations/PSR booklet for rules on refunds; notification that financial assistance is not possible from the University of London
- **Students with specific access requirements**
Information on providing materials in alternative formats; special examination arrangements; the Inclusive Practice Arrangements panel and its purpose in respect of examinations; the Inclusive Practice Manager's contact details; the special examination arrangements policy; where to find information on Disabled Student Allowance; information for students who are in the Armed Forces or in prison
- **Student complaints procedure**
What the procedure is and how to make a complaint

Programme handbook

The following is a list of information to be included in all *Programme handbooks*. These will not necessarily constitute separate pages or sections, but may be brief sentences or signposts to where students can find further information. The list below will form a minimum set of information to be included alongside any other information or advice Colleges wish to provide to assist students through their studies.

- **An introduction to the handbook**
Including an explanation of the purpose of the handbook; where students can find general information from the University of London; the relationship between the handbook and the Programme Specification and Regulations
- **Contact information**
How to contact the University of London and the Lead College; who to contact for what
- **How the programme is delivered**
- **Support provided**
Including tutor/academic support; administrative support; if applicable student-to-student networking and courses put on by the Lead College
- **Overview of the programme structure**
General overview of structure signposting students to the regs for more information; specialism that are possible if applicable; advice on subject choice if applicable
- **Programme specific resources**
What the VLE is, what it contains and how to access it; if applicable other resources such as examiners commentaries and past exam papers; a signpost to the information about the Online Library in the *Student guide to the University of London International Programmes*

- **Books and reading (subsection of the above)**

Information on the level of access needed to books and other publications not supplied as part of the study materials; minimum cost of purchasing books over the lifetime of the programme; if applicable, information on finding the correct editions of books and accessing the Lead College library

- **Studying**

Study timetables - where programmes, or the support offered, are structured in accordance with a particular time frame; planning your studies and study techniques; advice on reading and note taking; what to do if you get into difficulties

- **Assessment and feedback**

Examinations

Advice on preparation and revision; practical information on writing exams e.g. writing in pen not pencil, answering the correct number of questions, using the time sensibly

Coursework, assignments and dissertations

Advice on preparation and writing; how to reference and present a bibliography; how to submit pieces of work; deadlines; if applicable information on deferrals and extensions; plagiarism software if used

Formative assessment (if applicable)

- **Intermediate and exit awards**

If applicable an explanation of what they are; the difference between them and when and how a student can be considered for them; advice on whether if a student is awarded an exit award they will be able to re enter the programme

- **Student feedback mechanisms**

What mechanisms are in place; student representation and representation on committees if applicable

- **Prizes and scholarships**

If applicable